

Local government and The Living Murray

The Living Murray program was established in 2002 in response to evidence that the health of the River Murray system is in decline. The Living Murray's first stage focuses on improving the environment at six 'icon sites' along the River.

The sites were chosen for their high ecological value—most are listed as internationally significant wetlands under the Ramsar¹ convention—and also their cultural significance to Indigenous people and the broader community. They are:

- Barmah-Millewa Forest
- Gunbower-Koondrook-Perricoota Forest
- Hattah Lakes
- Chowilla Floodplain and Lindsay-Wallpolla islands
- Lower Lakes, Coorong and Murray Mouth
- River Murray Channel.

The key to The Living Murray is to find a balance between social, economic, cultural and environmental interests to ensure fair and equitable results. It is essential that those communities and individuals with an interest in managing land and water resources, and who are likely to be most affected, participate directly in implementing The Living Murray. This includes local government.

Natural resource management

The Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council has long recognised the importance of engaging local government in managing the Basin's natural resources. In fact, local government played a key role in establishing the Community Advisory Committee (CAC) in 1986. This Committee provides advice to the Ministerial Council on natural resource management issues and community views in the Basin. Local government is represented on the CAC through the Australian Local Government Association and the Murray Darling Association, a consortium of 100 councils across the Murray-Darling Basin.

In recent years, local government organisations along the Murray have taken a growing interest in the environmental health of the River. A decline in its health can have a significant impact on community and economic activity, which in turn impacts on the services that local government can deliver.



Local government representatives participating in a study tour of Coorong. Photo: Murray Darling Association.

Local government is the key land-use planner, and each year invests millions of dollars in managing the environment at the local level. This growing interest was reflected in a scoping study undertaken by the Murray Darling Association in 2003, which identified local government's increasing role in natural resource management.

In 2003, six workshops were run by the Murray Darling Association along the River Murray to assess local government and community responses to The Living Murray. While responses were mixed, there was an overwhelming belief that something had to be done about the state of the River and its tributaries. The Association then conducted a national conference for local government on environmental flows, to develop a greater understanding of, and involvement in, healthy working rivers.

In the same year, a consortium of councils—the Local Government Living Murray Alliance—undertook a socio-economic study of the anticipated impacts of The Living Murray on communities in the central Murray region. This study is available from the Murray Darling Association.

Community Reference Group

The Living Murray Community Reference Group was established in 2004 to provide community advice on implementing The Living Murray. A number of representatives on the Group come from local government. This Group reports to the Community Advisory Committee which considers this advice and communicates it to The Living Murray Committee, the Murray-Darling Basin Commission and its Ministerial Council.

Murray Darling Association partnership

The Living Murray is relevant to the entire Murray-Darling Basin and provides a template for river health for all catchments. It requires an effective partnership between community and government that is based on understanding and cooperation, which includes local government.

The Murray Darling Association has represented local government across the Murray-Darling Basin for over 62 years and has a membership of over 100 local government councils.

Under an agreement with the Murray-Darling Basin Commission, the Murray Darling Association will help to ensure the flow of information about The Living Murray to local government is improved. This will include bus tours for local government councillors and staff to icon sites, reporting to councils on implementing The Living Murray, and reporting on the activities of The Living Murray Community Reference Group.

This partnership approach will ensure that local government continues to have an active role in implementing The Living Murray.

For further information about the Murray Darling Association's involvement in The Living Murray, contact:

Ray Najar in Adelaide on (08) 8226 4407
Adrian Wells in Albury on (02) 6021 3655
Jo Haw in Barham on 0427 376 157

Information is also available on the following websites:

www.thelivingmurray.mdbc.gov.au
www.mda.asn.au

Engaging young people

The Murray Darling Association will also conduct youth forums along the Murray and Darling Rivers to help young people understand and contribute to The Living Murray program. Programs here will include incorporating The Living Murray information into education material, as well as involving students in the development of work books, posters and stickers.

Recent youth forums run by the Association at Cohuna, Swan Hill and Corowa enabled students to propose solutions for improving the health of their stretch of the River Murray. Ideas included seeking landholder advice on improving irrigation plans, placing more snags (fallen trees and branches) in the River, adding finer filters to pollutant traps, and holding local environment days.

Using the Association to consult with young people is a particularly exciting challenge, as young people offer a fresh perspective to managing land and water resources.



Gannawarra Shire representatives meet with local students at Kerang during Book Week.
Photo: Gannawarra shire.

Keeping a balance

Local government is the closest level of government to the community. Many communities along the River Murray are highly dependent on irrigation and its associated industries. While ensuring that the health of the River is improved, local government has a role to ensure that this is not achieved at the expense of regional communities. Keeping a balance between a healthy River and viable communities continues to be a goal of paramount importance for local government.

Other fact sheets in this series

- Our unique icon sites
- Protecting and improving the icon sites
- Market-based water recovery
- Infrastructure improvements to recover water
- Communities and The Living Murray
- Construction and other activity.

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¹ *Ramsar* is an international treaty that focuses on the conservation of internationally important wetlands. The convention was signed in 1971 at a meeting in the town of Ramsar, in Iran.

Murray-Darling Basin Commission

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