



“DON'T GIVE ME NONE OF THAT TREE-HUGGIN' HIPPIE CRAP...”

In 1988 while the Australian government was spending excessive amounts on the celebration of Invasion -'The Bicentenary' - I was studying the rapidly increasing salinity problems of the Mallee district, occurring as a result of the rising water table which is three times saltier than the ocean water. My studies revealed that the water table was rapidly rising as a result of the massive land clearing required for commercial farming of thousands of hectares of surrounding land. The large, deep-rooted trees that had been cleared from this area would filter salt from the soil and reduce the rate of absorption into the water, reducing both the salt and water content of water table seepage. At that time my science textbook estimated that if ways of preventing this were not developed within forty years, the salt content of the Murray river would increase to levels that would make the water undrinkable; also contaminating the river to the extent that the fresh water habitat would be decimated. Animals and plant life reliant on the river for fresh water such as fish, wallabies, and humans, would either have to locate another source of fresh water or perish. Little did I know then that this problem was not only confined to the Murray river but was so extensive that every major Australian river system was experiencing similar levels of contamination, again due to agricultural mismanagement. Here we are - only twelve years later - and the same political mentality that failed to address the problem then, is again spending excessive amounts on less important promotional campaigns; this time on the Centenary of Federation and touring the Olympic torch and it's crew about heavily affected areas like the Mally region. The rate of salt contamination has increased to exceed 4000 tones of salt seeping into Australia's river systems each

day. Currently the EPA estimates that at the current rate the water irrigated from our major river systems will become undrinkable within the next thirty years, supporting data available to our government over a decade ago. Currently scientists have been unable to develop strategies which might significantly regenerate the contaminated land. Despite this, land clearing continues at the rate exceeding forty-thousand hectares per year. Due to recent pressure induced by these alarming statistics our government has recently reallocated funds for land management away from costal areas to inland Australia negating the importance of environmental rehabilitation projects occurring in costal areas, instead of providing the new funds that this one highly significant problem requires. Salinisation results from the accumulation of free salt to an extent that causes degradation of vegetation and soil. Salt is a natural element of soil and water, however human practices have increased soil salinity by changing the natural balance of the water cycle in the landscape by allowing excess recharging of ground water. Introduced crops and land management practices generally have different water use characteristics than native vegetation, allowing more rainfall to enter the groundwater. If more water is being added than can be accommodated by the subterranean water table then the water table will rise, bringing with it salt - as ground water is approximately three times more saline (Saltier) in most areas. Long term observations indicate rises in the water table of tens of metres in some areas since land clearing began. Buildings, underground electrical equipment, roads, fences, foundations, pipes septic tanks, cemeteries, rubbish dumps and water supplies can be damaged by the combination effect of the increasing salt content of the rising water table. In Wagga Wagga

alone the annual estimated cost of salinity related damage is \$413,000. The cost to agriculture due to loss of crops and fertile land is inestimable.

In 1982 it was estimated that 4,000 ha. were severely effected by soil salinity. The conservative estimate for NSW alone indicates that 25,000 ha. are currently severely contaminated and unusable for agriculture resulting from the rising water table and soil salinity. It is estimated that approximately 70-80% of all irrigated land in NSW is threatened by the rising water table and soil salinity with in a thirty year period.

Currently no strategy has arisen to slow, halt, or reverse completely our country's worsening salinity problems. Regeneration of heavily affected areas is currently only possible in geological time (100s-1000s of years); Yet our government continues to allow land clearing at excessive rates that continues to exacerbate the problem. Some land care groups have begun to plant desert plants in some test areas to examine whether this might increase the land's rate of recovery. It is not expected however that this will significantly reduce the soil salt content at a deep enough level for revegetation of native trees within the next century.

Current government funding for scientific research has been widely criticised as inadequate. Many Australian scientists are finding the economic rewards inadequate in comparison to research budgets offered by other countries like the USA. If our government were serious about addressing the problems of soil salinity (amongst many others) they might begin by refraining from nominating politicians that have no genuine interest in the concerns represented by portfolios they are responsible (I use that term loosely) for. Our current Minister for the Environment totally lacks any credibility in the arena of environmental activism. Instead he appears to take action on issues that he perceives the majority of Australian voters expect him to. The fatal flaw in this mentality is that the majori-

ty of Australian voters are so overwhelmed and disenchanted with environmentalism that they avoid knowing too much in fear of becoming consumed by the extreme pessimism associated with actively seeking to address these concerns. The problem of soil salinity is so serious that our government should have been doing everything in its power to minimise the damage twenty years ago. Instead they continue to pray for a wizz-bang scientific miracle that might amend their continued negligence. This time it's too late. No such divine intervention will prevent us all from paying the price that has arisen as a result of the arrogance of our leader and our worship of the all mighty \$. Our governments position on the environment has consistently been 'Don't fix it unless the general public can prove that it's broken, and don't fund projects that might provide such proof until the problems are so extensive that they are undeniable'. It is this mentality that has seen the re-opening of Port Kembla copper and the multi-million dollar upgrade at Lucas Heights Nuclear Reactor. Wouldn't it be wonderful if by the time of our next national celebration the government stopped demonstrating their empty rhetoric toward potent public issues and started to go into action on behalf of the people they are supposed to represent?

Oh, dream on you tree-huggin' hipster!
-John Thorpe



UP YOURS CARTMAN!