

the **basin**

BULLET

the voice of desert channels queensland

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exit

floods
basin
stop
it's all
about
water!
February 2007

As I See It....

How important are our inland rivers?

No one argues with the fact that they drive a vibrant cattle and, to a much lesser extent these days, wool industry. We all know that the ancient landscape through which they wend is cherished and often visited by Australians from all corners.

But there are other Australians (and foreigners) who now rely almost entirely on these same watercourses. These are the smaller Australians, the ones who don't make the decisions, the ones who get what is left over and are expected to thrive and always be there for the rest of us.

They have been decimated by drought, lost their homes, lost their families yet, somehow, they persist.

And now...the rains come.

The lazy rivers of the Lake Eyre Basin have been stirred and jerked awake by the sudden outpouring of a fecund monsoon low that settled over the north. Vast sweeps of turgid water are inching their way toward the world's largest salt lake.

And now...the birds come.

Australian and off-shore waterbirds, in their depleted thousands are flocking to these rivers of life and hope. Most wetland breeding habitat elsewhere on the continent has disappeared beneath concrete and plough.

How important are our inland rivers?

The Editor

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the stirring of sleeping

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giants

The rivers of the Queensland section of the Lake Eyre Basin are usually sun-baked beds with an occasional dwindling waterhole. Recent rains across the region have awakened their slumber, but will it be enough to slake the thirst of the world's largest salt lake?

Lake Eyre, in northern South Australia, waits patiently for anything the western Queensland rivers deign to give her. At times, a hollow promise; at others no more than a sip or a mouthful. But sometimes, when Jupiter aligns with Mars, she gets a gutful.

This has only happen a few times in recorded history. Is it about to happen again?

Recent heavy rains across much of the Desert Channels region has raised the prospect, however, according to the people on the ground, there is still a long way to go.

Stonehenge district grazier, Angus Emmott of Noonbah, has lived on the Thompson River all his life and is well tuned to her moods. Angus says that while there was only a low flood upstream from him, Vergemont Creek came down really big and backed the river up over much of his floodplain country.

"That's given us a really good local flood," he says. "That, on top of the response from our 75 millimetres of rain means that, production wise, we have an optimistic outlook.

"The other thing that most of us take for granted is the boost that rain and flood events like this give to nature. Plant and animal life is really going to boom after the previous 'bust' period."

Another who knows the Cooper system like an old friend is Sandy Kidd of Ourdel, Windorah. He had 250 millimetres and says the top end of the Cooper is having a very handy flood. "It'll be very handy," says Sandy, "but only a gutter flood. It hasn't really got out of the channels and onto the flats much."

Sandy says this break to the season will allow him to keep the stock he's got and maybe get a few more on. Even so, many to the east of Windorah are still in diabolical straights.

Much further down the Cooper at Innamincka Station in South Australia, Stewart Morton is watching the grass grow. They've had 188 millimetres since Christmas eve and still have a fair bit of water lying around from later rain.

In typically laconic understatement he says, "It's pretty green around here. Most of the dams are full and the creek's had a good run."

On the 7th February the Cooper at Innamincka was on the rise again with water from the Wilson River impacting on the flow. Even so, the current flood, without any further rain, is expected to do little more than fill the Coongie Lakes system north-west of Innamincka.

...So, no prospect for Lake Eyre from the laziest of lazy rivers...just yet.

Three hundred and twenty kilometres north of Innamincka, on the Diamantina River, Monkira Station homestead is

overlooking an inland ocean. Anthony Desreaux says it's unreal.

"It's a big turnaround," he says, a barely suppressed smile in his voice. "We're going to have a bumper season. There's feed everywhere, even here on the hill at the house where I've never seen it before.

"We had 161 millimetres here at the house and up to 225 in other gauges around the run. South of the house you can only see the tops of the sandhills poking out of the water."

Anthony says they'll be able to get back to a normal carrying capacity and even be able to spell some of their Mitchell grass country to allow it to regenerate.

Further up the Diamantina has not been as fortunate.

Tom Henderson of Brighton Downs says they only had 60 millimetres. "The river didn't break a bank here," he says. "We'll get some reasonable feed and good

Even below Monkira there was much less rain.

David Brook's Adria Downs at Birdsville only received 58 millimetres but David says it was a breath of fresh air. "We'll be turning off fat cattle after Easter," he says.

Further south, still on the Diamantina, Pandi Pandi Station beat Adria Downs by just 2 millimetres. Jane Morton says, "We'll get some handy feed from the local rain and the river has a small, useful flood at this stage."

At Clifton Hills, well down the Birdsville Track, water is sheeting across the vast, 80 kilometre long floodout of Goyder's Lagoon. Theresa Gilby says while all floods are different, they'll definitely get some good feed from this one.

"This one's travelling fast and spreading out," she says, "and the lead's just about at the Inside (Birdsville) Track."

They are also expecting water down Eyre Creek from the Georgina system.

