

## **'Fresh & Salty'**

### **Wimmera CMA Waterwatch /Regional Arts Victoria partnership: engaging local artists to showcase the message of salinity to the Wimmera Community**

**Kate Rhook**

*Regional Waterwatch Coordinator, Wimmera CMA*



**ABSTRACT:** Over the past eleven years, drought has impacted the Wimmera Catchment which, with less than average rainfall, cessation of natural flows and increasing salinity levels to the Wimmera River system, has reached a critical point. Engaging school students and the wider community in the important issues of salinity and water quality in a vibrant and interesting way is often a challenge, especially in drought, and calls for innovative collaborative partnerships. This paper explores the partnership and opportunity the Wimmera Catchment Management Authority's (WCMA) Wimmera Community Waterwatch (WCW) program developed as part of a statewide arts project exploring the issue of 'Water' with Regional Arts Victoria (RAV).

The 'Fresh & Salty' project in the Wimmera involves collaboration between the Wimmera CMA and local artists: animator, puppet maker, and animator trainee, to develop and produce an innovative short animated feature film to use as a tool to engage the wider community and school students through WCW, to form an understanding and appreciation of causes and impacts of salinity.

Injecting humour and animation alongside strong local issues is intended to connect and create information and images that can be understood, recognised and identified. The production of this short film and educational resource endeavors to capture the imagination of people, both young and old, connecting with people in a heartfelt, imaginative and engaging way through the creative interpretation of local salinity issues. This project provides the chance to mix arts with science in a way that can provide a fresh and invigorating take on difficult and often challenging community issues.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Engaging school students and the wider community in the important issues of salinity and water quality in a vibrant and interesting way is often a challenge and calls for innovative collaborative partnerships. This paper explores the partnership and opportunity the Wimmera Catchment Management Authority's (WCMA) Wimmera Community Waterwatch (WCW) program developed with Regional Arts Victoria's (RAV) through the 'Fresh & Salty' project, to develop an innovative salinity DVD animation resource to promote the important issue of salinity to the wider Wimmera community. This paper highlights the artistic RAV state wide project, the steps involved in this partnership, the linkages and outcomes of the animation development to be an innovative and valued resource for local Waterwatch Coordinators. The collaborative partnership successfully produced a product that would engage with the wider community on the serious nature of salinity in the Wimmera and achieve regional program targets during a time of drought.

There is much to be learned from this reflection of the project's development and successes that would be of great benefit to anyone interested in undertaking such a project connecting water education programs with Art projects in the future.

### **THE ISSUE...**

Increasing salinity is one of the most significant environmental problems facing the Wimmera Catchment. While salt is naturally present in many of our landscapes, land use practices and water extraction leading to changes to ground surface water movement have caused a marked increase in the expression of salinity in the Wimmera's land and water resources. Dryland salinity affects more than 22,000 hectares of the Wimmera catchment. On average, 110,000 tonnes of salt is generated or imported into the Wimmera River System each year (WRSAP,2003) - the equivalent of 4,400 semi-trailer loads annually!

The Wimmera River Catchment located in Central western Victoria, with catchment area of 23,500 square kilometers, forms the south west part of the Murray Darling Basin. The Wimmera river and its tributaries hold social, cultural, environmental and indigenous importance to the region. The river supplies water for stock, domestic and irrigation purposes, providing a social and environmental focus for many in the region. The Wimmera River is unique, being Victoria's largest endorheic waterway. As a landlocked catchment, the river and its tributaries drain from Mt Cole in the Pyrenees Ranges in the south East and the Grampians Ranges in the South, winding west then north to the terminal lakes of Hindmarsh (Victoria's largest freshwater lake), and, in exceptionally wet years, onto Lake Albacutya extending to the Wirrengren Plain in Victoria's Mallee region in the north of the Catchment (WCMA, 2006).

Prolonged dry conditions and low to nil flows over the past eleven year period, has seen the rise and concentration of salinity in wetlands and waterways of the catchment, to alarming elevated levels. In some areas of the lower Wimmera River, salinity has been recorded at levels of 170,000 EC, (more than twice the amount of sea water!) resulting in deteriorating water quality, impacting soils, vegetation and biodiversity (WCMA, 1992; WRSAP, 2005). These impacts have led to significant decreases in fish, invertebrate populations, riparian vegetation, a loss of recreational opportunities, impacted land productivity, contributing agricultural economic loss, and furthermore, social change for local communities learning to live with salinity (Commonwealth of Australia, 2004).

