



Climate Eyes 2022

we saw • we learnt • we survive



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Foreword

Having lived in the Wimmera for most of my life I have seen and experienced many droughts.

My father knew that water was the lifeblood of our community and said: “you can make money out of mud but not out of dust”.

But when the rains ceased during the Millennium drought, we discovered the true value and limits of our water supplies.

Country life is more than just agriculture, but the success or failure of our crops and livestock affects our region’s economic, social and employment opportunities.

Droughts have an enormous human impact, and it is often the women who take the lead in keeping families and communities together and adapting to challenges at hand.

Droughts can also be times of change and insight. Without drought, I would not have left the farm, gone to Melbourne to study or had the opportunity to play VFL football.

Returning to the country, drought was one of the drivers for me becoming a local councillor and politician.

One lasting change from the Millennium drought was the construction of the Wimmera Mallee Pipeline, which gave us a reliable, quality water supply for farming communities and townships.

These pipes brought countless flow-on economic, social and environmental benefits.

We live in an ever changing climate – droughts, floods, bushfires and other extreme events are part of our lives. It is critical to remember and understand our past so we can adapt for the future.

The climate is changing, and I congratulate the people of the Wimmera who have lived through this challenge and continue to plan and adapt.

Their stories highlight the importance of working together and how communicating with each other can greatly assist in good times and in bad.

Through sharing their experiences in Climate Eyes, they have documented what they learnt and did, and I am sure this will assist many others experiencing drought or other climate challenges.

**The Hon. Hugh Delahunty,
former Member for Lowan**



Introduction

It was 2019 and it had hardly rained for two years in NSW. Water supplies were dangerously low and drought-weary residents at a loss of what to do in these unprecedented times.

I remember thinking. 'This is not new. We have been there; and have so many stories and practical solutions to share.'

We Wimmera Residents survived the 10-year Millennium drought; where water supplies dipped to a mere 3 % – our crops fried, froze or blew away and our kids knew little of lawns, sprinklers and rain.

There were drought reports and research projects, but nobody turned them into a simple guide for the people to use in times of need.

Climate Eyes tells our stories of living through and with drought.

Sometimes it was so depressing and demoralising. Some people left, most soldiered on and many adapted and adopted new ways.

We all learned plenty. We discovered how much we needed each other. We worked together on solutions – some as unprecedented as the drought weather patterns.

We learned about the importance of resilience, mental health, water savings, shade, drought farming, thinking outside the square and simply seeing some green grass.

Climate change is here; and we have and continue to live through it.

Climate Eyes is what we saw, learned and changed to survive then, now and into the future.

We hope these precious and practical stories from generous Wimmera residents will help other people across Australia to stand together when climate change impacts hit hard in their own communities.

Thanks to Department of Families Fairness and Housing and Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning for funding this project, the steering group who guided it and to WDA for its ongoing support to complete it.

Simone Dalton
Project Coordinator





Chapter I

In the home

Climate change and drought have a personal impact on family and daily life. Limited water in the home and the community, reduced income and stress all take a toll. There are things we can do from something as simple as not flushing the toilet every time, to finding new ways to work and play.

Top 10 tips for looking after yourself, your family and home

1. Take shorter showers
2. Collect wastewater to re-use elsewhere
3. Upgrade to more water-efficient appliances, taps and toilets
4. Make the most of public green spaces
5. Cool off with a swim at the local pool
6. Take the opportunity to try new hobbies rather than worry about things you can't do
7. Set a budget and look for opportunities to save money
8. Be prepared for hotter days by creating shade at home and in the garden
9. Take an afternoon siesta on hot days and go back outside in the evenings
10. Try to find some positives – at the end of long hot days there is often a spectacular and beautiful sunset

Water in the home challenges

- Water quality declined as storage levels dropped – it was not as good for washing and caused skin irritation in some people
- Household water tanks ran dry and people had to buy water for the house and livestock
- Using hoses to water the garden or wash cars was banned



Our experience

“There were times when we had to limit how much we used the evaporative air conditioner because we just didn’t have the water.”

– *Emelia Sudholz*

“We had to have quick showers and used a water timer to make sure it was no more than 2 minutes. We used a bucket to collect water for the garden. Once a week we had a nice long 5-minute shower to wash our hair!”

– *Maddi McCredden*

“There was a lack of water for house and garden. For quite a long time the entire region’s water supply was down to less than three per cent.”

– *Anon*

“I remember going to a conference and having a huge spa and feeling so guilty filling it as it seemed like weeks of water for one bath!”

– *Anon*

Water in the home solutions

- Conserve water in the household, especially if relying on tank water
- Take fewer and shorter showers and have children share the bath water
- Turn the tap off while brushing your teeth or washing your hands
- Only flush the toilet when needed
- Install a dual flush toilet, or put a brick in the cistern to reduce the water required to fill it
- Wash clothes less often
- Only use the washing machine and dishwasher when full
- Replace appliances and taps with more water efficient models
- Wash the car less often

Our experience

“Around the house we became obsessed with water saving. Recycled washing water, 1-minute showers, we did it all.”

– Anon

“Our toilet mantra was, ‘If it’s brown flush it down, if it’s yellow – let it mellow’. Our houses must have stunk!”

– Anon

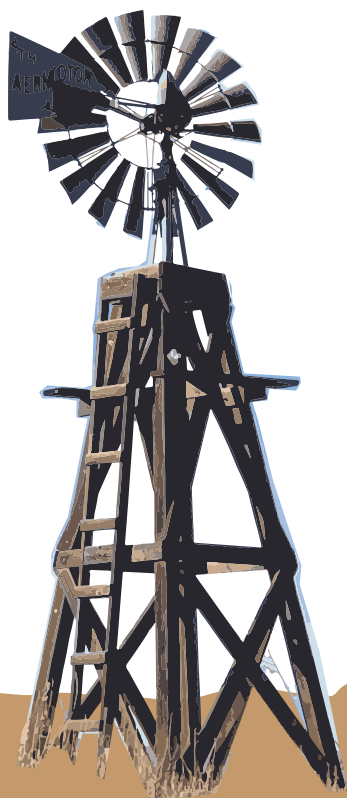
“We learned to really appreciate and value water – something that continues today.”

– Anon



Family challenges

- No lawn to play on
- Family is stressed
- Family members might need to work more hours or take a second job, which adds stress to the household



Drought and loss

It was very difficult on the farm. We believe the stress of the drought played a role in Dad passing away with heart trouble. The crops were so bad that we couldn't find a single decent head of wheat to put in his coffin.

A few months later there was the massive storm when we had the first decent rain in an eternity and we just stood out in it laughing. It was also a very memorable autumn break when it rained for two straight days – we thought there just might be an end to this.

– *A farmer's son*

Our experience

"Our kids missed out on the simple joys we had accepted in childhood. I remember instead of swimming in the river they were exploring an empty riverbed one year. We'd feel guilty if we filled a kiddy wader pool but some days we just did it to get some relief from the heat."

– *Anon*

"All the dams and lakes were dry. We had no fishing, yabbing, boating or lakeside picnics of any kind. Our children had a totally different family experiences to the one we had when we were growing up. And the heatwaves meant that it was so much hotter and more unpleasant being outdoors on some days in summer."

– *Farmer*

"There was co-operation and togetherness, but also loneliness, and keeping busy."

– *Helen Ballentine*

Family solutions

- Visit the local pool or air conditioned play space
- Take time out to enjoy family, friends, sport etc
- Tailor activity levels to the climatic conditions

Our experience

“We took the kids into town to spaces that had greenery and got away from the house/property for sport and recreation.”

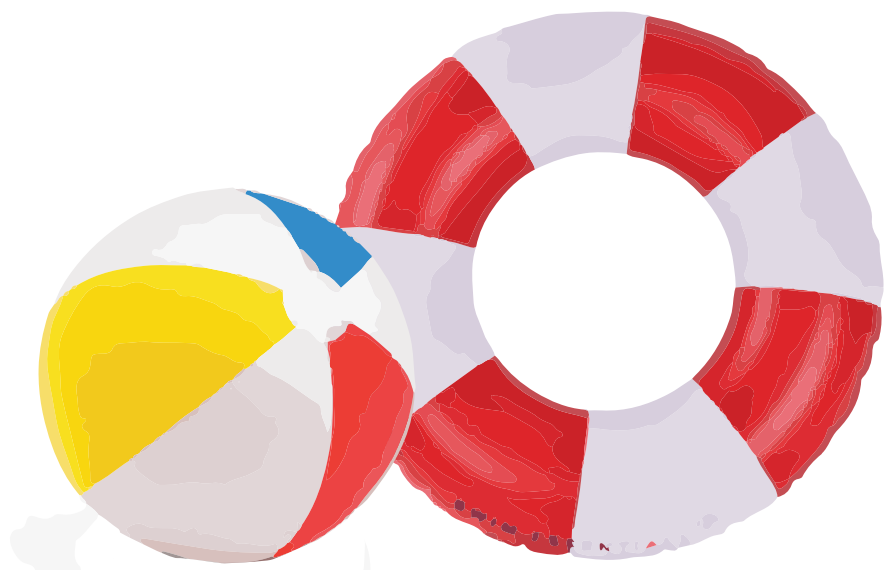
– *Emelia Sudholz*

“One of the biggest changes was the acknowledgement that there are days and times of day where it is foolish to try and do something. We took a leaf out of the Mediterranean/North African playbook and accepted that from 1–5pm on a hot day you are better off indoors and then try and get something done later when it cools off.”

– *Anon*

“During the summer we increasingly became creatures of the night, rather than working through the heat of the day we’d stop and come back out about 8pm. It’s common now but in the old days people just worked through the less intense heat.”

– *Anon*



Money and stress challenges

- When the family's income depends on rain and water, the whole family suffers financially
- Less time and money for family activities, leisure, holidays, education costs, etc
- Drought stress puts parents under constant pressure physically, emotionally and financially
- Kids see the pressure on parents
- Conversations focus on the negative
- Years of lack of maintenance or upgrades can take a toll

Our experience

"It was tough times as a farming family. Lots of stress and worry about money. I was young, but I know my family worried. Mum had to get a job to help support the farm."

– *Maddi McCredden*

"No rain meant no money, so we had to cut staff and all non-essential items."

– *David Jochinke*

"Fear that it would not improve was always present. It's the 'not knowing' about our future. Optimism begins to wane."

– *Mary Mason*

"Increased stress about the future. What it might mean for local opportunities for our children."

– *Anon*

"We had to go without, wait, prioritise, make the survival of the farm the priority, endure disappointment, frustration and repeated unpredictability."

– *Helen Ballentine*

Stressful business

The mental health strain impacted on family dynamics. Instead of having a home, business and sense of place where we expected to live and work for decades, we questioned how much longer we'd remain in farming.

Being from a farming family, it was tough to watch the wasted time, money and resources with failed crops. It was a time of stress and uncertainty.

– *Anon*



Money and stress solutions

- Tighten the budget and minimise household expenses
- Defer big expenses, such as replacing a car
- Set a price limit for birthdays and Christmas
- Make sure drought is not used as a reason to stop participating in activities
- Socialise and talk with others
- Keep fit and active
- Volunteer
- Activities provide a welcome release from the stress of the situation – find new hobbies to replace things that can't be done
- Try to have positive outlook

Our experience

"We became more frugal, reducing costs and even used credit cards at one time to juggle, but not without knowing that there was something expected to cover it in a month or two. At one time I hid the bank balance from the family until it rose again so that only I had the worry."

– *Helen Ballentine*

Long-term solutions

- Build shade structures to improve passive cooling of buildings
- Use lighter colours for roofs and walls to reflect heat
- Learn more about climate changes and impacts
- Be aware of the danger from fire, flood and other natural events – develop a fire-ready plan
- Accept that life is always changing

Challenges for children

Adults don't face the challenges of climate change alone. Children are also living these changes and their memories and experiences will often last a lifetime.

- Children miss out on the simple childhood experiences – stomping in puddles, playing under the sprinkler and water sports
- Children understand their parents are stressed about the lack of rain and this often means they are stressed about money as well – try not to let this anxiety impact your children
- They feel the tension throughout the entire community especially at school
- School ovals were dry and dusty and many days hot
- Children in high-risk areas cannot attend school on 'code-red' days

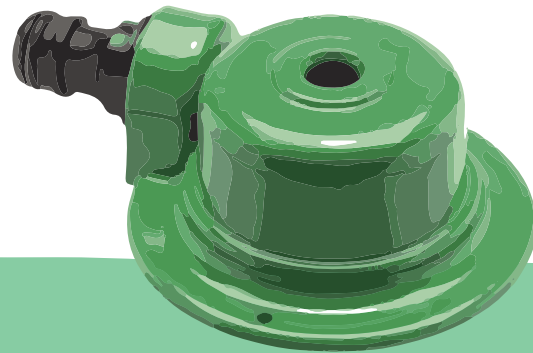
Our experience

"My daughter, who was four, was surprised during a rare time it rained and asked; what happens if it rains for two days in a row?"

– Anon

"Our kids missed out on the joy of playing under a sprinkler. They were so excited the first time they got to see and play under a sprinkler when visiting family who lived elsewhere. That says a lot about what our household missed out on in drought."

– Anon



Childhood memories

"Even as a young child (primary school age) you knew that the dry wasn't typical. Tension was high in the community. Talking amongst other kids at school about how much rain you'd had, boasting about who had the most, whose crops were higher. I was young, but I know my family worried."

"I have very strong memories of lots of school activities revolving around saving water and sustainability. I was in grade six when the floods came, and our class went wading through the water and looked at all the water bugs we'd never seen before."

– Maddi McCredden

Solutions for children

- Reassure children that every season is different and that it will rain one day
- Take the family to the local pool and teach them about water safety
- Schools installed shade sails over the playground equipment and replaced grass with artificial turf
- Teach them good adaptation and mitigation habits but try to avoid burdening children with the worries of drought and climate change
- Encourage children to consider and act upon solutions such as recycling, low water gardens, planting local trees and walking rather than driving
- Talk about how many people are trying to stop climate change and describe major problems we have solved in the past
- Be willing to learn from your children on climate change too – they will be tomorrow's adults

Our experience

"The local water authority created the character 'Phil the bucket', to promote water saving tips. They even gave away buckets with a smiley 'Phil' face on them."

– Anon



Case study: Maddi and Prue McCredden

Child of the drought sees community rebound

THE MILLENIUM drought meant there was a whole generation of children through the Wimmera-Mallee who knew nothing but the dry through their early years.

Born in the late 1990s, Maddi McCredden had never seen her home in anything but drought until she was 12 and big floods hit.

Growing up at Beulah East in the southern Mallee, Maddi has vivid memories of how limited water influenced every facet of farm life on the farm.

“Things like (the Grampians-Wimmera Mallee Water mascot) Phil The Bucket, having timed showers and then bucketing that water back out onto the garden, I can remember all those things relating to water and to saving water so clearly,” Maddi said.

“There was a real feeling of tension in the community, which only now as an adult, reflecting on it, you can understand. All the reports of the drought and the fires and the talk about how it never used to be like this, the stress about failed crops and money, it was a tough time. When the floods came I remember wading out in the Yarriambiack Creek near school and looking at all the water bugs, they used to be common but we’d never seen them before.”

Maddi’s mother Prue said her daughters Maddi, Bridget and Charlotte missed out on everyday experiences due to the lack of water.

“They missed out on the joy of playing under a sprinkler and the first time they got to see and play under a sprinkler - when visiting their grandparents outside the drought zone - they were so excited,” Prue said.

Prue said a pre-emptive decision to use government rebates to install more rainwater tanks helped to maintain some sort of a garden, as did a switch to hardier species.

“I came up from the Western District when I was married and had high hopes of putting in a beautiful English cottage style garden, the drought taught us those sort of plants just aren’t suited to the Mallee,” she said.

While the drought was tough, both Prue and Maddi said the tight-knit local community tried to keep life as normal as possible for kids, through school projects to installing shade sails and a grey water sprinkler system.

“The community was fantastic in how it all came together, we had events and concerts and we kept on going,” she said.

Maddi said the Wimmera-Mallee pipeline, which replaced leaky channels, had changed the landscape.

“It is nice to have just that little bit of water in the weir pools along the creek and a bit of green grass, it makes the region as a whole more liveable,” she said.

Water has also made the region more attractive for young people to move to the area to work.

“It’s great to see a lot more diversity in the region than when I was growing up, we’ve got a fantastic community of Indian nurses at Warracknabeal (hospital) and they really like the area for the most part, but people probably need to be made more aware of what a move to the region really means.



The McCredden family.

“We have wonderful open spaces, we have friendly communities but equally there is a lot we don’t have. There is little public transport, there aren’t the array of art galleries and other entertainment you find in the city and that can often catch people by surprise when they arrive.

“I think if people have a clearer idea of what life is going to be like when they move here we are more likely to attract people who will stay for longer.”

The pipeline may have created more water security, but old habits die hard for Maddi.

“I still only run the dishwasher/washing machine every couple of days with very full loads to save water, take quick showers, don’t leave hoses on, have bottles of rain water saved in the fridge just in case, all that is a result of the drought, which is probably a positive overall.”

Prue said it was great to see the drought in the rear view mirror.

“It was very tough at the time but we definitely learnt a lot about living through dry periods and hopefully although there will drought again it does not have that massive impact on our lives.”