(continued overleaf)

the stirring of sleeping giants

Near the top end of Eyre Creek, Glengyle Station is awash. Jon Cobb says they had 227 millimetres for January with up to 300 millimetres around the place. That, combined with the 296 millimetres to the north at Bedourie, is giving them one of their biggest floods.

"We're living on an island at the moment," he says. "Virtually every bit of floodplain, about 1000 square miles, is under water.

"Things have been a bit tight for a while and we were looking at destocking in March, but it means fat cattle now; back to full production." Jon says that Lake Machattie filled from the local rain and the Lake Mitia floodout has been filled by the floodwaters. The lead of that water has been joined by, reportedly, the biggest flood ever seen in the Mulligan River and is currently filling Muncoonie Lake and will take a further five weeks or so to make it to Goyder's Lagoon.

Will there be enough water to surge down the Warburton and onto the parched salt pan of Lake Eyre?

David Brook's family has lived in Birdsville since 1885 and have been grazing the Channel Country and its arid environs for generations. No one knows these rivers more

intimately or have a greater feel for what they might do.

"I image it'll run through to the lake," he says.

How much water the lake will see depends on what follows, but with the river systems full it augers well. "It's only the beginning of our wet season," David says, "and any further rains will quickly kick the flows up."

Trevor Wright runs an air charter business out of William Creek on the western side of Lake Eyre. He specialises in tours over Lake Eyre, and since the outback Queensland rains, he's been inundated with enquiries.

"We've had a lot of interest from around Australia and even overseas," Trevor says.

"The surprising thing is that a lot of enquiry is coming from people who want to see, not so much Lake Eyre, but the Channel Country in flood."

"It's fantastic seeing the colour change in the outback," he says.

He says the spurt of growth has brought a lot of feral camels to the south-eastern parts of the Simpson Desert and there is a lot birdlife descending on the Channel Country.

No one feels the pulse of life and opportunity that surges through the veins of Australia's waterbird community as a result of an inland flood like Dr Richard Kingsford, Professor of Environmental Science at the University of New South Wales.

If the floodplain graziers of the Channel Country understand the flows and cattle production values of these fickle rivers, it is Richard Kingsford who knows what they mean to our waterbirds.

"This is a Godsend for them," he says. "These floods are going to be a magnet for waterbirds right around the country."

Our waterbirds have been in poor shape for the last five years so the expected breeding frenzy of up to 50 species of birds making the most of the rare bounty will go a long way to replenishing their drought-depleted numbers.

While numbers will obviously start lower than usual, some estimates have them burgeoning into the millions as they feed and breed on the invertebrates, fish and plants that have suddenly appeared.

...and if that grand old lake fills?

"It's gunna rain"

That's what many old bushies say when they see a flock of red-tailed black cockatoos. Whether or not these lumbering birds are precursors to wet stuff falling from the sky is not clear, but they certainly are quick on the scene when it has rained.

Steve Wilson, DCO's Regional Coordinator and keen naturalist writes...

The only black cockatoo of inland Australia can turn up at anytime and in a range of habitats. They have the uncanny knack of appearing when plants have responded to rain. Around Longreach, for example, they appear when the onion grass springs up along the river flats and the bloodwoods start flowering.

One of the great sights in nature is many hundreds of these birds travelling in loose groups although they are usually seen in smaller parties of 20-30. Good flood events and rain can stimulate breeding activity outside the

normal October to May. The big river red gums that line Cooper Creek are classic nesting sites for these birds and they often return to the same nesting hollow year after year.

On a recent trip to Windorah; I saw birds busily courting and examining nest sites.

One, and sometimes, two eggs are laid in a tree hollow.

