

Water Politics in the Murray-Darling Basin. Daniel Connell. The Federation Press, February 2007, 272 pp. ISBN: 978-1-86287-633-0

This is a very heavy book, but I enjoyed it all the same. Connell has managed to bring together an enormous volume of information and condense it into a very readable text while still maintaining a feeling of the depth of background material used. The book is divided into six chapters that can be read in sequence or individually if you are interested in just one aspect:

- “Conversations with Goyder’s Ghost” provides the backdrop to the book, outlining the history of water resource development and changing politics within the Murray-Darling Basin. It is a wonderful historical account of the Basin’s history, of changing perceptions to water, water use, water quantity, water quality and finally to the now competing needs of the environment in a Basin brought to its knees through overuse and over development.
- “Beyond Sober Thought” tracks policy development in the early part of this century in relation to visions of water resource development within the Murray-Darling Basin, reflecting historical decisions into modern interpretations. It is an interesting account of federalism, the emerging irrigation economy and provides reflection for where we are today in a badly degraded system.
- “Excluding Lawyers from Paradise” tracks the institutions of the Murray-Darling Basin during the 1900s after Federation till the 1980s. It covers the major period of water resource development in the Murray-Darling Basin, discusses the emerging realisation of the nature of the river system, its variable flows, periods of large floods and periods of drought. Again, Connell reflects on the differences between historical decisions to control the river and modern thoughts of degradation. This chapter is full of very interesting historical information that provides the context for the current management responses to the use of the Murray-Darling.
- “Alignment of the Planets” provides the final section on the political infrastructure within the Murray-Darling Basin; the emergence of the Murray-Darling Basin Commission, the Natural Resource Management Strategy, the Salinity and Drainage Strategy and the implementation of the Water Cap. This chapter focuses on the emerging environmental issues within the Basin and describes the processes put in place to mitigate disaster.
- “Talking Environment, Dreaming Production” really brings out the major issue facing the struggling Murray-Darling Basin of 2007, that is, how to protect the environment, maintain the system for future generations but still manage to keep production in what has become the “food bowl” of the nation. Connell does this conflict justice and brings in the difficulties associated with sustainability given the different modes of government within the Murray-Darling Basin.
- Finally, the “Chariot Wheels of the Commonwealth” looks to the future and discusses “what is to be done”. Connell does this well and reflects on the impact of the decisions that have been made in the past.

As an ecologist who has researched the rivers of the Murray-Darling Basin for many years I really enjoyed this book. It is a wonderful resource for those within the Murray-Darling Basin machine or others willing to learn from the Murray-Darling experience. As an educational text this book is very suited for Masters level students from education, ecology or environmental management, but would also be an interesting

read for undergraduate students of law and policy as well. It certainly summarises the changing nature of legal and policy frameworks with respect to environmental management over the last 150 years within Australia.

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