

Creating a Better Water Future for Australia

Imagine thousands of people from all walks of life learning and gaining new insights into the water realities facing Australia. Imagine too, the experience of rural dwellers, farmers, city people, scientists, business people and technicians brought together in ways that are both profound and practical.

Welcome to the Watermark Australia Project

Between October 2004 and March 2005, we are building a base of thousands of people who agree to convene small local groups of up to nine other people, bringing citizens together into a dialogue about our use and management of water, and helping to define the scope for future action. The people come together in their groups, meeting monthly. What emerges is a shared vision for the future, guiding principles and a program of decisive action on water. Working together like never before, and with a high level of information, confidence and agreement, people adopt solutions for water on many levels - households, local communities, regions, states, and nationally

Watermark Australia Aims

The over-riding project objective is to create unprecedented national momentum that changes the way we think and act about water

To achieve this goal, *Watermark* Australia aims to

- generate a widespread and high level of water literacy – new knowledge and sharper awareness of water as a critical resource issue for Australia.
- create a means for popular exposure of the difficult issues around water use, management and conservation; and for identifying a way forward in terms of principles and solutions.
- provide an opportunity for tens of thousands of Australians to listen to one another and contribute their ideas and concerns about water use and management.
- provide specific opportunities for the active involvement of women and young people on the issue of water.
- provide a process that dramatically influences people's behaviour, in their own households and local communities.
- establish a composite picture of the vision, values and action commitments that underpin new directions in people's use and management of water.
- legitimate the role for ordinary citizens in institutional arrangements and decision-making processes about water.
- raise water onto the long-term political agendas of the three levels of government in Australia.
- model a process for international adaptation.

We seek these practical outcomes:

- a measurable change in people's understanding of the fundamentals about water - where it comes from, the state of our water resources, the management arrangements, our beliefs and values systems, and the big political, economic and environmental challenges facing us.
- mass numbers of people can engage more readily in present and future debates about the significant change, and strategies, required for a sustainable water future.
- debates move beyond the current divisive situation of country versus city - with urban dwellers, especially, having a greater understanding of their relationship to rural and regional Australia. A greater recognition of their interdependence paves the way for urban and regional communities to work co-operatively into the future.

- a significant new bank of community knowledge and experience about water that integrates lay and professional understandings, triggering wide-spread behaviour change.
- a pronounced, measurable take up of changed practices, new technologies and approaches at individual household levels as well as in local/regional communities.
- Individuals and communities participate with greater confidence in the formation of public policy on water:
- a clear, practical community framework that equips people to move into the future - clarifying the steps and strategies that can lead to a more sustainable water future.
- people are sufficiently knowledgeable and aware to argue for, accept and work towards, the major readjustments that will have to occur in the longer term.
- the two biggest groups currently missing in the discussion about our water future, women and young people, take their rightful place in the water policy arena.
- a more dynamic relationship between people in the broader community and the institutions charged with the role of managing our water resources.
- an evaluated process that can be taken up elsewhere, tailored to accommodate cultural and geographic difference.

Project Essence

The *Watermark* Australia project creates a much needed space for ordinary people to come into the public discussion about water and our common future.

It is designed according to 6 basic tenets:

People learn, and learn quickly, in the company of others.

Ordinary women and men come together in small groups of up to ten people in their local communities and, through the dynamic of group discussion and support, effect a significant change in their understanding of water use and management.

A significant leadership role for women.

While *Watermark* Australia is not only for women, past experience suggests the majority of those who run groups (Group Convenors) will be women; women prepared to embrace a process with its distinctive collaborative ethos. *Watermark* Australia represents an unprecedented opportunity to enhance women's participation and leadership on a central issue of concern.

Energy and interest from young people's involvement.

Future generations of younger people will face complex and difficult decisions concerning water use and management. It is imperative therefore that young people become skilled and confident in this area of public policy.

The merging of lay experience and wisdom with more technical and scientific knowledge.

The output from all local dialogue groups is compiled and processed with reference to ideas and debates among professional and scientific quarters. This process overcomes an unhelpful dichotomy between 'folk' wisdom and professional knowledge and power.

The move from opinion to the search for solutions.

Discussion and debate occurs in the small local groups during two periods of approximately 3-5 months each. These are followed by two periods in which group output is validated by, and merged with, scientific and other professional expertise. This encourages the progression from *opinion* to *ownership* of the issues, to the preparedness to find and accept solutions

A positive addition to community interest on water.

Many initiatives and programs on water are already being delivered from government and non-government organisations in the wider community. *Watermark* Australia respects these endeavours. The project does not seek to compete with these; rather it aims to build on these and so enhance the range of opportunities for people to become interested participants in relation to our water resource

National Scope

Watermark Australia is a national project for the simple reason that we have to start thinking about water as a nation.