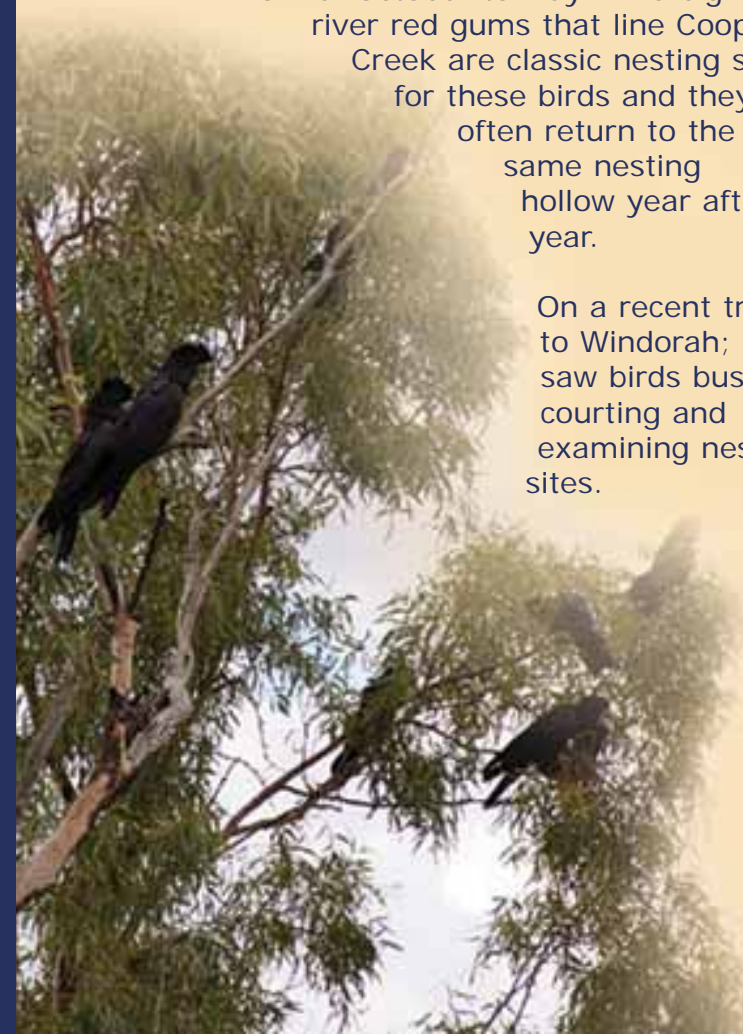
The hen incubates the eggs for 28 days while the cock bird forages and feeds, first the hen, then the resulting young which fledge at around 85 to 90 days.

Differentiating between the sexes is relatively easy in the field. The cock is all black with distinct, red panels in the tail. The hen and immature birds have numerous yellow spots on the head, neck and wings. The breast has yellow-orange bars while the tail has panels of the same colour with black bars.

The diet of the red-tailed black cockatoo includes grass seeds, pods, shoots, cones and flower heads. Early morning and late afternoon are their preferred drinking times and they appear unconcerned if they drink from a waterhole or stock dams and troughs.

There are currently five subspecies of the red-tailed black cockatoo recognised. These are: *Calyptorhynchus banksii banksii* in north-eastern Australia from Cape York Peninsula east to the Gulf of Carpentaria, extending into south-west Queensland and far north-east New South Wales; *C.b.macrorhynchus* in the tropical north; *C.b.samueli* in north-western Australia, north-western New South Wales and mid south-western Queensland into South Australia; *C.b.naso* in south-west West Australia; and *C.b.graptogyne* in south-east South Australia and south-west Victoria. The last two subspecies are at risk due to habitat loss.

So, two or two hundred, when you see the deep, steady wing-beats and hear their drawn-out screech like a windmill crying for oil, check out the ground-lice, nesting turkeys, emu chicks, ants, rain lilies, and your dicky knee because, chances are, those red-tailed black cockies know something we don't.





In Queensland, we don't seem to have a name for these damaging flexings of nature's muscle, these small wild storms that cut a swathe two or three kilometres across through northern Australia. In the Northern Territory they're called 'cock-eyed bobs'.

In Queensland we struggle for a name, grabbing descriptions from television – 'tornado, mini-cyclone' and so on. But a storm by any other name can still confront, threaten and inspire awe. Helen Avery watched the storm arrive...

cock-eyed BOB!



The shreds of cloud are racing ahead of the storm. They whip past and stir with niggling exhilaration, almost fear, that this could be more than just another summer storm. The air is nervous and still for a moment like an intake of breath. The bruised cloud boils and festers. Behind me a door whips shut with a bang and the wind begins as I race to close the house.

Earlier in the day, a premonition as a hawk blunders into the kitchen. He seems almost unafraid, lumbering awkwardly against the screened windows. I catch him quite easily with a tea-towel and hold him to inspect the fierce eye, the proudly hooked nose, the dusky feathers. He doesn't struggle. I step out and release him. His wings scoop the air and he swoops from my hands low through the garden and beneath the trees before lifting over the fence and away.

From the upstairs verandah I watch the surface of the house dam blacken. The wind grows anxious, stirs and freshens, whips across the surface of the ground then turns banshee, wailing and lashing the trees impossibly close to horizontal, flinging sand and dirt in our faces, against walls and windows, sucking the heat out of the frantically shut down house. The lino in the kitchen floor billows up on a bubble of trapped air. Outside the world is gripped by a primeval wildness that excites more than terrifies – a world in motion and sound with ourselves caught in the still centre.

Rain comes – it thunders. It roars. It whites out the landscape, sheeting across paddocks so there's barely 50 metres vision, a fog of rain with blown shapes of tumbling drums, branches, trees. The ground steams and dissolves.

The wind spins around, lashing the rain in from the other side of the house, then a crazy sun emerges and turns the earth to a million spangles. A sudden rainbow spans the last of the purple storm clouds grumbling away to the east and north

The creeks come down with a rush and a great spreading of water and we are content to absorb the fertility of a wet world from the house and garden before nightfall. The birds are full of excitement and along the road the cattle are splashing their great bulks in mud.

