River communities must diversify for a sustainable future

New business and community development opportunities funded by the Federal Government would lay the foundations for a sustainable economic future for Murray and Murrumbidgee river towns following a major water buyback, according to Flinders University researchers, Professor Chris Miller and Associate Professor Fiona Verity.

Professor Miller said funding for new economic and community infrastructure should be an integral part of the Federal Government’s Murray-Darling Basin Plan to be released shortly.

Professor Miller and Associate Professor Verity were co-authors of the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists’ report entitled *Sustainable Diversions in the Murray-Darling Basin* released in early June. The report recommended a major water buyback that would see 39 per cent less water available to irrigators and other users in the Murray system and a 65 per cent cut-back for Murrumbidgee users.

“There is no doubt that a significant reduction of water use is required if we are ever to achieve the environmental flows required for a healthy and sustainable Murray and Murrumbidgee river system,” Professor Miller said.

“We have estimated that reducing water use by 3200 gigalitres (GL) would achieve that goal but such an outcome will require major adjustments the length and breadth of the river system,” he said.

“If our predictions around the water allocations are correct, those water catchment area communities will be hit

*continued on page 2...*
Nanotechnology lowers desalination costs

Flinders University research that could dramatically slash the energy and maintenance needs of desalination plants has just been given a major boost.

The Australian Research Council has extended a three-year Linkage Grant for ‘The Nanotechnology Desalination Research Project – Low Energy Desalination Membranes’ for two more years.

Program Manager Dr Milena Ginic-Markovic of Flinders School of Chemical and Physical Sciences said the project team was making excellent progress in improving the performance and efficiency of desalination.

“Desalination plant operators around the world, especially seawater facilities such as that under construction in Adelaide, know full well the problems that biofouling of reverse osmosis membranes can cause in relation to increased energy consumption, chemical usage and deterioration of water quality. Improving membrane design is one way of helping to combat this issue.”

“Biofouling is costly: it increases the amount of energy needed to force the seawater through the membranes; it forces parts of the plant to periodically shut in order to clean the membranes by backwashing or with chemicals; and it reduces the life of the membranes,” she said.

“By introducing nanoparticles in two layers in the membrane system, we can improve the flow of water, reduce the need for cleaning and strengthen the membrane structure.”

Dr Ginic-Markovic said the process has the potential to reduce biofouling by 75 per cent, thereby reducing reverse osmosis energy needs by 30 per cent, halving the downtime for cleaning and extending the life of the membranes from two to 10 years.

“Support for new initiatives to help communities adjust to a future with less water could be provided by the Federal Government, which has allocated $8.9 billion for water reform. We have estimated that the 3200GL water buyback would cost an additional $2.7 billion, leaving up to $5 billion available to be invested in public infrastructure to assist the most affected communities.

“With this financial support, some communities may decide to move out of irrigation and branch out into new industries. Others may prefer to consolidate their irrigation industry and use the funds to invest in new water technology or to add value to their products. However, this decision would be made for the benefit of the whole community, not just individual irrigators.

“Flinders University has developed a modelling system called Thriving Communities which could provide the basis for this new approach to community development.”

Cover photo: Study urges more water for the Murray

Peter Gill

Vincent Ciccarello

Adelaide’s desalination plant takes shape

Dr Stephen Clarke, Leader of Flinders Materials & BioEnergy Group and Chief Investigator of the project, said the potential savings for desalination plants were significant.

“All reverse osmosis membranes are currently imported,” Dr Clarke said.

“By improving the efficiency of desalination using our technology, fewer membranes are needed, lowering freight, handling and waste disposal costs,” he said.

“Desalinated water will play an increasingly important role in ensuring Australia has a secure water supply. So it’s important technology for Australia and for the rest of the world.”

... continued from page 1

fairly hard and our work is really saying that we shouldn’t leave those communities in that situation. We are arguing that it is really important to enable all of the members of those communities to come together to be part of the process in deciding what the future could look like for them.

