

## **Drought is not to blame**

Australian politicians say, and your correspondent reports that the drought is the main cause of the water shortage at the mouth of the Murray River (Aboriginal film warns of cultural loss, 25 June). But that is not true. A similar drought occurred in the 1940s, about the time that Tom Trevor remembered the estuary as still being alive with fish.

The great difference today is that some 70% of the water is now diverted for irrigation upstream. The natural median flow to the sea in precolonial times was around 14,000 gicalitres but by the 1950s about 3,500 were being diverted and by 2000 it was about 12,000. Much of this was put in storage and at times of drought even more is held back. Why let water flow past when you can put it in the bank? As a result there's been no flow to the sea for over a decade.

Previously, when rules obliged irrigators to release water if flows downstream dropped below certain levels, this was manageable. Droughts come and go and people worked with them. But now, even though the current drought is ending, it won't make a difference because the government has replaced the rules with a water market. The environment obviously can't pay for its water, the government won't buy on its behalf, everyone else stores it regardless, so the environment is dying and the market will follow. The Aborigines are in absolute despair at the bone-headed stupidity of it.

It's the water market that will kill the Murray, not the drought.

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