Wimmera Community Waterwatch (WCW) program has been engaging schools, landholders, and the wider community through active water quality monitoring and catchment education activities since the program commenced in 1995. Whilst previous Coordinators and education initiatives were employed through NHT funding via a range of mechanisms (eg GMW Water and other) , since 1999 Waterwatch has been a key program of the Wimmera Catchment Management Authority's (Wimmera CMA) Health Waterways programs (WCW, 2004) .

WCW's salinity engagement activities in the past has included, hands on salinity monitoring, data recording, salinity experiments, Saltwatch and catchment tours. Over the past twelve months the Wimmera river has experienced many challenges with less than average rainfall, cease of natural flows due to drought, no allocation of environmental water releases, and the increasing salinity levels to the Wimmera River system has reached a critical point. But despite these issues the river remains an incredibly important part of the Wimmera Landscape and Wimmera Life. Engaging school students and the wider Wimmera community to place value on the river environment in its current state and to understand the important issues of salinity in a vibrant and interesting way, especially during drought, is a challenge.

### **THE OPPORTUNITY**

In 2006 the Wimmera Community Waterwatch program was successful in receiving funding through the Bureau of Rural Science's Community Stream Sampling Project. Apart from establishing and supporting community monitoring networks across the region to improve understanding and management of salinity in the landscape across the Wimmera Region and Murray-Darling Basin; a large part of the project was to engage the wider community in the issue of salinity. Initial thoughts and ideas in scoping a productive regional resource for WCW program included producing an educational booklet resource for schools, a community and salinity glove box guide to the Wimmera. These resources would have met regional targets; however the preference was for a useable engaging resource that would not sit on the shelf and nor would clearly convey the messages to the wider community.

### **THE PARTNERSHIP**

A creative and innovative opportunity to explore 'salinity through art' came through Regional Arts Victoria (RAV), a community-based, not for profit, peak regional arts agency in Victoria. Prompted by the current water shortages and continuing drought and the aim of supporting the development of arts and artistic talent in regional communities, RAV identified a state wide contemporary arts project across regional Victoria that would explore the central theme of 'Water' and related specific issues in regional Victorian communities, hence came the 'Fresh and Salty' Project.

Initial discussions with RAV Horsham's Regional Arts Development Officer (RADO) with the Wimmera CMA education officer scoped possible project ideas that could partner with RAV to employ local regional artists, ventured the possibility of engaging the science of salinity with art to meet the deliverables of the WCW programs salinity engagement targets. Support for this project was also provided through the Waterwatch program funded through the Australian Government's National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality.

A successful project partnership developed in collaboration between the Wimmera CMA and RAV to engage local Wimmera artists Dave Jones - Animator, Mary French - puppet maker, and animator trainee - Hannah French, to develop and produce a short animated feature film to use as a Waterwatch resource tool that would engage the wider community and Wimmera school students to form an understanding and appreciation of the causes and impacts of salinity. The creation of

'Fresh and Salty' developed around a story board and narration developed and scoped by Wimmera CMA Education officer and Waterwatch Coordinator team. The Wimmera CMA Community Education officer liaised closely with the artists throughout the project.

### **ARTISTIC LINKAGES**

A second part of the project and engagement with the animators was to tie into the Wimmera CMA's current media advertisement campaign – 'rivers are more than water'. The 'Creature Comforts' style of animation modeling, coupled with interviewed voices from live Wimmera locals, taken at the local Wimmera Field days answering "*What does the Wimmera's waterways mean to them*", was collated through the artistic talents of the animation and puppet team to create and produce three 30 second animated feature advertisements. These advertisement animations featured the models and characters of Fresh and Salty – the animation enabling strong linkages to be formed between the television and radio advertisements and the Fresh and Salty animated Waterwatch resource.

The completed 'Fresh and Salty' animation was shown at the WCW Schools Salinity Forum during National Water Week and received acclamation from attending students. The eight minute film and advertisements was publicly launched to the community as part of a National Water Week film night showcasing Wimmera CMA's Waterwatch and Wimmera Landcare film 'Mountains to Mallee' (featuring the fifteen day river journey along the 350km Wimmera River walked by Landcare and community members).