Chapter 2

In the garden

With a drying climate our gardens go from being a little oasis of calm to a dry and dusty reminder of what we are missing. But there are things that we can do to help, from small things like collecting shower water in a bucket to bigger changes like replacing a lawn with artificial turf or stones.

Top 10 tips for looking after your garden

1. Install a water-wise garden using more plants that are local to your area, succulents and low water lawns
2. Use a bucket to recycle shower and bath water, but only carry what you can manage
3. Switch to a low-phosphate detergent when washing clothes and recycle the rinse water on the garden
4. Install a grey-water system and use water timers and drippers to reduce garden water use
5. Install rain water tanks
6. Replace water-hungry lawn with synthetic turf, stones or native groundcover
7. Install shade structures to protect vulnerable plants, such as vegetables, against extreme heat
8. Focus your resources on one or two trees or a small area of lawn for children to play
9. Enjoy the time savings that come with less mowing and pruning
10. Don't give up on your garden as it is your oasis – do your research and make the most of the resources you have

Garden challenges

- Plants died
- Dead lawn or bare, dusty ground was an eyesore
- No lawn for children to play on
- Had to use buckets to water the garden
- Unable to grow fruit and vegetables
- The loss of the garden space was a source of distress to many people in the community
- Dust everywhere

Our experience

“It really knocked the garden for six.”

– *Greg Fletcher*

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“There was no lawn for young children to play and we had to buy fruit and veg! It was a bit sad to see our lovely garden oasis curl up and die, but then everyone was in the same boat.”

– *Corinne Heintze*

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“Our water supply got so low that the local water authority banned using hoses. Suddenly everyone was using buckets and the shops sold out.”

– *Anon*

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“The oasis around the house was our escape from the reality of drought. Losing it had a mental cost.”

– *David Drage*



Garden solutions in the short-term

- Prioritise which areas of the garden to look after – some parts may need to be sacrificed
- Hand water high-priority plants using a bucket or hose with a trigger nozzle
- Shower with a bucket to save water for the garden
- Mulch garden beds
- Upgrade garden watering systems replacing sprinklers and spray heads with dripper systems
- The local water supply was supplemented with groundwater
- Treated effluent and other recycled water was used more



Our experience

“We put a hose on the outlet from the washing machine – and washed with environmentally friendly washing powder – so we could have a little patch of back lawn for the kids to play on.”
– Anon

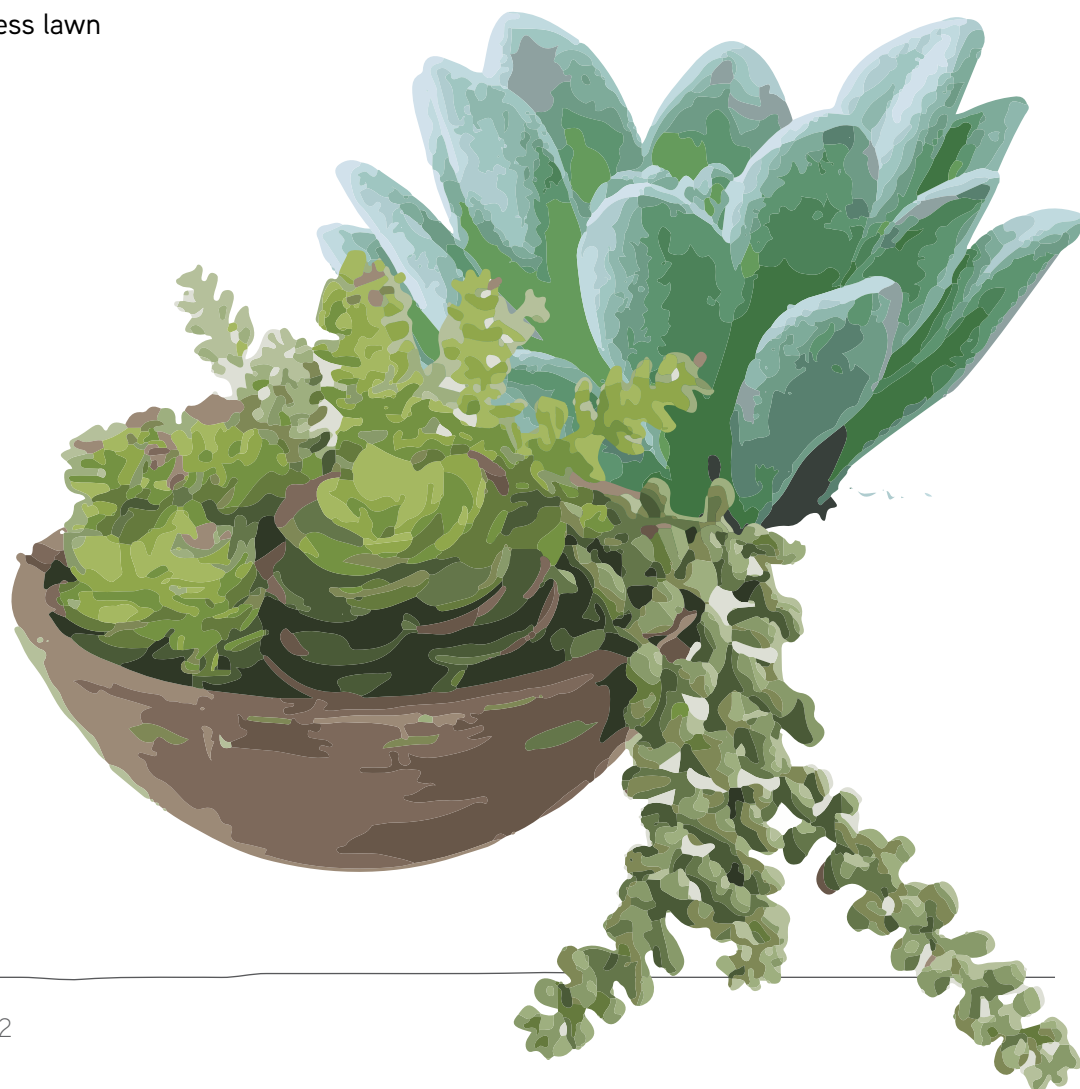
“Carting the kid’s bathwater out to the garden was hurting my back so we brought the pond pump inside and attached it to a garden hose. Then I forgot to turn it off, and burnt the motor out.”
– Anon

“When it was dry we had less yard maintenance, weeded less and one year I think we only mowed the lawn once. That was a bonus.”
– Dean Netherway

“We saved every drop of water we could and completely overhauled our garden. It was the survival of the fittest.”
– Anon

Garden solutions in the long-term

- Plant drought-tolerant gardens
- Grow plants that belong in the local area such as natives, particularly local varieties
- Remove plants that are better suited to wetter environments
- Remove or reduce grassed areas
- Use stones, native groundcover or artificial lawn instead of grass
- Build shade structures for vulnerable areas such as the vegetable patch
- Install rainwater tanks
- Appreciate the reduced maintenance of a native garden or one with less lawn



Our experience

“After several years we changed the dry lawn to a native garden, carefully choosing plants indigenous to the area. We used buckets from the shower to water it and were amazed how the natives survived.”

– *Anon*

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“The big change is the move away from acres and acres of water-hungry lawn.”

– *Anon*

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“We changed our thinking about what we grow and how to make use of water we did get. We purchased two large water tanks and a greywater system and plumbed them into the house.”

– *Mary Mason*

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“We value water, green grass and the world around us. More people accept the climate has changed. Even if they can’t say those words, they will acknowledge their rainfall has dropped.”

– *Anon*

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“We’ve changed expectations of our garden view and care less about dust. We appreciate the beauty of flourishing gardens when it rains.”

– *Jeanie Clark*

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“We pre-empted the drought and made the most of government subsidies to install two large rainwater tanks and a dual rain-mains system. This investment gave us some relief in meeting our extended water needs. We also concentrated heavily on planting arid perennial garden plants, underpinned by native eremophila species, which remain alive today.”

– *Anon*

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“Beware the Yucca. Originally promoted as drought-tolerant, they have become almost a noxious weed. When it finally rained, they turned into huge prickly beasts.”

– *Anon*

Case study: Maree and Graham Goods

Letting our native species shine

Colourful and hardly native flowers have long been appreciated in the bush but it took a 10-year drought for many gardeners to dig in and put them in their gardens.

One couple with half a century of native flower know-how is Wimmera's Graham and Maree Goods.

"I remember being really interested by the birdlife around the Wail East primary school even as a young fella, it wasn't anything terribly unusual, just magpies, willy wagtails, things like that, but that interest is something that has stuck with me," Graham said.

"When we were thinking about setting up the garden we thought that to attract native birdlife back to the garden we probably needed to get some native plants in and it all went from there," he said.

"Back in the early 1970s there was little information on native plants as a whole, let alone ones suited to the dry Wimmera region. A lot of the information was written for more temperate areas, so there was a lot of trial and error," Maree said.

"It's still the case today really, we're still finding out more all the time, but in those early days in particular, we had a steep learning curve finding what worked and what didn't in our environment," she said.

"We found those species that were a bit hardier in terms of drought tolerance were obviously at an advantage, things like *eremophilas* grow very well here," Graham said.

"Not all the plants that grow in the desert will grow well here on the heavier soil, but sometimes you get a surprise, so it is just a matter of planting them and seeing how they go."

Along with trial and error, Graham credited some key people for helping them on their way.

"Fred Rodgers was a great source of knowledge, as was Alby Lindner, a real bushman who had this mental map of huge areas of bush where he could find important species," Graham said.

Graham grew up not far from a huge native garden - the Little Desert - but had not spent much time there.

"Then some friends of ours came up from Melbourne and we took the four wheel drive and went out to explore. It was just fantastic, all this colour and all the birds and animal life, we became really interested in the Desert from that moment on and we've spent a lot of happy times out there over the years," he said.

They say native gardens need less water.

"During the Millennium drought it was a real boon to have native plants when many others were having to do things like laying down fake lawn or concreting as they could not continue watering. The plants survive much better than cool climate European plants when it is hot and dry," Maree said.

There are other subtle and satisfying changes with native grasses and insects, including a rare moth.

"I took the sheep out of the house paddock and we have made an effort to boost the number of native grasses. By targeting the mowing we've seen a real increase in the number of those native grasses in the dry years, which are a really important part of the eco-system."



“The pale sun moth is only found in patches of remnant vegetation in a few places through the Wimmera. We found a population of them, which was really exciting, but we had to stop looking for them as the willy wagtails soon figured out what we were doing and would follow us along and make a meal of these incredibly rare moths when we flushed them from the grass.”

The Goodses do not grow exclusively plants indigenous to the Wimmera region, but rather look at plants native to the Australian continent.

“There are some fantastic species that are not native to here but they do really well for us,” Graham said.

The pair have hosted a number of open gardens with many visitors surprised at how well natives can fit into an organised garden.

“We constantly get people saying they did not ever think a native garden could look so attractive.

It is good to raise awareness,” Maree said.



Chapter 3

On the farm

Farmers are on the front line when the rain doesn't fall. Livestock and plants need water to survive and thrive and adapting a business that depends on climate requires a combination of innovation, strategic planning and cold-hard determination to succeed.

"On the optimistic level, the changes to agriculture mean we still have a good future here even under hotter and drier conditions." – *Anon*

Always another year

I worked with farmers and spent every day hearing their experiences of drought. It was sometimes heartbreaking but then they would show such resilience. I remember being at Speed Field Days in early August and it was obvious the season was pretty much done – that early in the year. I think this time it was a frost which killed the plants. An absolute disaster.

An old farmer turned to me and said, "There will be another race next year." This bloke had lost hundreds of thousands of dollars in one bad weather event and instead of being devastated he could still look with optimism to doing the same thing again the following year.

It was incredibly humbling, and I realised these people were so strong in such difficult times. At other times the resilience abandoned them – not surprisingly – and they struggled with the disappointment. I often felt their pain.
– *Anon*

Top 10 tips on the farm

1. Maximise the capture of water on-farm to fill dams and store soil moisture
2. Use the latest techniques and equipment to grow a crop on less water such as early sowing, no-till cropping, stubble retention, controlled traffic, disc seeding
3. Build stock containment areas to make feeding livestock easier and protect soils during dry conditions
4. Focus on core expenses – maintaining breeding livestock or planting a low-risk crop
5. Have a financial plan for tough times and renegotiate loans
6. Develop a strategy for the business that includes plans for dry times – especially fodder conservation, water supply and finance
7. Use drought downtime to clean up, repair and improve farm safety and do some strategic thinking
8. Look for opportunities to diversify or generate off-farm income
9. Take time out and continue to maintain social connections with your family and others who are going through similar challenges
10. Focus on the things you can control

Practical challenges

- Farming needs rain
- Managing livestock through drought is very challenging when there is no water
- Feeding requirements increase and hand feeding may be required
- Crops fail completely or get frosted
- Rain can fall at the right times for a crop but still not be enough to fill storages or tanks
- It is difficult to prepare for drought
 - like planning to fail
- Need to farm to minimise environmental damage and protect soils

Our experience

“The end of the Millennium drought was very hard. Our channel-filled dam water became very salty. The sheep could still drink the water, but if the pipeline hadn’t come through in 2009, I would have had to destock.”

– *Corinne Heintze.*



Practical solutions for everyone

- Use forecasting tools to identify high-risk seasons and use low-risk strategies when required
- Focus on financial planning and negotiate flexible loan structures
- Use drought time to plan for the future, clean up or fix safety issues around the farm
- Participate in farmer group social gatherings
- Install more rainwater tanks on the farm
- Minimising farming input costs, delaying machinery turnover
- Build more hay and grain storage to hold product over for bad years
- Look for opportunities to diversify into new industries

Our experience

“There are some advantages to dry seasons depending on the industry. Stock being hand fed can be easier to care for in the dry than when it is too wet. Cropping can have higher yields in drought years if the timing of rain is better than in a wet year. Diversification can spread the risk and impact of seasonal conditions.”

– *Dean Netherway,*

“We added more rainwater tanks after we diversified into hay production in 2007 and risked building a large hay shed. We removed stock from our business to focus on clean and level paddocks.”

– *Helen Ballentine*

“The Wimmera Mallee Pipeline and funding for stock containment area construction were the two biggest positives from government.”

– *David Drage.*

“We would have been stuffed without the pipeline. Having access to pipeline water saved us.”

– *David Jochinke*

“The pipeline project has changed the landscape and farm practices across the region. Removal of channels, piping of on farm water and tank storages was a partnership activity with farmers, who invested significantly in new infrastructure. Much of this work was driven by drought necessity from 2002.”

– *Jo Bourke*

Practical solutions for livestock

- Carefully manage water use for stock and cart water for stock where required
- Turn sheep onto failed crops
- Increase fodder storage
- Move stock to alternate locations
- Establish stock containment areas to prevent soil degradation and maintain livestock condition
- Concrete feed pads can limit waste during feeding
- Consult a nutritionist to develop total mixed ration

Our experience

“The state agriculture department ran a trip to Western Australia, which was excellent to help build better farm strategies. We learnt more about stock containment, got good at carting water, tinkered in the workshop and did small jobs that didn’t cost much like pull out fences and reshape driveways.”

– *David Jochinke*

“We don’t rely on purchased feed, so had to halve our flock twice to match the carrying capacity of the feed our land produced. It was important to focus on generating stock feed on farm to be stored. This was paramount to recovery.”

– *Jeanie Clark*

“I concentrated on improving my sheep operation during drought. Keeping a core sheep flock through drought was challenging but new management skills were a positive and improved breeding improves income when drought ends.”

– *David Drage*



Practical solutions for grain growers

- Conserve soil moisture using techniques such as no-till farming with direct drilling or disc seeding, stubble retention and managing summer weeds
- Cut crops for hay instead of grain
- Use split applications of nitrogen to minimise up-front risk
- Monitor seasonal risk and minimise input costs



Our experience

“We took on more leasing opportunities to maximise our ability to make a reasonable income to continue farming and meet our commitments. However, there are risks with leasing. The landlord can cease the contract at any time and when one fellow called an end to his lease, we were forced to buy his land during the drought and another got sick and cut it short by a year. Another lease was too far away and caused too much wear and tear on the machinery and drivers.”

– *Helen Ballentine*

“We can now do more than survive in a dry climate. What was considered disastrously low rainfall in the early 2000s would now be sufficient to grow a crop on.”

– *Anon*

“Changing farming practices, such as no-till, were happening by 2002 and by 2007 it was accepted practice. For an industry that gets lumped as slow to change it was pretty rapid.”

– *Anon*

“Farmers are getting better at moisture conservation and soil conservation. It is a massive positive that we haven’t seen a major dust storm of Wimmera soil blowing in recent years. We still have smaller dust blow through but no massive local soil movement.”

– *David Drage*

Financial challenges

- In a drought you often have the same expenses but little or no income
- You have to manage farm finances to get through the drought and deal with less income
- Cash reserves are critical to a quick and effective response
- Income does not come until the end of the season, so it a failed season may mean not getting paid for two years

Our experience

“Bad seasons have a massive financial impact on farmers. We’ve got all the same expenses but reduced income. Pressure from banks, pressure on marriages and families. It’s so tough on families whose income depends on weather (farming and other). People who are not impacted just don’t get it.”

– Denise McLellan.

.....
“Part of the annual plan is to build the business model to withstand a long dry autumn and maybe winter as well, and in some cases for even longer.”



