



Caring for our largest, loneliest place

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The people who live in and care for Australia's largest, loneliest wild place, the Lake Eyre Basin, need all the help they can get from governments to look after it.

As the world's last wild desert rivers again run free and life is replenished in the empty lake beds of the Lake Eyre Basin a major new report from the Desert Knowledge CRC has urged federal and state governments to get behind the region's inhabitants as they grapple with the immense task of protecting it for future generations.

Released by the Minister for the Environment, Hon Peter Garrett, DKCRC's Lake Eyre Basin study identifies major challenges facing Australians living in isolated areas in caring for our remaining near-pristine desert regions.

It cautions about the huge load which can fall on a very small number of committed individuals from all the overlapping jurisdictions and agencies, about the risk of policy imposed from outside without full local support – and the danger to committed locals of personal burnout.

Spanning South Australia, New South Wales, Queensland and the Northern Territory, the Lake Eyre Basin covers 1.2 million square kilometres, around a sixth of Australia and is home to just 100,000 Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people – one of the lowest population densities on the planet.

The Basin's rivers are among the last wild dryland rivers on the planet. The region overlies a large part of the Great Artesian Basin, containing approximately 64 000 billion litres of groundwater. Its evaporation rates exceed the area's annual rainfall, making it one of the driest parts of Australia. It supports a unique flora and fauna adapted to extreme boom/bust cycles of flood, fire and drought. Its ephemeral wetlands support huge bird populations and are becoming critical as the Murray-Darling Basin wetlands disappear. Its industries include tourism, pastoralism and mining for gold, copper, zinc, uranium as well as potential solar thermal and geothermal energy.

“With so few people, such a vast area and so many resources to care for, the challenge of looking after this part of Australia is immense,” says DKCRC chief executive Jan Ferguson. “The people, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, who live there are deeply committed to preserving their landscapes and resources – but they are also incredibly overstretched.”

Many different government jurisdictions overlay the Basin. These demand a lot of residents but don't always provide the necessary support, the study indicates. Sometime they impose external values and sometimes they prevent people from managing their landscapes in the best way they know.

The study says the most important ingredients for success in engaging the people of the Basin in managing their natural resources are: trust, adequate resources, effective communication and inclusivity.

“This is an immensely complex region, both by its very nature and in the way it is administered,” Ms Ferguson says. “To even study such a region you need a nationally co-ordinated research effort, which

is what DKCRC was able to provide. Unfortunately such studies may be harder to achieve in future now it has been decided not to renew the DKCRC.”

The study has already had one important outcome: the natural resource management bodies and state and territory governments of the region have combined in an application to the Federal Government’s Caring For Our Country program for support to manage the Lake Eyre Basin as one of the world’s iconic arid zone regions.

“The Basin may be large and still relatively pristine – but it faces increasing pressures and threats,” Ms Ferguson says. “There is a high danger that introduced weeds will replace native flora on a landscape scale and the cane toad has recently been confirmed as a serious threat to local fauna. Without good management, we could still lose these iconic Australian landscapes.”

“After a hundred and fifty years of European settlement, the Lake Eyre Basin is in relatively good condition when benchmarked against the rest of the world’s desert regions,” Ms Ferguson says. “The report makes it clear our urgent task is to keep it that way.”

Copies of the Lake Eyre Basin report can be found at:

<http://www.desertknowledgecrc.com.au/publications/research.html>

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