

The Murray- Darling Basin: too big to fail.

A MURRAY-DARLING
CONSERVATION
ALLIANCE PROPOSAL

March 2024

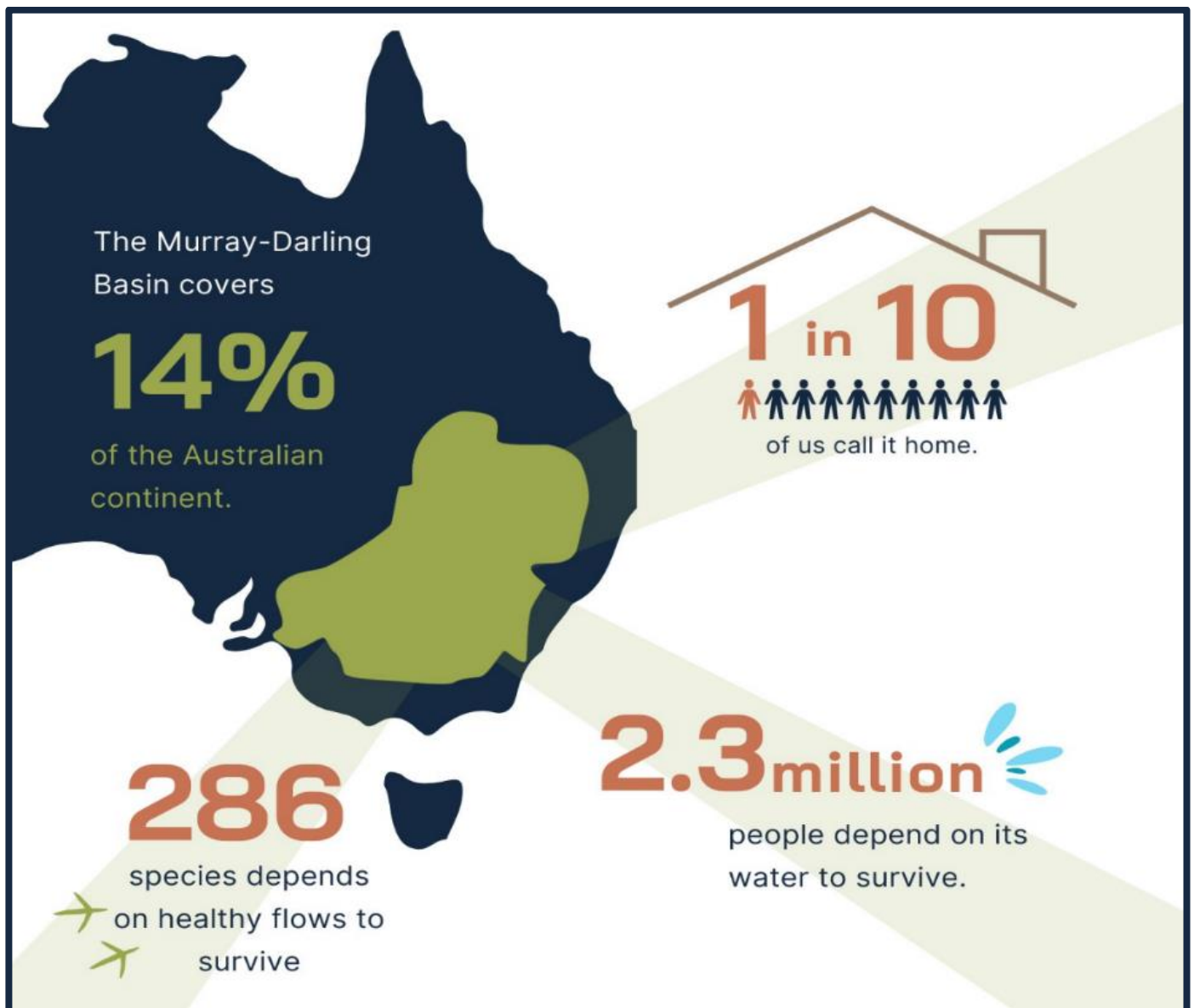


THE MURRAY-DARLING
CONSERVATION ALLIANCE

A Powerful Voice for Nature and Communities

This proposal outlines a winning plan to harness the wide community support we know exists for restoring Australia's most important river system back to health. The next three years are going to be critical for the future of the Murray-Darling Basin. How well we represent nature and communities at key decision points will help decide the survival of these ecosystems.

