



Photograph courtesy of Andrew Rowland and Dean Thorburn.



Photograph by Arthur Mostead.

Recommendations for action

The conference participants agree that a nationally coordinated approach to protecting freshwater ecosystems should be based upon the following recommendations:

1. The Council of Australian Governments should negotiate an Agreement, as a matter of priority, to drive the development of a national strategy and programs for identifying, classifying, and protecting freshwater ecosystems of high conservation value across Australia.

2. A national inter-jurisdictional program should be established to work towards a nationally-consistent approach to the classification and inventory of freshwater ecosystems.

3. A nationally applicable decision support system to drive the appropriate use of existing and emerging freshwater protection tools should be developed.

4. The vast majority of freshwater ecosystems of high conservation value occur outside the formal reserve system. A nationally coordinated approach to protecting freshwater ecosystems must be applied across all land tenures throughout Australia, using new and existing freshwater protection tools.

5. In northern and central Australia, which retain many of Australia's less impacted freshwater ecosystems, development of a comprehensive, adequate and representative protected area system should occur in tandem with comprehensive protection of freshwater

ecosystems and native vegetation through whole-of-catchment mechanisms.

6. In more developed systems, such as in parts of southern Australia, development of a comprehensive, adequate and representative protected area system should occur in tandem with targeted rehabilitation.

7. Traditional Owners and non-Indigenous landholders manage vast areas of high conservation value freshwater ecosystems across Australia; they should be supported and encouraged in their efforts through management planning that specifically addresses freshwater ecosystem protection, and by the provision of incentives and information.

8. Partnerships with Indigenous peoples need to be formed to protect freshwater ecosystems. Traditional Knowledge Systems should form a key basis for the management of freshwater protected areas.

9. Where landholders have voluntarily established freshwater protected areas on their land, governments should provide greater support to ensure that the values of those areas are protected from off-site impacts, such as from reduced river flows.

10. Obstacles to the full use of existing, but to date under-utilised, tools for protecting freshwater ecosystems should be reviewed and addressed.

11. The establishment of an Australian Heritage River System should be investigated, as proposed by Kingsford et al. in a report commissioned by Land and Water Australia (in press).

12. Levels of 'adequacy' of protection of freshwater ecosystems, in relation to a comprehensive, adequate and representative approach to protection, should be investigated.

13. Secure, long term funding mechanisms for the establishment and management of freshwater protected areas should be established.

14. Inter-agency and inter-jurisdictional coordination to achieve a stable framework for managing freshwater protected areas should be enhanced.

15. Precautionary policies and protection mechanisms should explicitly address the cumulative impacts on freshwater ecosystems at the catchment scale.

16. Governments should make full use of existing legal provisions to protect existing freshwater protected areas

17. Legal and policy frameworks for catchment and water management planning should explicitly provide for the identification, maintenance and enhancement of the conservation values of freshwater protected areas.

18. The capacity of communities to lead the establishment and management of freshwater protected areas across land tenures, both public and otherwise, should be enhanced.

19. New and innovative partnerships for establishing and managing freshwater protected areas should be developed through building bridges and meaningful community engagement across all communities in a catchment.



Freshwater Protected Areas - new and existing tools for conserving freshwater ecosystems in Australia

CONFERENCE STATEMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS



A NATIONAL CONFERENCE

27-28 SEPTEMBER 2004
UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY





Photograph by Arthur Mostead. Sourced from the Murray-Darling Basin Commission.

Photographs below by Peter Solness. Sourced from the Murray-Darling Basin Commission.

Introduction

Freshwater Protected Areas: New and existing tools for conserving freshwater ecosystems was held at the University of Sydney, 27-28 September 2004. The conference brought together a diversity of speakers and participants, including scientists, agency staff and landholders, with on-the-ground experience in protecting high conservation value aquatic ecosystems.

IRN and WWF Australia convened the conference in the belief that Australia can and should become an innovator in protecting freshwater ecosystems of high conservation value. It was a truly national conference, with speakers from every state and territory, reflecting the demonstrated need and support for an over-arching framework for identifying and protecting high conservation value aquatic ecosystems that is national in scope. Even more than terrestrial ecosystems, aquatic ecosystems stretch across state

boundaries, and effective protection often requires interstate cooperation. In addition, systematic aquatic conservation planning can most effectively take place within a nationally consistent river classification approach.

