

our water mark



Statues is an age-old schoolyard game. A child out the front looks straight ahead. Behind this girl or boy there is stealthy movement as others invisibly creep closer. The child turns around to catch anyone moving but the others instantly 'freeze'. When the child turns around again the quiet movement resumes. Undetected, it eventually overpowers the child at the front. Water is the crisis that has crept up on us. Will we continue to face the other way?

Watermark Australia Project, *Concept document*, p. 5, 2002

At last water is on everyone's lips! In late 2006 the tide suddenly turned. Political debate took on a new edge and now the Federal and state governments are at pains to demonstrate their attention to the issue. Talkback radio is inundated with callers concerned about water, newspapers report on the water issue almost daily and water is the topic of conversation around the dinner table, in workplaces and on the streets. The prolonged dry spell that country people have been aware of for years starts to worry city people.

Intuitively, we know that we are everything with water and nothing without it. What we understand less well are the myriad ways we rely on water for every aspect of our lives: our health and wellbeing; our economy; the food we eat; the health of our ecosystems; and the livability of our cities.

WATER LITERACY HOLDS THE KEY

Our society places great importance on literacy. It holds the key to the way we create, and make the most of, the challenges and opportunities we face in our lives. In much the same way, raising the level of water literacy is crucial to bringing about effective water reform.

Widespread attitudinal and behavioural change will become much more likely when people learn first hand the nature and extent of our water crisis. Once equipped with this knowledge, they can then direct their good intentions towards positive action.

We need to come to grips with the state of our water resources and what has been happening to them over time. We need to move beyond a superficial knowledge of water – such as knowing the water levels in our dams, or which towns are on what level of water restrictions – to understanding the big picture of water in this country. But how do we construct the bigger picture? We can't simply rely on government-provided information (which tends to be treated with suspicion, in any case). And governments have not generally done a good job of informing us – apparently assuming that block ads on television are sufficient.

In piecing together the big picture, we need to look at the true extent of water use in this country, as well as the relationship between population growth and the competing demands for water. We need to appreciate the extent to which we have degraded our freshwater ecosystems, our rivers and streams, and depleted and degraded our groundwater supplies. We need to know the amount of water required to feed us and produce our exports, and how much water is embodied in our consumption of material goods and our urban-centred lifestyles.

We should all be aware that policy parameters have been set at national and state levels that will significantly shape the course of things to come. We especially need to understand the changes now being brought about by permanent water trading and the creation of a national market for water. In the face of these changes, we should be asking ourselves questions such as:

- How will social equity fare in a national water market?
- Will environmental stewardship be promoted?
- Will true water efficiency be achieved?
- Can we be confident that the introduction of permanent water trading is an appropriate arrangement as we head into an uncertain water future?

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Understanding this bigger picture better places us to scope the things we can all do. It helps us to identify the important principles we ought to work by and it helps us find points of entry into debates about water. It prompts us to initiate actions to make a real difference in our households, local communities and institutions, and on our farms. On another level, we can play a stronger role in shaping how our political institutions respond to this crisis.

OF PEOPLE, BY PEOPLE, FOR PEOPLE

Over a decade ago, the 1992 Dublin Water and the Environment Conference identified four principles that have become known as the Dublin Principles. The first states that 'water is a finite, vulnerable and essential resource that should be managed in an integrated manner'. The third states that 'women play a central role in the provision, management and safeguarding of water.'¹

In 2000, the Victorian Women's Trust, intuitively recognising this third principle, designed a community-based initiative to give people a greater knowledge of water issues and a stronger foothold in debates and discussions about water. The initiative followed in the footsteps of an earlier project, the Purple Sage Project. We named it the *Watermark* Australia Project.

We put our faith in the leadership capacity of women to help make this project a reality. This faith was rewarded in spades. Aside from The Myer Foundation, the private donors who made the whole thing possible were mainly women. Most of the group leaders who brought together the discussion groups across Victoria and interstate were also women, and the project team within the office of the Women's Trust was comprised largely of women.

Through 2004 and 2006, the Trust developed a set of innovative learning materials about water and a *Watermark* website. We set up a simple process whereby ordinary men and women, from

all over Australia, could come together in small groups to discuss these materials and determine what they might do in response.

Twice in this process, these volunteer *Watermark* groups (representing several thousand people) gave us reports that summarised their valuable conversations, their questions and their independent ideas about water. Many other people contacted us by phone and email to share their thoughts and experiences with water. At key points, we merged these reports and other inputs with our own thinking and with the experiences and the technical knowledge of a group of eminent scientists who gave us their time because they, too, saw an urgent need to mobilise the community around the water issue.

This document, Our Water Mark: Australians making a difference in water reform, is the culmination of all this labour.

It respects and builds on the wisdom and experience of the people who came together in *Watermark* groups, it draws out the consensus that emerged across these groups, and it combines this with scientific knowledge and technical data to provide a constructive framework for people everywhere to think about, and act on, water reform.

ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

Everything in this document, has been compiled with one aim in mind: to provide people in the broader community with a credible and accessible source of information about water. We hope that it will be read by all and sundry, talked about around the kitchen table and used as a spur for bringing about positive change in the way our society uses and manages water.

In compiling this document we have striven to use key reports and information that have been in the public domain for some time. However, while we all rely on these sources, the overall picture of water in Australia remains patchy because we still lack systematic, national data on key aspects of water measurement and use.

For practical purposes, every section of this document is written and formatted as a stand-alone piece. This is to allow individuals, families or other groups who want to read and talk about particular issues (e.g. surface water or groundwater) to select the relevant part in 'The Big Picture'. The particular section can then be photocopied, read and talked about.

Similarly, people who want to focus on the goal and principles or a relevant action section (such as what people in households or on the land can do), can select the relevant sections and reproduce these as a basis for discussion or action.

All text references are supplied so that you can access the sources used if you want to do further reading. We also include some additional references to encourage you to explore areas of interest further. A glossary is provided at the back of the document to help explain unfamiliar terms.

Towards the end of the document we outline a process whereby you can endorse *Our Water Mark* and sign on as a public gesture of your commitment to take action, share your experiences and hasten the necessary community momentum around water.

If you want to assess the credentials and bona fides of the originating project, *Watermark* Australia, and access any of the supporting documentation, this information can be found on the project website:

<www.watermarkaustralia.org.au>.

▶ REFERENCES

1. P van der Zaag & HHG Savenije, *Water as an economic good: the value of pricing and the failure of markets*, UNESCO-IHE Institute for Water Education, Value of Water Research Report Series No. 19, Delft, The Netherlands, 2006, p. 14.