“We believe changes can be achieved and create a positive and sustainable future for those river communities if they invest in technology and alternative business opportunities and community development.”

...
Robust new phone system a relief in disasters

A project to develop robust mobile phone networks for use in disaster zones and remote locations has this month received the support of the worldwide micro-granting body, The Awesome Foundation. Led by Flinders University’s Dr Paul Gardner-Stephen, the Serval Project – named after a problem-solving African wildcat – aims to provide fast, cheap, robust and effective telecommunications systems where conventional phone infrastructure has been destroyed or is not cost-effective.

“There are many situations and places where telephone infrastructure is damaged by bushfire, earthquake, tsunami or unrest, or where no infrastructure exists – where conventional networks are of less value,” Dr Gardner-Stephen said.

“We are aiming to fill that void.”

The Serval Project consists of two systems. The first is a temporary, self-organising, self-powered mobile network for disaster areas, formed with small phone towers dropped in by air. The second is a permanent system for remote areas that requires no infrastructure and creates a mesh-based phone network between Wi-Fi enabled mobile phones, and eventually specially designed mobile phones, that can operate on other unlicensed frequencies. The two systems can also be combined.

“We have developed software which we’ve called Distributed Numbering Architecture (DNA) that allows people in isolated or temporary networks to immediately use their existing phone numbers,” Dr Gardner-Stephen said.

“We believe that for a phone network to be useful, you must be able to call people, and have people call you on numbers that they know. This is especially true in disasters. This is the magic of DNA: it allows people to use their existing phone numbers, so that others can call them easily.”

By integrating DNA with existing mesh network technology developed by Village Telco with unlicensed wireless spectrum, Dr Gardner-Stephen and his team will be able to provide telephone access to literally millions of people who currently lack any or affordable telephone coverage, as well as being able to help those affected by disaster.

“It will allow people in remote or isolated townships, or farm workers in network black spots to talk to each other,” he said.

“People in a disaster ravaged area will be able to contact friends and family and aid workers will be better able to coordinate relief efforts.”

Professor Paul Arbon, Director of Flinders University’s Research Centre for Disaster Resilience and Health said the Serval Project addresses several key emerging issues in the management of disasters and emergencies.

“The impact of disasters is increasing as more people live in locations where they are at risk and become more dependent on essential societal infrastructure,” Professor Arbon said.

“During a disaster, most of the response capacity comes from within the local community with community members rescuing others. Mobile phones provide an important part of this response. They can be used to maintain the connections between family members, to alert and coordinate volunteers and, most importantly, can be used to provide the community with warnings and updates,” he said.

The US$1000 fellowship, provided by the Awesome Foundation’s Boston Chapter, will enable the project team to demonstrate a prototype of the system in coming weeks. Dr Gardner-Stephen said that with adequate financial support, the systems could be fully operational within 18 months.

Vincent Ciccarello

World primary health role for Michael Kidd

Professor Michael Kidd, Executive Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences at Flinders University, has become the first Australian in more than 30 years to be elected President of the World Organisation of Family Doctors. Known as WONCA (a part acronym of its full title), the organisation is the international umbrella for a range of national professional groupings of general practitioners. As World President-elect, Professor Kidd will take up the leadership of an organisation of 123 member colleges and academies representing over 300,000 doctors in 102 countries for a three-year term starting in 2013.

“WONCA does great work in creating links between countries – and particularly in assisting countries where general practice and family medicine is not well established – to set up training programs for medical students and graduates, to look at standards for the practices where people are working, and to advocate with governments to support strong systems of primary care,” Professor Kidd said.

“The whole rationale behind it is that we know that those countries with strong systems of primary care have better health outcomes for their populations,” he said.

Professor Kidd is no stranger to strategic roles – a former president of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, he also chairs the Australian Government’s advisory committee on HIV, viral hepatitis and sexually transmissible infections.