Financial solutions

- Cut back on family and business expenses
- Undertake long-term planning and budgeting
- Renegotiate business loans
- Diversify the business to keep cash coming in
- Seek off-farm income to support expenses
- Use multi-peril crop insurance
- Set up and utilise Farm Management Deposits to ride out the fluctuations in income (a government program)



Our experience

“If at all possible, it is helpful to gain work off-farm but some farms need all of the labour and some lowly paid positions aren’t worth the loss to the farm’s ability to gain financial support.”

– *Helen Ballentine*

“Be flexible. Always have a plan B or plan C. Who cares if you don’t conform with everyone else? So long as it works for your business. Do your sums and finances. Don’t put all your eggs in one basket. Learn to say ‘no’ and to be more flexible with work. I leased out some of my cropping land to make life easier. Financially it was fine.”

– *Corinne Heintze*

“Lower expectations! Ensure financial stress isn’t too great in conjunction with developing a clear exit strategy for the business to remove the uncertainty of drought.”

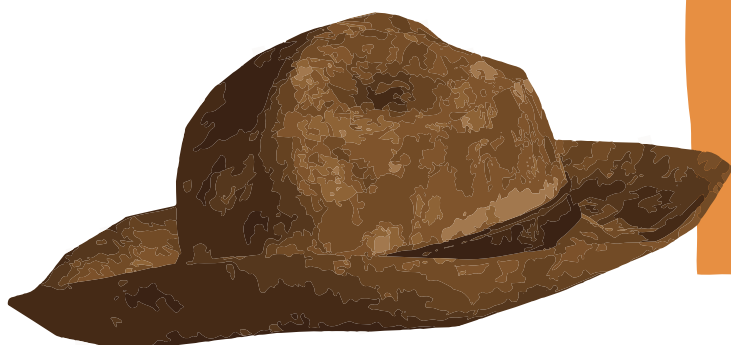
– *David Drage*

“We managed to grow some sort of crop, became more frugal, cut our wages, shared living costs, used credit cards at one time to juggle but not without knowing that there was something expected to cover it in a month or two.”

– *Helen Ballentine*

Mental challenges

- It can be mentally draining when the farm business is under constant threat
- There is an ongoing need to keep working and keep hoping that things will improve
- It is easy to lose hope when surrounded by dust and dead crops. The trick is to keep looking for it



Our experience

“Psychologist Rob Gordon spoke to farmers after many years of drought and talked about the response to crisis. He said that you will be fine while you are running and will probably fall in a heap after it rains. I never forgot that and have seen that it is correct and will probably manifest itself after COVID.”

– *Agricultural worker*

“Uncertainty and self doubt about our ability to maintain our multi-generational farm. Instead of having a home, business and sense of place where we expected to live and work for decades, we questioned how much longer we’d remain in farming.”

– *Jessica Adler*

“We had to go without, wait, prioritise, make the survival of the farm the priority, endure disappointment, frustration and repeated unpredictability.”

– *Helen Ballentine*

“The view out the kitchen window is still a problem as reality is always there! The desolation which accompanies drought is negatively powerful and hard to hide from.”

– *David Drage*

“It wasn’t just drought. There were bizarre mini tornados that came in strips, mouse plagues, locust plagues, floods, snail plagues and dry finishes. You either had to find money to resow or bait or suffer the disappointment of ruined or downgraded crops or insurance claims.”

– *Helen Ballentine*



Perseverance and resilience

Perseverance and resilience can be enhanced, helping people to feel that they are not alone. The real help is having co-operative banks that understand that this is not your fault, you haven't done anything wrong, and it is the weather that you have no control over. To a degree you need a driving force to continue, as it can reach a point where you wonder if it is worth it, or whether you should just sell up, but you continue for the family's future and livelihood.

You need to be open to new ways of doing things. Fortunately we had commenced no-till cropping before the drought hit, but we were upgrading machinery and buying land so it was quite a juggle over the years with average and below average incomes.

As for any serious business, including banks, it is always a good idea to write a plan of how you will mitigate the risk of climate change or drought as best you can, and once you start using the language it flows quite easily. It is a lot of what farmers already do but they don't always record it - it is called surviving as a farmer! But it is also about identifying your instinctual behaviours and thoughts.

- Helen Ballentine

Mental solutions

- Be prepared and have some options ready to protect your mental health
- Try to maintain a normal life
- Focus on the things that are within your control
- Maintain your enthusiasms by developing future plans and working out the steps required
- Develop a plan or exit strategy that will maintain income – knowing that you have an option removes the hopelessness and worry
- Be prepared to make the hard decisions and leave the farm if it is too much

Our experience

“The other things I learned was not to sweat the things I have no control over. You can’t make it rain - focus on the things you can change. I saw farmers who would turn their back on the dusty paddocks and begin creating sculptures or inventions or anything to take their mind off the dry and the frustration of drought.”

– *Anon*

“Moral support on farms is very important. I always took a snack to someone working, even if they could have done it themselves, just to have a conversation and check how they were going or how long they intended to work. Everyone needs to be caring and considerate of everyone.”

– *Helen Ballentine*

“We had plenty of time to work on strategy, which means we now have the infrastructure in place to help buffer the next drought. Also trying to diversify income a little so it is less seasonal. And having more flexible debt structures to have drought holidays.”

– *David Jochinke*

“Use risk management tools such as insurance and weather forecasting tools. Using better data and improved data management to reduce risk/expectations leading into drought. Being a local board member of a local organisation gave me an off-farm work activity to remove me from the farm on a regular basis.”

– *David Drage*





Case study: Bernard Noonan

Prosperity borne out of necessity

Adapting to change has been a key to survival for Wimmera farmers as they grappled with climate change impacts of less rain, hotter temperatures and increased frost risk.

Long time farm advisor Bernard Noonan has watched their journey and lessons learned for decades and says the change began long before the Millennium drought.

“You had the famous dust storms of the 1980s where Melbourne was coated with dust, primarily top soil from the Mallee and Wimmera,” Mr Noonan said.

“Farmers realised the value of the nutrients lost in these dust storms and that stopping erosion was critical and that was where you saw organisations such as the Wimmera Conservation Farmers Association (WCFA) formed,” he said.

The interest continued steadily before another run of dry years in the late 1990s saw more farmers willing to investigate less ploughing of their paddocks.

“We then saw the Vic No-Till Farmers Association formed and things like direct drilling, stubble conservation, even zero till with disc systems became more popular as the drought rolled on.”

Mr Noonan said farmers first saw erosion benefits and then realised these systems worked better in drier years.

“We saw that conserving stubble was often the difference between a crop and no crop so people saw what their neighbours were doing and moved a bit quicker than usual.”

Mr Noonan said no-till had been a game changer for some crops.

“Low growing pulses in particular have benefited from having cereal stubble to grow up on, there are bigger and stronger plants now and farmers are able to capture more of the seed in the headers as (before) they couldn’t go low enough to get it.”

The benefits of not ploughing paddocks continues although more people have reintroduced sheep, which lost favour in cropping systems and were difficult to run with low water supplies during the drought.

“Now they keep the sheep off the paddocks at the wet times and the very dry times and try to avoid the worst of the compaction and the erosion that was the reason they were told to keep livestock off.”

The focus on risk management has also allowed reform in input application with fertilisers applied more strategically than in the past.

“At its simplest farming is about controlling the things you can and best managing the things you can’t.

“Farming systems are an ever-changing beast. As times and conditions change farmers are more than capable of adapting and changing to manage.”



Case study: David Drage

Lessons from drought boost resilience capacity

Of all the lessons learned in the Millennium drought, the importance of business and personal resilience was one of the most critical.

Farmers constantly adjusted to manage through tough seasons, whether it was through no-till or minimum till cropping systems or growing lower risk crops such as hay.

As a result innovative farmers now manage to not only survive but thrive on much lower rainfall.

“We definitely learnt a lot during the drought years,” said farmer David Drage from Lah, in the Wimmera.

“Getting our businesses more resilient to be able to cope with the unexpected was essential, a lot of that came down to managing climatic volatility, through things like no-till and setting up low risk cropping programs,” Mr Drage said.

While farm businesses are better able to withstand the tough seasons, rural communities continue to reinvent themselves to survive.

“It may not be climate change but we’ll face other challenges and we’re going to have to be able to handle them ourselves without looking for government intervention,” he said.

“Hopefully the lessons on how to evolve to overcome problems will hold us in good stead to manage whatever comes up.”

Mr Drage said the next wave of positive change would be more likely be around mental and community health.

“Part of a sustainable business is ensuring you can do it without burning out. We’re going to hit crisis point in terms of the rural workforce if there is not some change, you can already see it, the shortages for seasonal workers like harvest or woolshed staff.

“We talk about sustainability primarily from an environmental point of view but closer to home working 80-hour weeks is also not something you can keep up forever.”

“The same applies with financial risk, it may be that taking forward contracts is a good idea for risk management in theory but if you end up awake at night unsure if you’ll be able to fill the contracts after a dry spring then it’s probably not worth it.”

Mr Drage said he would continue to work on a low risk business model after watching average rainfall drop from 350mm to 300mm.

“It has become clear in drought years you can lose far more in the dry years than you can make up in the good. The key is minimising the losses and to do that you need to understand your costs and the real risks to your business.

“You can’t praise the Wimmera-Mallee pipeline enough, it has given us reliable stock water and allowed us to take advantage of the good times in livestock in recent years, without it there would not be sheep in this area, simple as that.”

Mr Drage is also a fan of long fallow where crops are rested for a year.

“The extra moisture can be the difference between getting a crop and not. It may seem costly leaving a paddock out of production but in our climate, particularly when we’re losing our spring rainfall, it often pays to take the long-term approach.”

This strategy extends to making more hay.

“Cutting (vetch) for hay allows us a better chance of putting some moisture into the soil profile before the following year’s crop and it is also better for nutrient replacement than a grain legume. We seem to be seeing more of this boom and bust pattern, massive excesses of rain then dry periods, so it’s our job to make the most of the moisture whenever it lands.”



Chapter 4

In the landscape

Landscapes have endured many seasons of boom and bust. They can be devastated by fire, but beautiful new green shoots will emerge within a few weeks. The long-term impacts of drought and climate change are putting our landscapes under increasing pressure. There are things that we can do to protect our landscapes and things that we can do to protect ourselves within the landscape.

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“This region is at the vanguard of climate change impacts in Victoria - we are the canary in the coalmine. Some ecosystems are very resilient to drought impacts, but many are not. Water in the landscape is vital for community wellbeing/mental health/liveability.”

- *Greg Fletcher*

Top 10 tips for looking after the landscape and yourself

1. Install small water supplies for wildlife in your garden such as an artificial pond
2. Replace your front lawn with natives to support birds
3. Research your area and know what extreme weather event risks you may face – have fire fighting and good drainage to be prepared for all scenarios
4. Prepare your property to reduce the risk of fire and limit activities during high fire danger conditions
5. Develop an emergency or bushfire plan for your family and community
6. Don't stop community tree planting, just mindfully choose plant species that are adapted to the local environment
7. Keep your eyes open for opportunities to adapt and share your ideas
8. Find environmental positives such as enjoying the green space at local parks and gardens
9. Learn from those who have lived this before
10. Have faith – our ancient landscape is enduring and resilient

Challenges with climate risk

- Extreme weather events have become more frequent – hot, cold, windy, dry and wet
- The risk to people and property has increased – after bushfires we faced floods and landslides.
- These risks may extend to may include drought, fire, cyclones, flood, heavy rain and storms
- Bushfires are more likely to spread into urban areas
- Bushfire smoke can impact on widespread areas during the fire season causing breathing difficulties and ash and sediment can contaminate limited water supplies
- Insurance may become more expensive or impossible to get
- Travelling on some days in high risk areas becomes dangerous
- Increased risk of blue green algae in rivers and lakes
- Dust storms roll in when the wind blows in drier months

Our experience

“The 2009 Black Saturday fires changed everything. Before then we thought fires could be fought, but now we know differently. It would take days before we understood just how catastrophic they were and a lot longer to come to terms with it.”

– *Anon*

“Our kids were home alone when the fire hit. They were old enough to leave at home alone, but as soon as we realised there was a fire, we couldn’t get back to the house to get them. They were fine, but we did not know this”

– *Anon*



Solutions with climate risk

- Monitor weather conditions and warnings
- Develop a bushfire or emergency plan and share it with the family
- Prepare an emergency kit which includes survival items and important documents
- Clear around your property ahead of the fire season and install fire fighting equipment
- Consider moving if you live in an area of high risk
- Building codes are changing in areas of high risk
- Make sure your storm water system is up to scratch, you will need it too
- Never drive through floodwaters and avoid travelling in high fire, stormy or windy weather
- Find out more about your local risks using tools such as the Insurance Council's MyHazards App



Our experience

"We have had to revise our outlook on fire."

– Anon

.....
"Accept that it's only a matter of time before a fire takes our house and discuss what to do as a family when that happens."

– Mary Mason

.....
"People don't go into high-risk areas on hot days and are far more cautious about where and when they go camping, picnicking and bushwalking in the summer. They are more wary about hot and windy conditions and know the risk."

– Anon

.....
"After getting through a 10-year drought and then a devastating Black Saturday fire we were hit with a one in 200-year flood and landslides – and still some people could not appreciate the concept of climate change."

– Anon

Challenges in the natural environment

- Creeks, rivers, lakes and wetlands dry up or may become affected by blue-green algae
- Fish and other animals may die
- Trees die or tree limbs may fall

Our experience

“Before the drought, falling limbs were not common. They didn’t fall a lot in the drought either. But ten years on and we lost over 60 large branches from remnant Black Box trees on our place in a storm.”

– *Jeanie Clark*

“I still think the community are unaware of the true impact of climate change on flows in our waterways - apart from 2010/11 and 2016, virtually every other year sits in the bottom 10% of years of historic inflows – that’s a very scary statistic. Yet people wonder why all the lakes aren’t full all the time.”

– *Greg Fletcher*



Solutions in the natural environment

- Build a wildlife pond for frogs, birds and animals
- Join a tree planting group or take part in the weekend plant out
- Teach your children about climate change, recycling, low carbon footprints and many other responses to climate change
- Remember that traditional owners have cared for country and it has survived and supported community for 10s of 1000s of years
- Look to the First Nations people for solutions and care for country

Our experience

“Our children were brought up in a drought and it just feels normal to them. They think it is unusual when we visit places with green vegetation, such as coastal areas.”

– Anon

“When the lake was drying up dozens of people came together to catch the Murray Cod and safely relocate them to healthier waters.”

– Anon

Celebrating nature

“We focused on the good things. We took walks along dry river beds and on dry lakes to see what lives there and did surveys of saline remnant pools and celebrated that life. In 1995 we started a citizen science Waterwatch project to monitor the Wimmera River each month and provide data for the community. Later I set up a website to record all the good things that survive in the environment as a support for the United Nations’ Decade of Biodiversity and its theme – living in harmony with nature.”

– Jeanie Clark, Wimmera farmer



Challenges in our urban environment

- Large expanses of hard surfaces mean it takes longer for the environment to cool down
- Bitumen roads become unstable under very hot conditions
- Trains need to travel more slowly as the rail lines start to buckle in the heat
- Trees can shed branches at any time
 - especially during or after hot weather

Our experience

“On really hot days the bitumen starts to melt. The main street in Edenhope became impassable one really hot day.”

– *Anon*

.....
“The council had to stop watering lawns and gardens and replace them with synthetic surfaces or water-efficient plantings.”

– *Anon*



Solutions in our urban environment

- Local councils installed more water fountains and planned to include more shade and green spaces in the urban environment

Our experience

“Our botanic gardens are now a great source of ideas for drought tolerant plantings. They have great displays of succulents.”

– Anon





Case study: Tony Baker

Combatting climate change head on

A long-running survey highlights how landowners lead the way in practical responses to a changing climate.

“The long-term data shows that farmers through the region are adapting to climate change by making changes to how they run their business,” Tony Baker, Wimmera Catchment Management Authority statutory and strategic manager said.

“They may not be out there at climate change rallies but they are certainly adjusting how they operate,” he said.

With the Wimmera being one of Victoria’s most arid regions it is no surprise local farmers and among early adapters in terms of managing climate change.

“We saw it all come to a head during the Millennium drought. Farmers became acutely aware of the need to conserve moisture in light of declining rainfall and their practices altered accordingly, at a far quicker rate than we’ve seen with other changes prior,” Mr Baker said.

“There is a lot of politics surrounding climate change but what we can clearly see here is a changing of practices over time, whether farmers believe in man-made climate change or not, they’re noticing the weather patterns have altered and are adjusting accordingly.”

“Ultimately, successful farmers are going to be environmentalists as looking after their land is the best way to ensure their future,” he said.

“Sustainability is an important part in any farm business. One thing that we’ve seen through the results of the survey is that farmers very much base

their decisions on what they can see. They love to see information relevant to their own area and they love to see hands-on trials on how particular systems will work.

“It is great data for those at government level looking to implement change, you have to go through that extension process and provide the information as to why a particular change to a farming system is worthwhile. Long-term trials showing benefits are what sways farmers in terms of their decision-making process according to what we’ve seen in the survey.”

Mr Baker said farmers’ environmental management was not confined just to changes in cropping practices.

“Programs like Landcare have been invaluable, we’ve seen those where farms are more undulating, look closely at erosion management, we’ve seen initiatives such as tree replanting and shelter belts take hold. Other measures, such as control of exotic species, are also a priority.

Mr Baker said it was pleasing to see real-life change in agriculture in the region.

