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Doomed Planet

"Today's debate about global warming is essentially a debate about freedom. The environmentalists would like to mastermind each and every possible (and impossible) aspect of our lives."

Vaclav Klaus
Blue Planet in Green Shackles

Madness on the Murray

by **Walter Starck**

November 3, 2010

On 27 October the Australian Food and Grocery Council released a report showing a foreign trade deficit of \$1.8 billion in foodstuff for 2009-10. For the first time Australia has become a net importer of fresh and processed foods. Coming amidst the current public debate over plans to cut water allocations for irrigation in the Murray Darling Basin (MDB) by about a third or more, the government's approach to resource management has begun to assume an aura of the surreal.

The Murray Darling river system drains a vast arid region with highly variable rainfall over seasonal, annual and decadal time scales. Proxy studies clearly indicate that over recent millennia severe droughts are a recurrent feature of the region and there is nothing about the most recent drought or the historical record to suggest anything unusual regarding an increase in the frequency, duration or severity of droughts.

The net effect of agriculture and grazing in the MDB has been a vast increase in the abundance, diversity and condition of life there. The retention and distributing of runoff water and tapping of underground aquifers has greatly increased the carrying capacity of the land for both domestic and native animals and plants.

The proposal to take away about a third of water now used for irrigation to create artificial "environmental flows" will have negative consequences far greater than any benefits. With or without the proposed environmental flows, the riverine biota will still be governed by episodic periods of devastating drought. The most these artificial flows can achieve is to marginally improve the condition of life in and immediately along the edge of the river for a bit more of each year apart from times of severe drought. However, this small improvement will be an artificial one that never existed in nature and it will come at a much greater reduction in biodiversity over much larger areas which, without irrigation, will have to revert to their natural desert and semi-desert conditions.

The MDB produces about a third of the nation's food and an even larger portion of our fruits, nuts and fresh produce. In the face of increasing costs and restrictions on water use as well as concerns about future supply, MDB farmers have invested heavily in more efficient use. However, after two decades of striving to do more with less, further economically feasible gains are limited. Reducing the water available for irrigation by a further third can be expected to reduce production by a similar proportion.

For an issue that is purportedly driven by environmental concerns, the muddled thinking exhibited by many people who call themselves environmentalists and even some professional ecologists is astounding. Ecology is, above all else, holistic. What we do not get from one place must come from somewhere else or we must do without. To fail to consider where else such an amount of food is going to come from and what impacts will be created elsewhere is ecologically feeble minded.

The historic food trade deficit mentioned above is not just a temporary anomaly. It is a waypoint in a declining trend over the past two decades. Across the spectrum of agriculture, grazing, fisheries and aquaculture the predominant trend in both production and profitability is a declining one. Nowhere is this due to exhaustion of resources. Everywhere, the major cause is ever increasing costs, demands and restrictions imposed by government.

In a theatre of the absurd performance, politicians now debate whether we should aim for a doubling of the population by mid-century or only a 50% increase. If we cannot even fully feed the present population, one wonders how they imagine we will be able to feed that many more. Even a cursory examination of the situation reveals little possibility of further expansion. This is not because none exists but because regulation prevents it. Tree clearing prohibitions have our best grazing land being overtaken by low biodiversity eucalypt scrub doomed to eventual ecological holocaust in high intensity bushfires. Restrictions on removing native vegetation and water use prevent any significant expansion of farmland. In fisheries limited licences, quotas, a vast expansion of no-take Marine Protected Areas and a faith-based, evidence free, belief that our pathetically small harvest is already at or beyond the limit of sustainability all preclude any further expansion in that area. Aquaculture, which elsewhere is the fastest growing food producing sector in the world, has been declining here for several years after hardly getting started before regulatory demands and uncertainties made it economically prohibitive.

Beyond the prohibitions preventing any significant expansion in food production, there is also a growing morass of costs, restrictions and demands which are strangling the economic viability of existing producers. At recent trajectories the average profitability of farming is set to become zero sometime around the middle of the coming decade. In the meantime, a recent OECD survey has found that over the past decade the increase in food prices in Australia has been the highest in the developed world at double the average rate.

Add to this are the highest level of personal debt in the world and the highest house prices. Then load on high and rising costs for petrol, electricity, water, automobiles, clothing, health care and interest rates. Most families are already struggling to meet the cost of living. The food shortages and price increases certain to quickly result from taking a third of the MDB out of production are set to be a king hit to the entire economy. A wave of mortgage defaults and collapse of the real estate prices will almost surely be collateral damage. Then, with 60% of their assets based on inflated real estate, the banks will be in trouble. In short, the whole debt-based house of cards we call an economy could go bust, not just a few farmers.

All this is not just something that might happen someday. It already is. In a news item on last night's evening report a welfare agency estimated that about a third of Sydney families are now suffering from financial stress and they are seeing increasing numbers who are beginning to miss eating some meals because they can no longer afford the cost of food. However, the miasma of eco-delusion is too thick for reason and evidence to be seen. It seems that only some sharp shock of pain can penetrate, so a crisis sooner rather than later may be the best thing.

Over the past century the massive increase in productivity made possible by technological advance and the exploitation of cheap abundant fossil fuels has, for the first time in history, fostered the development of a society in which a majority of the population can live without producing anything. It seems increasingly doubtful that one-person/one-vote democracy in its present form can survive for long with a parasitic majority.

However, it also appears that without fundamental new discoveries in energy technology, the era of cheap abundant energy is coming to a close. When sustaining ourselves begins to require something more than just voting to make others provide for us, nonsense notions about things like "Saving the Murray" will quickly become a luxury we can no longer afford. Such illusions are set to soon be severely tested against reality.

The next few years are going to be challenging ones. Hopefully, when the real consequences of our delusions start to become fully manifest, people will begin to realise by whom and how their misfortune has been brought upon them.

Of all nations, this one holds more advantages, both natural and human, than any other. The difficulties we now face are entirely ones we have created and only political will is needed to undo them. Our problems are largely the result of having things too good for too long. Whether as individuals, families or nations, it seems that having life too easy is something we humans can't cope with for very long without losing our sense of purpose, direction and values.

The quicker we get this behind us the better. In the meantime, one can only hope that the necessary collision with reality occurs soon enough that when we finally come to our senses sufficient producers remain to still feed us all.



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