That night the moon is almost full and strangely beautiful, white and circled by light – not a summer moon softened by warmth and dust into a gold disc but a moon of finest silver.

In the aftermath, the woolshed roof is scattered across the paddock. Thousands of acres of trees are broken, stripped of leaves and branches. The roads are awash with sand and silt and scourings and sculptings where gullies have turned to torrents, and tea coloured water fills every depression.

I realize that I now see things differently. I can see further, see contours of land I hadn't known. There's a heaviness in the air, the thick

scent of wet vegetation, and I can see through the timber, see over the timber, see distances I've never been able to before. The trees are bare, totally leafless. The ground is bare, no fallen leaf litter, no branches, no weeds or herbs or grasses. I stop the bike. The silence is stunning. Nothing moves, nothing speaks, nothing breathes. This is a world stunned.

This is the hail damage. It has flayed the country as bare as it is possible. This is a paddock that was so heavily timbered with thickened gidyea you could scarcely ride through it. Elsewhere the hail has not been so devastating but the wind has broken trees like kindling.

On the second day we see a few birds; there are roos, stunned and bruised; a crow; and hawks. Near the bore a bronze-wing pigeon circles us at speed, a flash of iridescence as we stand at the bare circle of shining water where the bulrushes usually 6-8feet above the water have been flattened as if with a scythe.

Stories begin to emerge from the path of the storm beyond our boundaries – a flock of galahs dead; fences posts snapped off at the butt and flung across paddocks; walls with fist-sized holes punched staccato across them; windmills twisted, stripped and bent; windows shattered.

We are both awed and continue to try to understand.



from



the desk

If someone was to ask me what I do, my response would be: I talk to people.

It's the biggest challenge I face as Regional Coordinator, but the thing that makes the job so rewarding, the getting out and about and connecting and keeping in touch with the community.

Natural resource management is a social process where, more often than not, ideas for action develop around a landholder's kitchen table. And, despite our best efforts in public relations, it is usually over a cuppa that the message gets across that DCQ is not government. We are here to assist where we can; we are not enforcers of government policy.

The DCQ region covers a third of the State so it's a big job with a heck of a lot of driving time.

While being out and about and talking to people is a major part of what I do, I also manage projects and the on-ground team (that part of DCQ directly involved in delivery projects to the community).

To see DCQ grow and develop and to witness the growth and effectiveness of our on-ground activity through the various projects has been a great journey for me.

Being part of a small but dynamic team, working with community to get projects going, seeing projects finished and ultimately acquitted and signed off is a great achievement for all concerned.

One of the challenges DCQ faces is to keep the funds flowing. While our Regional Investment Strategy provides much of the horsepower to do our work, we also have been successful with other funding sources such as the National Landcare Program and the Indigenous Coordination Centre. Seeking funding is as much about the quality of ideas and projects that come to DCQ from community as our ability to convince funding bodies that we can deliver, be innovative and produce good on-ground results.

Another part of my role is to provide support to the catchment committees. Check out their update in this issue to see what they've been up to and what's coming up.

Next time you're in Longreach, drop in and have a cuppa with the team, otherwise I'll see you out there.

Cheers

Steve Wilson
Regional Coordinator

DCQ news

The closing comment in this column last issue was to wish everyone a wet 2007; for many across the region, that wish has come true over recent weeks. May it continue for those who have been lucky and commence for those who haven't.

This year is shaping up as one of our biggest and busiest years ever. Our latest round of devolved grant funding for \$600,000 (\$300,000 from DCQ's Regional Investment Strategy and \$300,000 from the National Landcare Program) has just closed and we have expressions of interest in for more than 1.5 million dollars worth of projects. It is very unfortunate that we can't fund them all, but it's a great indication of the level of commitment to the sustainable management of our natural resources, and the profile and acceptance that DCQ has in the land management community.

The Grazing Land Management project has entered a new phase with the delivery of the pilot workshop for the Mitchell Grass Downs biodiversity component by its developer, David Akers of the Environment Protection Agency. Feedback from the day was very positive with participants well involved and enthusiastic about the content.

Our Traditional Knowledge Project is in the process of engaging a support officer to assist project leader Vicki Webb. In addition to DCQ, this cross-regional project involves South-West NRM, Mackay Whitsundays, Far North Queensland and Cape York. It covers more than half the State and will, according to DCQ's Indigenous Facilitator, David Thompson: '...use whitefella technology to record blackfella culture for future generations.'

The results of the trial of water-based chemicals on the control of cactus (*Cylindropuntia* species), conducted in mid 2006, have been assessed and collated into a report. There were mixed results from the chemicals used but the best kill came from, unsurprisingly, the only chemical registered for the control of similar species. For more details, or a copy of the report, contact Brett Carlsson on 4658 0600.