“You may not see Wimmera-Mallee farmers at climate change rallies but what this survey categorically shows is that farmers here have acknowledged the risk of a warmer and drier climate and have made tangible changes to mitigate those dangers as best as possible. It shows that having a farm business that is environmentally sustainable is not mutually exclusive with having a a profitable farm business, in fact the opposite is true and that’s a message we’d love to get out to farmers right across the country.”

Case study: Uncle Ron Marks

Looking back to head forward



Wotjobaluk elder Ron Marks is optimistic about his country's future.

"All our people knew that Barengi (the Wimmera River) would dry up to a series of waterholes in the dry times, and that's even before we started seeing these hotter and drier conditions," Mr Marks said.

"When you're living here you need to understand there are going to be times that we have a drought and to be able to manage the water resources accordingly. It is all very nice for people to have acres of lush green lawn at their place, but is that the best use of water when its getting up to the mid-40s?"

"The old folks knew a lot about water and how precious it was and they looked to make the most of every drop. If the decision makers keep that piece of advice in mind I think we're in pretty good shape, the Wimmera-Mallee pipeline has meant good savings of water, but we can't pretend we're living in a wet environment.

"We want a fair share for the environment, recreation and for agriculture but you can't just keep on trying to increase the size of the bucket. Keep allocations to sustainable levels, that is the key.

“Over a long period of time we’ve observed the wet and the dry spells, there may be times when we’ve got a bit more water and we can afford to allocate more to recreation but we’ve got to realise that won’t necessarily be the case every year.

Mr Marks has vivid memories of school summer holidays at Dimboola in the 1950s and 60s, learning the best fishing spots and other knowledge, such as where to best collect bardi grubs for bait from his elders.

“We were able to collect buckets, which we’d take down to the pubs and the fishermen would buy them off us which we thought was fantastic.”

There were also common sense lessons too. “We were taught to keep out of the heat of the sun in the middle of the day and to wear shoes, which weren’t always that common for us in those days, if we were walking on the footpath or asphalt... it was that understanding of the surroundings that helped my people survive in the Wimmera climate.

“We’ve then seen the settlers trying to fight the conditions, trying to work out in the hot summer sun at 3 o’clock in the afternoon or playing cricket when it’s 40 degrees in the shade, you just have to understand and adapt a bit better.

“I’m seeing it more and more now, people get up and do their chores in the morning, take themselves out of the sun during the heat of the day and then get back outside when it cools down in the evening. People are understanding what we’ve known for centuries, there is no point trying to take the heat head on, you have to work around it at times in the summer.”

Mr Marks would love to see more indigenous knowledge incorporated in activities such as farming.

“There are a lot of areas of land and resources management where people could learn a lot from traditional knowledge, not only is it good for the environment but a healthier environment is good for the farmers’ businesses as well.”

He said he would love to see further investigation of the possibilities of production of indigenous crops in conjunction with the Wimmera grain staples.

“I’m not talking about replacing growing wheat, but there are trials growing species like kangaroo grass, which is really nutritious and obviously a tough native plant, and harvesting that. It might not be something you plant all over the farm but you might have a paddock where the conventional crops struggle due to poor soil or a lack of nutrients and I think we might see those native crops really thriving in areas like that.”

There are also opportunities to grow bush medicine plants.

“There are still a lot of plants we know are beneficial for a lot of ailments and you know these plants are going to cope with the climate which is not something you can say about a lot of the introduced crops grown here.”

Mr Marks said the Wimmera-Mallee had a lot of advantages over other regions.

“You look up and down Barengi and there is very little pollution, a lot of it is in pretty good condition, considering the droughts, that’s different to other waterways which have become polluted or degraded.

“Hopefully we can take up more of the knowledge of us local indigenous people and by looking after our water keep the Wimmera as a fantastic spot to live for generations to come.”



Chapter 5

In the workplace

The impact of drought and climate change can be felt in every workplace. For some the issues might be limited water, heat or a reduced income. But regularly dealing with people who are under financial and personal stress can make any job a challenge.

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“We were not able to fix things unless an emergency or start new projects as it would cost money. This was the worst, having to wait and wait. We became resourceful in doing jobs that didn’t cost money – recycling, fixing fences, picking stones, demolishing things, tidying up.”

– Helen Ballentine, farmer

Top 10 tips for the workplace

1. Be compassionate with staff and clients and respectful of their stress
2. Support business clients and customers with information and products to help them adapt or find support services
3. Monitor staff workloads and stress levels, particularly when they are working in difficult situations
4. Support staff to attend Mental Health First Aid training and contribute to adaption activities
5. Focus on workplace safety and plan for situations that may place staff under emotional stress or at physical risk. Good airconditioning is vital as heatwaves hit
6. Protect staff by limiting outdoor work and travel on total fire ban days, provide protective clothing and plenty of water
7. Monitor weather forecasts and warnings and be prepared to change plans. Safety first, sunsmart, no driving on Code Red Days and avoid travel in stormy weather and floods
8. Plan for the impact of climate events so that you have some options when they occur
9. Actively encourage staff to share in solutions at a workplace, community or global level to better respond to climate change
10. Look for ways to diversify or limit the impact of a reduced or fluctuating income on the business

Health challenges at work

- Temperature and rainfall extremes present challenges at work
- Heat stroke or heat stress can be fatal and must be treated promptly
- Heavy rain, storms and frost can be dangerous for people who work outside or need to travel as part of their work

Our experience

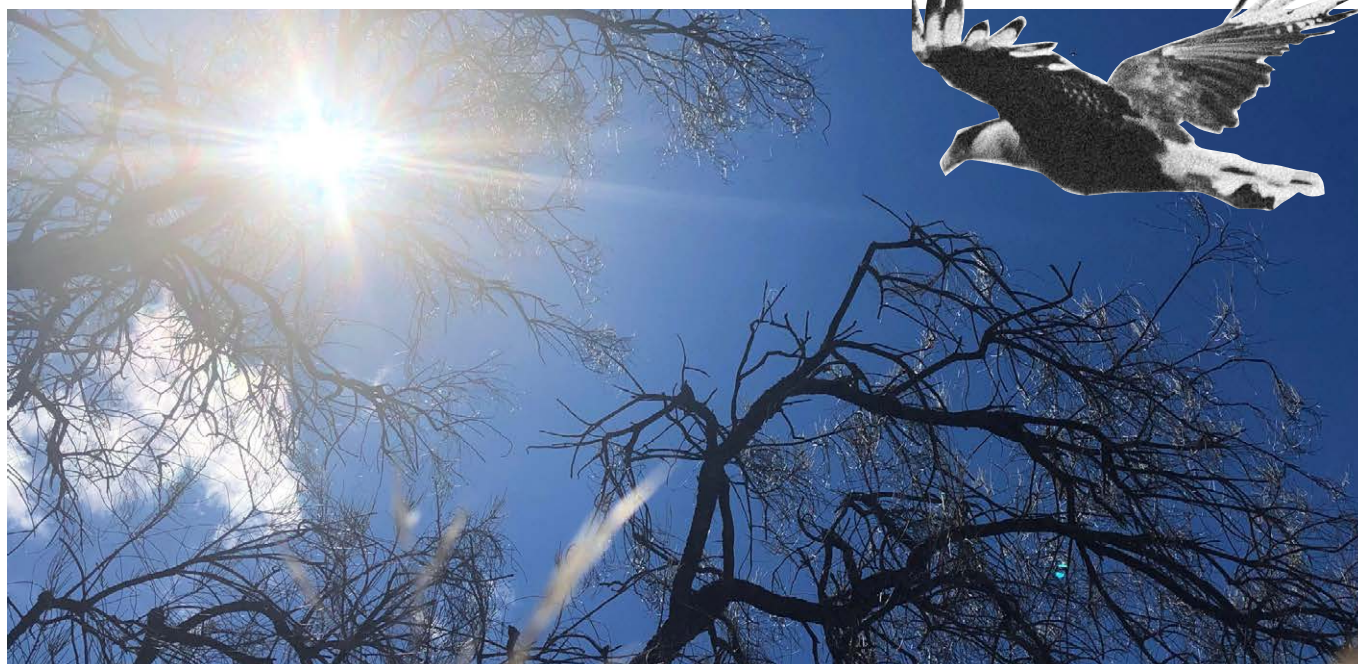
“The situation I was confronted with was the struggle for women to help their husbands, sons, neighbours or friends as the drought got worse. Mental health had never really struck me as an issue – not at the level where people would be mentioning it when they were getting their hair done.”
– *Robyn Kelm*

Health solutions at work

- Review occupational health and safety risks and develop new work policies and procedures to reduce risk such as limiting outdoor work during extreme heat
- Offer staff Mental Health First Aid training
- Install shade structures and make sure that indoor temperatures can be adequately controlled during extreme weather
- Keep an eye on weather forecasts and warnings and be prepared to change plans

Our experience

“We sent many of our staff to get training in how to talk to people in distress. It helped them to understand that sometimes people just need someone to listen.”
– *Anon*



Business challenges at work

- Reduced spending can impact on every business, even those not directly affected by the weather
- Job roles may change or become more focused on emergency response, disaster recovery and supporting people who have been impacted
- Businesses can become very risk averse
- Changing conditions mean that some companies may go out of business or need to employ fewer people
- Some people may lose their job or have their hours reduced

Our experience

“Some businesses fell over because after several years of drought, people were only buying the bare essentials.”

– Corinne Heintze

“I was working for government. We had to deal with more bushfires and animal welfare issues and were running drought workshops to help farmers manage.”

– Anon

Business solutions at work

- Accept that business has changed and customers may have different needs
- Become more flexible in the products your supply or how you deliver services
- Consider the need for backup power supplies and tank water
- Develop a plan of how you will mitigate the risk of climate change or drought
- Plan for potential loss of income and discuss options with your bank

Our experience

“We changed the services we were offering. Everything had to be structured around responding to the drought.”

– Anon

Stress challenges at work

- Drought and climatic events can have a big impact on how people approach every interaction
- Some customers may be very angry and act inappropriately
- Constantly dealing with stressed people can take a toll on staff and business owners

Our experience

“We had to stay alert to the pressures facing many in the community that we worked with.”

– *Anon*

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“I worked in waterway health. We were dealing with fish kills, community angst and waterways that were completely dry for the first time. It was awful.”

– *Greg Fletcher*

.....

“I worked in agriculture so you heard a lot of very confronting stories, a lot of confusion and probably saw a lot of unfocused anger.”

– *Anon*

Stress solutions at work

- Focus on ways to improve staff resilience and show compassion
- Put processes in place to help staff debrief when they are under pressure
- Manage work loads and rotate staff
- Ensure staff take rest breaks, weekends and holidays
- Focus on staff well-being and look for opportunities to reduce stress in the workplace
- Undertake training in how to deal with people under stress, such as a Mental Health First Aid course
- Consider alternative employment options if your job role is too stressful

Our experience

“I had to change my work to reduce fatigue after dealing with the same issues for years.”

– *Anon*

.....

“We trod very carefully with the way we phrased things and made conscious efforts to try to find small positives here and there.”

– *Anon*

.....

“I did some training on dealing with angry people.”

– *Jessica Adler*



Highs and lows at work

During the Millennium drought I was out monitoring the ongoing decline of the waterways. Each day I wondered what water quality records would be broken; what dead animals or fish I would see. Would I be yelled at by some irate farmer?

More positively, I remember following the flow of water along the river in 2009, the first time it flowed for almost half a decade. It was during the school holidays in September and so many families went out to follow its progress. It really lifted the mood across the region and generated a lot of interest in state and national media.

– *Greg Fletcher*

Case study: Robyn Kelm

Snipping away at mental health stigma

AFTER decades in the hairdressing industry, Horsham salon owner Robyn Kelm was used to light-hearted chat with her clients.

But things changed about six years into the Millennium drought.

"I had clients saying 'Rob I don't know if my husband is going to be alive when I return home'" Ms Kelm said.

"It felt like there was no end in sight. Country people can be resilient; but the farming community were really doing it tough."

She said men particularly found it hard to reach out for help when things were tough.

"Men were (traditionally) the providers of the family and responsible for the successful operation of the farm. As the drought got worse the struggle for women was to help their husbands, sons, neighbours or friends."

"Awareness of mental health issues was nonexistent and it was never spoken about.... (But) People would be mentioning it when they were getting their hair done so, even though I didn't know anything about it nor understand how to help, there had to be something I could do."

"When these clients left I would feel inadequate, hoping their story would improve at the next appointment."

Then she spoke to the local council drought relief officer Marion Matthews who provided information folders to assist these families.

"We discreetly placed the printed information in foyers, waiting areas and coffee tables for anyone to take home.... some clients on their next appointment would say a quiet thank you or give you a smile worth a million words," Ms Kelm said.

Then the process expanded beyond Robyn's salon with other hairdressers attending a sessions with a Melbourne psychologist on how to listen and respond to clients.

"It was a guideline for self-management and diplomacy in a field that is far beyond hairdressing skills or expectations on any hairdresser.

"The outcome was very rewarding. Clients would comment on the fact that they had no idea that the help and resources were available and that this was the first step in their process."

Ms Kelm said hairdressers were a good way of getting the message out to the community because of a mutual respect and trust and the project was rolled out by drought counsellors in others areas of Victoria.



Ms Kelm said the Wimmera example could be used in other disasters such as flood, fire and plague.

“We learnt about ourselves. As a community at large and with more awareness we are able to recognize warning signs and the importance of engagement, we don’t foresee all cases of people doing it tough but we probably get the majority. Our sporting clubs, working environments, schools, gyms, salons and businesses are instrumental with our support for others and knowing we care,” she said.

Ms Kelm said while hard, the Millennium drought climate crisis, played a role in developing today’s resilient community.

“I believe the Wimmera and the surrounding communities as a whole has come out the other side a better place,” she said.



Chapter 6

In leisure time

Sport and the great outdoors are fundamental to the Australian way of life. Local sporting clubs suffer when hot conditions, no grass and rock hard dirt make playing less enjoyable and harder on the knees. Drying rivers and lakes put a stop to swimming, fishing and boating activities.

“The impact was tremendous. My local football side became essentially a nomadic club until July each year when the little rain that did fall was sufficient to green up the oval. Going from having one of the most secure sources of water to the least, was tough. Cricket wise, we just played on, but it was pretty tough on grounds that looked like the moon and were as hard as diamonds.”

– Anon

Top 10 tips for leisure time

1. Visit the local pool for a dip
2. Seek funding to upgrade sporting facilities with drought tolerant or artificial turf, or opportunities to access recycled water
3. Share sporting facilities that have more drought-resistant facilities
4. Change afternoon sport to evening during summer
5. Arrange social activities to keep people coming to the local club, even if they travel away to play
6. Walk or exercise in the relatively cool weather in the morning or later in the day when the sun is low in the sky
7. Celebrate water when it is available and make the most of every opportunity to get out and enjoy it
8. Take the opportunity to try a new hobby
9. Travel to new places or waterways
10. Turn a dry lake into a concert venue

Challenges for leisure time

- Hot weather made it hard to get outside and stay active
- There was a loss of interest in outdoor activities
- People stopped doing activities because they couldn't afford to spend the money
- Opportunities for activities with children were limited
- Water disappeared which ended water skiing, swimming in river and fishing activities

Our experience

"Every day I would go walking and it was a bit depressing to see everything so dried out and no green."

– *Corinne Heintze*

Solutions for leisure time

- Walking was done early or late in the day
- There was a stronger emphasis making sure that younger people still had access to social activities and activities
- Drought funding to install shade sails and artificial turf in schools made a huge difference to how children could play

Our experience

"We worked hard to ensure sport and leisure activities continued despite the drought."

– *David Drage*

"We couldn't do much about it. Just got on with life as did everyone else."

– *Corinne Heintze*





Corinne Heintze

I had to work too much to have time to play golf. But when I did, the golf course was depressingly dry and not much fun. Sports grounds were so hard and there were more injuries because there wasn't any ground cover.

The golf club is a scrapes course – only operating for winter months – and relied on rainfall to keep it green. All our handicaps went down because the ball went so much further on dry ground. In 2016, it was wet and the grass grew so it was difficult to play to our drought handicaps.

In an effort to keep the local sports oval green, and the bowling club green alive, a storm water runoff scheme was designed. The town storm water was collected in a dam and pumped by solar power pump to the bowling green and the sports oval. It kept the grass alive until the drought broke in 2011. By the 2014/15 drought, we had pipeline water and could keep everything watered, even though it cost a fair bit.

Challenges on the sports field

- Playing grounds became rock hard without water and were very hard to play and train on
- Sporting ovals had to rely on groundwater to keep the grass alive
- Managing the grounds without water was very difficult
- Clubs had to rely on one or two grounds that had access to water, which meant that people had to travel further to play, and the local club wasn't able to make money from selling food and drinks
- The number of people playing sport decreased because it was too hot
- Clubs lost money and had to merge or fold
- Increased injuries on hard surfaces

Our experience

"Footy training was confined to a couple of locations in Horsham until the ground was suitable. Some clubs installed a bore to water but with limited success."

– *Greg Fletcher*

.....
"Playing football and training on below-standard ovals led to an increase injury and soreness due to hard surfaces."