We respectfully seek strategic funding and partnerships to achieve the next milestone in the only national environment campaign for the Murray-Darling. With your support we can secure election commitments from major parties for a new Basin Plan that brings hope and life to communities by returning water to rivers and wetlands, restoring catchments, climate proofing regional communities, and recognising First Nations water rights.

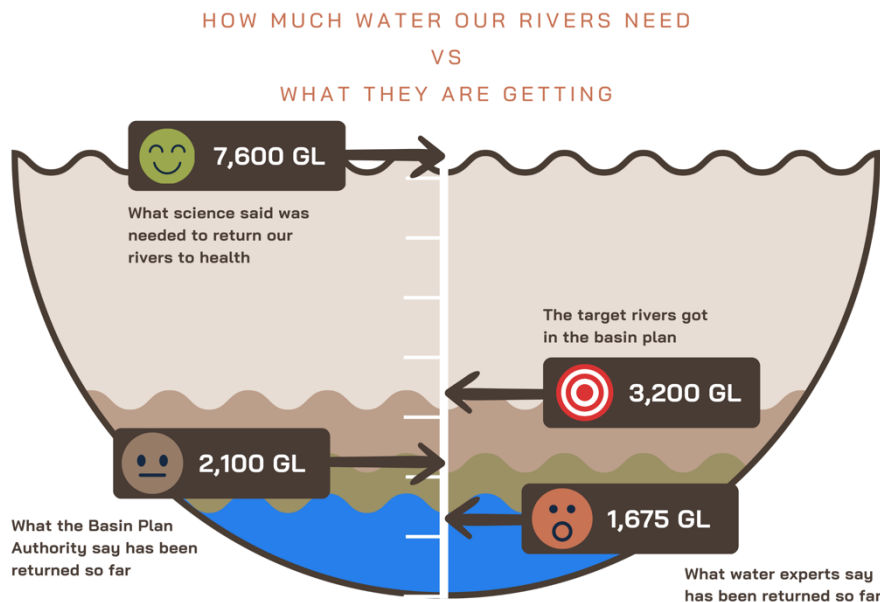


The Problem: Obstacles and Urgency

The Murray-Darling Basin covers 14 per cent of the Australian continent and is home to 23 rivers, 25,000 wetlands and some of our most iconic species. Due to heavy rates of land clearing, these waterways often provide a vital refuge and safe passage through a landscape severely depleted of native habitat. Sixteen of the largest wetlands in the Murray-Darling are recognised as globally important for their role in supporting unique plants and animals, including birds that migrate from as far as Siberia. **The Basin is Australia's largest river system, and its water is precious: more water flows through the Amazon in a day than flows through the Murray-Darling in a year.**

As a result of poor management and over extraction, total waterbird and native fish populations across the Basin are only ten per cent of pre-colonial levels. In the wake of the devastating Millennium drought, both sides of politics agreed on the Basin Plan in 2012. This was a political compromise balancing the interests of irrigated agriculture and the environment. It set a target of 3,200 billion litres to be returned to the environment every year, less than half than what the science recommended to ensure the future of the Basin. What was achieved in 2012 was enough to stave off disaster, but not enough to secure a healthy future for the basin.

When the Basin Plan was “won” in 2012, the groups that had successfully acted as a national voice for nature shifted their scarce resources to other issues. Without that voice holding them accountable, governments caved to powerful entities in the multi-billion-dollar water market, allowing the Basin Plan to descend into what a Royal Commission found to be a quagmire of “maladministration, negligence and unlawful actions.”¹ As a result, only two thirds of the promised water was returned to the environment. This failure to act has brought many river-dependent species such as the iconic Murray Cod to the brink of extinction².



Time is running out. The median annual inflow to the Murray over the past 20 years is around half that of the previous century, and the effects of climate change is making this worse. The World Meteorological Organisation predicts that El Niño could lead to global record-breaking temperatures in the next five years. If we do nothing, the next drought could push fragile wetland ecosystems past critical tipping points.

