

Do environmental flows in Australia have a public relations problem?

Dr Paula Hanasz

Methodology

- Source: The Australian
- Date range: 6 October 2000 - 2 August 2018
- Search term: environmental flow/s
- Number of individual records found: 385 (including 22 letters to the editor)
- Total number of occurrences:
 - Environmental flow/s: 530
 - Environmental water: 49 (searched only within records also containing 'environmental flow/s')

Quantitative insights

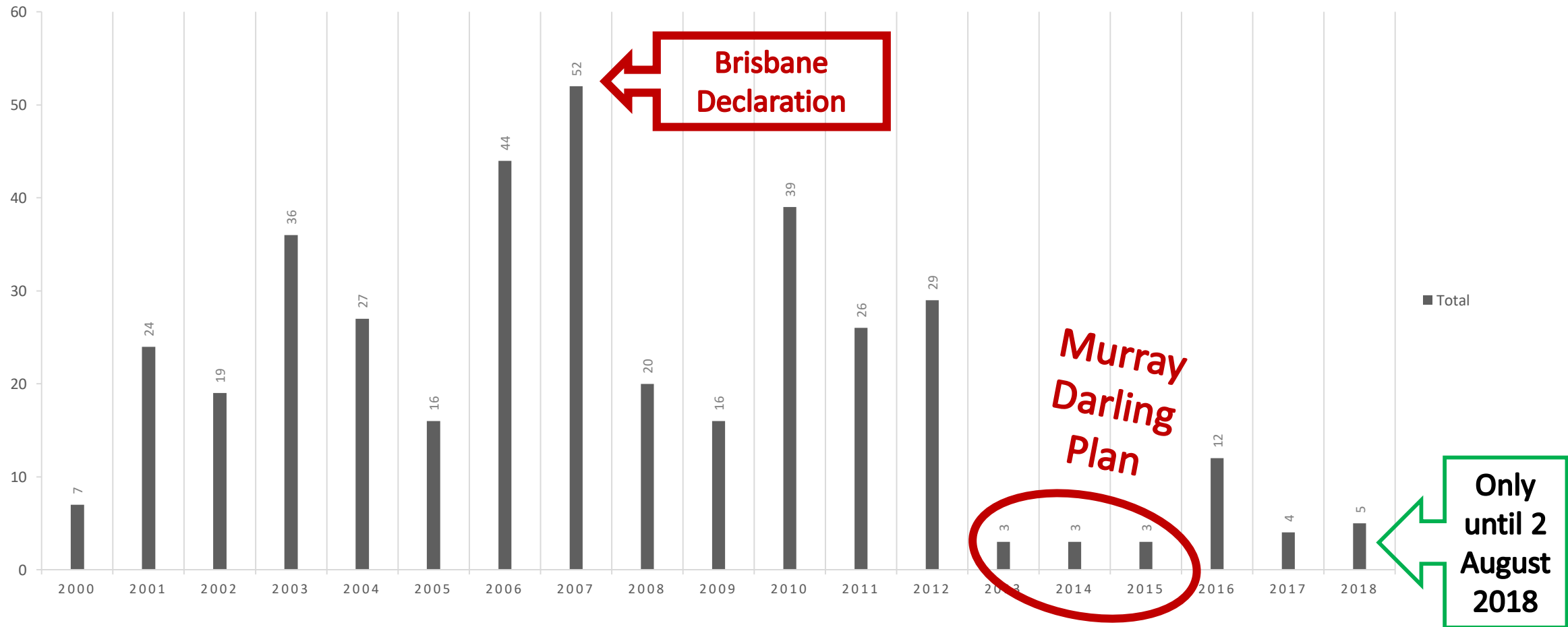
Irrigation (458 instances)

- Irrigator/s: 480
- Farmer/s: 564
- Irrigation: 458
- Crop/s: 111
- Rice: 77
- Cattle: 27
- Pasture: 7
- Orchard: 6

Environment (357 instances)