The next DCQ meeting is on the 14th February at the Longreach Club. Subsequent meetings for 2007 are set for 11th April, 6th and 7th June, 10th and 11th October (AGM) and the 14th December, all in Longreach.

basin BULLET

Indigenous Heritage Program

The Indigenous Heritage Program is continuing to consolidate and gain momentum, and racked up some good results since our last report.

We completed the Stratford Aboriginal Sites Survey back in October 2006. The week long project only covered one site completely and we began preliminary work on another two. This has become a very large project as additional sites are identified within the Stratford escarpment.

The Stratford sites could be part of a larger trade route, or story line, of the Iningai Traditional Owners in this region. DCQ has spoken with other landholders in the area, regarding other Aboriginal caves, paintings and native wells with the view to eventually assisting the Traditional Owner group and the landholders identify these sites for further investigation.

We have also received information from other Traditional Owner groups relating to the location and details of Aboriginal sites that hold both sacred and significant cultural values to the Aboriginal people of that area. DCQ is, and will be, working with both the Landholders and Traditional Owners to come up with ways in which these sites can be identified, restored and managed in partnership with all interested parties. We are very lucky that all the potential projects have the support and cooperation of both the landholders and the Aboriginal community members. It is through the goodwill of these wonderful people that DCQ is able to assist and provide funding to fence, research and manage these places so important to Aboriginal culture and to Australian history.

We would like to hear from people who may know of Aboriginal sites. The process of identification, research and management only proceeds with the acceptance of all involved (i.e. we only go to the next step when the Aboriginal community and the landholders are ready to take the next step).

For information or assistance, please call David A Thompson, Indigenous Program Facilitator at DCQ on 4658 0600 (mobile 0427 427 960). All enquiries will be treated with the strictest confidence and David will be only too happy to discuss the steps to progress projects of this nature.

catchment round up

Georgina Diamantina Catchment

The Georgina Diamantina Committee currently has its new Weeds and Problem Plant booklet available free to the community, with a poster series soon to follow. These provide a lot of useful information and raise the awareness on many common and not so common problem plants in our region. There are also still plenty of copies of 'The Field Guide to Plants of the Channel Country' book available at a very compelling \$20 plus \$8.50 postage.

An exciting project coming up for the GD is the Old Cork Homestead and Waterhole Restoration project. This project involves a community clean up of the Old Cork Homestead site, a flora and fauna survey of adjacent sand hill habitat, and the erection of some informative on-site signage. Barring a major flood event, the clean up is happening at Old Cork on 28th and 29th April. All are welcome, bring your own swag and sturdy gloves; catering will be by the Winton Scouts.

All residents of the catchment were recently surveyed to assess the effectiveness of the Committee. The feedback is essential for the development and direction of the Committee so if you haven't yet responded, please do so. Remember, it's your committee and can only be as good as you make it.

GDC & CCC Meeting Dates to remember:

Date	Committee	Venue
17th April	Cooper's Creek	Isisford
26th & 27th April	Georgina Diamantina	Winton
8th & 9th August	Combined	Longreach
25th & 26th October	Georgina Diamantina AGM	Boulia
14th November	Cooper's Creek AGM	Innamincka

Cooper Creek Catchment

In conjunction with the Georgina Diamantina Committee, the Cooper Creek Committee is working on a signage project where catchment information signs will be developed and placed at major waterholes around each catchment. As a result of a generous offer from the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries, the signs will be mounted with existing fish identification and catch regulation signs.

The Cooper WISE CD is in the process of being formatted for broader use (e.g. schools and libraries). It is a great tool for getting information and knowledge on the catchment into the hands of the land-managers of tomorrow.

The Committee has the opportunity to have input into the Innamincka Regional Reserve Management Plan which is being developed by the South Australian Department of Environment and Heritage and is currently in the consultation stage. Providing community input into these types of processes is an important part of the Committee's work; it is the community having a say in the management of the region.

The next meetings of the committees will be a combined meeting with DCQ and the Desert Uplands Committee on the morning of the 15th February in Longreach at the Longreach Club, followed by individual meetings that afternoon.

Desert Uplands Committee

The staff and active members of the Desert Uplands Committee have been busy over the last six months. Robert, Andrea and Will have been heavily involved getting projects on-ground, and finishing up others including the nasty paperwork at the end that needs to be done.

Regrettably, there has been no DUC newsletter recently but that is about to change. Hannah Whiteaker has just accepted the position of Communications Officer so expect an information packed newsletter in the near future. In the meantime, this quick update will let everyone know that the Desert Uplands Committee is alive and well, and ready for you.

We have recovered from the set back of early 2006 when we had a complete turnover of staff. Alana Wright's contract expired and we were unable to replace her immediately. Our new Property Management Planning project officer, Will Green, commenced work in the Charters Towers DPI&F office on 22nd January. Will's position is being funded by Burdekin Dry Tropics NRM based in Townsville, and his project will give landholders many benefits and skills, one being the ability to formulate a plan as required for renewal of leases on leasehold lands.

