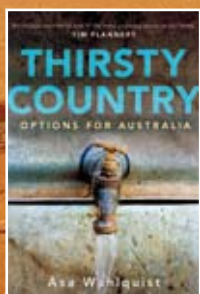


“In the driest inhabited country, in the midst of a great water shortage, water is free.”



Thirsty Country: Options for Australia

Åsa Wahlquist's book *Thirsty Country: Options for Australia* presents a striking outline of 10 paradoxes of the nation's struggle to manage its water. Like the proverbial canary in the mine, the effects of increasing temperature and variability on Australia's water resources could provide an insight for other regions around the world, which may be affected by a shifting climate.

Wahlquist's well rounded analysis of the water situation in Australia illustrates how the nation's current challenges have been created and influenced by its history and climate. Comprised of interesting interviews and statistics, the book covers issues ranging from the impact of El Niño and La Niña cycles, to the heavy restrictions on water use in urban areas and the hard lessons being learned by agriculture following the major drought from 2002-2007.

Making the deserts bloom

Australia is still fighting the legacy of 220 years of European settlement. The aboriginal population found sustainable ways to deal with one of the most variable and unpredictable climates in the world. The newer settlers brought European farming practices to a landscape much older, much less fertile and with highly variable rainfall. The timing of climatic patterns has played a critical role in Australia's post-settlement history. The major water storage and irrigation infrastructure boom from the 1950s to the 1970s coincided with a particularly wet

period. When drier conditions inevitably returned, water was quickly over-committed. There is simply not enough water for present needs. This realisation, coupled with the tendency for longer and hotter dry periods under climate change is now a major concern across Australian society. Politicians, water managers and the general public face difficult and lifestyle-altering decisions.

It takes a crisis...

Wahlquist explains that the crisis in Australia is not one of water, but one of its institutions and infrastructure. Awareness of the problem began in 1991 when a record long toxic blue-green algal bloom along the Darling River put the degraded health of the nation's rivers in the public eye. An audit performed in 1995 on water use in the Murray-Darling River Basin showed overcommitted water, declining ecosystems, rising salinity and threatened agricultural productivity. A National Water Initiative was started in 2004 that established a national water market and focused on water management that "optimises economic, social and environmental outcomes". In 2007, at the height of the drought in the Murray-Darling system, the Prime Minister announced a National Water Plan to address over-allocation and inefficient use of water in rural areas.

People are becoming more resourceful and innovative in their attempts to live within the water constraints of the country. The last 20 years has seen a new era of water manage-

ment take hold. Immense resources, both human and financial, have been mobilised to try to deal with the challenges the current water situation is presenting. The boom and bust nature of the natural system is better understood and management practices are finally starting to catch up. The author is careful to emphasise that the way a country manages water is a societal choice. It is not a matter solely for water managers or scientists. How Australians value water resources will determine how they are managed.

These values have undergone a paradigm shift since the early 1990s. The level of public awareness, the mobilisation of resources and the high priority given by government has been unprecedented over the last 15 years and particularly since the onset of the drought in 2002. Only time will tell whether the drought in the first decade of the new millennium will affect how Australians perceive and manage water over the longer term. Given that May 2009 has seen extremely high levels of rainfall filling dams in parts of the southeast, one hopes this does not mean Australians forget the lessons learned this decade.

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