

Hattah Lakes Storylines: facing the future, knowing our past

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Abstract

In the past, spring floods would have brought much of Hattah Lakes' wetland forest systems to life every 3 to 5 years. But with no big flood for 10 years, recent environmental watering has been essential to keep this iconic Murray River site's magnificent old river red gums alive.

Climate change and over-allocation of water resources threaten to leave these Ramsar-listed lakes dry for even longer periods in the future.

Yet during dry times, environmental watering is seen by some in the community as a waste of water. Linking environmental flows to social values is important to gain acceptance of the environment's rights to water.

The Hattah Lakes Storylines project – funded by the Murray-Darling Basin Commission and delivered by Environmental Victoria – brought together a diverse group of everyday people for a 4-day workshop where they recorded the story of their personal connection to Hattah Lakes as digital stories (short films) for distribution on DVD both along and beyond the Murray River.

This paper presents the Hattah Lakes Storylines example of how personal stories can be utilized to communicate the social and cultural importance of healthy river systems.

It also explores how bringing people together to create digital stories can be a great vehicle to activate community stewardship of our threatened natural assets, which is particularly important as we face the impact of climate change.

Introduction: why share stories?

Stories are a powerful tool to teach, express and inspire.

Throughout history, cultural knowledge and values have been passed from generation to generation through the use of stories; they bring life to lessons of the past and paint pictures in our mind of the future.

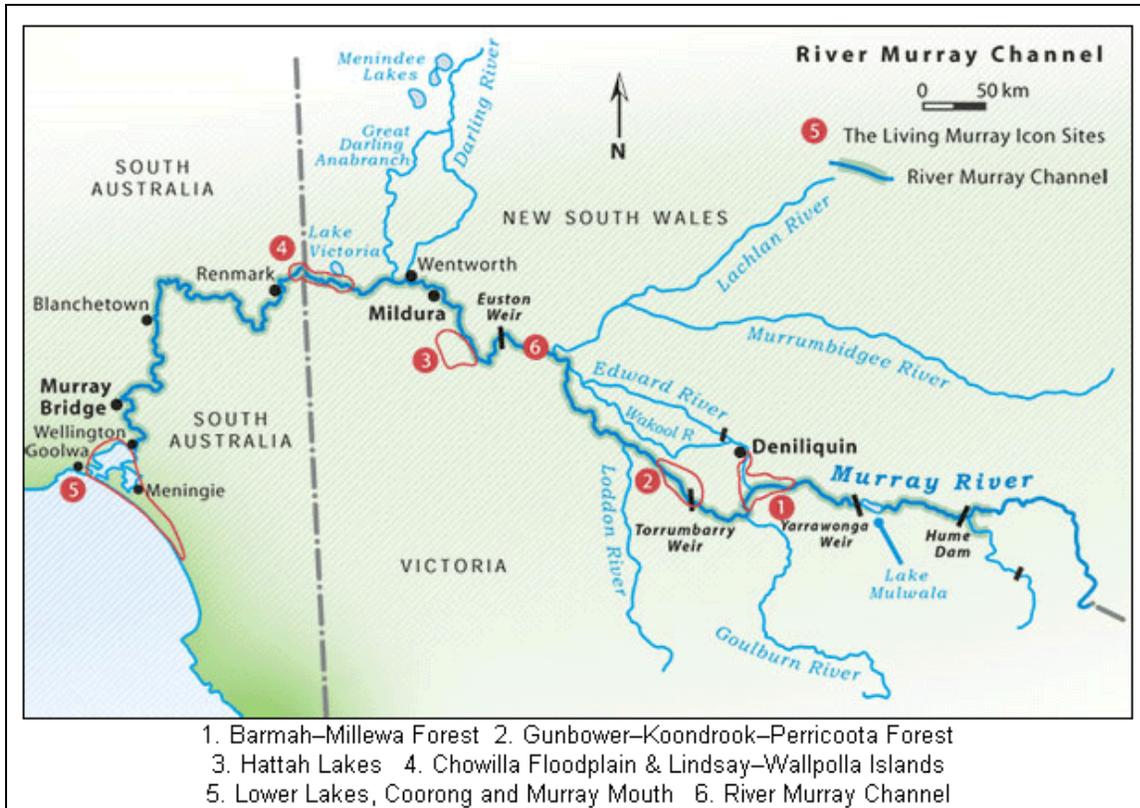
Yet river managers and advocates often rely more on facts and figures in their efforts to influence decision makers and the public in support of their work.

