

Clean green beef – the importance of free-flowing rivers in the Lake Eyre Basin

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Introduction

My wife Nell and I, with our family, own and operate 30 000 km² of certified organic farms for beef production in the pristine Channel Country, on the floodplains of the Georgina and Diamantina Rivers. The floodplains, covering ~50 000 ha, are the most productive part of our properties (Fig. 11.1). The bush poet Colleen McLaughlin beautifully captured the essence of our Diamantina country as well as our lives and sentiments in her poem ‘Song of the River’ (McLaughlin 2006).

Song of the River – Colleen McLaughlin (2006)

I am swinging to the northward, I am curving to the south,
I am spreading, I am splitting, running free.
I am creeping past the sandhills, going steady as the land fills,
For all my channels lie ahead of me.
Through the grasslands and the mulga, past the rocks, eroded bare,
I will cover up the secrets buried deep.
For if man thinks he can beat me, I will tell him, come and meet me,
But the signs to show the way are mine to keep.
Because I’m Diamantina, and I rule the great outback.
I’m its heartbeat, I’m its keeper, it’s my land.
With my channels full and flowing, and the grasses, green and growing,
I’m the power that man must learn to understand.
I will take your heart and hold it. I will commandeer your soul –
If you listen to my voice and stand up tall.
If you can hear me singing, and your answer comes back ringing,
Then I’ll know that you have recognised my call.
For this is my direction, as the sovereign of this land,
You must learn to read the rhythm of its ways.
If you want to know and share it, do not take its heart and tear it,
For I’ll tell you now – the loser always pays.
Listen hard – I’m Diamantina – and the sand hills and the plains
Need my water as their lifeblood – it’s my land.
Should my channels cease their flowing, then with dusty, dry winds blowing,
I know you have not learned to understand.



Fig. 11.1. The incredibly productive floodplains of the Georgina and Diamantina Rivers are the lifeblood for our livestock grazing, with periodic flooding providing boom periods when we can produce prime quality organic beef for export (photo, R. T. Kingsford).

The river system

This is what this river means to us; we cannot do without it. We care for our land, the Lake Eyre Basin and the Channel Country rivers, and we manage these systems sustainably, generating an income but also looking after the country and its rivers. The rivers flow through inland Queensland to Lake Eyre and South Australia. With their expanding floodplains and adjoining fertile land, they have long been home to Indigenous families, outback settlements, towns and a highly respected cattle and sheep production industry. The big rivers flow south, taking their water from areas with high rainfall into our dry country (Fig. 11.1). Where we live, the Georgina, Burke and Hamilton Rivers join below the town of Boulia to become Eyre Creek. This spreads out into a magnificent expanse of floodplain. Further east, there is the Diamantina River, which flows past my hometown of Birdsville, and the Thomson and Barcoo Rivers join to become Cooper Creek, north of Windorah.

In 2006, our country was in the middle of one of our worst droughts in the last hundred years but, during March, Cyclone Larry crossed the coast of Queensland, devastating coastal settlements and agriculture. The cyclone then moved across northern Australia to the Georgina catchment where it rained heavily, producing a mighty river which made its way slowly south. This water gave much needed relief to all the cattle properties and the small towns, including Boulia, all the way to Kati Thanda-Lake Eyre. This water in the Georgina catchment reached our cattle property in the middle of May and filled Muncoonie Lake in early September. It still had about another 300 km to go to Kati Thanda-Lake Eyre, filling

channels and floodplains along the way and providing nutrients. If this river's flow was diverted or changed, then the river would not reach all the places in the catchment it flows to now.

Livestock production

The famous Australian stockman, Sir Sidney Kidman, recognised the productivity of the rivers for cattle in the early 20th century and established a chain of stations along the mid to lower floodplains of these rivers where the country is most fertile. These rivers sustain Indigenous Australians (see Chapters 8 and 9) and the animals and plants they have relied on for tens of thousands of years (see Chapter 1). My family and many others have followed this productive path in the footsteps of Kidman. I was brought up on one of these properties. Following the early explorers, small settlements and livestock production were established along these rivers. The next wave arrived when access roads were opened up and visitors began to experience the outback.

In the early 1990s, Prime Minister Paul Keating declared an intention by the federal government to nominate the Lake Eyre Basin of South Australia as a World Heritage site (see Chapter 7) and we were advised that grazing would not be permitted. An intense period of political lobbying followed, finally defeating the initiative. This galvanised the community. We needed to demonstrate that we were good stewards of the Lake Eyre Basin rivers, receiving benefits from this amazing environment but also managing for sustainability (see Chapter 7). Food and water are among the most important issues of today and we rely on both. We produce high-quality beef from our cattle, relying on the floods that produce a 'boom' in the pasture. Our production faces challenges, particularly the 'boom and bust' nature of our country and the long distances to our markets. In 1995, a group of cattle producers formed the Organic Beef Export Company and focused on marketing our sustainable production as 'clean and green'. We began production in 1998, producing ~10 000 kg a week, and today we have increased eightfold, producing 80 000 kg per week, from 15 properties covering 6–8 million ha, mostly in the Lake Eyre Basin.

