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# PAROO RIVER LIFE: A REPORT ON A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO COMMUNITY CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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## INTRODUCTION

The project was based on an investigation into the use of water within the Paroo River. There was potential conflict regarding water use and the general care and welfare of the river among the people who were currently utilising the river, living in close proximity or in some relation with it as well as among some of the many agencies charged with its control, maintenance and care.

## THE PROBLEM AREA

The source of the problem was differing expectations and priorities about water use held by different groups of people living along or in some form connected to the river. Areas of disagreement can be broadly categorised as:

- Upstream demand for water use for crop and pasture irrigation which would benefit substantially many marginal or declining agricultural enterprises.
- Downstream need for adequate floodplain inundation and unpolluted water for livestock production. It was thought that water availability and quality would be compromised by irrigation.
- Throughout the entire length of the river there were those who were concerned about maintaining the environmental, aesthetic and ecological integrity of the river.

## ASSUMPTIONS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The project was confronted with characteristics that are in common to community disagreements regarding natural or scarce resource use. The risk with such projects is that in moving towards resolution there is a feeling of invalidation by one group or another, a polarisation that is the inevitable outcome of a “yes” or “no” decision. In our inquiry design we sought to go beyond the inherent limitations of such problems. Our hope and expectation was to develop an approach that would transcend the win lose dichotomy.

Complexity theory (Wolfram, 2003; Kauffman, 1995) and Fuzzy logic (Dimitrov, 2002) showed relevance and promise in this regard. Complexity theory explains how multivariate systems show adaptive self organization and through this, exhibit heuristic, and at times symbiotic, outcomes. Fuzzy logic may be thought of as a different way of knowing that does not require strict categorisation or polarities but seeks to explain circumstances where there are degrees of relationships and connectedness. These theories influenced the methodological approach taken.

## THE INQUIRY

We collected narratives from groups and individuals throughout the length of the river. This was a form of community consultation which started to pull together the oral history of the river and the region. The narrative flow, combining memories, stories, joys and hardships was like the river itself telling the stories to the listener/recorder as they journeyed down its length. The narratives were written up and made available to the community. We took metaphoric license and titled the narratives “The Voice of the River”. It was in this way that we began to introduce new knowledge and alternative points of view to the multiple reviews and discourses that were taking place. It was our expectation and indeed our finding that information provided in this way was more acceptable and less subject to negation than would be more objective and categorised data. To those engaged in the discourse we

could point out that they were bringing forth narratives of their own beliefs and values imposing legislation, law prejudices and agendas.

## CONCLUSIONS

The project was completed at the end of 2003 but discourse about and planning for the river is continuing. Our contribution is seen not as resolving the conflict but in having raised the standard of the conflict resolution process. Through the device of “The Voice of the River” we have sought to produce and contribute to the discourse a common sense aesthetic interpretation which would inform, stir emotions but above all would seek to heal.

The significance of this research is in the finding that if a community can be made aware of the range of values, hopes and expectations which exist within it and incorporate and address these in conflict resolution, they are likely to reach more sustainable and just outcomes.

In complexity terms we would describe our contribution as:

- Having informed and energised the discourse by ensuring it contained the requisite variety.
- Having sensitised participants to be aware of, and to look for, emergent outcomes; not just to move towards pre-planned categoric goals.

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