Charles Gent

New communication system for disasters

Research
Research

Tree frogs have tantrums to protect patch

The red-eyed tree frog’s secret is out: rather than croaking an attractive tune, it uses vibrations to improve its chances of finding a mate.

Flinders senior lecturer and conservation biologist with Zoos SA Dr Gregory Johnston and colleagues from Boston University in the USA have discovered that the flamboyantly coloured red-eyed tree frog from Central America uses its rear legs to send ‘seismic signals’ along tree branches to ward off rival males encroaching on its territory.

The discovery, presented in the journal Current Biology, paves the way for “a whole realm of possibilities” of new research into how animals communicate.

“Unlike most species of frogs, the red-eyed tree frog doesn’t show any evidence of females choosing a mate with the loudest or prettiest voice,” Dr Johnston said.

“Instead, male red-eyed tree frogs set up territories around the edge of a pond and sequester females and mate with them. Females are quite indiscriminate and will mate with several males,” he said.

“Having a territory is really important to these male frogs for getting a mate and reproducing. By creating a vibration on a bush, they send a clear signal to other males to ‘back off’ while keeping it a secret from predators, which cannot detect the vibrations.

“You end up with these frogs very evenly spaced, one frog per small bush. It’s about negotiating space.”

Dr Johnston made the discovery while observing the frogs in a Panamanian rainforest in 1999 while working with the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute.

“I saw the frogs making little tantrums at each other and from my PhD research into territorial lizards I recognised it as territorial behaviour,” he said.

His initial investigation, using a miniature seismograph to measure the signals, led to experiments over more than seven years by his North American colleagues. It is the first time the use of vibration as a method of communicating has been demonstrated in a tree-dwelling vertebrate.

Dr Johnston will be teaching in the new Bachelor of Science (Animal Behaviour) degree to be offered at Flinders from 2011.

Flinders teams up with two of China’s best

Flinders University has established collaborative research and education centres with two of China’s top tier universities.

Flinders Deputy Vice-Chancellors Professor David Day and Professor Dean Forbes led a 16-strong delegation of senior academics and administrators to attend extended workshops with Hunan University and Central South University, both located in Changsha, the capital of Hunan province.

The two workshops, held in early June, have established a Joint Research and Education Collaboration Centre (JRECC) with each university to act as an umbrella for ongoing collaboration for an initial five year-period.

Vice-Chancellor Professor Michael Barber described the Centres’ creation as a bold initiative.

“Flinders University has had a memorandum of understanding and ongoing involvement with both universities since 2009. The JRECC will now act as a platform for intensive collaboration across several research areas and educational programs.”

Both Chinese universities are among the so-called ‘985 Project’ institutions – the top five per cent of Chinese universities – that number only 39 in all.

“We have a number of key areas of research and education in our Faculty of Health Sciences and the Faculty of Science and Engineering that make this collaboration a natural match,” Professor Barber said.

“Hunan University has a very strong reputation for its research and education across a wide range of engineering fields, and there is strong potential for co-operative ventures with Flinders in some of our areas of strength such as chemical engineering, material sciences and nanotechnology, environmental engineering and biotechnology,” he said.

“Central South University is well known for its medical research and education, offering opportunities to engage with Flinders University’s expertise in biomedical engineering, nanotechnology and biotechnology, reproductive medicine and cancer medicine, and also with our programs in public health, nutrition and dietetics, general practice and nursing and midwifery.”

Professor Barber said successfully establishing close links with two large and prominent Chinese universities was a highly significant step for Flinders and for Australian education overseas.

“The Centre will contribute substantially to the ambitions of internationalisation among all three universities, and will facilitate government and industrial funding support for teaching and research programs in both countries,” he said.

“We see this as the conduit for a long and productive relationship.”

Charles Gent
Explosives research could finger terrorists

New techniques for tracking bomb-making materials, and possibly pointing the way towards the terrorists themselves, are being researched at Flinders University.

University, defence and government officials discussed the latest developments in this field at a recent National Security Research Information University Workshop, organised by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and hosted by the University.

