

WATER WARS: THE MURRAY DARLING BASIN AND VANDANA SHIVA

By Sue Jackson

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In 1865, the Surveyor General, George Goyder, rode 5,000 kilometres on horseback through outback South Australia collecting information for prospective farmers about rainfall patterns. The boundary line he drew across the map of his home state distinguishing suitable from unsuitable land for agriculture has proved amazingly accurate over the intervening years.

Yet, as the homestead ruins and ghost towns amid the salt bush to the north of 'Goyder's Line' attest, many of the surveyor's contemporaries ignored his warnings, some dubbing the boundary Goyder's Line of Foolery. And, ever since, others have followed in the footsteps of the misguided pioneers establishing orchards, vineyards, wheat fields and a rice industry above the line, all dependent on water from the Murray river.

But as Goyder predicted, in this the driest continent on earth (and getting hotter and drier), agriculture above the line was never a long-term prospect. And the cost to the whole Murray-Darling Basin (MDB) area - irrevocable de-salination, imperilled ecosystems and disfigured rivers - is incalculable.

An historical perspective is only one of the crucial dimensions lacking in the most parochial and a-contextual of battles – the MDB consultations. The other omission is any real global perspective.

Increasing numbers of people, for reasons of social justice, oppose the very idea that fresh water should be for sale. In 2007, this view received mainstream support when Maude Barlow, world-renowned Canadian activist and co-author of the acclaimed *Blue Gold: The Fight to Stop Corporate Theft of the World's Water* (New York: The New Press, 2002) was appointed to the newly-created position of United Nation's Senior Adviser on Water Issues, working directly with the President of the General Assembly.

Addressing the UN on the crucial issue of who owns water, Barlow stated unequivocally: 'It must be commonly understood that water is not first and foremost a commercial good, although of course it has an economic dimension, but rather, a human right and a public trust.'

Uruguay had already acted on this principle when in 2004 it became the first country in the world to pass a referendum affirming that water is a fundamental constitutional and human right. As a result, the multi-national corporations that had been selling Uruguay's water were forced to leave the country.

Another important first for South America was the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth (CMPCC) held in Bolivia in April this year. The conference attracted more than 15,000 people from 150 countries, including heads of state, activists, many indigenous people and even some Hollywood celebrities.

CMPCC was staged in the small town of Tiquipaya, the site of the 'water war' that helped sweep President Evo Morales to power. In reaction to what he deemed the abject failure at Copenhagen, Morales opened the conference with the shout 'Planeta o Muerte!' (Planet or Death). Presenter after presenter urged that only by prioritising the environment over all else, particularly economic concerns, has our species any chance of

survival. No doubt the UN meeting on Climate Change, scheduled for November 2010 in Cancun Mexico, was on everyone's minds.

One of the speakers in Tiquipaya was the Indian environmental activist, Vandana Shiva, currently in Australia to accept the Sydney Peace Prize. A nuclear physicist by training, Shiva decided over twenty-five years ago to commit ten years to environmental activism, but is still hard at it.

Shiva is the founder of 'Ecofeminism', a philosophical approach that unites feminism and environmentalism under the same banner. It challenges us to locate ourselves as part of nature, rather than above it, and encourages a deep respect for the needs of other species and nature itself. Shiva was awarded the prestigious peace prize for her 'courageous leadership of movements for social justice – the empowerment of women in developing countries, advocacy of the human rights of small farming communities and for her scientific analysis of environmental sustainability'.

Speaking last Friday on her Melbourne detour, Shiva opened with the declaration: 'What is freedom? Whose freedom? This is the defining issue of our times. The freedom of rivers, of the sea, of every form of life, including people, are part of the same long continuum.' With that principle in mind, she added: 'On the basis of current usage, the Murray is dying. Mankind is killing the river with dams, diversions and extractions.'

Shiva is no stranger to battles over water. In 2002, she was influential in the successful campaign to resist privatization of water from 'Mother Ganges'. 'We want water to be a commons, a public good, not to be privatised. For most of the world, not only is water not a commodity, it is sacred.' For Shiva it is a no-brainer that the carnage

in Australia's iconic river system has to stop immediately: 'We have higher laws to obey – the laws of the earth and the laws of justice'.

Shiva suggested that although many Australians are panicking at the impact of climate change, especially the unpredictability of the weather and the increased aridity, our situation is not necessarily hopeless. Provided we don't go on as we are. If we accept the necessity for change, all might still be well.

The only solution, Shiva believes, is a radical paradigm and practical shift - the embracing of ecological, organic farming. Shiva is eminently qualified to make this assertion as the organisation she founded, Navdanya, has now trained more than half a million Indian farmers in sustainable agriculture. She argues that organic farming, which uses less water and promotes 10–20% more water retention in soils, can in fact become a 'climate solution'. She also suggests that it is simply more productive, particularly when measured on the 'health per acre' scale, that is, how much nutritional food per acre is produced. On the other hand, industrialised farming, which requires huge amounts of water and is highly destructive to the environment, she believes, must become a thing of the past.

Shiva is certainly not the first commentator to be astonished that, for a continent with such low rainfall, vast tracts of our land have been dedicated to rice growing. She recommended we seek out crops that need little water, including some varieties of Indian millet.

A final wry observation made by Shiva was that 'tourism is where you go to seek what you have destroyed at home'. Perhaps a revitalised MDB, with the rivers returned to

their former glory, would open up rich and unimagined local tourism opportunities and create rafts of green jobs.

Goyder was ridiculed by some, ignored by others and pilloried by those bent on pursuing their economic interests at any cost. He stood by the line he had drawn in the sand, and his prescience is now widely acknowledged. Today's champions of the environment, like Vandana Shiva, who are drawing their own lines in the sand, often provoke similar reactions. It is not hard to imagine the reception Shiva's suggestions might get at a typical MDB consultation. Yet we ignore experience from the past and the rest of the world at our peril.