There is also funding available for on ground nature conservation works and the advertisements are out now. Look out for Will, flyers and advertising for coming events.

Rob Cameron, our Coordinator for the past year, (funded by Desert Channels Queensland) and Andrea Lingard, Landscape

Linkages Project Officer (funded by Burdekin Dry Tropics NRM) are both working out of our Barcardine office. They will soon be joined by our new Communications Officer, Hannah Whiteaker.

Be on the lookout for flyers of upcoming Desert Uplands Information Days.

These workshops, funded by DCQ, will be across the entire DU region within the next three months, covering such topics as: -

GIS mapping and on-site demonstrations of its uses

An update on all vegetation management issues e.g. thinning and latest information and details on renewal of leases

erosion control measures

what Will's new Property Management Planning project has to offer

poisonous plants – what to be aware of and when, especially with the recent rain

funding sources available

update of current and recently completed projects

The latest round of Envirofund has opened and our staff are there to help you with them.

Calls for Community Water Grants are due soon, and again the staff will be there to assist.

Please feel free to ring the DUC office for any information, input or queries on 1800 007 807.

We are looking forward to catching up with you all soon at the Information Days. Not just the familiar faces but the many new faces now living in the Desert Uplands Region – the Heart of Queensland.

Lesley Marshall, Chair.



A God for all seasons

The jury is no longer out – climate change is a fact.

In his thought-provoking and award-winning book, *The Weather Makers*, Tim Flannery explores how the weather has been taken out of the hands of the Gods and put firmly in the hands of each and every one of us.

Flannery, a well-credentialed scientist, explorer, writer, and current Australian of the Year, writes with great authority and clarity on climate change. This subject has divided the scientific and lay world for decades but is now overwhelmingly accepted in scientific, political and industry circles.