Organic peroxides are increasingly being used as the explosive of choice by terrorists because they can be easily prepared and do not require 'off the shelf purchases' which run the risk of detection.

However, researchers at Flinders have found that tell-tale evidence can be tracked through material which has survived the explosion and can point to the source material such as a substance like hydrogen peroxide that is used, amongst other purposes, by hairdressers as bleach.

Associate Professor Stewart Walker, Associate Professor in Forensic and Analytical Chemistry at Flinders University, said bombs based on organic peroxides – which were used in the London transit system bombings in 2005 and the foiled plot to destroy trans-Atlantic airliners in 2006 – could contain impurities in the "starter material" that can be used to identify the source of the explosive.

"These impurities may serve as markers for the identification of the starting materials and batches of explosives for evidence or intelligence purposes, in a similar manner to that established for illicit drug analysis," Associate Professor Walker told Flinders Journal.

"Identifying the starter material gives you an opportunity to find a chemical fingerprint which could then lead you to a source of that material or establish a pattern of use which could also help identify the user," he said.

"The research being undertaken at Flinders has the potential to make a contribution towards fighting the war on terror."

The workshop also heard from Flinders researchers who are developing Autonomous Underwater Vehicles that could improve the success rates of operations such as those currently underway to plug the oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico.

Henry’s menu for broader tax raises questions

Within its 1300 pages and 138 recommendations, the Henry review of taxation provides current and future governments with a blueprint to broaden the national tax base and to substantially increase revenue, according to Mr Paul Kenny, lecturer in the Flinders Business School.

What happens next is up to the politicians.

"It leaves lots of choices up to the government of the day," Mr Kenny said.

With growing health costs associated with the ageing population and other rising infrastructure costs, Mr Kenny said there is a strong argument that increased taxes are needed to improve public goods and services, or simply to maintain them. He sees the resource super profits tax, even with returns through reduced company tax, as a signal of the government’s intentions to increase revenue.

There are still fundamental questions to be decided about what sort of publicly funded system Australia is willing to underwrite, Mr Kenny said.

"When we look to other OECD countries, does the community want superb health and social security systems like the Scandinavian countries or are we content with something that more closely resembles the US?"

Mr Kenny said that Australia has had a fairly constant tax rate in terms of percentage of GDP, but he believes a higher rate, achieved through means such as the mining super tax, would be acceptable to most people if it produced better government services.

Mr Kenny does concede that the super tax may temporarily make Australia less competitive against other countries, but believes that the international situation will even out over time.

At the other end of the tax scale, Mr Kenny said the government’s acceptance of the recommendation to introduce standard deductions for workers was "a winner", bringing much needed simplification by eliminating thousands of people from an overly complex system. But there are still major issues for Australia’s taxation system, Mr Kenny said.

"Why, for instance, are we still giving millions and millions of dollars in tax concessions and exemptions to high income earners? In effect, they are undermining the system, and this has a cascading effect with everyone else in the system trying to minimise their tax. We need to change the culture, and means testing concessions would seem a good place to start."

Charles Gent
South Australia’s founding fathers failed to obey Royal instructions in respecting Aboriginal peoples’ ownership of land, but it is not too late to develop a new relationship that provides a foundation “for a more just future”, according to Mr Shaun Berg.

Delivering the Elliott Johnston Tribute Lecture recently, Mr Berg – principal of Berg Lawyers – said “the virulence of the strain of dispossession in Australia was presumed to be absolute and lethal to Aboriginal land rights until the decision by the High Court in Mabo” in 1992.

Mr Berg detailed the actual language used in the Letters Patent, drafted by King William IV, establishing the colony in 1836, and related documents. He argues these documents confirm that “British colonial policy recognised the need to protect the property rights of Aboriginal people”.

“Without doubt, the legal structure being created in South Australia was designed to protect Aboriginal rights to land. But equally clearly those rights were not protected and we find ourselves in a situation, some 180 years later, confronted with what to do,” Mr Berg said.

