

## Murray-Darling Basin Plan: Five-year assessment

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There has been extensive discussion around the environmental and agricultural implications of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan and its implementation, however, limited attention has been given to assessing the 'amenity' implications of the outcomes from the Plan.

The ecological values of waterways have been rigorously considered, even if agreement on the end point is some way off. The controversies that relate to the relative merits of volumetric environmental interventions (i.e. securing more e-water) versus other fixes seem far from resolved, and this might be expected given these are also influenced by long-standing state rivalries over water.

It is also important to recognise that environmental values are often conflated with the amenity value of waterways and some published research is now emerging on the disaggregation of these values in the context of waterways (Cooper et al. 2017).

This is particularly important because the Plan does not separately address amenity benefits in any meaningful way. Rather, it seems to be the presumption that amenity will simply track with environmental gains.

The discussion about environmental changes, however, has become more nuanced (e.g. system-wide versus assets specific) so additional understanding of the amenity of different changes would likely make for better decisions. For instance, if two interventions are being considered that deliver equivalent environmental outcomes and one uses less water (through complimentary measures), then under current arrangements the low-water-using option will usually be put forward. What is not considered rigorously, however, is whether both options deliver the same amenity.

There is no guarantee that the low-water (or high-water for that matter) option delivers more amenity.

The MDBP boasts that it will ensure "Strong and vibrant communities with sufficient water of a suitable quality for drinking and domestic uses (including in times of drought), *as well as for cultural and recreational purposes*" (MDBA publication number 21/14 – emphasis added). It is not clear how this is being measured, even though there is a possibility that amenity values for some sites will match or better the agricultural or environmental values.

Cooper et al (2016) illustrate how amenity and ecological values can be separately and collectively measured. The study also highlights the complex interaction between these values and the necessity for policy makers to take these complexities into account. There appears to be only limited and ad hoc processes for incorporating all such values into the decisions being made under the auspices of the plan. I would encourage the Commission to encourage a more systematic approach to measuring and including amenity values as part of further implementation.