– *Anon*



Solutions on the sports field

- There was cooperation between clubs and the grounds that still had water shared their facilities with clubs who did not
- Clubs found alternative sources of water – storm water, groundwater or recycled water – to keep the grass alive
- Sporting clubs used government grants to install more efficient watering systems or synthetic surfaces
- Twilight sessions instead of playing sport during the heat of the day

Our experience

“There really was only so much you could do – we adjusted to life on the road, although it did cost our club significantly financially with the lost home games and with fewer people attending play at our alternate grounds. Since then, however, there has been a real focus on drought-proofing, new systems and new types of grass have been installed to better manage the heat and the dry.”

– Anon

“Our club made sport more social and focused on eating together to extend the time spent at the event.”

– David Jochinke



Challenges of finding recreational water

- Lake and river activities disappeared
- Many water bodies were closed due to blue-green algae
- The fishing or boating opportunities in the Wimmera were extremely limited
- Fishing was concentrated on a smaller number of waterways and competitions were cancelled
- No yabbing
- No water for swimming in dams and lakes
- The rowing club closed
- No annual waterskiing holiday
- Summers were so incredibly hot, but apart from the public pool there were limited places to swim

Our experience

“When the rivers and lakes dried up we didn’t have anywhere to swim. Even where there was water, the quality wasn’t up to scratch. I remember our family going for a swim in the river one day and coming out with a green ring around our necks!”

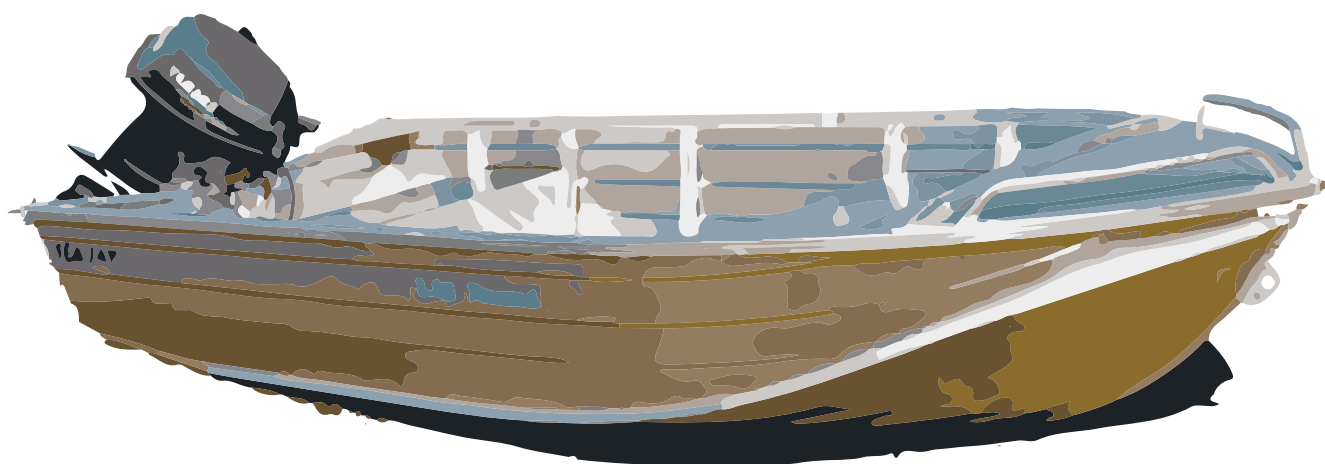
– *Anon*

“The lack of recreational water made it less appealing for family from Melbourne to come and visit.”

– *Greg Fletcher*

“There were big changes to leisure activities. We went sailing down the Murray River and instead of having the whole river available, you had to very carefully follow the channel markers, because it was so shallow either side of the channel. The wind blowing the sand banks of the very low Murray River is a strong memory of the drought.”

– *Sally Marcroft*



Solutions for recreational water

- Buy a small pool for the kids
- Take up new interests and hobbies and look for other recreational activities to replace those that rely on water
- Find new beauty spots to visit and picnic, instead of going to lakes or the river
- Travel to visit areas away from the drought, particularly places that have water

Our experience

“One benefit of the dry river was that when the kids were small we had a great bike ride they could do with training wheels, riding across the empty riverbed to the picnic tree. When there was water in the river, it took much longer to get to the picnic tree.”

– *Sally Marcroft*

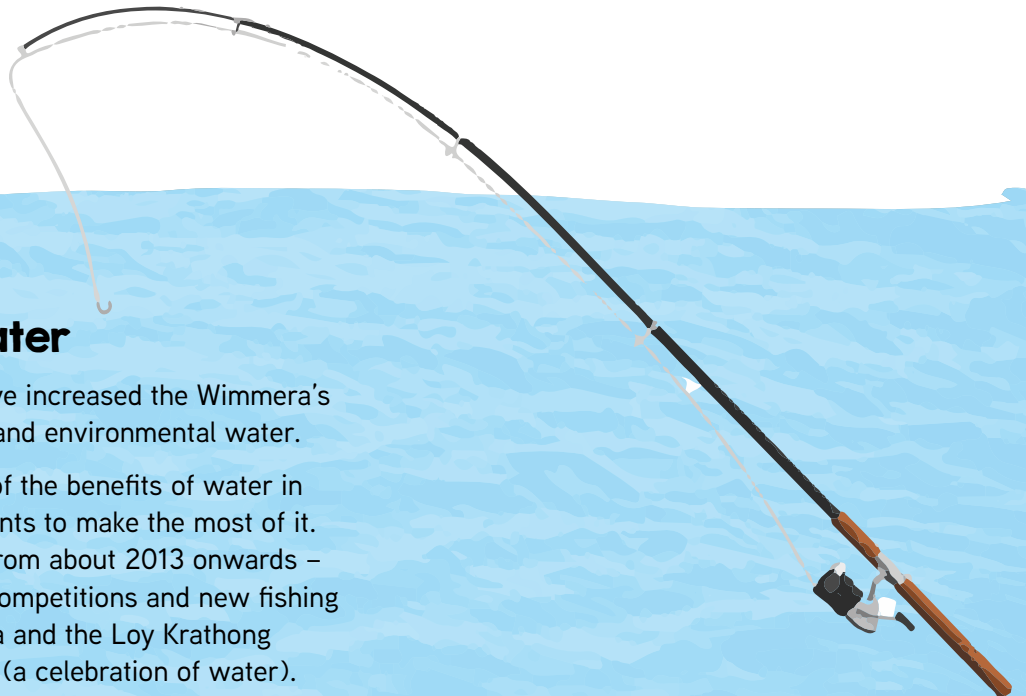
“There was increased travel to get to waterways where we could relax and enjoy of social activities. We learnt to make bigger deal out of something we possibly took for granted.”

– *Anon*

Celebrating water

The years of drought have increased the Wimmera’s passion for recreational and environmental water.

People are more aware of the benefits of water in the river and so plan events to make the most of it. This started happening from about 2013 onwards – events like barefoot ski competitions and new fishing competitions at Dimboola and the Loy Krathong Thai festival in Horsham (a celebration of water).



Case study: Taylors Lake

Footy club rises from the ashes

It is not easy running a country football club, finding players, coaches, volunteers and sponsorship is an annual challenge.

But a bushfire destroying your facilities is a unexpected and devastating blow.

That is what happened to Taylors Lake in 2002 when a pile of dry fairy grass from an empty lake across the highway caught fire and spread to the football ground.

The club, based 20km east of Horsham, was left homeless for 18 months while it rebuilt from the ground up.

“It was a tough period for the club, not only were we pouring any available cash into the rebuilding process but we lost a lot of revenue,” club president Travis Mackley said.

“There was a lot of hard work from volunteers and we’ve now got ourselves set up so hopefully we never encounter a situation like that again.”

Taylors Lake life member and local Country Fire Authority group captain Robert Kelm said a number of factors combined to create a perfect storm for the devastating blaze.

“Green Lake, just across the road from the oval, had gone dry and the fairy grass had got out of control. It was a fire waiting to happen.

“It was stinking hot with the forecast of the wind getting up. I rang some people around the community tied up with the fire brigade and the footy club and we decided to take both the local Green Lake fire truck and a private unit down to the oval, just in case.”

It proved to be a move of foresight.

“I got down to Dock Lake and had a word to the Drung South (the home side) tennis players and asked them about their fire plan and they said they didn’t have one. I then went over and had a word to the cricketers and warned them to stay put on the oval if a fire did break out.”

The fire ironically started when tourists in a bus got out to the look at the big pile of fairy grass and their hot exhaust set fire to it.

“I got a call from Al Brooksby who was manning the unit and he said he could smell fire and then it was on us really quickly.”

The tennis shed and the football change rooms were totally destroyed and the social pavilion sustained serious damage but due to the quick thinking of CFA members at the reserve there was no loss of life or serious injury.

“It was a horror event but all you can think of is that it could have been so much worse, at least having the trucks right there from the start we were able to ensure everyone was kept safe,” Mr Kelm said.

The fire had taught the entire Wimmera sporting community lessons.

“We’re confident we won’t ever have a repeat of that day because there have been a number of changes,” Mr Mackley said.



“Firstly, you’d just never play sport on a day like that now, we’ve got the fire indexes that tell you when it is safe to play and when you had a horror day like that with temperatures in the 40s and wind, then you’d just pull the pin straight away. Secondly, across the region we’ve been really lucky to have the (Wimmera-Mallee) pipeline implemented since then, which means we have much better access to water and locally we also have a bore near the reserve in case of emergencies.”

Mr Kelm said it was critical to plan for consequences of climate impacts.

“Now, I think we’ve been through those droughts and we’ve realised we’ve all got to pull together. We all want what’s best for the community and the environment and by using everyone’s skills, including those with a bit of local knowledge, we can avoid these dangerous situations, we can’t let things like the reduction of fuel loads get caught up in red tape.”

In the years since, the football club has been through ups and downs.

“We’re like a lot of country clubs right around the state, it’s getting harder to find both players and volunteers but we’re battling on. The rebuilt facilities have been great and just the fact we’re out here after what happened is proof of the hard work and community spirit of our members and the local community,” Mr Mackley said.

Case study: Chris Spence

Fishermen looking to get more out of less

Despite being on the edge of the Little and Big Deserts, the Wimmera had a tradition as a water playground.

The region's 17,500km-long open channel system filled lakes which attracted thousands of anglers, water skiers and campers each year.

Swamps were ideal for catching yabbies and rivers popular for swimming and rowing.

Then in the late 1990s the rains stopped and wetlands, which had been full for decades, began to dry up.

A generation of young people never got to waterski, swim locally, learn to fish or go through the ritual of catching, cooking and eating yabbies.

Instead of catching fish for the table in Green Lake near Horsham, a band of locals waded out to rescue and relocate the last few Murray cod before they perished. The lake later filled with fairy grass which caught fire and burned the nearby football facilities.

It was only the creation of the \$688 million, 9159 km-long Wimmera Mallee Pipeline that brought the water back to the rivers and some of the lakes.

Veteran angler Chris Spence believes that while the region is never going to return to the halcyon years of angling of the 1980s and 1990s there is plenty to look forward to with careful water resource management.

"You look at the run-off patterns and there just is not the water getting into our storages there used to be, so we can't continue to plan as if there will be," Mr Spence said.

"We have to ensure we get the maximum value for it across the economy, the environment and recreation."

Mr Spence does not believe environmental and recreational water are mutually exclusive.

His long-term vision for angling in the region is a series of permanent lakes closer to the Grampians, supplemented by river fishing and seasonal flows into non-managed lakes and creeks in boom seasons.

Mr Spence believed changes in farming practices had been a major driver in the lower in-flows into the water storage system.

"We get the flows off the rocky ground in the heart of the catchment in the Grampians but it is not supplemented by as much off the agricultural land because farmers have improved their soils to allow them to retain more moisture."

In spite of the drying out of recreational water in the 21st century Mr Spence said he was still upbeat about angling's future.

"Fishing is a great way to appreciate the wonderful natural environment we have around us and now we have the future of a lot of our lakes and rivers shored up to a large extent with the pipeline, there is a lot to look forward to if things are managed correctly."

"You've got the lakes that really get going over the winter time, while in the summer you can hit the rivers."



In terms of the rivers, he said the run of reasonable years following the drought had meant biodiversity was building back and carp control programs were starting to do their job.

“The Wimmera River has really started firing once again over the last couple of summers which is great.”

He also said wet years would bring opportunistic fishing opportunities.

“Fishing in our smaller lakes and yabbing the swamps is not something that will happen every year in our climate but we need to ensure they are not left out when we’re making our water decisions as they are very important to a lot of people.”

Mr Spence said angling and fishing were a critical part of the Wimmera’s identity.

“We saw people leaving the region during the drought and part of that was that lack of water and the opportunity to get outdoors for a morning or afternoon or whatever.

“We’re now set up better with the pipeline to deal with drought, now it is a matter of the communities and the officials working together to keep our water systems as healthy as possible.”



Chapter 7

On your mental and physical health

One of the greatest challenges with drought and climate change is that you don't know how long it will go on for. Drought eventually wears everyone down. Look out for people in your community. Just showing that you care enough to listen can make all the difference.

“Looking at dry, dusty landscapes for months and years has a negative impact on your health and wellbeing.”

– Anon

Top 10 tips for looking after your mental and physical health

1. Stay connected – regularly keeping in touch with friends and family, face to face or on the phone
2. Take care of yourself, making time for leisure, self-care and to practice gratitude
3. Attend, organise or volunteer at community events to maintain your social connections and motivation
4. Exercise regularly but work around hot and cold times of the day. If bucketing water, watch your back health
5. Try to develop and maintain good sleep habits
6. Limit alcohol and strive for a healthy diet
7. Plan and prioritise to avoid over-commitment, over work and increased stress levels
8. Be realistic in your expectations and don't sweat the things that are beyond your control
9. Focus on the positives and proactively consider adaptation and mitigation actions that you and or your community can take
10. Don't skip your regular doctor's appointments for both your physical and mental wellbeing

Challenges for mental health

- Disappointment, frustration and desolation
- Powerlessness to change the situation
- Expectations not met
- Uncertainty about the future

Our experience

“Looking at endless blue skies all winter, or watching clouds roll in and only provide thunder and lightning - which sometimes causes fires as well - was soul destroying. Droughts really mess with your capacity for hope.”

– Anon

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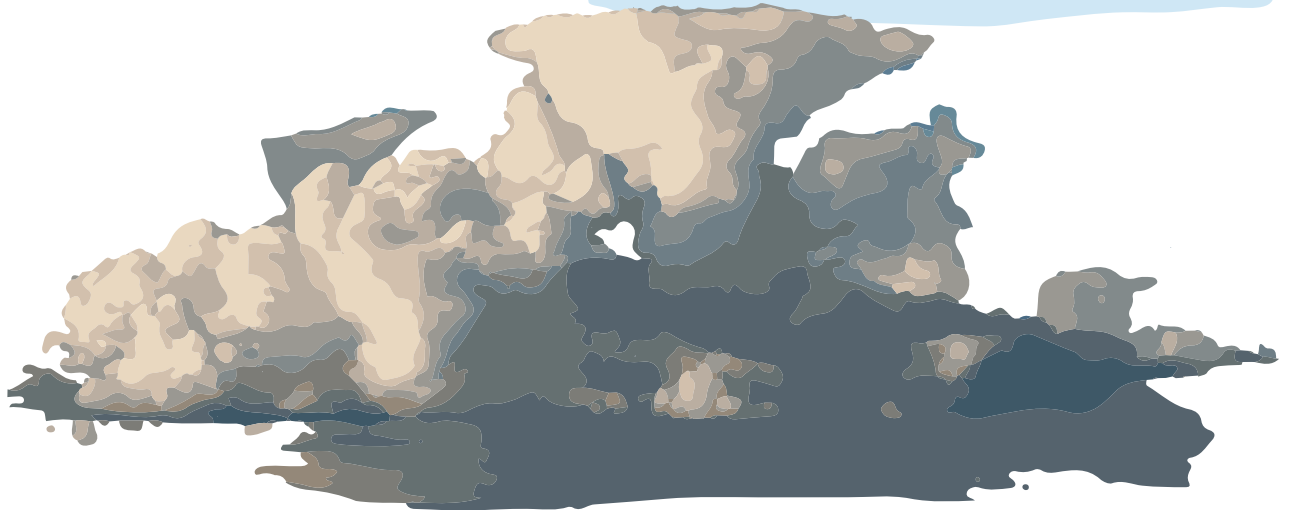
“Waiting for rain weighed heavily on all those looking to the sky. It felt like forever. It was tiring to be around brown all time with no hint of green.”

– Anon

.....

“Disappointment was the biggest emotion, then frustration, endless patience, risk of burnout, and some physical and physiological health issues.”

– Anon



Solutions for mental health

- Stay connected to family and friends by talking regularly
- Attend social events rather than stay home
- Do regular physical activity or sport
- Take up a new hobby or return to an old one
- Allocate some time or money to small rewards such as preserving a patch of greenery in the garden or travelling away from the desolation
- Find a way to have a laugh
- Focus on small positives
- Change expectations to ensure good mental health
- Create easily accessed list of supports updated daily and available across the region in hardcopy and electronically



Our experience

"I went to the doctor and he said to do something which I used to really enjoy, so I took up golf again and have been playing ever since."

– *Corinne Heintze*

"We would go away for weekends to the coast just for a bit of green and cool."

– *Anon*

"Drives provided a change of scenery. The cost was justified as these were essential for mental health."

– *Helen Ballentine*

"Talk through issues and support one another. Have empathy for others, listen attentively and let them get things off their chest."