- Environment: 256
- Ecolog*: 73
- River health: 26
- Ecosystem (NOT ecosystem services): 23
- Environmental services: 3
- Ecosystem services: 2

Number of articles in The Australian containing “environmental flow/s”



Observations

- Since 2013, reporting has focused on conflicts between Commonwealth and state governments
- The narrative is framed as false dichotomy between irrigators and environmentalists
- There is no acknowledgement of the ecosystem or value of ecosystem services
- The national interest is assumed to be only economic
- When reporting directly about environmental flows, primacy is given to potentially negative consequences

Textual analysis 1

Environmental flows panelist, Jamie Pittock, said damming and pumping water from the Murray-Darling had turned the ecosystem “upside-down”.

In nature, water levels are lower in summer due to decreased rainfall. But winter rains stored in dams are released in the warmer months to ensure plenty of water is available for farm irrigation.

This means water levels actually become higher in warmer months, throwing native species into confusion. “The Redgum forests are dying because they rely on some floods to help the seeds generate, but they also need dry periods because they die if their feet get too wet,” Pittock said.

He said **people wrongly assume high water levels are a sign of a healthy river**: “It needs to have periods of high flows and low flows. When the water is low, plants grow on the flood plains, so when it floods, it provides food for the fish.”

What's known as ‘thermal pollution’ is another side-effect of damming. Water released from dams usually comes from the bottom, where it is much cooler. The cooler water can interfere with the breeding patterns of native fish up to 300km from where it is released.

“The Murray cod are confused creatures,” Pittock said. “They normally know when to swim upstream and breed when the water is the right temperature. Their numbers have crashed, and 90 per cent of the fish are now feral European carp. **One of the solutions is to build uptake pipes which will pump out the warmer water from the top of the dams first.**”

High price for messing with natural flows, 24/08/2007, p. 35

Textual analysis 2

One of the nation's biggest, **most expensive** environment programs, the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, has **inadvertently** created perfect breeding conditions for Australia's worst freshwater pest: the European carp. The **destructive** fish have **invaded** almost every branch of the Murray-Darling river system in the past 50 years, their numbers increasing dramatically during natural flooding in the 1970s and 1990s and in the past decade **after authorities released environmental flows**, flooding wetlands to save bird habitats and river red gums.

Just add water 'a recipe for carp invasion'

by Rachel Baxendale, 21/04/2016

Textual analysis 3

Barkindji elder Badger Bates fears its **water is being controlled more and flowing less**, and that its complex natural wetlands and flood systems such as the five Menindee Lakes risk being disconnected from the river **in the name of irrigation water savings upstream**. “They talk about water sharing and **controlled environmental flows; these words are foreign to my people**,” Bates says. “We are not sheep; if we are going to protect the Barka as is our traditional responsibility and keep our culture, we need natural small flows like we have had for ever; at Wilcannia there is no flow right now and if that is called water sharing, then we have nothing of that share.” With the Darling already only ankle-deep and slowing on Tolarno Station, McBride admits to increasing cynicism about how **big business appears to be manipulating the Murray-Darling Basin Plan**. “You look at the huge amount of cotton being grown up north around Bourke and there seems no shortage of water; and yet here on the Lower Darling we are on blue-algae alert and being warned the river will run dry,” she says. “**The politicians seem to think the river stops at Bourke and their responsibility ends there too.**”

When the river runs dry, cry for the future

By Sue Neales, 17/02/2018

Conclusions

- Environmental flows in The Australian do have a PR problem
 - ‘the environment’ is pitted against farmers
 - Environmentalism is a dirty word
 - There is little understanding of ecosystem services
- What should we do?
 - Write up/talk publicly about something you learned at this conference
 - Befriend a journo
 - Communicate more
 - Communicate better – engage with audiences other than just readers of The Conversation
- How to talk about environmental flows
 - Explain complex issues with concrete examples, not jargon
 - Understand your audience – are you trying to persuade or inform them?
 - Emphasise the highest common denominator – we all have an interest in a healthy ecosystem
 - Avoid politicised or emotive terms (NB: these will be different for different audiences)

 @paulahanasz