As a nation, we lack effective national processes that encourage public debate, ownership of issues and the resolution of important national problems. Party politics dominate, usually in an adversarial climate. Much needed, broad public debates rarely get a start, let alone a proper grounding in the issues and the search for solutions.

But ideas and action around water have to come from people all over Australia – wherever they live and whatever they do. The wiser use of water is our issue; requiring our involvement, our preparedness to adopt a new mindset and our willingness to implement wide-ranging solutions that have a lasting impact on water use and management

Role of Group Convenors

In many respects the people who act as Group Convenors in *Watermark* Australia are the most important people of all!

These are the ones who agree to bring up to 9 others together as a small group, and in so doing, trigger the whole process of thinking, talking and acting about water.

Group Convenors need to be able to

- bring together a small group of other people. These might be friends, relatives, neighbours, workmates - in other words, people they are comfortable about approaching.
- organise and manage the meetings of their group, and keep a contact list.
- receive materials from the *Watermark* Australia team for group members, either by downloading from the web or via the post.
- keep in touch with the *Watermark* Australia Team. Group Convenors will need to report back to us at the Melbourne Office, probably three times through the whole process.

Communicate with the *Watermark* Australia Team, in both written and spoken English. Meetings, however, can be conducted in any language the group wishes.

Supporting Group Convenors

Group Convenors play a key role in *Watermark* Australia, and we will support and encourage them in all the key phases of the project. For instance, we will

- make ourselves available for contact by phone, fax, email and some face-to-face contact
- communicate clearly at every step of the way
- supply the materials to support their group's discussion
- provide practical advice on how to run the groups
- make sure that they know exactly what stage we are at in the process and what is happening next
- deal with any queries that they might have
- report back to them after each stage of dialogue, and assist them in any other way that emerges!

Stages& Timelines

Watermark Australia will run through until early 2006. These are the main phases:

1. **RECRUITMENT OF GROUP CONVENORS: OCTOBER 2004 - FEBRUARY 2005.**
The aim is to recruit 15,000 people to establish small groups of up to ten people. To assist here, we are working with networks throughout the broader community and a growing number of companies who are helping to promote the project with their employees.
2. **FIRST ROUND OF DIALOGUE: MARCH - MAY 2005**
The groups meet monthly and achieve a significant shift upwards in their knowledge and overall level of water literacy.
3. **FIRST ROUND VALIDATION: JUNE - AUGUST 2005**
A period of 3 months in which professional/scientific experience and expertise tests and clarifies the output from the first round of citizen dialogue.
4. **SECOND ROUND OF DIALOGUE: SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2005**
The groups re-convene for a second round of dialogue in which people learn and explore the possibilities for action.
5. **SECOND ROUND VALIDATION: DECEMBER 2005 – FEBRUARY 2006**
A three month period to validate the ideas and strategies emerging from the whole dialogue phase with its focus on action components.
6. **PREPARATION OF A WATER CHARTER: MARCH - APRIL 2006**
The compilation and distribution of a public Water Charter that captures the vision, guiding principles, actions and strategies to emerge from this constructive amalgamation of specialist expertise and civic.

Why Are We Doing This?

The issue of water is now one of the greatest challenges in our settler history. Yet there is ample evidence pointing to the failure of politics on water in Australia. Successful resolution of our water resource issues requires a new and refreshing community politics, new institutional arrangements, longer-term perspectives and commitments, and most importantly, a community capacity to remain engaged and active on the issue over the next decades.

At the most fundamental level, we will have to transcend the usual practices spawned by our federal/state arrangements. There will need to be an articulation of a vision, key values and new directions on water that enjoy widespread ownership and support by Australian people – wherever they live, work and recreate. Hard choices will have to be made.

We need to reach the point quickly where Australians in mass numbers are willing to learn more about water and as a result, to change their attitudes and behaviour – in their own households, local communities and regions. This is a demand not likely to be satisfied by conventional ‘top-down’ water conservation campaigns that do little to effect real change.

This reality dictates the need for a wide community engagement and dialogue about our water present and our water future. This will, of necessity, be different from the sectoral debates of the past and the present.

Without a truly national debate, broad ownership of the issues and acceptance of proposed remedial actions is unlikely. Instead, we will see a series of political fixes put in place at varying intervals. Meanwhile, the urgency of the problem is ignored, and the prospects for long term and effective solutions become even harder to contemplate.

Change is possible.

We *can* all make our mark in the better management of water. We can come to new understandings about problems and we can change our own ways and trigger changes in others. We can encourage new technologies in agriculture and new directions in urban water use, adopt more appropriate pricing regimes and create better institutional arrangements between all three spheres of government. We can search out innovative responses that lead to a mix of environmental, social and economic gains.

It is not that Australians are uninterested water consumers, or complacent and inert. Indeed, opinion polls consistently show that environmental awareness has never been so high. People everywhere – town, country, and city – do have wide experience and wisdom.