– *Anon*

"Longer term I guess we learnt the region could cope with the dry, having the water pipeline changed the whole game. We stopped worrying about the imminent threat of running out of water to drink and now can afford to be a lot more philosophical about it all."

– *Anon*

Challenges for physical health

- Alcohol consumption increased
- Hard sporting ovals caused long-term damage to athlete's joints
- Dry conditions aggravated asthma because there was more dust in the air
- People had trouble sleeping

Our experience

"We weren't allowed to use hoses in the garden and carting buckets of water was hard work. One day, I saw an older woman fall over in her front yard while watering by bucket. She was fine, but it was a real wakeup call on the risks."

– *Anon*

.....

"I worked too hard, at times working 70 to 80 hours a week, and eventually suffered burn out and stayed in bed for a week. I couldn't work properly for about a month. I had to work off-farm more to make up for negative farm income. I thought I was fitting everything in, but then fell in a heap and stayed there. I probably should have either leased out more land like I do now or cut my workload."

– *Corinne Heintze*

Solutions for physical health

- Limit alcohol and strive for a healthy diet
- Try to develop and maintain good sleep habits
- Look at options for exercise that suit the climate
 - walk before it gets too hot
- Try a different activity if your regular activity is not available



Our experience

“If it is too hot, it is just easier to stay home. We get our jobs done early and don’t go out after lunch.”

– Anon

“We have to be so much more aware of the potential for heat stroke, keep hydrated and stay out of the sun on really hot days.”

– Anon

“Physical activity can help free the brain. Stay active and engaged. Join a sporting team, listen to music or go for a walk. Indulge in simple activities that can be done as a family such as cycling, hiking and camping.”

– Anon

“Counselling, self-care (exercise and sleep) and practicing daily gratitude can help.”

– Denise McLellan

Challenges in the community

- The whole community feels the impact of the pressure on businesses
- The impacts on community feeling and economic prosperity extend beyond those immediately affected by climatic events

Our experience

“It was hard to stay mentally strong around so many stressed and depressed people. A sense of hopelessness became the norm.”

– Anon

“Mental health takes a beating because you don’t know the duration of the event. Drought eventually wears everyone down. Everyone has different levels of resilience, and we all need to watch out for each other and offer support.”

– Anon

“Mental health was hard hit by drought in our community, but not as hard as COVID.”

– Anon

“Stress comes not just from increased workloads, but also from worrying about others.”

– Anon

Turning a negative into a positive

There was a big photo shoot at Edenhope where the whole town turned out on the dry Lake Wallace and had their photo taken. It brought everyone together and meant that when people looked at the lake they would relive the feeling of coming together as a community instead of seeing a lake with no water.



Solutions in the community

- Community support activities provide a lift to the whole community
- Social activities help people to reconnect, to share and to briefly set aside their worries
- The community is more aware of the need to look out for others and to ask, “are you ok?”
- People are more willing to share their own experiences with mental health
- Community works together to develop and maintain a list of supports updated daily and available across the region hardcopy and electronically
- Collectively lobby for funds to hold social connection activities

Our experience

“There was government funding in the Millennium drought for social gatherings. While many said they would prefer to get funding for direct costs such as municipal rate relief, over time they began to understand the value of these funds in bringing the community together. These included the drought concert at Longerenong in 2007, a photo shoot of the whole community in the dry lake bed at Edenhope and an orchestra concert at Albacutya.”

– Anon

“Funding support for events to bring the community off their farms to connect and have fun for free. People from the support services attended these events, which included community barbeques, fishing, fireworks, an art project and a pizza night, to quietly support those who wanted to seek information.”

– Anon

“When the next drought came along several years later there was a request right at the start for funding to support mental health and social connections.”

– Anon

“We all have different levels of resilience, so we all need to watch out for each other and offer support.”

– Anon



Case study: Geoff Witmitz

Communities take the lead on mental health

RURAL mental health challenges confront the whole community.

Isolation, climate change impacts and lifestyle factors are all risks that can lead to much higher rates of often undiagnosed mental illness in rural and regional Australia.

During the Millennium drought Wimmera-Mallee leaders embraced the challenge to reduce stigma and identify potential mental health problems early.

A Mental Health First Aid training program, auspiced by the Wimmera Primary Care Partnership, helped people to better identify those at risk and refer them to the relevant services.

“It helps people in the community to identify potential issues and seek help before it gets to that crisis stage,” Geoff Witmitz from Wimmera PCP said.

“Growing up in the Wimmera it was not something that you discussed. During the drought years of the early 2000s so many in our region, particularly in agriculture, were under so much stress. The community realised the seriousness of mental health issues and that they had to be talked about. We’ve slowly been destigmatising mental illness and it’s now a subject those at the local football club or the local men’s shed are happy to sit down and have a conversation about.

The Mental Health First Aid program was set up in 2016, but Mr Witmitz said he could trace its origins back to the drought of 2014 and to increased understanding and discussion about mental health throughout the latter stages of the Millennium drought.

“I can clearly remember a drought meeting at the Boolite Hall near Minyip and the people said they wanted some sort of help to be able to make a difference in terms of mental health. There was real concern about how some in the district were coping and with help from Dunmunkle Health we got some sessions up and running.”

Community, local and state government and services all combined to lobby for funding to train up local people who could deliver the training.

“We had over 1000 people go through our workshops at some stage over a five-year period which equates to about 3 per cent of the region’s population.

“In nearly all our communities there is someone that will be able to pick if something is not right, whether it is the classic signs like withdrawing from social interaction or the more severe manifestations like threats of self-harm or suicide. The next step is being able to point the way to professional help and telling people that it is OK to seek that help to get better, like you would with a physical ailment.”

“The training has saved lives through the region. Having a local, who understands the difficulties people are facing, be that first point of contact can be invaluable in getting some people to act.

“Given the lack of formal mental health services and GPs in the region and the lengthy wait times to access services, we think having these ‘community champions’ that can help identify symptoms and then direct people to a service like our Rural Outreach program is a great way to fill service gaps.”



“It’s run on a minimal budget, with help from local organisations in developing the instructors who can deliver the course as part of their job roles.

He said training modules ranged from 40 minute awareness, 4-hour conversations around suicide or self-harm to two day full courses. Courses can also be tailored specifically for workforce and community need.

“Given we’re such a strongly agricultural region and there can be so much situational stress in tough climatic years, having more support will benefit the region as a whole.”

Mr Witmitz said skills and resilience learned through the drought would be critical in dealing with the COVID-19 recovery.

“Stress and trauma from COVID are huge but we may find ourselves at an advantage having dealt with

many of the same themes during previous climate related disasters.

He said the Wimmera-Mallee still lagged in terms of access to digital services.

The pandemic has showed how useful sourcing information and attending meetings remotely can be, especially in our region with its sparse population and big distances between towns. We all just need to be able to get online and access these things.”

But like they have with climatic challenges this resilient community is bound to rise to the challenge

“We’ve shown that we are capable of being innovators in the Wimmera-Mallee and people have shown that if there’s a chance to improve the community’s resilience, they are willing to seize it, no matter what the format.”



Chapter 8

In the community

The financial and mental stress associated with drought and climate change impacts the whole community. People stop spending money and participating in events. It is important that the community maintain services and events and encourage people to participate and stay connected. Government support is vital to provide economic support.

“The community lost population when people just got sick of the dry and left the farm or the region. The economy was impacted because agriculture is such a big part of the regional income. It was almost like an invisible cloud hung over the region, but the sky was always blue.”

– Anon

Top 10 tips in the community

1. Stay active and engaged with your community
2. Be an attentive listener when interacting with others and show empathy
3. Organise, assist or attend community events to encourage social interaction
4. Seek funding to support free or subsidised events
5. Support groups and agencies to band together in connection or adaptation activities
6. Organise or attend Mental Health First Aid training for community members
7. Look for opportunities to do things differently – if you can't boat on the lake, then hold an event on the dry lakebed
8. Celebrate the positives – such as when the river flows or the lake fills
9. Don't be afraid to dream big – every huge event starts with one person
10. Be kind to each other and open minded to solutions

Challenges for the economy

- There was less money around
- Less employment and discretionary income negatively impacted on the local economy and donations to community organisations
- Agricultural impacts from the drought flowed into all parts of the community and suppressed its financial viability
- Financial stress on farmers flowed through the entire community

Our experience

“Drought impacts on all rural communities through economic and emotional hardship.”

– *Anon*

.....

“Drought and its economic impact on the region dominated most discussions. It impacted on everything from jobs to social activities.”

– *Anon*

.....

“The broader Wimmera suffered more as time rolled on. I am not sure residents in larger towns and cities really understand our reliance on mother nature.”

– *Anon*



Solutions for the economy

- Community groups sought government and other grants to maintain facilities and services
- People looked for opportunities to diversify income or to direct market farm produce
- Businesses marketed their services more widely such as providing online services to companies based in other locations

Our experience

“What was surprising was how well Horsham weathered conditions, perhaps suggesting the Wimmera’s capital relies more on service provision than farm production. But it missed the cream that flowed mentally and economically from good cropping seasons.”

– Anon



Challenges of community stress

- There was a general sense of increased stress across the community
- An overall depressive regional community hit mental health hard
- Farmers and agricultural businesses seemed to contract and needed to be engaged socially
- Events requiring water were cancelled – fishing competitions, regattas and rowing



Our experience

“It was challenging for the community. People dopped on others for using water when there were restrictions.”

– Anon

“Community events declined as there was less enthusiasm to get things organised. Ad hoc events that didn’t rely on planning worked better.”

– David Jochinke

“There were fewer opportunities to come together. People became more introverted when under pressure.”

– Denise McLellan

“People became a bit insular and didn’t reveal how hard the drought was affecting them. Its a bit shallow to say we are all experiencing the same as some have more family or health issues than others, some have more luck, some get the rain when others don’t. It’s not wise to talk doom and gloom as gossips will have you sold up in no time.”

– Helen Ballentine

Solutions for community stress

- Stay active and engaged in the community
- Create opportunities, particularly in smaller communities, for people to come together
- Community events were funded to bring the people together and improve social interaction
- Drought funding boosted normal events, such as the local show, and enabled new events to bring people to town
- Attend a Mental Health First Aid course or other mental health support programs
- Finding a positive – like turning a dry lake into a stage – makes all the difference

Events included

- ‘Spirit of the Bush’ free concert at Longerenong in 2007 – attended by over 20,000 (see story below)
- Natimuk fireworks in 2016 – thousands of people converged at Natimuk for the biggest fireworks the town had ever seen
- A series of silo performances at Natimuk with local volunteers, climbers, dancers and animation
- At Edenhope the whole town turned out to have their photo taken on the dry bed of Lake Wallace
- An orchestra performed at Lake Albacutya

Our experience

“Shopkeepers and agribusiness were very supportive of farmers. Asking them how they were going and allowing themselves to be sounding boards if needed. There was a lot of kindness in the community.”

– *Helen Ballentine*

“Men’s Sheds created safe places for those at risk of disengaging or becoming socially isolated.”

– *Anon*

“Farmers’ ability to ride the waves is impressive. But we needed to make sure they were not allowed to become isolated and suffer in silence. The Aubrey Hall Initiative, where farmers came together for a social BBQ once a month was a great initiative west of Warracknabeal. It was not formally established, but grew into gathering of up to 30 who would come along and have a chat, share stories and forget their worries with some neighbours and mates.”

– *Anon*

The day Lee Kernaghan came to town

Funding came in in the Millennium drought for social gatherings. While many said they would prefer to get rate relief, over time they began to understand the value of these funds. The big drought concert at Longerenong in 2007 was a fine example of proactive activities that brought some joy to those impacted by drought. The ‘Spirit of the Bush’ concert featured some big

names, but Lee Kernaghan was the headline act and driving force behind it.

I was drought weary, my dad was in palliative care with cancer and I sat out there in the dust and looked at all those happy faces and had to this rare moment of joy – for me and the hundreds of others around me. It really was a powerful moment when you saw the goodness of the world and the people who live in it.

– *Anon*

Challenges for where we live

- Businesses close and people move away
- Declining populations reduce the critical mass needed to provide jobs, keep schools, sporting clubs and businesses functional
- Volunteers become overworked and burnt out
- Reduced populations reduce town viability and infrastructure spending



Our experience

“Sadly, some people just left the region which impacts schools, business and broader community. We all soldier on but it becomes harder to keep the community viable with fewer people shouldering the load, which in the long run is not sustainable.”

– Anon

“Drought has hurt the community. Many withdrew from participation. The biggest problem is that the recent droughts led to the population in our smaller towns falling below the critical mass needed to keep many organisations running. Many older institutions closed and those remaining face burnout. Population has been rebounding through better seasons, but recovery is hampered by numerous factors, including a lack of housing, reduced corporate/government employment, negative talk, and the difficulty of finding suitably skilled staff. These greatly reduce the ability of the region to rebuild from drought and regain the resilience required to get through the next one.”

– David Drage

Volunteering pressure

Townspesople still expect farmers to come to town and do their share of volunteering in droughts and it is a real dilemma if you are doing it hard. While it is good for people to contribute, you have to wonder what they have sacrificed to be there. Droughts and

tight budgets remind you of how much it costs to be a volunteer. Thirty years ago, and running after three kids and ‘doing my bit’, I think I once worked out that it cost me about \$5000 (in-kind) annually. Food for thought.

– Helen Ballentine

Solutions for where we live

- Look for opportunities to build the future viability of the region, such as supporting new industries and infrastructure improvements
- Focus on improving region liveability such as planning for recreational water conservation and facilities
- Work to maintain access to sporting and other facilities through facility sharing or mergers
- Ask people what they need to improve local liveability

Our experience

“Once the pipeline was built, recreational water was allocated to support tourism and social activities. This was very healing to many souls to see water. Public water has a magical soothing effect but can also be exciting for the activities it offers.”

– *Helen Ballentine*

“The water savings from the pipeline have had significant positive impact on the region’s waterways and wetlands and provide environmental benefits for the future. Incorporating recreation water in the pipeline project has supported tourism and social activities in the region.”

– *Jo Bourke*

“At a Horsham level I think they actively tried to create a bit more of city vibe. We transitioned from the pubs being the only gathering spot in town to opening cafes, the odd restaurant. With fewer outdoor attractions available there was more focus on the commercial centre. Locally, there were more coordinated events, as you no longer would just meet up at the lake in the evening as happened in the 90s. There were real efforts made to keep people engaged.”

– *Anon*

Dancing to bring on the rain

At Ouyen in March 2003 – More than 500 women danced naked at a secret location to help make it rain. Inspired by a group of Nepalese women who carried out a similar successful rain dance the previous year, the dance was followed by a family day at the local recreation reserve.

Two weeks later, Edenhope, whose lake had dried up from the first time in living memory, held an all male rain dance.

Twelve male rain-dancers from Connewirrecoo Tennis Club also headlined the community event, wearing only gumboots, underpants and plastic rain hats as they appealed to the elements for drought-breaking rain.

One thousand people also turned out to have their photograph taken in the middle of the dry lake Wallace at Edenhope.

Case study: Jillian Pearce and Natimuk

Adversity and diversity enliven place and space

"Out of adversity comes opportunity," Benjamin Franklin

Benjamin Franklin would smile smugly if told the story of Natimuk during the Millennium drought.

This small town on the edge of a giant rock and a little desert learned a lot when, in 2003, the district children wanted to talk about disasters.

They'd been working with local artist and schoolteacher Mary French, who lives near that rock - Mt Arapiles or Dyurite - on a project to tell stories from the walls of their towering grain silos.

As children of farmers on the dusty Wimmera plains, they had already lived through flood, a mouse plague, fire and drought in their short lives and disaster was a fitting description of life on this often unforgiving, flat land.

Out of the mouths of babes.... came Space and Place.

Mary worked with the children and a team of local artists led by Natimuk based director, climber and aerial dancer Jillian Pearce, animator Dave Jones, artist Greg Pritchard and Melbourne based composer Santha Press to come up with a performance that would shine a light - well several - on the silo and local lives and a lived experience of the extremes we all live with in the Wimmera.

What transpired was a world first - shadow puppets, aerial dancers and animations collectively illuminating the silo and the night sky. One drinker at the local pub declared it 'definitely the biggest thing to happen since the tractor pull'.

Thousands came to see it and loved it so much it was repeated a year later as part of Regional Arts Australia's national arts conference. This Natimuk team of Artists had arrived in all their glory and keep flourishing and woo-ing the crowds today.

But while Y Space led this charge, it was a community-wide effort with 150 people involved in total - continuing a Natimuk performance tradition as strong as the sun's heat in the early February drought.

Fathers and sons beat drums together, the CFA truck featured, and local Werrimul Aboriginal artwork and Wallup Mara Dancers led by Farren Branson took centre stage.