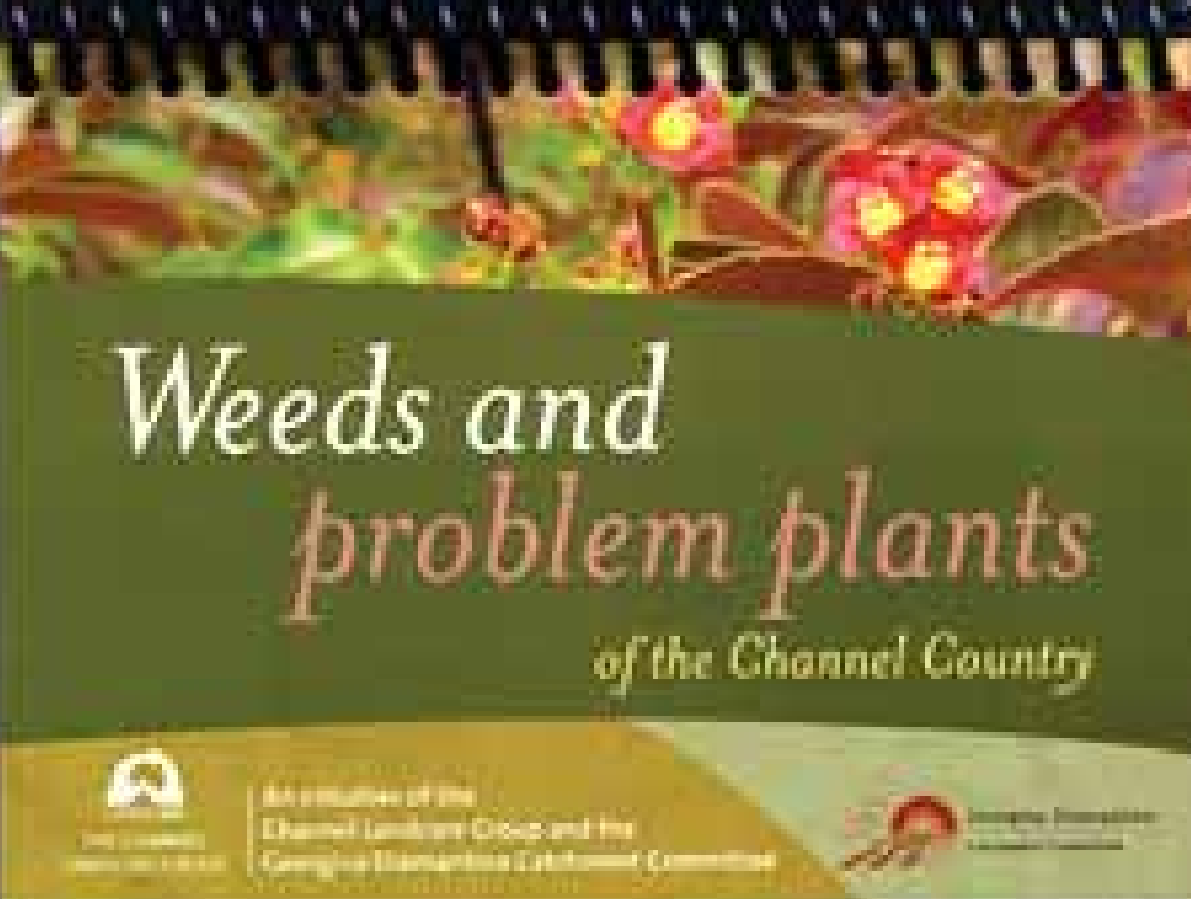
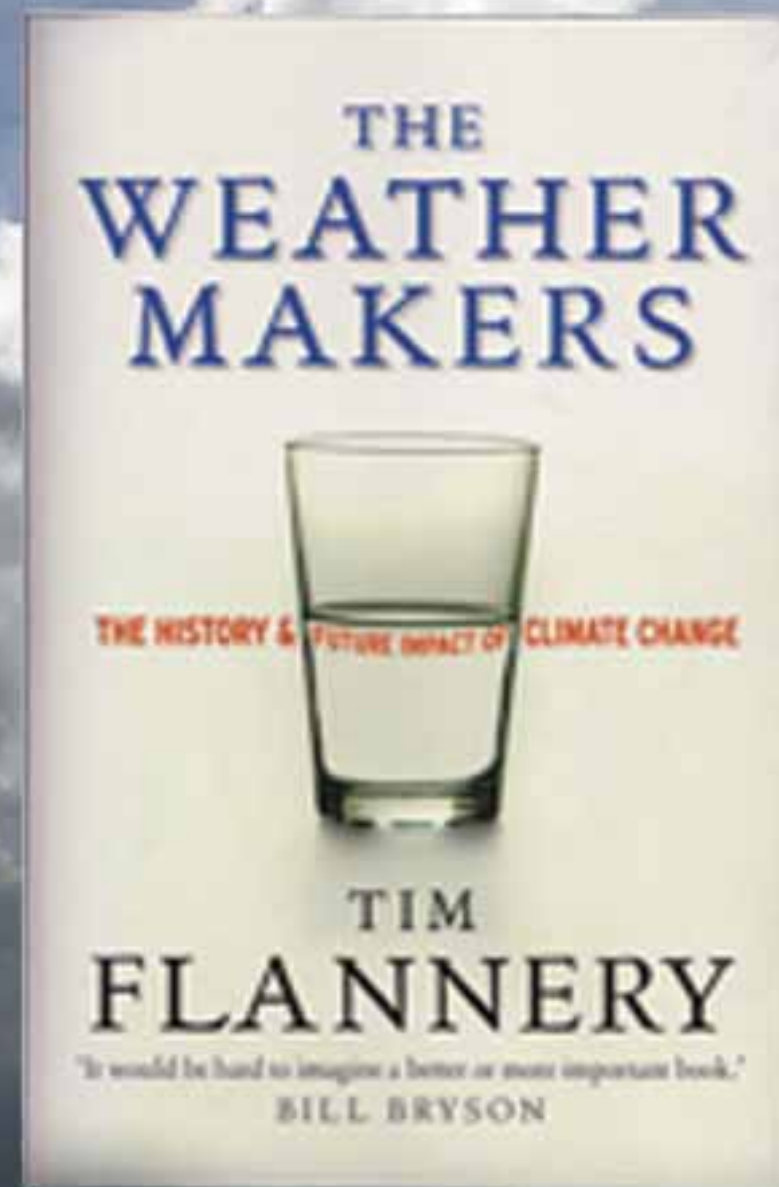
He takes this very complex subject and makes it available to the masses through his command of plain, simple English, engaging style and obvious passion. It's a shame that many other science writers don't follow his eminent lead.

Is it balanced? Flannery spends 266 pages setting out the case that the glass is half empty, then 40 pages telling us that it may yet be half full. The final fillip does little to lighten the deep concern generated by the bulk. Does that make it biased?

Have we stepped onto the slippery slope that will take us ever rapidly downhill? Or do we yet have plenty of time to curb the humanity-driven warming of our world? That is something each and every one of us should assess and come to an informed decision on.

If you're not sure you'll get anything out of *The Weather Makers*, read <http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/civilisations-darkest-hour/2005/09/23/1126982230888.html> and make an informed decision on whether to read the book.

Be prepared to learn, be prepared to be challenged and, most of all, be prepared to read *The Weather Makers: The History and Future Impact of Climate Change* by Tim Flannery (Text Publishing).



Attention:

Georgina Diamantina community – new weed & problem plant booklet available

Weeds and Problem Plants of the Channel Country is a glove box size 135 page booklet designed to aid in the identification of weeds and problem plants likely to be found in Western Queensland.

While the booklet was developed by the Channel Landcare Group, the text and photography are a combined effort of people who have lived, or are living, in Australia's unique Channel Country.