We focus strongly on sustainable cattle production (Fig. 11.2). We have no need for and do not use growth promotants, drenches for parasites, fertilisers or supplementary feeding. We are officially certified as organic. We also look after our cattle on the way to their markets, feeding them organic hay during resting stops. We avoid overgrazing of our country by shifting our cattle away during the dry times so that vegetation can recover quickly after rains. This continues to pay dividends. Our organic product commands an extra 50 cents a kilogram in the markets, generally 15–20% but sometimes as much as 50% above the market price. We have regular visits from our buyers, inspecting the sustainability of our operations. Certified organic beef is now an established line in supermarkets and hamburger chains in Australia and around the world. We export to Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Middle East, North America, Indonesia, Singapore and Taiwan. Demand is far outstripping supply.

In Australia, organic beef production has nearly tripled between 2004 and 2012 (Monk *et al.* 2012), increasing by 127% between 2011 and 2014, more than doubling to be worth \$198 million (Australian Organic Ltd 2014). I believe that in the future Australia will be the



Fig. 11.2. Organic cattle production from the floodplains of the Lake Eyre Basin rivers is a long-term sustainable industry which commands a premium but would be threatened by development of rivers and reduction in flooding (photo, D. Brook).

world's most important country for organic beef produce. Consumers choose to purchase organic products because they are chemical-free, nutritious and tasty. Organic products may provide children with their best building blocks for a healthy life, particularly pleasing for me as an organic producer. We also market the Channel Country of the Lake Eyre Basin, the people and tourism to the world. This concept is not new. The wine industry adopts a similar approach, marketing regions and wines in Australia, including the highly successful Hunter Valley, Barossa Valley and Margaret River. We can do more here in the Channel Country of the Lake Eyre Basin. We already have a good identity.

Sustainability

Resource degradation is increasingly an international, national and local concern. I liken our Lake Eyre Basin to the great natural icons of Australia; we need to look after it in the same way as we look after them. Think of Sydney's magnificent harbour with its bridge and Opera House, or Uluru. Damage to these national treasures would cause uproar and substantially affect environmental and economic sustainability, particularly tourism. The Lake Eyre Basin is an icon of our country and the world (see Chapter 7). It is a large area with a large range of values respected and exploited by people for generations. It has great rivers, cultural history and even the Great Artesian Basin, one of the world's greatest underground water sources.

The Lake Eyre Basin has oil and gas resources (see Chapter 19), bush tracks, wildlife and blue skies that draw visitors (see Chapter 13). Wise use of these resources is essential if we are to benefit in the long term from this special environment. We have to plan well. The people of the Lake Eyre Basin are not demanding massive developments and so there should be no rush to exploit the values that are special to all of us. It is all about wise use. What is wise use? Is it measured in money or sustainability? High-value mining resources are generally extracted over a short period of time (see Chapter 19), whereas beef production and tourism deliver low to medium value over generations. All industries need to be sustainable with appropriate regulation to ensure there is no damage to the Lake Eyre Basin (see Chapter 22). We still want visitors from here, other parts of Australia and overseas to be able to experience the incredible diversity of our country for centuries to come.

Governments need to protect the values of the Lake Eyre Basin river systems, particularly the Channel Country rivers. It is critical that the rivers be allowed to flow uninterrupted, following their natural behaviour. Water management plans guided by scientific knowledge need to adequately protect the rivers (see Chapter 22). Downstream habitats and values cannot survive if we divert, diminish or corrupt the free-flowing nature of our rivers. This has allowed a clean and green livestock industry, our organic enterprise, to prosper in one of the drier parts of Australia. It has also fostered a tourism industry, which grows rapidly with improved access. When the great rivers flow to Lake Eyre, they bring unimaginable numbers of bird life and publicity to our region. We need to live in harmony with these values and demonstrate that our industries of livestock production, mining, tourism, towns do not degrade our great environment. All industries have to be clean and green, with a strong sustainability focus. We need to keep it this way.

Conclusion

The Lake Eyre Basin rivers are a long way from intensive agriculture and use of chemicals. The rivers and floodplains of the Channel Country are proving to be ideal for successful organic livestock production. Prices and demand have grown, allowing the industry to become increasingly environmentally and economically sustainable. We continue to brand our industry with this regional identity, also benefiting tourism. My plea is for wise use of our Lake Eyre Basin resources. We already have vibrant and viable agricultural and tourism industries. Those of us who live on the upper reaches of the Lake Eyre Basin understand our rivers. We know how important they are for downstream communities. We must not divert or diminish the volume and quality of water which flows naturally into Lake Eyre. The community in the Lake Eyre Basin can be a world leader in managing this amazing river system for future generations.

References

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