¹ Quoted in the Guardian, 31 Jan 2019, 'Murray-Darling Basin royal commission report finds gross maladministration'. Accessed online here: <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/jan/31/murray-darling-basin-royal-commission-report-finds-gross-maladministration>

² See 2023 Environment Victoria report Doomed without a Drink: <https://environmentvictoria.org.au/2023/07/12/doomed-without-a-drink/>

The Communities: Transition & Resilience

In an arid landscape water is life. The Murray-Darling is a source of drinking water for over 2.4 million people across the Basin, and a further 1 million in Adelaide.

40 First Nations trace their cultural heritage back over 45,000 years within the Murray-Darling Basin, and water is central to Indigenous cultural, social and spiritual identity. However, First Nations now own only 0.2% of water rights in parts of the Basin where they make up 9% of the population.³

The Basin is our food bowl. The annual agricultural output across the Basin is worth around 40% in value of Australia's total agricultural production and is entirely dependent on a healthy river system. Tourism is a significant industry for the region, worth over \$8 billion a year prior to COVID⁴, and rebounding again now. Grand rivers reduced to toxic algal puddles are not attractive to tourists or locals. And while the benefits of a healthy environment to human health are well documented, disturbing new research by Prof Dominic Rowe from Macquarie University⁵ is showing possible links between blue green algae and a motor neurone disease called ALS which is attributable to one in 200 deaths in Australia; New South Wales Riverina towns have rates seven times the national average.⁶

Many Basin communities are feeling left behind. They are experiencing familiar rural dynamics: migration from smaller towns to growing regional centres, and mid-sized towns benefitting or suffering from rapid technological changes in the agricultural supply chain that have reduced employment and raised capital costs. Smaller farmers are hit the hardest by the triple whammy of climate change, commodity price volatility, and consolidation of the agriculture sector.

Unfortunately, there is a misperception that the Basin Plan is to blame for what are in fact complex challenges faced by Basin communities. These challenges date back to the abandonment of protectionist policies like import tariffs and price reserve schemes in the 1990s. Then through the 2000s, liberalisation of the water market brought new sophisticated and aggressive market participants: institutional investors and water-intensive crops like almonds.

Our leaders have allowed a false “farmers vs environment” frame to dominate the public conversation and this has been a major barrier to the Basin Plan’s full implementation. It does not have to be this way. More than ever, we need a positive campaign that shifts away from this divisive paradigm, amplifying the message that “healthy landscapes benefit us all”.

³ Hartwig, L. et al; 2020/12/01 'Trends in Aboriginal water ownership in New South Wales, Australia: The continuities between colonial and neoliberal forms of dispossession' VL - 99 Land Use Policy. Accessed here on the web: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343147281_Trends_in_Aboriginal_water_ownership_in_New_South_Wales_Australia_The_continuities_between_colonial_and_neoliberal_forms_of_dispossession

⁴ <https://www.transparency.gov.au/publications/agriculture/murray-darling-basin-authority/murray-darling-basin-authority-annual-report-2020-21/part-1-overview/about-the-murray%E2%80%93darling-basin>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/sep/26/is-there-a-link-between-motor-neurone-disease-and-blue-green-algae-nsw-expert-calls-for-closer-look>

⁶ Accessed here on the web: [https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/mar/09/its-scary-motor-neurone-disease-spikes-sevenfold-in-rural-nsw#:~:text=The%20numbers%20of%20sporadic%20\(ie,other%20hotspots%20for%20the%20disease.](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/mar/09/its-scary-motor-neurone-disease-spikes-sevenfold-in-rural-nsw#:~:text=The%20numbers%20of%20sporadic%20(ie,other%20hotspots%20for%20the%20disease.)

The Opportunity: Unique Voice & Political Window

Our campaign has become the national environmental voice advocating for Basin rivers. Thanks to our work, for the first time in a decade the federal government has made a serious, renewed commitment to restore the rivers of the Murray-Darling.

Step by step, the Murray-Darling Conservation Alliance have used levers of influence in each Basin state and coordinated actions that have cut through in the national political debate.