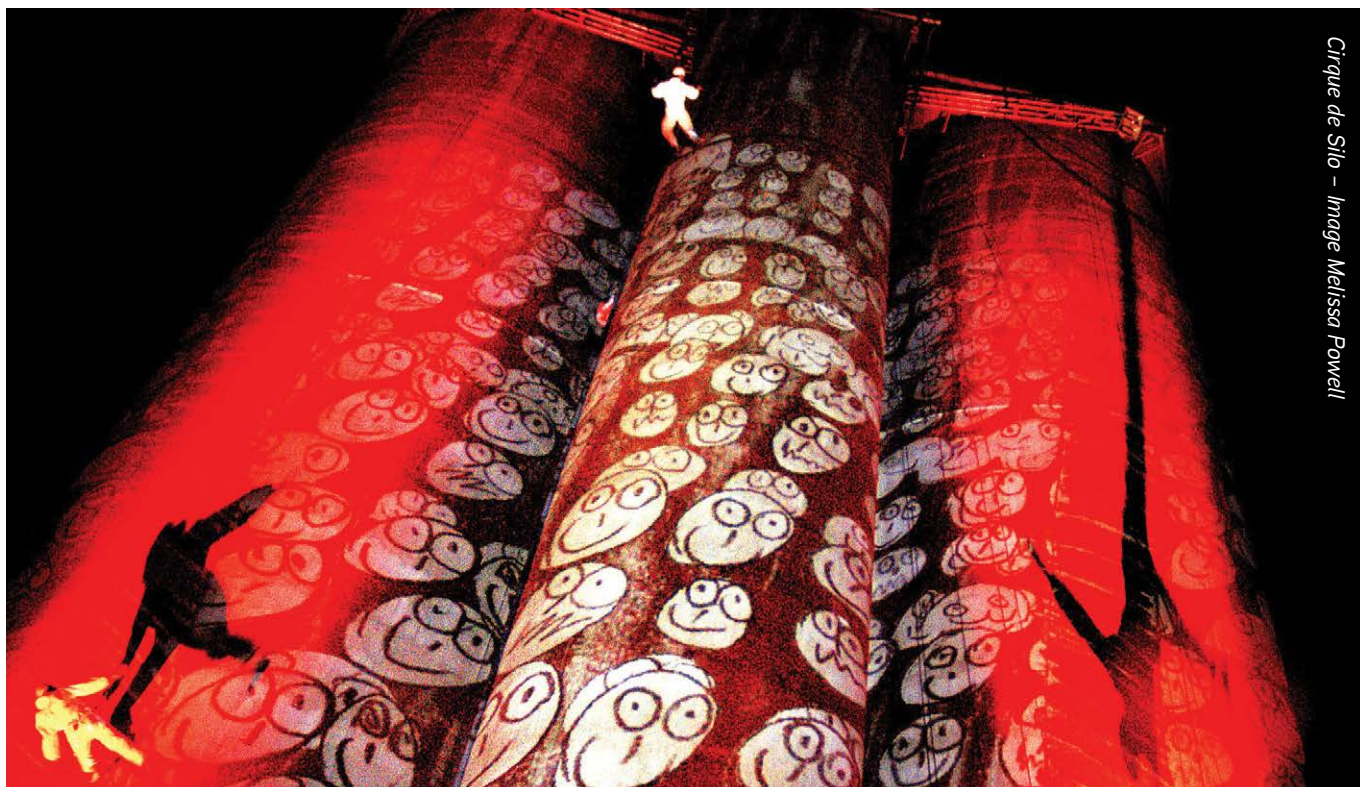
"Its uniqueness caught people's imagination and there was a real sense of euphoria and achievement," Y Space Director Jillian Pearce said.

The first show was linked to another earlier performance in Melbourne on the Art Centre Spire and coincided with the then fledging Nati Frinj Biennale, now in its 22nd year (12th Festival).

Jillian said many abstract images on the mighty silo were ideas of disaster as told by local children.

"It reflected their experience and it involved youth friends and family - they connected through a felt and lived experience. The extremes we live with in this community."

The performance brought the community together. Climbers lured to the area by the challenges of Mt Arapiles' towering rock face, became strong friends with fourth generation farmers.



Jillian calls Natimuk the home of the original silo art – which in more recent years has been more about painting silos than beaming lights and images onto them.

To date more than 52 silos have been painted by professional artists across all Australian states.

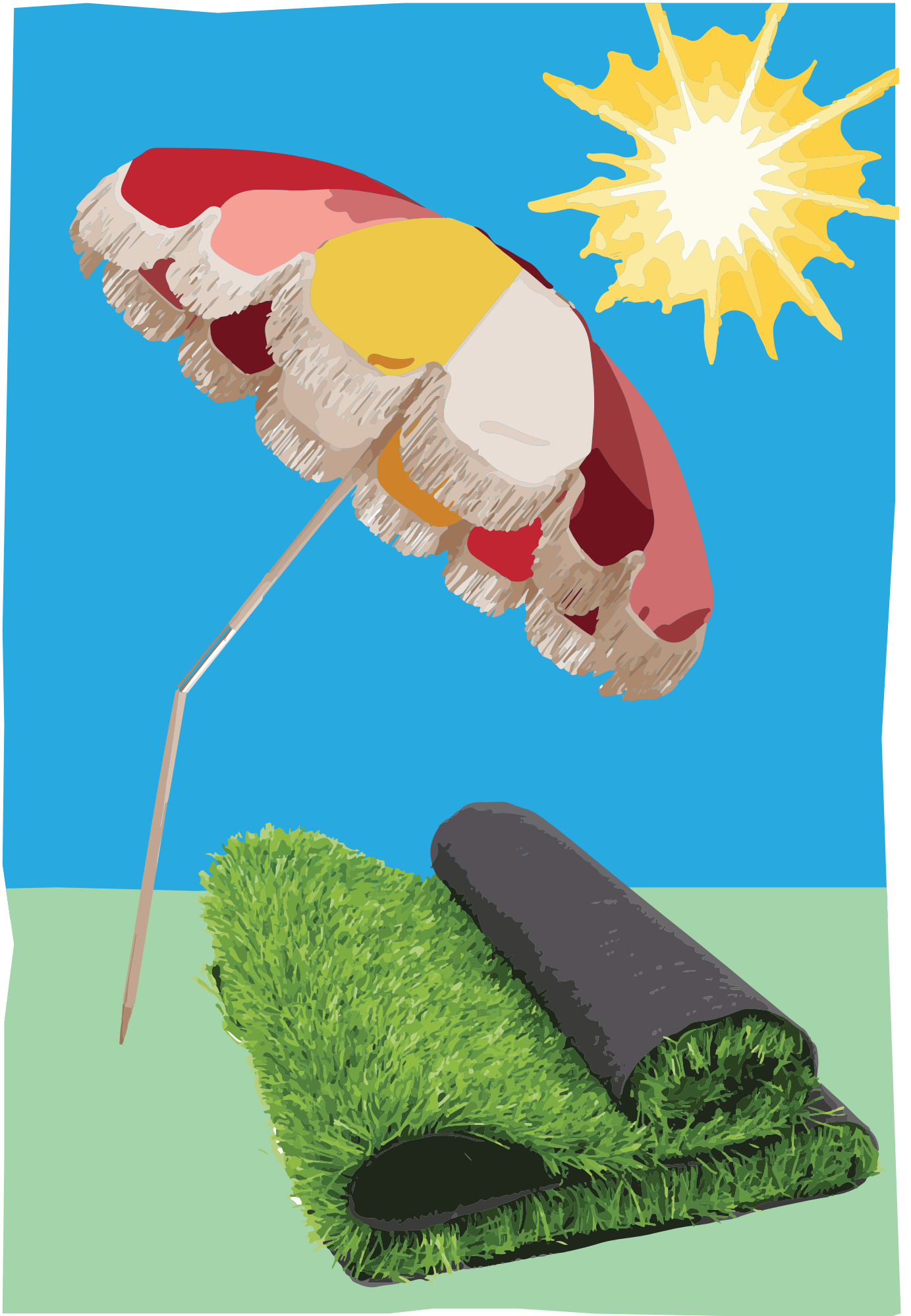
Since that first show in 2003, Natimuk has hosted a range of productions at the dry lake, in the grain shed, with Buddhist Monks, bamboo, a giant puppet, a circus theme and a shadow puppet harvester, to name a few.

But it was that story about climate disasters in the early years of the Millennium drought that first put this little town on the creative map. Helped by local residents co-creating an event that proved a turning point for greater connection, understanding and support for each other.

Out of adversity, creative, collective and transformative opportunities were born.

“Whether you are a climber, an artist or a farmer, we were brought together through the art of story telling and a shared experience of our Space and Place,” Jillian said.





Chapter 9

Innovations to come out of climate adversity

“Rural life is about more than just agriculture, we want to live in vibrant communities, so we need to push hard to ensure there are jobs available in our rural and regional towns, that there are services, that there are leisure and recreational opportunities.”

– *David Jochinke*

Top 10 tips for innovations to come out of climate adversity

1. Dream big – plan for change and look for opportunities to do things differently
2. Change how you live by installing artificial turf and shade structures
3. Conserve water by reducing usage, recycling, and installing infrastructure to capture run off or replace open channels with pipes
4. Changing agricultural farming systems to store soil moisture and conserve fodder
5. Develop plans for bushfires and other emergencies and take steps to reduce risk
6. Monitor weather forecasts and warnings and be prepared to change plans
7. Seek funding to support events and encourage social connection
8. Try new hobbies or activities when heat and lack of water prevent you from doing old favourites
9. Promote initiatives to build community understanding and resilience – such as Mental Health First Aid courses
10. Focus on the positives and proactively consider adaptation and mitigation actions that you and or your community can take

Attitude and preparation

- Be prepared for adverse weather events and dangerous conditions
- Have emergency plans in place for events such as fire and flood
- Reduce energy consumption and seek out green energy sources
- Look for opportunities to improve shade to reduce the impact of summer heat
- Become more self-sufficient in growing food and using water saving techniques like wicking beds



Our experience

“Stories of the past and previous droughts and pioneer experiences lessened the impact of what we were facing, at least we had some running water and power.”

– *Helen Ballentine*

“This was a resilient community before the drought, but I think it was a more mature and resilient community after it.”

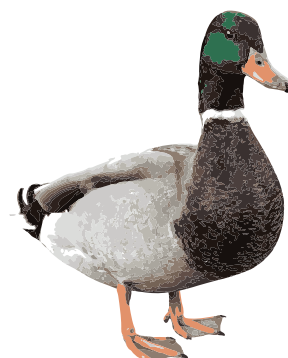
– *Anon*

“Roll with the punch of drought and climate changes. Don’t fight it. Mother Nature can be a bitch and she will always win. Learn to live with that.”

– *Corinne Heintze*

“We value water, green grass and we value the world around us, more people accept the climate has changed. Even if they can’t say those words, they will acknowledge their rainfall has dropped.”

– *Anon*



Other positive actions to take

“Don’t spend your life worrying about the things you can’t control - like rain. Focus on the things you have some power to change. It is valuable for so much more than climate change.”

- Anon



Gaps that still need filling

“The Wimmera Mallee is at the vanguard of climate change impacts in Victoria. We are the canary in the mine. Some ecosystems are very resilient to drought impacts, but many are not. Water in the landscape is vital for community wellbeing, mental health and liveability. There is a need to show the impacts of climate change on the region to policy makers in Melbourne and Canberra who are buffered from the real-life experiences.”

– *Greg Fletcher*

Urban design needs

- A bigger focus on natural cooling methods in the design of buildings and urban spaces to reduce the reliance on energy-hungry appliances
- Funding to upgrade houses to improve energy efficiency and temperature management, particularly for the rental market and for people on a low income
- A greater focus on housing suitability to local climate through local government and building codes
- Ongoing support for water saving and storage ideas, shade and subsidies to people to help people build more water-wise gardens

Our experience

“Improve housing standards and upgrade housing insulation. Most new houses are pre-fab boxes which need air conditioning for people to survive in them. Many are no better than a shipping container donga.”

– *Corinne Heintze*

.....
“How are houses with no eaves and verandahs getting planning permission? New houses must be more energy efficient.”

– *Anon*

Local action needs

- Programs to increase physical liveability are crucial going forward
- Improve shade along walking tracks and in parking lots
- Affordable recreational and aesthetic water and a clear and transparent process for deciding where water is allocated
- Greater re-cycling of water
- Better flood infrastructure

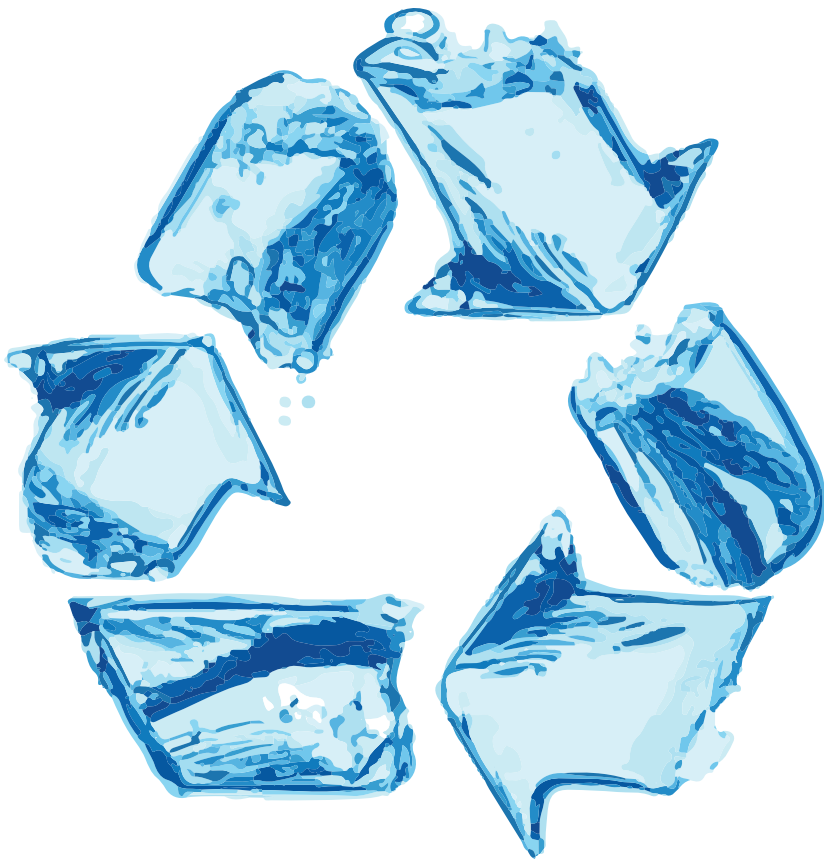
Our experience

“How do we come up with a way to stop these adverse climate events driving our youth away? A program to assist with this would be great.”

– Anon

“We have learned to live in a community that is continually declining in population, for many reasons, including climate change. I hope that the COVID crisis will renew the love of rural living will change this for the better.”

– Anon



Climate needs

- Improve weather research with more funding, weather stations and data analysis
- A more systematic community conversation around climate change and what we need to do to respond
- Government policies around carbon, renewables, recycling and climate variability to support innovation and investment
- A more proactive response to climate challenges rather than the reactive response of waiting for issues to arise then deal with them
- See climate change as a chance to develop a new vision for the future, incorporating change and building new opportunities
- Look for better ways to manage the power grid and redistribution of energy to meet new industries and generation methods, and ideally to reduce the need for huge power lines through private property
- Carbon offsets need to be reviewed – offsets generated in one industry are being used to enable other industries to hide their poor behaviour
- Recognition that agriculture has already, and continues to invest in sustainable practices
- Replace the remaining inefficient water channels with pipes

Our experience

“There is a general despondency with the lack of acceptance of climate change in the community and at government level.”

– *Mary Mason*

“I think what we still don’t have is national agreement on how we are going to go beyond adaption and move more to mitigation. That is what we really need in the longer term.”

– *Anon*

“There is a need for a more systematic community conversation around climate change and what we need to do to respond.”

– *Geoff Miller*



Government support needs

- Funding from government that is flexible to respond to the needs of community
- Better coordination between all levels of government in their preparation and response
- Advocate to state and federal governments to support local responses and build on pre existing relationships and platforms rather than trying to create something new
- Address population decline in rural areas and support diversity in rural businesses and employment opportunities outside agriculture
- Support agricultural industries to adapt to higher temperatures and unreliable rain with alternative crops, horticulture or aquaculture
- Regulatory change across a range of daily life areas in relation to activities, buildings, modes of travel, sources of energy
- Infrastructure funding for strategic projects, short-term local project funding for employment, data and information sharing
- Relocation incentives in marginal areas where land is purchased and returned to native vegetation

Our experience

“Government offers, such as those replacing lightglobes, shower heads and insulation to improve water and energy efficiency should be run through trusted local businesses and agencies. This will reduce the number of unsolicited phone calls and door knockers and support quality work by better enabling customers to follow up if there are any issues.”

– *Anon*

.....

“Drought planning, and real planning for climate change should happen outside of crisis events, but we have not built on our multiple historic experiences. Most drought planning seems to rely on the resilience of our people and systems. However, we do not invest enough in people and in the processes to build proactive flexibility and innovation.”

– *Anon*

.....

“Most government preparation programs are well intended but end up being used as tax avoidance tools.”