Although the Georgina Diamantina Catchment Committee member and vice-chair, Rhondda Alexander was the driving force behind the project, the Weed Deck is a community initiative and is available free to the Georgina Diamantina catchment community. It will be distributed to local shires, schools, the pastoral community and interested residents.

Weeds and Problem Plants of the Channel Country, presented in an easy to read style with sections covering trees, shrubs, grasses, forbs, cactus and water plants, covers all major weeds and problem species. Information includes description, habitat, palatability, nutrition, toxicity, notes on the plant, pest plant declaration status and prescribed action.

Weeds and Problem Plants of the Channel Country and the accompanying poster series can be obtained from the Desert Channels Queensland Regional Resource Centre in Longreach. Call in to 92 Galah Street or phone 07 4658 0600 or fax 07 4658 0122.



The Lesson

by The Chastened Jackaroo

basin BULLET

Ethel was our cook and Ethel was sour. Acerbic, sarcastic and sour - a full bush-lemon in a single bite.

She kept our plates filled, her fare was more than half way tasty, but her demeanour took the edge off your appetite. So me and Bees, the other jackaroo, decided to lighten her up - well I think it was more to cheer us up, grey skies get depressing after a while.

We dared not interfere with the kitchen 'cause we knew which side our bread was buttered. So we tried lobbing rocks onto the roof of the outhouse when Ethel was in residence.

Nothing.

Then we tried running a stick along the corrugated iron walls.

Still nothing.

We seemed drawn to that old thunderbox - if we couldn't inject some humour into the cook at least we'd get light relief.

Ethel, however, remained unmoved.

Perhaps we were going about the whole thing the wrong way. We needed a fresh idea. We got it when Bees caught a big lump of a joey - fully furred and full of spark. This was it; the big one. We only had to wait for Ethel to perch.

We waited.

We had that little roo in an old sugar bag and he wasn't too tame. He was like a couple of boisterous boys under a blanket; legs, head and arms poking this way and that.

Ethel finally sought the iron-walled sanctuary of the dunny.

We gave her just enough time to get settled then, bellies tight with excitement, we snuck up to the door of the dunny.

Our prank was a wonder of organisation and timing. I pushed open the door just enough for Bees to tumble the joey out of the bag and through the gap. The roo's feet had barely hit the floor when I slammed the door shut and we bolted, the pounding of our feet echoing the thumping of our hearts.

The din from the thunderbox swirled in our wake. That joey sounded like a well-struck tennis ball, ricocheting around the inside walls. Bounding and rebounding, thumping and bumping and all the while Ethel was screaming. Deep down from the bottom of the dunny screams that followed our dust, across the yard and around behind the shed.

Me and Bees collapsed with our backs against the building, sides heaving with the remembering, our cheeks running with tears. Each time our convulsions stopped, one of us would echo Ethel's screams and another tin full of kero went onto the smouldering coals of our mirth.

Our entry to the kitchen that evening was nothing if not cautious. We expected revenge; it was only fair. Maybe a booby-trapped chair or extra salty stew or what-ever. At least if it tasted all right we'd be safe, after all, she couldn't poison us.

It seemed our caution was unnecessary. Ethel was as nice as pie - and the pie was nice, so was the dessert. Me and Bees really put some away.

"Have some more, boys," said Ethel.

And we said, "Just one more spoonful, thanks."

Ethel wore a half-smile and there was a twinkle to her eyes I'd never noticed before. She was almost human. It seemed our prank had worked. Bees winked at me and I grinned back past a final mouthful.

Finally, tight-stomached and satisfied, we washed the dishes and headed for bed.

We were lying in the dark, chuckling about the day and congratulating each other on our success when my guts flipped a mickey. I was up and running with the urgency of survival and, so it seemed, was Bees.

Ethel hadn't poisoned us but she'd done the next best thing.

We funnelled into the open doorway and jammed like sheep in a small gateway, neither wanting to yield. My guts bubbled with the strain so I eased off. We popped through, and headed for the dunny, quietly so we wouldn't wake Ethel. It was best that the success of her doctored food remain unknown to her. We should have seen it coming; we were as green as grass.

The heat in my guts had the sweat trickling down my leg - at least I hoped it was only sweat.

I was putting everything into that mad dash, everything I was game to. Bees mustn't have been as game as me 'cause I had drawn level with him by the middle of the yard.

First use of the throne was going to be another jostle.

A severe internal churning forced me to slow and Bees ducked into the waiting dunny first. I swore. Bees wailed. I pushed in beside him.

"The lid's jammed," he moaned.

"Here, give me a go," I demanded in desperation.

I couldn't budge it. "She's nailed it," I howled, no longer caring if she heard us.

My bowels were bubbling, straining for release. I was starting to panic, I couldn't hold back much longer. In the bright moonlight, Bee's sweat-beaded face was reflecting my agony.

Whining like a pair of wounded pups, we took off for the bush, Ethel's triumphant laughter snapping at our heels.

Desert Channels Queensland is funded by the Australian Government's Natural Heritage Trust



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