In celebration of the Launch of this innovative salinity animation, Wimmera Community Waterwatch engaged the local schools in a 'River Critter' competition for students to produce their own model of a critter that spent part of its lifecycle in the waterways of the Wimmera, trying their hand at becoming budding animators and further 'science and art' opportunities in their school curriculum. The response was encouraging with over 120 entries from five schools. These 'River Critters' were displayed during the National Water Week film night and awarded through a people's choice award voted by the attending audience.

'Fresh and Salty' was also launched as a feature film at the 2007 Wimmera CMA Kids Conference, attended by Grade 5 Wimmera students across the region to learn and further their knowledge about their local environment. The Wimmera Kids Conference is an annual part of the Wimmera CMA focus on building a culture of environmental awareness and action in our community.

### **OUTCOMES AND EVALUATION**

The final outcome of the 'Fresh and Salty' animation was beyond expectation! By injecting humour and animation alongside strong local issues, the animation intended to connect and create information and images that can be understood, recognised and identified. The production of this short film and educational resource achieved its endeavor to capture the imagination of people, both young and old through the creative interpretation of local salinity issues.

The success of the 'Fresh and Salty' DVD project was contributed to a number of reasons. Firstly the project had purpose, life and value to both RAV and the Wimmera CMA. Project expectations were clearly articulated by both RAV and the Wimmera CMA, with agreed and shared outcomes. Progress of the project monitoring and involvement was established, whereby input and consultation was provided at key stages of the project's development (Hamdorf, 2007).

The artists chosen through the partnership were of national and international standard and were given creative freedom to pursue their craft within the context of a clear conceptual and organisational framework. Successful linkages were further contributed to the artists, CMA staff and RAV RADO, who all knew each other and have worked with each other in the past. There was a pre-existing relationship and trust, prior to the project occurring. The creative objectives were valued and respected by the Wimmera CMA and staff felt included in the project life and were open to seeing where else the creative project could be integrated to add further value to the organisation (Hamdorf, 2007).

The final development of this short animated feature film will incorporate the DVD with a large reading book format that incorporates image stills of the animation film along with easy to read facts on the Wimmera catchment and salinity, including Waterwatch activities that will engage school monitoring programs, as a tool to connect school students to form an understanding and appreciation of causes and impacts of salinity on our waterways and landscapes. This resource will be presented to Wimmera schools in early 2008 as part of Waterwatch Catchment education sessions. The DVD will also provide a resource to be played in the Wimmera Community Waterwatch Trailer at field days and community events.

By connecting with people in a heartfelt, imaginative and engaging way through 'Fresh and Salty' the animation will in real terms produce far more tangible and long lasting benefits locally, than producing another brochure or education kit on salt.

As part of the outcomes for RAV, the Wimmera Fresh and Salty Project will bring opportunities to promote regional and rural Victoria's water and salinity issues to the city and metropolitan areas, as well as showcasing exciting arts practices as each of the five Fresh and Salty projects developed around the state are displayed. These projects will be promoted in a touring exhibition in Melbourne and regional tour in 2008.

WCW would strongly encourage the Waterwatch network to pursue and take on alternative opportunities that present like partnerships with Regional Arts. With the growing importance and awareness of water issue in our media, in government policy and publicly, this project provided the chance to mix arts with science in a way that could provide a fresh and invigorating take on difficult and often challenging community issues. The partnerships established with Regional Art Victoria were successful and will provide opportunities in the future to engage local Wimmera artists to promote and engage the community in activities of the Wimmera CMA.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Thanks to Carolynne Hamdorf – Wimmera CMAs Community Education Officer for exploring the initial opportunity with RAV and facilitating the project and artists.

Amazing talented creators and Animators of the Advertisements & Fresh and Salty Animation - Dave Jones, Mary French, Hannah French and Jackie Shultz, thanks for your outstanding creation of 'Fresh and Salty', it's beyond expectation!

Thanks to Marion Mathews – Horsham's Regional Arts Victoria Regional Development Officer for providing the opportunity and to Regional Arts Victoria for their funding contribution for the project. Thanks also to the Wimmera Community Waterwatch Team – Jeanie Clark, Bronwyn Bant, Harvey Champness and Leigh Blackmore for your ideas and feedback in establishing this resource.

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