– *David Drage*

Community consultation needs

- Keep all lines of communication open
- Listen to the community and develop a local response to issues
- Provide young people with platforms to share their ideas
- Focus on developing relationships with people who have strategic vision to progress thinking and options
- Government spending during times of drought could be done better with more consultation

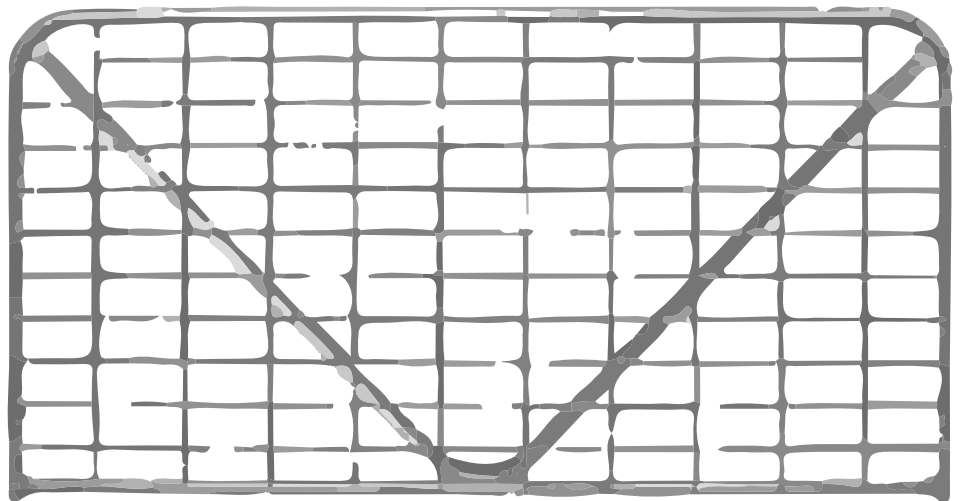
Our experience

“Social programs often do more harm because they need to be implemented by locals who are already already under a lot of stress.”

– *David Drage*

“Strategic planning for regional responses, particularly focussed on water supply and agricultural impacts, is very important. Local government is a critical player in this discussion, though more strategic thinking is needed. The state and federal government do not have all the answers that we need. Local innovation can sometimes be overlooked.”

– *Jo Bourke*



Government support programs that helped our community survive the drought

- Funds to bring communities together
- Rural Financial counsellor programs
- Pipeline funding
- Government financial support for viable businesses through the drought Interest Rate Subsidy, Centrelink Household Assistance and Council Rate Subsidies
- Government support programs such as Men's Sheds, Rural Outreach Program, Local Govt responsibility for wellbeing and liveability
- Support for schools and kindergartens to replace grass with artificial turf and install shade over play spaces
- Free green waste disposal to support bushfire preparedness
- Grant programs to provide infrastructure to reuse and recycle water
- Grants to install rainwater tanks
- Support to manage livestock during drought such as stock containment areas, feed, etc

Our experience

"Never discount new ideas as unachievable - they can be developed and built on to provide benefit."

– *Jo Bourke*

"Any small pool of money for grants is always welcome when people have little to spare.

Fundraising in droughts or when there is low income is very embarrassing for many rural people who normally give very generously."

– *Helen Ballentine*

"One of the big things the community did during drought was stick together. In the 2016 drought 10 shires were meeting and talking about the issues and the possible solutions, and they provided one source of information for government. Agencies worked together to support the community. Health workers educated residents about the need to protect their health in heatwaves and created some great cultural changes which probably saved lives on the worst heat health days. Instead of just complaining about the situation we responded to it."

– *Anon*

Look over the Farm Gate

This government initiative provided \$1500 to support events so that community could get off their farms and connect and have fun for free. It allowed communities to take control of their own events, which was a great way to get people

motivated and own the solutions. Events included fishing, fireworks, an art project, a pizza night. They were often attended by service providers who were there in the background to quietly support those who wanted to seek information.

High-impact project: The Wimmera Mallee Pipeline

- The Wimmera Mallee Pipeline Project was one of the largest water infrastructure projects in Australia
- Between 2006 and 2010, 17,500 kilometres of inefficient open channels were replaced with 9,159 kilometres of rural pipeline
- Strong community support played a pivotal role in gaining government support
- Drought drove the need to replace channels with pipes and on-farm tanks and the project worked in partnership with farms who had to invest significantly in new infrastructure
- Replacing the open channel system has provided increased water security and improved water quality which has allowed Wimmera communities to buffer the impacts of climate change
- The water savings from the pipeline had huge positive impact on the region's waterways and wetlands, and provide environmental benefits for the future
- The pipeline also provided recreational water to promote tourism and social activities in the region

Our experience

"The Pipeline was the big one – this area would probably have almost shut down without it."

– *Anon*

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"The Wimmera Mallee Pipeline is the most significant climate adaptation project in the Wimmera. It has provided increased water security and improved water quality, which has allowed Wimmera communities to buffer the impacts of climate change."

– *Geoff Miller*

.....

"Conserving water, rather than losing it through evaporation is such a wonderful change for the Wimmera Mallee."

– *Sally Marcroft*



Case study: David Jochinke

Advocacy journey forged in adversity

David Jochinke learned as a young man that we all have a voice.

“I still remember overhearing some people in line at the silos tipping off one harvest complaining about things within the industry, but just accepting that was the way it was,” he said.

“I thought to myself, if there are things wrong I want to be involved in the process of making them better.”

As a teenager he took a role in his local Victorian Farmers Federation lobby group, which decades later he would lead for several years.

Mr Jochinke’s early years in agri-politics were dominated by climate management in the devastating Millennium drought.

“Many grain growers had never really asked for help before so it was a challenge both going to government to ask for assistance but also to go back to the farmer community and convince them to lodge an application for support.”

Mr Jochinke is not satisfied drought support has been perfected.

“There is no one silver bullet to the issue of Australia’s volatile climate and the best strategy for climate mitigation but one thing that’s clear is that the best path is to allow farmers to manage the problem themselves.

“Self-insurance seems to be what farmers want so we have to provide them with a suitable pathway to be able to do this.”

“Multi-peril crop insurance sounds promising but there have been a stack of different options and unfortunately they’ve all largely failed to attract clients so we need to look elsewhere to help farmers manage their major variable risk – the weather.”

Mr Jochinke said some issues faced in his early life remained current today and others had been resolved.

“The climate stuff is constant, the battle to get equitable services in rural Australia, basic infrastructure like road, rail and telecommunications are just as relevant today as 20 years ago, but you look at some of the other things and can see how far the industry has evolved.”

“Through the noughties topics like the deregulation of the wheat market was huge, we had the concerns over genetically modified crops, in particular canola, they both feel like they were a very long time ago.

Mr Jochinke said he saw a couple of key issues for the future.

“Many farmers may scoff at terms like social licence but it’s just going to become more and more important.

“If we lose the consumers then we lose the market so thinking we don’t need to explain ourselves is not good enough,” he said.

“Over the years agriculture probably hasn’t promoted itself as well as it could but it is going to be really critical that we do start to engage better with our



markets and find out more about what they expect of us. We need to be able to reassure consumers that we are operating in the most ethical and sustainable manner possible.”

Mr Jochinke said he was also looking at ways to improve rural living as a whole.

“We want to live in vibrant communities so we need to push hard to ensure there are jobs available in our rural and regional towns, that there are services, that there are leisure and recreational opportunities.”

“There are some wonderful country towns right across Australia that are great places to live and now we are seeing we can do a wide range of jobs remotely this could see an injection of new blood revitalising our rural areas.”

“I (have always) wanted to improve agriculture and make the region more sustainable, we’re seeing ag in the area go ahead in leaps and bounds and hopefully these improvements flow through to the broader community and make not only the Wimmera, but all of rural Australia a better place to live and work.”

Case study: Jo Bourke

Environment for change

AFTER helping secure the Wimmera's most important infrastructure project Jo Bourke has some simple advice on regional drought-proofing.

"Look after your environment first, make sure you take steps to do this even in the good times as it will be a whole lot worse and harder to do in the bad times," Ms Bourke said.

During the early 2000s she and other community leaders fought for funding to replace the region's wasteful open channel system with a more efficient pipeline.

In the depths of the Millennium drought regional water supplies dipped as low as just 2 per cent of capacity, but now, after the pipeline was built there is enough water to last for years in the event of another serious drought.

"What the pipeline has showed is where you have water you have life," Ms Bourke said.

"It created security of supply, but also, security of quality of water as well, which has been really important for businesses to have access to food-quality water."

She said while the pipeline's economic benefits were easy to quantify there were other more intangibles.

"When we are looking to attract people to the region one of the things we talk about is the general amenities and having that easily-accessible water around and the good quality sports facilities are things that are really important to a lot of people.

"While it is not necessarily something easily quantifiable, recreational water has been really important."

Ms Bourke said the region had recovered strongly from the Millennium drought aided by better agricultural seasons and a more resilient broader economy.

"The mobile network is improving so a business here is now nearly on an even footing with one in a regional city or metro area which definitely wasn't the case back then.

"In a weird way COVID-19 may also have long term benefits, people are getting out and seeing that it is possible to work remotely so families previously held back from relocating to the Wimmera due to a lack of job opportunities for both parents will have more options."

Ms Bourke said she was also proud of how the Wimmera had become more diverse in recent years.

"We're moving on from having people coming up here to do an enforced regional stint and the majority of them leaving as soon as they can, which makes for a stronger region."

Other gaps yet to be filled include affordable housing to meet an increasing population and functional public transport to unlock the region's potential.

Ms Bourke said while the pipeline had eased the fear of the region running dry, climate change was always going to be a big challenge.



“We’re going to have to continue to adjust as the climate changes, whether that be having gardens with more natives or whether it be changing times we do things in the summer to minimise exposure to heat in the middle of the day, it is something we have to work with.”

“We just need to remember these things are cyclical and to invest in your community, your people and your environment when things are good. It’s a little like a bank, you put away some credits in the good time to draw down on when things are a bit tougher.”

Top tips from the experts on resilience

Sourced from the Rob Gordon video

Create and stick to a routine – climate change impacts may challenge this but we all work better if we have regular tasks to schedules.

If times of uncertainty and challenge it is normal to feel tired and unfocussed but critical to continue to be connected with other people, especially informal communications with other people.

Step out of stress by making regular times for leisure and pleasure – eg just set aside one weekend afternoon for fun – start a project.

Value social capital – all work and no play really does make you dull and make the effort to socialise even if you think you don't want to or don't have the time. And do the same for others who may be struggling with change or stress.

Climate change will see things change, you must understand this can be overwhelming or frightening but also be open to being flexible and open to changing and learning.

It is okay to not be okay and there are many people out there to talk to and help you.

For those around you, learn to listen and hear what they say and encourage them to talk to someone if they are not feeling well.

Getting On With It – A conversation with Crisis Psychologist Rob Gordon

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iemAsYtAMo>

Our experience

“Drought is always around the corner. You never know when a drought starts.”

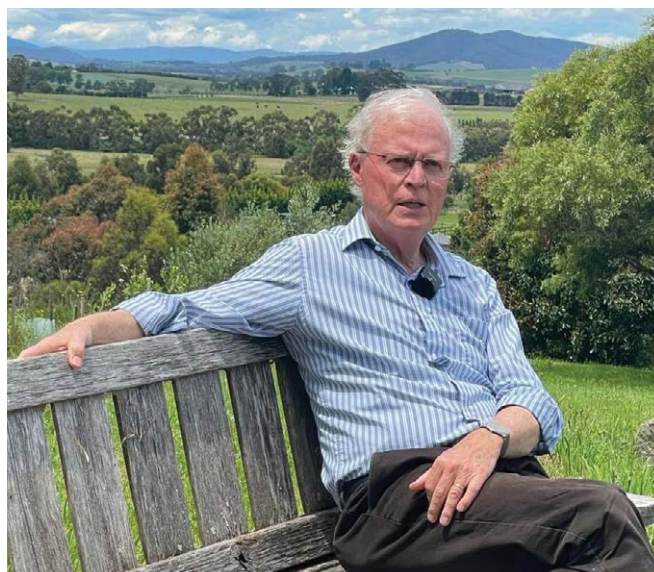
– Anon

“We live expecting dry rather wet weather, we protect ourselves from the heat, we are fire ready, we understand the precarious nature of our mental health and wellbeing and that while you can't see a broken heart or soul it is a very real injury that needs nurturing and care.”

– Anon

“Rural life is about more than just agriculture, we want to live in vibrant communities, so we need to push hard to ensure there are jobs available in our rural and regional towns, that there are services, that there are leisure and recreational opportunities.”

– David Jochinke



“The drought changed both my local small community and the Wimmera as a whole. I often think how lucky the region was to have the mine and the pipeline operational at the time which kept Horsham vibrant. We think back to those days when it was essentially a large, dusty town and the slow evolution that started around then that led it towards becoming the regional city it is now, so there was definitely a silver lining. Locally – it changed the small community I am involved in – people exited agriculture, moved into Horsham. The way of life with fishing and yabbing and so on really altered. We had to find different things to do through the summer.”

– *Anon*

“Towards the end of the drought, people who wouldn’t normally talk about mental health, such as men and farmers, started to share their stories of facing depression. It normalised discussions about mental health and made it okay to not be okay.”

– *Anon*

“As a community you need things and influences that provide positive experiences and don’t destroy all hope.”

– *Anon*

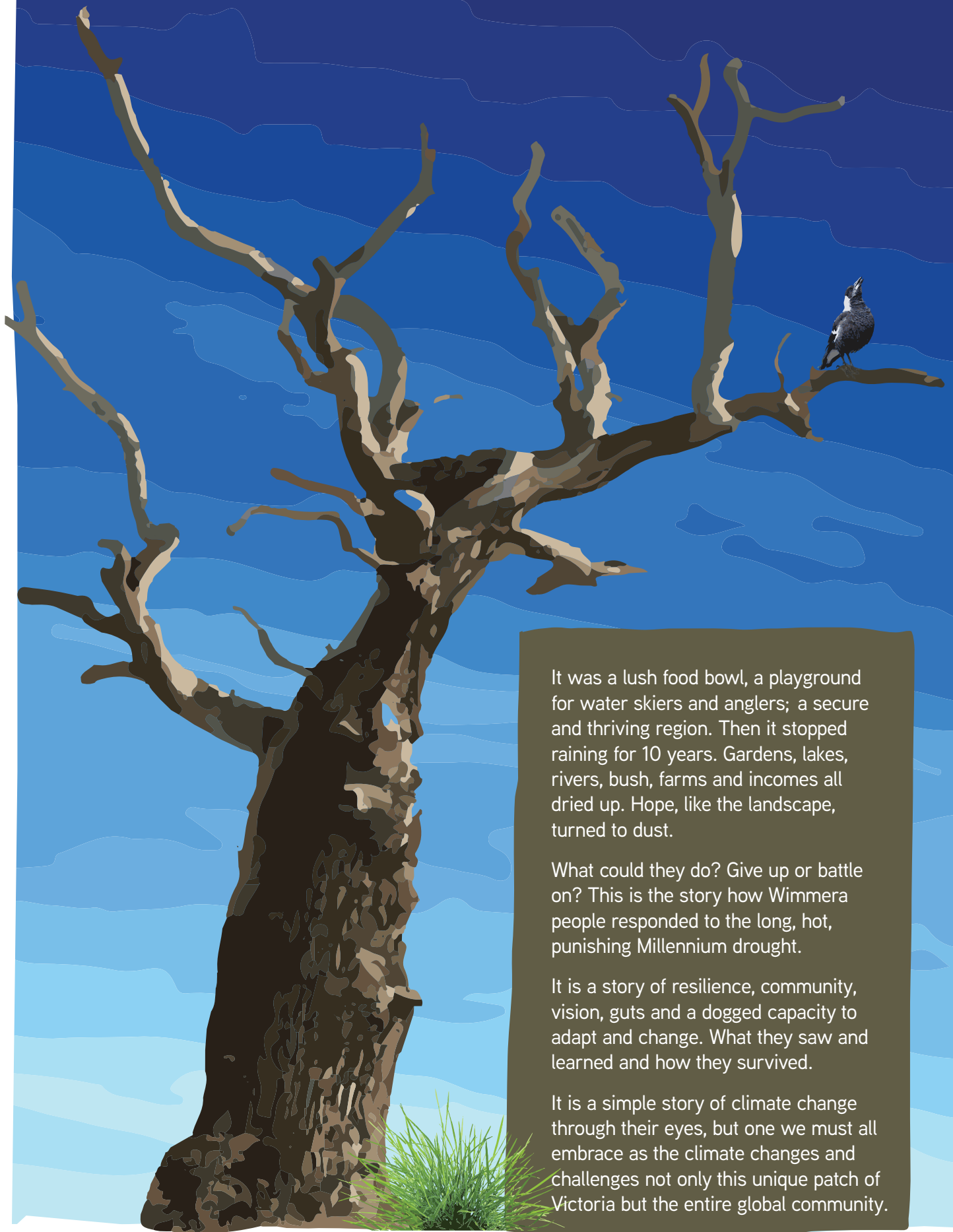
In summary

We live in a changing climate. Droughts, floods, fires and extreme weather are part of all our lives. Climate Eyes celebrates the capacity to survive these challenges. To focus on the things you can control and not stress about those beyond us. To work with each other and for each other to get through tough times. To change, adapt and accept that some things may never be the same again. It hardly rained for a decade but we are still here. We lived, we learned and we survive. And you can too. Adapt every day, consider what you can do for mitigation and try to find the positives in the crazy world of uncertainty that some days can seem unfathomable. And remember, the rains will come when they are ready and the ever-reliable sun, will always rise again tomorrow morning.

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It was a lush food bowl, a playground for water skiers and anglers; a secure and thriving region. Then it stopped raining for 10 years. Gardens, lakes, rivers, bush, farms and incomes all dried up. Hope, like the landscape, turned to dust.

What could they do? Give up or battle on? This is the story how Wimmera people responded to the long, hot, punishing Millennium drought.

It is a story of resilience, community, vision, guts and a dogged capacity to adapt and change. What they saw and learned and how they survived.

It is a simple story of climate change through their eyes, but one we must all embrace as the climate changes and challenges not only this unique patch of Victoria but the entire global community.