

## Book Review

*Dead in the Water: A Very Angry Book About our Greatest Environmental Catastrophe. The Death of the Murray-Darling Basin*, edited by Richard Beasley, 2021, 296 pp, ISBN: 9781760878450.

This is indeed a very angry book. For those with delicate sensibilities and a low-level of tolerance for spirited language, we would recommend that you turn away now, and seek insights elsewhere. For everyone else, we cannot recommend this book highly enough.

The author's personality shines in this book as their larrikin approach, combined with their bluntness, great wit and a cunning mind, make this a pleasurable read. As an overview, the book is bittersweet; in equal parts, Beasley will have you laughing out loud, crying without care and angry beyond words from his unique perspective on how the management of one of our most precious and important resources has been botched. Beasley was the Senior Counsel assisting the South Australian Murray-Darling Basin Royal Commission from January 2018 to February 2019. This is not an academic book. This book is a reflection of insights and conclusions that one of Australia's premier lawyers has drawn from his encounters with a range of water experts during the Royal Commission. Beasley has peppered these insights with facts and reflections of how the careful and novel design of the 2007 Water Act was bastardised during the design and implementation of the 2012 Basin Plan that was supposed to meet the Act's objectives.

As Beasley makes clear, the Water Act was unique. It was designed to establish a sustainable level of extraction based on scientific evidence. Just to repeat that important, yet clearly now totally ignored requirement; scientific evidence and insight was *supposed* to be the basis of any planning or processes for change in pursuit of a sustainable Basin ecosystem. As you make your way through the book, both the regularity with which this requirement was ignored as well as the blatant disregard certain staff at the Murray-Darling Basin Authority had for the law and their legal obligations in meeting those requirements are laid bare.

Beasley's (accurate) conclusion is that we have, as a nation, failed. The book critically examines the steps and actions taken by a series of groups and individuals that either wilfully and/or deliberately ignored the Water Act's objectives and legal directives, forced science to lie and/or ignore basic facts to suit political purposes, deliberately introduced road blocks and obfuscations to pervert the Water Act, and ultimately failed their responsibilities to the environment.

It is a sobering and infuriating glimpse for many of those not directly engaged in this process, and who lack the time to read through the transcripts

and findings of the Royal Commission. For the rest of us, it is simply a case of déjà vu.

If we take issue at all with Beasley's text, it is on two fronts. First, contrary to his view that it is not possible to account for and model economic, social and environmental objectives, we would state that this is indeed possible and has been undertaken by economists in the past. We agree that, with respect to the Water Act, such analysis was not at all necessary but feel that the potential for economic modelling and insight should not be so easily played down or overlooked as Beasley has done here. We feel certain that, having had this pointed out to him, he will feel a lot less inclined to lift his head outdoors again!

Second, in the chapter on water economics, he appears to attribute our work to Prof Quentin Grafton! Richard, please take a look again at the *Agricultural Water Management* paper we wrote (Adamson and Loch, 2014, p141) wherein the broad calculations related to return flows that you utilise (to good effect we grant you), are laid out. Geez Richard, if you think you're angry, keep doing that and you'll soon find yourself be joined by two water economists!

Good. Having gotten that off our chests we can return to the serious nature of the book review. For us, this brought back many great memories of the period leading up to the Royal Commission, many interesting and funny meetings with Richard and his team, and the process of truth-telling that ensued. The Royal Commission needed to happen, and the facts brought to light from it needed to be exposed. It was a pity, and still remains so, that at the time, more was not done in response to those truths and that many heads did not roll. That seems to be a sad and angering fact of today's Trumpian world without consequences.

While this book is cathartic for the author, it served the same purpose for us as reviewers. So in all seriousness, thank you Richard for writing this, and we hope it finally brings some justice to the issues included and travesties catalogued.

For those of us still working on water issues in Australia – and many that have dropped out as a consequence of the matters covered in this book – we must remember the fine (paraphrased herein) words of Cummins and Watson (2012). Water policy in Australia is 140 years of mistakes and misadventures that has created a legacy that may take another 140 years to fix. Aside from those researchers and scientists mentioned in the book, the *Australasian Agricultural and Resource Economics Society* (AARES) has a fine legacy of its members working on MDB water issues, including (but not limited to) John Quiggin, John Freebairn, Mike Young, Jim McColl, Donna Brennan, John Pigram, Lin Crase, Glynn Wittwer, Thilak Mallawaarachchi, Jock Anderson, Alan Randall, Warren Musgrave and Bruce Davidson. Many of these people have had their views summarily dismissed as well. The problem we have is that the advent of climate change and the implementation of the Basin Plan means we do not have another 140 years to fix it.

Beasley's book then is a wake-up call. For too long, politicians have bugged up and perverted good advice in the pursuit of short-term rent-seeking. Perhaps, now is a time for a call to arms and demands for an active, wide-ranging policy debate within society to call out the limitations in our current system. However, if we want to contribute to this debate, we must have meaningful solutions and not just 'empty calls' for action or change. That is our job following this fine book.

The continued failure by Basin managers to recognise or act in response to the Royal Commission remains galling, to say the least. Scientists now know that the time to fix this has diminished badly, and when – not if – the Basin fails, few may be willing or indeed left that are able to meaningfully engage and help. The current Basin Plan, developed without scientific input, may lock us into another round of failure and future calls for industry structural adjustment. So read this book, and get angry!

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### References

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