The first window of opportunity opened when the Queensland Conservation Council was instrumental in securing an election commitment from the Albanese Labor opposition to finally recover the full volume of environmental water promised under the 2012 Basin Plan. Then, Nature Conservation Council of NSW secured a promise from the NSW Labor Government to deliver the Basin Plan in full before the 2023 State Election, after taking the Shadow Water Minister on a VIP tour of the Ramsar listed Macquarie Marshes.

From there, the Alliance's relentless campaigning kept the pressure on the newly elected governments. We played a central role supporting cross-party negotiations to strengthen and pass the 2023 Restoring our Rivers bill, securing more environmental water, improved accountability, and a pathway to recognition of First Nations' water rights.

But this rescue package is only a first step. New science shows climate change will slash average rainfall in the Murray-Darling and compound existing threats like invasive carp and degraded habitat. In the face of these challenges, we need a vastly more ambitious Basin Plan to build resilience into the rivers and wetlands that support us.

Our elected representatives need to hear the voices for nature – particularly those in river communities. As we approach the next Federal election, all sides of politics must be confident that the voting public will give them the social licence to save our rivers.

We invite you to join us in making the most of this once-in-a-generation chance. With your support, we will ramp up this national campaign to secure election commitments to unlock \$10–15 billion in Federal funding to restore nature in the Murray-Darling Basin.

Three Campaign Milestones

The campaign started with three key milestones and in November 2023 we secured Milestone 1:

✓ 1. 2023: Getting the Basin Plan back on track

Tanya Plibersek’s Restoring Our Rivers Bill opens a window for change and shows how much our Alliance can achieve behind the scenes. In the year leading up to the passing of the Bill in November we secured access to influencers in government and industry. We mobilised over 10,000 people through our “Stand by your river” campaign, created a drumbeat of support in the media and on socials, and brought a convoy of First Nations, farmers, and fishers to share their powerful stories at an event in Canberra attended by senior representatives from all sides of politics.



Hon Minister Tanya Plibersek in November 2023 with community members representing every corner of the vast Murray-Darling Basin.

□ 2. 2024-2025: Locking in serious election commitments

With your help we will supercharge grassroots support across the Basin to show our federal leaders that their support for a healthy and thriving river system is a vote winner and cuts across party lines. We will harness the electoral power of community to campaign on a shared vision of a healthy Basin where rivers, wetlands, and floodplains have the long cool drink they need, catchments are restored, First Nations have regained their water rights, and regional communities are supported to transition to a less water-intensive economy.

South Australia will play an important role in the next election. We are planning a strategic and inspiring campaign to activate the Basin’s broad base of supporters, based on the popular appeal of an “I love Murray” test campaign that won bipartisan support in 2012.

With your help, we can supercharge a groundswell of support for the Murray-Darling and secure election commitments from Federal parties by the second half of 2024, ahead of the next Federal election, which if the government goes full-term will be in May 2025.

Images from the Conservation Alliance Murray-Darling BBQ in November 2023 at Parliament House, from top to bottom: Liberal Senator from South Australia Andrew McLachlan and rivers advocate Dr Anne Jensen; Nationals Leader David Littleproud with Sunraysia farmer Bill McClumpha; Foreign Affairs Minister Penny Wong and Aunty Polly Cutmore; Environment and Water Minister Tanya Plibersek at the Conservation Alliance press conference.



□ 3. 2026-27 Securing the detail in the next Basin Plan

The Commonwealth Water Act 2007 requires that the Basin Plan is reviewed in 2026, giving us this crucial window of opportunity to address the gaps and failures in the current Plan. We know from the first Plan that this is when vested interests will pull out their top lawyers and advisors. We will be ready to defend the science and ensure more natural flows across the floodplain, ecological restoration, proper regional development, and water rights for Traditional Owners. We will give Governments the confidence to act in the interest of the many, not the few. We will make sure that the precious Murray-Darling Basin is well represented, and that nature has a powerful seat at the table.

Three Funding Milestones by 2024

1. Hire a talented leader and secure basic costs \$250,000

Thanks to generous catalyst donors we have secured Year One of the basic costs needed to launch a new backbone entity for the Alliance. The immediate outgoing CEO of Conservation Council South Australia, Craig Wilkins, is bringing his wealth of connections to lead the Alliance as we head into the next phase of the campaign in South Australia.

