

## Case Study

### **A billion dollars committed by government before the Traveston Crossing Dam was finally stopped. A community's commitment to their river.**

A billion dollars committed by government before the Traveston Crossing Dam was finally stopped. A community's commitment to their river.

The Mary River rises in the rainforest-clad hills of the Blackall and Conondale Ranges immediately to the north of Brisbane, the capital city of Queensland (Australia). It flows northwards for about 300 km through progressively drier agricultural land (parallel to the rapidly growing urbanised coastal strip of the Sunshine Coast), to join the sea in the lee of the World Heritage listed Fraser Island.

In April 2006 a 'megadam' project (Traveston Crossing Dam) was proposed for the middle floodplain reaches of the main trunk of the river. The purpose was to transfer water from the Mary River into a South East Queensland water grid, as part of a suite of drought emergency measures intended to deal with the combined consequences of a long-term drought and a rapid growth in urban water demand. This project was strongly opposed by communities in the Mary Valley due to displacing hundreds of families and predicted impacts on downstream river flows and water quality.

The State Government received more than 15,000 formal submissions from members of the public against the project in response to the release of its Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The Federal government also commissioned a number of independent scientific reviews of EIS information.

Based on these independent scientific reviews, both the federal Senate and House of Representatives passed motions calling on the Queensland Government to abandon the dam project. Nevertheless, the Queensland Government refused and continued with its program of land purchases and associated infrastructure development (roads and inter-connector pipelines), spending over 1 billion dollars of public funds. In the wake of these actions, local towns and communities in the Mary Valley began to collapse.

The construction of Traveston Crossing Dam was halted by the Federal Government in 2009, although by 2012 three pre-existing small storages on tributaries and an off-take from the main trunk of the river will be connected to the South East Queensland water grid, allowed for by a 2006 law. There is a planned review of this leg-



## A billion dollars committed by government before the Traveston Crossing Dam was finally stopped. A community's commitment to their river. Page 2

isolation in 2016. However, the state government has given a clear commitment that they will not revisit the proposal for a dam at Traveston Crossing, and all references to the project have been removed from state legislation.

More than one billion dollars of public monies had been spent on land purchases and associated infrastructure and pre-construction projects before the dam was stopped. Many citizen advocacy groups would have given up when the first houses were demolished. How did a citizen group have the strength to persist in the face of what appeared to be a losing battle?

In the early 1990's, visionary local farmers and community leaders saw that the only way to deal with the landscape-scale water and land management issues was on a whole-catchment basis - involving the broadest base of community, industry and all levels of government. These people built a groundswell of support (including government officers, teachers, etc.) to get local and state governments to support the concept, including forming a council of mayors from 13 local governments to support the idea. The group lobbied for many years to establish such a catchment body, and the Mary River Catchment Coordinating Committee (MRCCC) was born.

The MRCCC functions as an independent body with support from the community, industry and all three levels of government. Its activities are guided by representatives from 25 interest sectors throughout the catchment (e.g. local government, state government, mining, dairy, community, fishing, conservation, forestry, education, beef, horticulture etc.) The MRCCC has no statutory powers at all. Its roles are: public education and awareness, encouraging best industry practice and sustainable landscape management, and encouraging catchment-scale planning and policy development in collaboration with government. The group has earned considerable standing within the local community and government because of its extensive, practical, community-based networks throughout the catchment. However, no-one is legally bound to listen to what they suggest - as is evident from the attitude of the State Government with respect to the Traveston Crossing Dam.

Because of this history of strong community involvement, the State government knew that there would be strong opposition from within the Mary catchment to the dam proposal and the proposed level of transfer of water out of the catchment. Indeed, several extraordinarily dedicated local action groups, most notably Save The Mary River and the Greater Mary Association were formed immediately after the dam announcement and took up a forceful and focused political and media battle against the State on the dam issue. Groups opposing the dam feel they subsequently suffered poor treatment from the State Government, with no attempt at meaningful consultation that considered any options to not constructing the dam. Many examples of this, including being deliberately lied to and suppression of technical data, were presented to the Federal Government during the Senate inquiry into the dam project in 2007.

The MRCCC made technical arguments on the basis of intimate knowledge of the Mary River system – that the dam would not be as effective for water supply or flood mitigation as claimed, that true social and economic costs had not been accounted for, and that it would have unacceptable impacts on a number of federally protected endangered species and ecosystems. Once this information started breaking through the concerted pro-dam media campaign, many residents including people within the water industry and state agencies could see the flaws in the State's position and started to oppose it. The project

## A billion dollars committed by government before the Traveston Crossing Dam was finally stopped. A community's commitment to their river. Page 3

turned divisive within the Labor Party itself, with several sitting State MP's resigning over the issue, and many local Labor Party branch officials leaving the party. When the sitting (Labor) State Environment Minister lost his seat in the 2009 election, he identified the State commitment to the Traveston Crossing Dam as the principal reason for his defeat.

