

The protection of rivers and aquifers

The terms of reference of this enquiry appear to preclude any detailed submission on a balanced assessment of the impact of recent water policy initiatives on anything other than agricultural production. Although it is well known that agriculture uses nearly 80% of the water available to Australians, our sectoral approach to managing water makes it difficult to grasp that the value of a unit of water is directly related to the number of people who have direct access to it and, hence, to the diversity of purposes it can serve. By this ecological measure, most of the water that is located where there is a lack of diversity in potential uses is comparatively worthless. Furthermore, ecology argues for using water where it falls.

Both recent and less recent policy initiatives have, however, failed to acknowledge these facts. The environmental externalities of water trading have been ignored as much as the stark differences between the water usage profiles of populous coastal zones and the relatively deserted hinterland. Recent water policies in NSW, for example, have been focussed on the needs of the Murray Darling Basin at the expense of the quite different but equally pressing requirements of the catchments to the east of the Divide.

To summarise this necessarily brief comment, I submit that Australia is little nearer fixing the hole in its bucket than it was twenty years ago. Despite some significant water policy initiatives during that time, protection of the whole hydrological cycle, which includes rivers and aquifers, is more pressing than ever due to the increasingly unrealistic demands being placed on our often scarce supply of fresh water.

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