2. Fund the South Australia campaign \$490,000 by June

If we can secure this support by June 2024, we will be able to take full advantage of our political leverage in South Australia. The immediate priority is to reboot a supercharged version of the “I Love Murray” media and grassroots campaign to secure serious electoral commitments across the political spectrum. We have run a smaller version of this campaign before and know just how effective we can be with extra support. Your gift will pay for additional staff capacity to coordinate the campaign, plus advertising and media to reach hundreds of thousands of people and build a powerful movement of support in key South Australian constituencies.

3. Fund the work to secure Basin Plan 2.0 \$955,000 by December

If we can have this funding in place by December 2024, we will be able to hire the team to build people power on a scale needed to secure a new Basin Plan that restores the Murray-Darling to health, accounts for climate change and recognises First Nations water rights.

Specifically, increased community organising capacity in Victoria and New South Wales and a Communications Director will boost the above mentioned “I love Murray” campaign and First Nations engagement. The Alliance is presently engaging with First Nations to establish their aspirations for the next Basin Plan, appetite for collaboration and the resources they require to campaign for water justice.

The national team will draw on and support the staff teams of four combined Murray-Darling Alliance members (including administration, media liaison and campaigns staff). It will leverage their established networks and expertise to mobilise and build the capacity of key hotspot communities across the Basin, while coordinating targeted lobbying in each Basin state.

What Success Looks like

We understand the vital link between healthy rivers and healthy communities. And for the river system to be healthy it must continue to be free flowing right out through the Mouth of the Murray - as it has done for millennia. This flow is crucial to the survival of 286 threatened species currently under threat of extinction. With your support for our plan to keep the river system connected and free flowing, we will secure the survival of these species together.

Our successful action to get the 'Restoring Our Rivers Bill passed means that 450 billion litres will return to the environment every year, approximately equivalent to the volume of Sydney Harbour. This is the water that that was promised to the rivers a decade ago. This is a step forward but to give wetlands and ecosystems the support they really need in the long term, to weather droughts and a changing climate, we need to lift our ambition.

Together we can shape the next Basin plan – due for review in 2026 – and inspire Australia's biggest ecological restoration and climate resilience project. The new Basin plan must right the wrongs of historic over-extraction and the exclusion of First Nations, whilst future-proofing regional communities with effective catchment restoration, climate adaptation, and resilience measures.

With your support, we will win the \$10-15 billion dollar government investment required to:

- Set aside enough water so that the 286 flow-dependent threatened species will survive.
- Improve catchment health across 1 million km² of habitat.
- Support irrigation-dependent communities to transition to an economic base that is resilient to a hotter, drier climate.
- Respond to First Nations' demands for water justice, increased water rights and much greater influence over water management and cultural flows.

This is the time to act. Climate change is breaking down an already depleted system. Piecemeal measures are not enough. Nothing less than large-scale restoration of the Murray-Darling Basin will secure the river system's future. Scientists around the world are now sounding the alarm, and even large businesses like Ikea and Nestle are joining the call: [we need to invest in large-scale restoration](https://www.wwf.eu/?10840916/More-than-100-corporations-make-the-business-case-for-the-new-law-to-restore-nature) ⁷ like our future depends on it. It does.

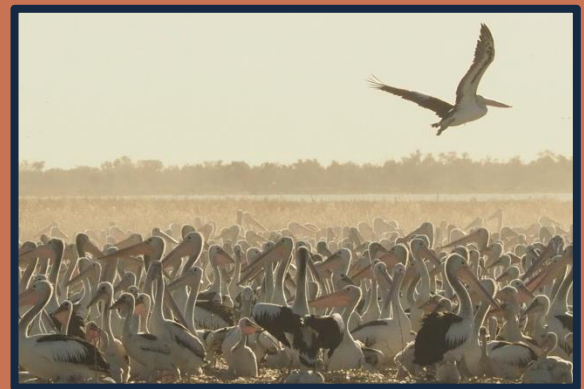
⁷ Accessed here on the web: <https://www.wwf.eu/?10840916/More-than-100-corporations-make-the-business-case-for-the-new-law-to-restore-nature>



My family have fished the Lakes and Coorong area for over sixty years. My Grandson Justin is our 6th generation fisher and works in the Lakes and Coorong fishery.