“There can be no denying today that the modern view is that Aboriginal people have elaborate social and cultural issues and related documents. He argues these documents confirm that “British colonial policy recognised the need to protect the property rights of Aboriginal people”.

But he said that Aboriginal leaders retain “the goodwill and commitment to negotiation,” noting that Associate Professor Daryle Rigney – a Ngarrindjeri man and research coordinator of Yunggorendi First Nations Centre for Higher Education and Research at Flinders – has said “it is time for Australia to act as a mature and responsible nation and to reach in and examine its own heart”.

Mr Berg added: “Australia’s colonial past includes reprehensible practices and events but there also exist principles of fairness and equity within colonial policy and legislation.

Abortion not a contraception option

Almost two thirds of women over 30 seeking to terminate a pregnancy were using contraception at the time of becoming pregnant, a Flinders University researcher has found.

The study was conducted by Ms Wendy Abigail, a final-year PhD candidate in the School of Nursing and Midwifery looking at fertility management issues of women over 30 prior to a termination of pregnancy, and was published in the Australian Journal of Primary Health.

She surveyed almost 1000 women who presented to Adelaide’s largest clinic between 1996 and 2006 about their contraception practices.

Her study also found that, overall, 90 per cent of women left the clinic with some form of contraception.

“This study dispels the myth that women over 30 are using termination as another form of contraception,” Ms Abigail said.

“They are taking measures to manage their fertility, whether they’re using natural family planning, barrier methods or hormone methods of contraception,” she said.

“But contraception can fail. The Pill may not be effective if the woman has diarrhoea or vomiting. Condoms can break.”

And as women get into the older reproductive age group, their patterns of fertility aren’t always as easy to recognise. So they may successfully have been using natural planning methods for 10 years and all of a sudden it hasn’t worked.”

Termination of pregnancy, Ms Abigail said, was often a last resort.

“While our survey was purely quantitative, these data do not support the commonly held view that women are irresponsible with contraception usage,” she said.

“Women don’t think, ‘I’ll just get a termination if anything goes wrong’. It’s an inconvenience and it’s emotionally draining.”

Ms Abigail said she hoped the research would lead to the development of health promotion activities to cater for the over-30 age group.

Issues

Fairness and equity could provide a just future

It is clear that in 2010 the position of Aboriginal people in South Australia falls far short of the promises made by the Crown and the Colonization Commissioners in 1836.”

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Frisbee buffs on their way to Prague titles

Joel Pillar isn’t fazed by the gags about Frisbees, dogs and beach sand – he’s heard them all before.

While he will admit that the famous flying disc’s popularity has “hippy roots” in 1960s US college culture, Joel is in no doubt that the worldwide competitive team version of Frisbee throwing known as “Ultimate” is a serious sport.

Next month, the Flinders final-year Bachelor of Commerce (Honours) student will lead a 23-member mixed team, “Smurf”, as captain/coach to the World Ultimate Club Championships in Prague.

“Smurf” is made up of the best players in South Australia, drawn from the six domestic clubs,” Joel said.

“It’s the only South Australian team and only one of three Australian mixed teams going to Prague, where there will be 160 teams and 5000 athletes,” Joel said.

Training is underway in earnest, with three team sessions and up to 15 individual sessions per week.

“Ultimate is a really physical sport and it requires a lot of athleticism: running, jumping, diving. Every team member is expected to do throwing, running, gym, plyometric and stretching sessions,” he said.

Ultimate has been described as a mixture of American football and netball. Played on a pitch resembling a rugby field, the two seven-person teams aim to score points by getting the Frisbee into their forward end zone.

At around 193cm, Joel and fellow Flinders Frisbee devotee Brett Middleton are “receivers” – similar to tall forwards in AFL parlance – who play “down the end zones, taking ‘screamers’”.

Joel’s younger sister, Sarah – another Flinders student – is a “handler”, someone who tries to play around the disc, throwing off quick passes (similar to an AFL midfielder).