In building a national framework, however, Australia will not be starting from scratch. A national framework should be sufficiently flexible to incorporate existing tools for protection and to promote the development of new tools where needed. In that spirit, the conference featured presentations on existing programs for protecting HCV aquatic ecosystems from states and territories around Australia, case studies across tenures from public to private to Aboriginal land, and analyses of the still extensive gaps to be filled.

Finally, a national framework should promote landholder and community involvement in conserving freshwater ecosystems. The conference featured presentations on existing partnerships between irrigators and conservation groups, a

cooperative management agreement between and Indigenous group and a state, and a community-based program to restore an urban creek system.

These and other essential elements of a national framework are noted in the conference statement and recommendations developed and endorsed by conference participants.

The conference is the most recent event in an ongoing collaboration between IRN and WWF-Australia regarding river conservation, including weir management, cold water pollution and fish stocking.

This conference was also supported by the Murray Darling River Commission, The Myer Foundation and the Department of Environment and Conservation (NSW).

Brendan Fletcher
Coordinator
Inland Rivers Network
Sydney

Stuart Blanch
Freshwater Manager
WWF-Australia
Sydney



Proceedings from the conference are available from Inland Rivers Network NSW. Please email coordinator@irnsw.org.au, or phone (02) 9212 5112.

Conference photographs by Sue Lennox.



Statement

We, the participants of the first national conference on Freshwater Protected Areas, find that:

1. Australia's freshwater ecosystems are priceless and unique natural, social, economic and cultural assets.

2. Urgent action is needed to protect and rehabilitate freshwater ecosystems across Australia.

3. Australians are concerned about river health and the security of freshwater ecosystems.

4. All Australians have a duty of care towards our freshwater ecosystems to ensure their long-term security.

5. Freshwater ecosystems are defined for the purposes of this document to include rivers, wetlands, floodplains, lakes, inland saline ecosystems, estuaries, karst and other subterranean ecosystems, springs and groundwater dependent ecosystems.

6. Protected areas are a cornerstone of biodiversity conservation in terrestrial and marine ecosystems, and should also be a foundation for conserving freshwater ecosystems.

7. Development of a comprehensive, adequate and representative (CAR) system of freshwater protected areas should form a core component of a nationally coordinated approach to protecting freshwater ecosystems.

8. Significant opportunities exist to develop and effectively manage a network of freshwater protected areas across less impacted areas of Australia, notably in tropical and arid- and semi-arid-zone river

systems. In these landscapes, the management of whole river systems to maintain and enhance freshwater ecosystems is not only possible, but is a national imperative.

9. There is a pressing need for formal protection and rehabilitation of aquatic ecosystems of high conservation value in more developed parts of southern and eastern Australia, using both new and existing tools such as Ramsar-listed wetlands or conservation reserves.

10. Traditional Owners have lived along rivers, wetlands and estuaries across Australia for tens of thousands of years and have an inherent right and vital role to play in their management. Non-Indigenous Australians have much to learn from Indigenous communities about how to care for freshwater ecosystems.

11. Protecting less impacted freshwater ecosystems is significantly more cost effective than rehabilitating degraded freshwater ecosystems.

12. Comprehensive efforts for freshwater ecosystems usually entail both protection and rehabilitation.

13. Many useful tools exist for protecting freshwater ecosystems, including site-specific tools (such as protected areas, property management planning, Ramsar designation, heritage rivers and covenants) and catchment management tools (such as natural resources and fisheries management, land-use planning and providing environmental water for river health). However, there has been a lack of both political will and resources to use these tools effectively.

14. Emerging river protection tools provide innovative mechanisms for river protection,

notably Wild Rivers listing by state and territories, Heritage River listing under the federal Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act, the proposed Australian Heritage River Systems, aquatic or fisheries reserve establishment under state and territory fisheries laws, and formal environmental water provisions.

15. While much is already being done by governments, landholders and communities to protect and rehabilitate some freshwater systems, efforts need to be dramatically improved if future generations are to inherit an ecologically healthy Australia.

Dinner speaker Dr Bob Morrish.