In the early sixties, Clayton where we live

was a true wilderness. A paradise that I have been privileged to witness. Fishing in those days with regular environmental flows and good quality water were exceptional. Cod, Gallop, Silver Perch, Catfish were plentiful in the Lakes and Mullet, Coorong Mullet, Flounder, Sea Bream in the Coorong. Fish fed the migratory birds as well as the local birds. Estuarine, marine, and terrestrial animals, from turtles to native water rats, from mussels to aquatic plants, all rely on this abundant ecosystem for a source of food and water.



It remained this way until April 1981 when the Murray Mouth closed for the first time in 7,000 years. Over the next two decades things deteriorated to the point in the Millennium drought when we were a whisker away from catastrophe and our beautiful Lakes almost became Australia's Aral Sea. I never want to see this again.

Gloria Jones, Community Advocate

Every fish kill and toxic water event makes it clearer that you can't have thriving communities without healthy rivers. This ambitious project needs ambitious funders. And with your support, over the next four years we can secure a new government plan to restore Australia's biggest river system, the Murray-Darling, to health.

This campaign is time-bound and will require commitments over the four-year period. Below you will find our annual budget for \$1.4M per annum. We welcome your feedback on what is possible, whether a one-off gift or a commitment across the four-year life of the campaign.

Budget

RESOURCES	ONE-OFF COSTS	ANNUAL COST 2024-27	DETAILS
Funding Milestone #1			
National Director & Backbone Organisation overheads		\$250,000	2024 COSTS SECURED
Funding Milestone #2 - \$490,000 by June 2024			
"I love Murray" campaign	\$220,000		Digital and grassroots campaign to secure election commitments
Staff		\$270,000	1 campaigner based in South Australia and 1 fundraising staff (incl. recruitment and on-costs)
Funding Milestone #3 - \$955,000 by December 2024			
"I love Murray" campaign	\$400,000		Ongoing digital and grassroots campaign to build support for Basin Plan 2.0
Staff		\$430,000	Communications Director; 2 community organisers in Vic and NSW
Grassroots grant program		\$125,000	
Anticipated Annual Costs 2025-2027 - \$1,075,000			
National Alliance Team		\$950,000	Annual salaries for 6 key staff
Grassroots community grant program		\$125,000	
Conservation Council staff time		In Kind – covered by Conservation Councils	Administration; media liaison; campaign staff

Appendix

Our Role and Credentials

As the Murray-Darling is such a large and environmentally significant part of our states, the Conservation Councils will always have a stake in the river – indeed we are the only environmental NGOs to have maintained paid staff capacity in the Basin consistently since 2012. We are currently filling a critical gap as the only national campaign for the Murray-Darling. Our close friends at the Australian Conservation Foundation and WWF Australia are strongly supportive of our campaign and will provide important contributions at key moments. The Wentworth Group will once again provide an essential scientific voice that is distinct from, and must remain independent from, the voice of environmental campaigners who are free to apply significant pressure to political and corporate targets as required.

The new Water Trust will play an important role in facilitating dialogue and trust amongst stakeholders and with governments, but as an impartial actor it cannot play the role of advocate for either the environment, communities, or First Nations. The Water Trust is also based on a deliberative democracy model which requires stakeholders to willingly come to the table; currently there are vested interests that are not compelled to come to the table. At this stage, we believe that a strong positive advocacy campaign for the environment is required to create the policy conditions that will bring all stakeholders to the table.

The Alliance's Leadership



Sean Halse

Strategy Advisor, Murray-Darling Conservation Alliance

Sean was the Deputy Chief of Staff to then Water Minister Tony Burke when the Basin Plan was finalised and put in to law. Since then, he has worked on water issues for governments, NGOs and business. He has been a strategist inside government and has a wide scope of experience on water issues outside government - developing communications and engagement strategies on water issues, policy papers on water and climate, business cases on water projects and strategic plans on environmental protection. Sean is experienced in developing and delivering big policy and lasting change. In addition to helping deliver the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, he was the Minister's advisor on the Tasmanian Forestry Agreement, the Indigenous rangers program and the Australia's national network of marine reserve.