“Sarah will put up a 70 metre ‘huck’ and Brett or I will go up and ‘sky’ someone to grab the disc,” Joel said.

In the 10 years since Joel first played Ultimate, he has seen the sport grow in South Australia from six players to more than 300.

He is currently President of the South Australian Flying Disc Association and has been President of the Flinders Fury team. He’s keen to see children develop an interest in Ultimate.

“We don’t have umpires. Ultimate relies on a concept we call ‘spirit of the game’. You have to respect your opponent and work things out by negotiation. It’s one reason school physical education (PE) teachers are now running Ultimate as part of their programs,” Joel said.

“That’s really a growth area for us.”

Vincent Ciccarello

Mentors for elite student athletes

Recipients of the 2010 Flinders University Sporting Scholarships will also have the benefit of a new mentoring program that enlists the experience of former student athletes who have graduated or are in postgraduate study.

Ms Sue Wells, Development and Marketing co-ordinator for Flinders Campus Community Services, said the idea behind the Sporting Scholarships is to assist elite athletes in successfully combining their sporting and academic ambitions. The new mentoring initiative extends this aim by setting up a database of volunteer mentors, giving current student athletes access to practical advice from sporting veterans.

“Coping with the demanding training and competition schedule demanded by participation in elite sport requires not only dedication from the athlete, but also support systems around them to enable the best possible outcome in both spheres,” Ms Wells said.

All the recipients of the 2010 Sporting Scholarships have represented Australia in some capacity, and include middle distance runner and national junior record holder Richard Everest as well as Australian representatives in volleyball and beach volleyball (William Mercer), waterpolo (Lisa Callahan), and kayaking and canoeing (Chad Alston).

The scholarships, which are funded by student services organisation Flinders One and the Australian Sports Commission, provide the athletes free access to Flinders’ sporting facilities, and also offer some financial assistance to attend the annual University Games and national level competitions. Three full scholarships, five half scholarships and three facilities-only scholarships have been awarded in 2010.

Flinders is also a member of the Elite Athlete Friendly University Network, a program that supports student athletes with the demands on their time by negotiating a range of flexible study arrangements.

Charles Gent
Making it real with photography

Steven Duncan says he is a teacher first and a photographer second, but that any extra skill you can take into the classroom always goes down well.

Steven, who is just about to complete his Masters in Education (Primary/Junior Primary) at Flinders, calls himself an amateur, but his extraordinary picture of the night sky has beaten hundreds of professional entries to win Gold in the Science Environment and Nature Category of the 2010 Canon Australian Institute of Professional Photography’s National Photography Awards.

A specialist language teacher, Steve only took up photography “seriously” about five years ago. He uses it as a weekend job and hobby, and is only too happy to show off his skills to his school students. While photography is not formally taught in primary school, he says the students are keen to learn about the elements of composition and are fascinated both by the technology and the results.

“As a teacher, it’s nice to have a second string – I guess it makes you seem a bit more real,” Steven said.

Steven’s winning photo of the Spit Point lighthouse at Airey’s Inlet in Victoria with the Milky Way as a backdrop was taken using a 90-second exposure. The illumination of the lighthouse by car headlights was, he said, “just luck”.

The photograph will be part of a national touring exhibition of the winning entries.

Charles Gent

Witness the power of the print

The images may be confined to black and white, but there are few limits to the evocative power of the prints that make up Divinity, Death and Nature, the current exhibition at Flinders City Gallery.

Featuring an extraordinary breadth of technique and expression, the prints, all selected from the University’s Art Museum collection, show the work of artists from across six centuries and range in subject and mood from the contemplative to the brutal. Great European exponents of the techniques of woodcut and engraving such as Durer and Goya are on show alongside the work of major Australian printmakers.

The exhibition runs until June 27 in the Flinders City Gallery in the State Library building on North Terrace, Adelaide.

Charles Gent

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