This paper provides an example of how personal stories can be utilized to communicate the social and cultural importance of healthy river systems.

It also explores how bringing people together to create digital stories can be a great vehicle to activate community stewardship of our threatened natural assets, which is particularly important as we face the impact of climate change.

The challenge: communicating value of environmental flows

In the past, spring floods would have brought much of Hattah Lakes’ wetland forest systems to life every 3 to 5 years. But with no big flood for 10 years, recent environmental watering has been essential to keep this iconic Murray River site’s magnificent old river red gums alive.



Hattah Lakes is one of six icon sites identified through the Murray-Darling Basin Commission’s The Living Murray program for their high ecological value and wider cultural significance. (Map courtesy Murray-Darling Basin Commission)

Climate change and over-allocation of water resources threaten to leave the Ramsar-listed lakes dry for even longer periods in the future, which mean the waterbirds that make the site internationally significant won’t have the chance to breed in their lifetimes.¹

¹ Department of Sustainability and Environment (2008) *Northern Region Sustainable Water Strategy Discussion Paper*, State of Victoria

Protected as national parks in north-west Victoria, Hattah Lakes is a favourite place for 10s of 1000s of people who go there each year to camp, fish, bushwalk, canoe and enjoy the tranquility of nature.

Without secure protection of water for the environment, future generations may never experience first-hand the ecological richness of Hattah Lakes.

Yet during dry times, environmental watering is seen by some in the community as a waste of water. An objective of The Living Murray program (<http://thelivingmurray.mdbc.gov.au/>) is to increase understanding of and support for watering programs. Linking environmental flows to social values is important to gain acceptance of the environment's rights to water.

The project: Hattah Lakes Storylines

Hattah Lakes Storylines is a unique initiative of Environment Victoria's Healthy Rivers Campaign, with funding provided by the Murray-Darling Basin Commission through The Living Murray program.

The project brought together a diverse group of everyday people for a four-day workshop to explore and record the story of their personal connection to Hattah Lakes.

The group ranged from writer Lynne Kelly who overcame arachnophobia by learning to love the spiders that live at her beloved Hattah; to 74-year-old Murray Bouchier who honeymooned by the lakes; and local schoolgirl Madeleine Tickle for whom the national park is a favourite playground.

Under the guidance of documentary film-maker and social historian, Malcolm McKinnon, the participants learnt the basics of storytelling and digital editing to weave personal memories, old photos and new reflections into their own 'digital story'. These simple films are each 2 – 3 minutes long, narrated in storyteller's voice and often complemented by original music and sounds from the field.

The final 12 stories have been compiled onto DVD, along with a brief introductory film. 1500 copies have been offered as an inspiring educational resource through schools, community groups, government agencies and cultural institutions.

The stories can also be found on Environment Victoria's website (www.environmentvictoria.org.au) and on video sharing website YouTube.

The result: product plus process

The best way to understand the project is to watch one or more of the Hattah Lakes Storylines digital stories.

(‘Bush Easters’ by Mark Johnson shown at Riversymposium 2008)

The website, DVD and accompanying Teachers Guide are tangible outputs of the Hattah Lakes Storylines project.

There were also a number of other positive outcomes. These are the top three:

1. Increased accessibility and reach of the healthy rivers message

Stories are a powerful tool to teach, express and inspire.

Environment Victoria's Healthy Rivers Campaign has found capturing stories a useful way to highlight the many social and cultural values of healthy rivers. Initiatives such as the online 'Your River' project have used personal stories to provide context and meaning to the often complicated world of river science and water politics. (See www.environmentvictoria.org.au for details).

But Hattah Lakes Storylines took this work to a whole new level.

Digital storytelling brings the timeless art of narrative expression into the digital age. With their visual dimension these stories are more accessible and engaging.

The digital storytelling process was developed in the 1990s at the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, California, and its application is increasing around the world.²

What makes digital stories particularly powerful is their focus on personal experiences. They are created by the subject and narrated in their voice. The honesty and passion conveyed can make a powerful impact on the viewer.

We found the Hattah Lakes Storylines project really captured people's imagination.

When the DVD was launched in July 2008, it was to a capacity cinema audience at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image at Melbourne's Federation Square. The event was so over-subscribed further screenings had to be organized.

There was also keen media interest in the project, with extensive coverage in both metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria.