Craig Wilkins

Conservation Alliance Lead, former Conservation Council SA (CCSA) CEO

Craig has worked in the areas of public health, social services, environmental change, and politics for over 30 years in for-purpose organisations, in the public service and in Parliament House. For the last 9 years he has been the Chief Executive of South Australia's peak environment body, the Conservation Council of SA. Craig knows how to mobilise South Australian politicians, communities and importantly – the South Australian media.

About CCSA: The Conservation Council of SA is the lead community environmental voice for the Murray-Darling in SA. The organisation was a prominent advocate at the start of the Basin Plan and has since partnered with ACF to deliver the Healthy River Fellows program, held community rallies and events at the Murray mouth and on the steps of Parliament House, and kept SA's Federal representatives accountable and focused on standing up for the river.





Jono La Nauze

CEO, Environment Victoria

Jono has worked on environment and land justice campaigns in and around the Murray-Darling since 2001. He negotiated a landmark Cooperation Agreement between Murray & Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations (MLDRIN) and seven state and national environmental NGOs that underpinned the successful campaign to establish a 250,000-hectare river red gum reserve system incorporating numerous Indigenous joint management agreements. He was a nationally prominent voice in the establishment of the Basin Plan as the Australian Conservation Foundation’s national campaigner.



About Environment Victoria: Environment Victoria has been working for the protection of Victoria’s rivers and waterways for more than 20 years. The organisation was part of an alliance of environmental groups pushing for a strong Basin Plan when it was first negotiated a decade ago and continues to act as a watchdog for its full implementation in Victoria.



Jacqui Mumford

CEO, Nature Conservation Council of NSW (NCC)

Jacqui has a diverse background in strategic leadership, philanthropy, organising and environmental compliance. She brings this wealth of experience into her new role as CEO of the Nature Conservation Council of NSW, alongside a passion for climate action and environmental protection. An inspirational speaker, Jacqui knows how to work with the diversity of stakeholders, environmental groups and policymakers across NSW to ensure a better deal for nature.



About NCC: The Nature Conservation Council of NSW is the state’s leading environmental advocacy organisation. Representing over 180 conservation groups and 80,000 people across NSW, the organisation is supported by a dedicated team of leading ecologists, scientists, campaigners, and community organisers working to build a stronger, more diverse and effective voice for nature.



Dave Copeman

Director, Queensland Conservation Council (QCC)

Dave is an experienced campaigner and community organiser, who has spent 25 years organising for social change in Queensland and internationally. He is committed to building people power and was the founding lead organiser of the Queensland Community Alliance, He has also worked as a union, human rights, and pro-democracy campaigner, and a political advisor. Dave continues the long legacy of environmental activists within his family, who have worked for generations to protect Queensland’s natural wonders.



About QCC: The Queensland Conservation Council is Queensland’s peak environment non-government organisation, representing the interests of over 50 member groups across Queensland. Since the early 2000’s, QCC has been actively engaged in the development of state and national water management plans, policies and programs, including the Water Act 2007 (C’t) and the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

About Us

We are an Alliance of Conservation Councils working on river health from Queensland to New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia.

Donations to the Conservation Alliance are tax deductible.

Sean Halse

STRATEGY ADVISOR,
MURRAY-DARLING CONSERVATION ALLIANCE

Sean was the Deputy Chief of Staff to then Water Minister Tony Burke when the current Basin Plan was finalised and put into law. He is experienced in developing and delivering big policies and lasting change.

Please contact us about our detailed plan for success.

Jono La Nauze

ALLIANCE CHAIR

0402 904 251

j.lanauze@environmentvictoria.org.au

Camille Warambourg

KEY RELATIONSHIPS
MANAGER

0433 633 363

c.warambourg@environmentvictoria.org.au

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF THE RIVERS' TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANS

The Murray-Darling Conservation Alliance works across the country of over 40 First Nations. We pay our respects to Traditional Owners past and present, recognise their continuing contribution to caring for country, and acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded.



EVERY DAY I GO
DOWN TO THE MURRAY
RIVER, DHUNGALA, AND
I GIVE THANKS TO MY
ANCESTORS.

- Monica Morgan,
*Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal
Corporation CEO*



THE MURRAY-DARLING
CONSERVATION ALLIANCE