Since 2006, the MRCCC had pointed out that the state was spending taxpayers' money on the project before it had the required federal approvals, and that in their opinion the science was clear that the project could not meet the requirements for this approval. When the project was stopped in late 2009, the MRCCC's position was vindicated. Significantly, the State did not appeal the federal decision. However the State seemed shocked by the federal decision and had no contingency plan in place. The project, and water and land management within the Mary Valley fell into administrative chaos, a situation still not resolved at the time of writing.

The growth in urban water demand predicted 8 years prior has not eventuated and, climatically, flooding has been more of an issue than drought. Many of the water infrastructure projects pushed through between 2006 to 2011 in political response to the 2002-2007 drought lay dormant or underutilized. A major new dam south of Brisbane (Wyaralong Dam) was completed, is full, but has not been connected to the water grid because there is no demand for the water from it.

A positive outcome of the long media campaign surrounding the dam was the public attention to the supply and demand assumptions used to justify the dam. A well coordinated public education campaign has been subsequently implemented by the State Government to increase urban water use efficiency. As a result, per capita urban water consumption declined from more than 300 liters/person/day (as used in the initial justification for the dam), to less than 150 liters/person/day, over a time span of less than 4 years. The Queensland Water Commission's revised Water Strategy now predicts urban water security into the middle 21st century without any new 'megadam' projects.

Queensland has a comprehensive legal framework for managing water resources on a catchment by catchment basis, based on a Water Resource Plan and a Resource Operations Plan for each river basin, legislated under the Water Act and aligned with the National Water Initiative (NWI), a multilateral agreement between the federal and state governments. However, it should be clear from the story above that water management in the Mary Basin occurs in a politically charged environment where there are many competing interests for the river's resources, and great imbalances in political and economic power. Even with comprehensive legal and policy frameworks in place, achieving 'a sustainable and productive catchment' involves a continuous process of community-driven communication, education, research, negotiation and consultation, including concerted direct political action to see laws and policies applied.

### **Key lessons learnt by the MRCCC**

- Promoting the equitable, sustainable and productive management of a catchment is a continuous process. It is never 'done' but battles can be won – even after seemingly irreversible commitments have been made to poor decisions.
- Even within a seemingly comprehensive policy and legal framework, strongly networked and motivated community action is essential to apply law and policy to economically or politically powerful actors in the catchment.
- Powerful stakeholders may be tempted not to bother with meaningful consultation, often going through the motions of insincere, 'sham' consultation or simply launching a propaganda campaign. The earlier that sincere consultation is initiated, the more chance of avoiding poor decisions and outcomes and perhaps even finding an unexpected positive outcome.
- The MRCCC has created community networks of volunteers involved in water quality monitoring, management of riparian vegetation, improved grazing land management, biodiversity conservation, dairy effluent management, irrigation management and education. These voluntary networks, interconnections between people generating local knowledge on how to restore the watershed, builds credibility and visibility for citizen initiatives and constitutes social capital to be passed on to future generations of Mary Valley residents. The importance of this work is often not understood by policy makers.
- With creative campaigning, citizen groups like Save The Mary and the Greater Mary Association can use their electoral power to punish politicians for water mismanagement. One might think of water politics and resource management generally as obscure technocratic details and outside of the public spotlight. But in Queensland, the people of the Mary Valley made water management issues decisive in determining the careers of state politicians.
- There are certainly examples of how participation by citizen groups in multi-stakeholder processes that include actors more powerful than themselves can backfire. In some instances, these dialogues between political and economic unequals are "window-dressing" consultations and community groups come away feeling manipulated. Here, although there was plenty of room within the MRCCC for the state government to use the MRCCC to railroad its pro-dam position, the community position prevailed through careful alliance-building, including with federal agencies, and standing by its good, grassroots science.

**The full introduction, recommendations and case studies from *Water Commons, Water Citizenship and Water Security: Revolutionizing Water Management and Governance for Rio + 20 and Beyond* are available at [www.ourwatercommons.org](http://www.ourwatercommons.org). Join us in exploring the following cases:**

- Stopping an unnecessary dam on Australia's Mary River after U.S. \$1 billion invested
- Repairing ecosystem damage from eucalyptus groves in Minas Gerais, Brazil
- Breaking through caste barriers to supply water for all in Parambur, India
- Strengthening peri-urban, locally-managed water systems in Bolivia
- Upstream-downstream coordination along the Lempa River in El Salvador
- Water citizenship tales from Filipino water districts
- Farmers protecting New York City's rural water supply
- Building an extensive, participatory rural aqueduct system in Colombia