One of the problems is that they cannot find, or are not provided with, the right entry points for civic engagement, access to sound knowledge and directions for individual/community action. The pathways for people's involvement on this pivotal resource issue are strewn with obstacles and disincentives to participation.

People's knowledge, attitudes and behaviour are the crux of the matter. We are all water users. We need to find a way to engage and connect people on the issue of water, neutrally, without blame and division. We need to find a way to mass educate on the water problems now facing this country. We need a process that enables people all over the country – women and men, young and old, urban and rural – to respond to the wake-up call on the use and management of our precious water resources.

And we need to do this as soon as possible.

Values that drive us

The *Watermark* Australia project reflects and builds on the values that we regard as vital in a civil society:

- trusting in people
- working together
- respecting the views of others
- being willing to negotiate and compromise
- promoting the democratic right to give voice
- truthfulness
- independence of thought
- building constructive and effective consensus
- recognising that wisdom and experience exist through the community and not just in the few
- bringing together scientific knowledge with personal wisdom and experience

The Victorian Women's Trust

The Victorian Women's Trust is fired by the vision of a just and humane society in which women enjoy full participation as citizens.

Since its establishment in 1985, the Trust has worked to improve conditions for women in whatever practical ways it can. It uses a funding program to invest in women and to effect social change. It forms strategic alliances to undertake significant action projects. It advocates for women on key issues and fosters networks for the exchange of skills, ideas and information. It showcases women's talents, and encourages women from diverse backgrounds to participate in cultural events and in public policy discussion and debate.

The *Watermark* Australia project opens up like never before, opportunities for women, as well as men, to become actively involved. So it is not just a women's project!

The ***Purple Sage Project***, carried out in Victoria between 1998-2000, showed how women in particular could drive a wide-ranging process of civic engagement at the grass roots level. The people who stepped forward to act as Group Leaders were mainly women. Their energy abounded. They were comfortable with the ethic of dialogue and collaboration. In many ways, the success of the project lay in the way it harnessed women's capacity for local leadership.

In much the same way, the issue of water use and management provides an enormous opportunity for women everywhere to support a similar and extensive public process of dialogue and action, and to make it work.

A successful process of dialogue that triggers exploration of wide-ranging ideas, identifies solutions and supports their implementation, has the capacity to transcend the adversarial culture that often prevents us from moving forward on issues of national importance. Women's active support of this sort of deliberative process may well be the circuit breaker that is needed.

Some water facts that will startle!

Just in case you need some ammunition to stir the interest of your likely group members, here are some striking facts about water in contemporary Australia.

- ◆ From 1985 to 1996/7, total water use in Australia increased by 65 per cent. Water extracted for irrigation in this period increased by 76 per cent, whilst urban and industrial use increased by 55 per cent.
Australia State of the Environment Report 2001
- ◆ On a per head basis, Australians are amongst the highest consumers of water in the world. On average, each Australian uses 1.31 million litres each year.
In a typical Australian household in 1996/97, each person used around 350 litres per day. Half was used for gardening and a further one quarter was flushed down the toilet.
National Land and Water Resource Audit 2000
- ◆ Per capita water consumption for personal use (drinking, sanitation, cooking, gardens) :-
47 litres per day – Africa
85 litres per day - Asia
263 litres per day - Australia
334 litres per day - UK
578 litres per day - USA
Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, Maryland USA
- ◆ Almost half of Melbourne's rivers and creeks are in poor or very poor condition.
Victorian Government Report on Melbourne's Rivers and Creeks 2004
- ◆ Fifty to eighty per cent of wetlands in the Murray Darling Basin have been severely damaged or destroyed.
Murray Darling Basin Resources, author Peter Crabb, Murray Darling Basin Commission 1997
- ◆ There are signs that climate change is adding uncertainty to Australia's highly variable water resources. Over the past 30 years, Perth has experienced a decline in average rainfall of 15 per cent, compared with the previous 70 years, resulting in a 50 per cent reduction in average stream flow into Perth's water storages.
Prof. John Langford, The Sustainability Equation: Climate Change and Water, Melbourne University Water Research Centre 2004
- ◆ The threat of dryland salinity now extends across nearly six million hectares of country, rising to seventeen million hectares by 2050 – an area more than twice the size of Tasmania.
National Land and Water Resource Audit 2000
- ◆ Without proper remedial action for the river Murray, it is estimated that by 2020 on two days in five, the water for Adelaide – a city of more than one million people – will be undrinkable.
Salinity and Drainage Strategy, Murray Darling Basin Commission 1999
- ◆ One in five New South Wales people have not been curbing their water use, despite restrictions being in place.
September 2004 CityPoll, State Chamber of Commerce (N.S.W)
- ◆ In 2000, about a quarter of Australia's surface water was classed as highly used or overused. An estimated 30% of water in Australia's irrigation systems is lost to evaporation and leakage.
- ◆ The United Nations predicts that by 2025 two thirds of the world's population will experience shortages of clean water.