

A life living between a river and a creek

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Introduction

I describe what this river means – from my heart. Cooper Creek is an incredible system, sometimes a creek and other times a raging river. The Cooper is folklore in our home, reflecting the heroics of my father who ‘swam’ 600 bullocks across the flooded Cooper in 1949 on the Birdsville Track (Fig. 12.1). There was a cairn erected to mark this feat, as no one had done it for 30 years. My grandmother chided him about his celebratory photograph in the Adelaide Advertiser: ‘at least you could have had a shave’. My childhood was also coloured by Tom Kruse the mailman, a legendary outback character, who linked our remote communities (Fig. 12.2). I remember going down to dry bed of the Cooper in the 1960s with



Fig. 12.1. The Cooper flows down from south-western Queensland, past the town of Innamincka to fill the Coongie Lakes system, and then flows south to the lower Cooper lakes where the Birdsville Track crosses the river (dry in this photograph from October 2016). The punt (on the left of the photograph) takes cars across the river when it has water. This was near where my father heroically ‘swam’ 600 bullocks across the swollen river in 1949 (photo R. T. Kingsford).



Fig. 12.2. Tom Kruse and his family, the outback mailman, was a legend in the Lake Eyre Basin, connecting communities with his dependable mail deliveries, sometimes delayed by the floods. He was a vivid part of my childhood memory (photo, Kruse Family Collection, <http://www.lastmailfrombirdsville.com>).

my mother, Mrs Kruse and her son Jeffrey to meet the great Tom Kruse. He was late again, delayed by a Cooper flood upstream, and so we had to camp in the dry bed of the Cooper. We came back later to see the floods cut the Birdsville Track and so we had to cross by the Cooper by punt (Fig. 12.1).

My memory is punctuated by flood times. They were markers in my life. I was palpably excited by my next big flood in the 1970s, when I was 19. Then I deeply understood the importance of floods, unencumbered by my early innocence. In the 1970s, our outback community descended on the river, from far and wide, to fish and camp. It was a momentous time. One flood followed another in an incredible sequence of floods that eventually filled Lake Eyre. I was astounded by the magnitude of the flood when I visited the great lake in 1975. It seemed that we were out at sea, speeding across its waves in our boat. I returned in 1977 when I began teaching at Oodnadatta and there was still water in the drying lake, now an amazing pink colour.

Six years later, I was the teacher in the small town of Stonehenge, between the Thomson River and Vergemont Creek, tributaries of the Cooper. Here, the country was different but the floods were just as important, a powerful force shaping our community. I watched the vast 2000 flood in wonder, every morning, as it crept across the floodplain. Sometimes it even made waves. We couldn't move for nine weeks but no one complained.

The river

This river is integral to our lives. It affects us physically and spiritually. Its dry years and flood years determine what we do and how we live. Our stories and memories are woven

together by its booms and busts. Water connects our community from top to bottom, over vast distances. The river's behaviour underpins our myths. For example, Laddie Milson lived on the river for many years and always used to say 'if the river isn't running before Christmas, it is going to be a dry year but if it is, the good times are coming.' For our family, we watch and wonder what happens in Pie Melon Gulley, the tiny creek on our place, feeding the great river. When it rained and rained in 1990, I took my children to the creek where I told them how this water would run into the Thomson River, and then join the Cooper, eventually running into Lake Eyre. Now 20 years later, my children have grown up and live and work on the Cooper and the Diamantina River. Another generation deeply understands the paramount importance of this great river and its floods. I think, learn and care deeply about this river. Increasingly, I have become concerned about its future.

In 2007, I became a member and soon after the chair of the Cooper Creek Catchment Committee, followed by a stint serving on the board of Desert Channels Queensland, the regional natural resource management body (see Chapter 7). Another world opened up for me. Despite living on the river, I was for the first time exposed to its vulnerability, particularly the insidious threat of irrigation, so often sanctioned by water planning. I was appalled by how few checks and balances existed on diversions of the river's precious water. I innocently believed the river that had flowed uninterruptedly for millennia was safe and little could threaten the river I loved. It came as a great surprise to me that no one knew how much water people took from the river. My questions reverberated around our meetings – unanswered. What stopped a person taking more water than their licence allowed if no one measured it? Even if the legal take was exceeded, there was an inconsequential fine – certainly no deterrent. I realised I was not alone. Others continually asked the same probing questions, with equal frustration. There was a strong partnership of fellow custodians (see Chapter 7).

Then everything crystallised when I attended the 2008 conference at Windorah (see Chapter 7), sponsored by the Australian Floodplain Association. People like me, living on the rivers, talked of our collective experience. We heard the sad stories of lost rivers from landholders in the Murray–Darling Basin (see Chapters 14–16). Landholder stories were the same from each of the Macquarie, the Lower Balonne, the Lachlan and Murray Rivers, all experiencing widespread severe damage caused by diversions of precious river water upstream for irrigation. It had had a huge impact on their lives. It showed me how my river could easily be changed forever, affecting the land, people and social fabric of our community. In 2012, the Liberal National Party Government arrived with a new agenda (see Chapter 17). For us, it was on again – the push for small-scale irrigation on the rivers of the Lake Eyre Basin. The government's 'spin doctors' tried to convince us that new technology changed the equation. But you can't make more water. There is a limit to how much water can be diverted before affecting people and environments downstream. Now, there is another 'elephant in the room' – mining (see Chapters 19 and 20). It has a place in our economy and we need it, but this does not give the industry any right to destroy our rivers. We have to have the right policies and regulations in place (see Chapter 22).

Conclusion

Our river is intermittent and fragile. It is one of the last great free-flowing river systems in the world and in good condition. But to us who live and work here, this river means much more. It's our lives and has been for generations; we have to make sure it flows freely for future generations. My family's lives are intertwined with this great river system. Our community is galvanised to protect its future and stop potential damage from increasing diversions of water for irrigation or mining. We all have a great passion for the river, reflected by its tremendous unpredictability. It needs all its flow for its environment and people. We need to protect this mighty river at the level of the entire river basin for our future, and for future generations.