

Preface

This book is about the values, the people and the many ‘battles’ (including those to come) over sustainability of Lake Eyre Basin rivers. I am passionate about these rivers and their incredible environmental dimensions. I have had the privilege of visiting many parts of the Basin, often during aerial surveys of waterbirds and when working with ABC TV crews, including the indefatigable Paul Lockyer, who tragically died with his colleagues on the edge of Lake Eyre. I have also come to know the remarkable people who care about the Basin, particularly those on the committees I have served on. These include Traditional Owners with their long connection with the rivers on which they rely for survival, reflected in the rich tapestry of dreamtime stories. Many other people depend on flooding of the Lake Eyre Basin rivers and all Australians appreciate the incredible wildlife response on display during floods. Much of the impetus for this book came from concern about making sure we don’t repeat the mistakes of the past in this great place. Various people, often supported by governments, have tried to develop the rivers of the Lake Eyre Basin. The environmental and social consequences, particularly those in the nearby Murray–Darling Basin, are all too well known.

The catalyst for this book was a conference held in Longreach, Queensland, in February 2013, when once again the rivers were under threat from policies of the Liberal National Party Government (2012–15). Most of the contributors to this book were there, presenting their view of their river – views informed by different lifetimes and experiences but fertile in variation. Most are deeply connected to the river basin, and many depend on the free-flowing rivers for their livelihoods. It struck me that few of these people had had an opportunity to tell their stories of why they care so deeply about the future of the Lake Eyre Basin rivers. An equally powerful theme of the conference was provided by river people from the Murray–Darling Basin. Their experiences of development on their rivers provided powerful cautionary tales of a potential future for Lake Eyre Basin rivers. And so this book began.

There followed a long journey, first involving recording speakers’ passionate talks. I subsequently worked with each person, many with relatively little experience of writing, making sure that their written word captured their thoughts, knowledge and experience of Lake Eyre Basin rivers. My aim is that their collective story will help everyone understand what is at stake and keep these magnificent rivers and floodplains flowing freely, unencumbered by dams and diversions. The book is not intended to be a comprehensive account of relevant environmental, cultural or socio-economic issues, but I hope it captures the essence of current and likely future debate about the sustainability of the magnificent rivers of the Lake Eyre Basin. It is fitting in the foreword that the three leaders of the Northern Territory, Queensland and South Australia, where the rivers of the Lake Eyre Basin run, acknowledge these values and recognise the critical role that their governments play in the future sustainability of the rivers of the Lake Eyre Basin.

This means protecting the natural cycles of the rivers and their water, on which all living things depend on. Water is scarce in the Lake Eyre Basin in the heart of Australia,

with an average of less than 500 mm of rainfall each year. Sometimes water comes in a rush or flood, driven by intense rainfall in the catchments of the mighty rivers of the Lake Eyre Basin – Cooper Creek, the Diamantina and Georgina Rivers – and the many smaller tributaries such as Eyre Creek, Mulligan River and Neales River. I have tried to capture the ‘difficult’ word of sustainability through three sections in this book: a description of the Lake Eyre Basin environment; the social, cultural and economic dimensions; and, finally, looking after the rivers.

In 2014, a partnership of people from the Lake Eyre Basin, including many of those who contributed to this book, won the Australian Riverprize in recognition of their effective protection of this wonderful river system. The following year, there was global recognition when the international community awarded the Lake Eyre Basin partnership the International Riverprize – the first time this had ever happened for protecting a river. This basin and its rivers are a national treasure in all dimensions, recognised globally. It’s incumbent on all of us to keep it this way.