2. Space for reflection and the exchange of experiences

Throwing a dozen people together of varied backgrounds and levels of skill and preparedness for a four-day output-focused workshop certainly had its challenges! There were some tense times and even a few tears.

But digital storytelling workshops are designed to be a forum to "inspire, connect, and incite action"³ as much as they are about delivering a product.

² Lambert, Joe. (2006) *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community*. Berkeley, CA: Digital Diner Press

³ http://storiesforchange.net/about_digital_storytelling (accessed August 2008)

Indeed, we found the workshop provided a space for personal reflection and the introduction of fresh perspectives on a place they all love. It facilitated learning between people of different generations, cultural groups and geographic origins.

An evaluation survey revealed that workshop participants enjoyed the exposure to new perspectives and a sense of clarity and solidarity which emerged.

Comments included:

“It made me realize that Hattah’s importance lies well beyond my limited experiences which although are profound, are only a small part of the collective memory of this rich ecosystem.”

“The opportunity to share our different feelings about the Hattah Lakes with more or less strangers was fabulous and enhanced our desire to help Hattah Lakes where ever we can.”

“The storylines process also helped to clarify my own perspective on the great value of this Park.”

“I didn’t know that there so many people out there compassionate of Hattah like myself but in a different way.”

3. Vehicle to inspire confidence and empower action

Among the many great lessons that emerged from the workshop, was the recognition that every person has a story to tell and you don’t need to be a scientific or policy expert to know why healthy river systems matter.

According to the workshop evaluation survey participants found celebrating their connection to this special place to be an empowering experience. They were left with a feeling of renewed confidence and determination to defend it.

Comments included:

“Discovering new perspectives was an excellent learning tool to clarify my arguments on the need to protect Hattah. I feel better equipped to discuss Hattah with a larger range of people.”

“I think the workshop empowered me to believe that it is possible to make an impact by telling my story.”

“It intensified my passion to assist in maintaining the place.”

“I gained a feeling of empowerment that the work may help protect the ecosystem.”

A key principle of the digital storytelling technique is to encourage participants to use their stories “both to start conversations with friends, coworkers and family, and in more formal efforts at community building, education ...and advocacy.”⁴

As part of the Hattah Lakes Storylines project design, the 12 storytellers developed individual promotion plans, such as media interviews, newsletter articles, public speaking and sending copies of the DVD to their local MP.

Examples of this work include schoolgirl Madeleine Tickle’s invitation to show her film at the 2008 Youth River Health Conference in Mildura; 74-year-old Murray Bouchier’s media interviews including on ABC Radio’s Bush Telegraph; and Mildura artist Helen Turner’s screening as part of her photography exhibition.

Each storyteller is a great champion for this special place and now they have a useful resource, fresh insight and renewed inspiration to support that role.

Conclusion: over to you!

For some who shared their Hattah Lakes story, this is still their favourite place in the world. For others, they could barely express their despair at how much has already been lost.

When it comes to issues like the deepening crisis in the River Murray system as we face the impact of climate change, we’re often fed the line that it’s a matter of people versus nature; of country versus city; of economy versus ecology, but if there’s one concept that rivers in their very nature make obvious to us it’s connectivity.

And that’s what these stories are about: about rivers connecting with their floodplains; about people connecting with place, and with each other and with themselves.

These 12 stories are all about Hattah Lakes – the place – but they are they are also tales of happiness, hope and harmony; they are about relationships, recovery and renewal. And they are about beliefs and belonging.

It is our hope this project makes a valuable contribution to reigniting the passion of those who care for this wonderful place; to get more people inspired and active in defense of our river systems; and to highlight the priority of protecting and restoring our environment to our political leaders.

I encourage you to be part of this vision: utilize the stories as an educational and advocacy tool and/or promote this resource through your networks.

To access stories and more on project:

Contact Leonie Duncan, Healthy Rivers Campaign, Environment Victoria. Telephone: 03 9341 8120, Email: leonie.duncan@envict.org.au or visit www.environmentvictoria.org.au

⁴ http://storiesforchange.net/about_digital_storytelling (accessed August 2008)

Environment Victoria is the state's peak not-for-profit environment group. Founded 40 years ago, we run campaigns and deliver programs to inspire and activate Victorians to live sustainably and defend our precious natural assets.

Over the last decade our Healthy Rivers Campaign has worked to influence governments to protect and restore Victoria's river systems and to raise the profile of river and water management issues in the media. We also support a network of grassroots river advocates across Victoria.

Acknowledgements

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