



Less rain another blow to our Red Gums

Reduced rainfall and snowfall means reduced river flows, and that has repercussions across the landscape, affecting towns and farms as well as Victoria's natural areas.

River health is a growing problem for most of Victoria's rivers now, from the alps through to estuaries along the coast. And a lack of big flood events, or flood events at unusual times, affects natural systems in floodplains and wetlands throughout the state.

Victoria's Red Gums, for example, generally require a flood event to reproduce and they also need reasonably regular flooding to survive.

River Red Gum wetlands, mainly along the northern-flowing rivers such as the Ovens and Goulburn as well as the Murray River, traditionally flooded each spring when snow-melt in the alps caused swollen rivers to burst their banks.

Each year, these flood waters would harbour huge flocks of wetland birds, with the waters slowly receding over two months or more.

Murray River flows are now heavily regulated, and flooding of wetlands like the Barmah Forest is artificially contrived to accommodate conflicting demands for irrigation water. Large floods are rare, and wetland birds will not breed unless a flood is a big one, lasting long enough to provide food for their hatchlings.

Red gum wetlands in the Wimmera and Mallee, such as at Lake Albacutya and Wyperfeld National Park, are also struggling.

Water rights (allocations) essentially have similar legal status to land ownership, and our rivers are already widely acknowledged to be over-allocated or over-used.

Without intervention from government, the environment will lose out with reduced water inflows under climate change. Irrigators with high-reliability water entitlements will get first take.

It is critical that environmental water has similar security of supply to irrigation, and that the amount of water available for the environment is increased dramatically.

A drier climate will put stresses on most natural

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Photo: Paul Sinclair

Reduced snowmelt in the alps will lead to less frequent and smaller flood events downstream, and this in turn inhibits the breeding of many wetland birds and means less water for our Red Gum wetlands.

Photo of Great Egret: Ray Sizer





Coastal saltmarshes are important feeding grounds for a range of birds, including the highly endangered Orange-bellied Parrot. Photo courtesy DSE Victoria

systems across Victoria, affecting ecosystems in many ways.

Coastal saltmarshes

These are generally found at low elevations, at the edge of the high tide line around bays and tidal estuaries.

Flat, wet, saline areas, generally with low-lying salt-tolerant plants like Glassworts, they are important breeding and feeding areas for a range of birds, many of which are seasonal migrants – some from the far corners of the earth.

For example, the Double-banded Plover flies from New Zealand to spend the winter in our saltmarshes, and the Eastern Golden Plover migrates here from Siberia and Alaska.

They are also important feeding grounds for the highly endangered Orange-bellied Parrot, which migrates across Bass Strait from its breeding grounds in Tasmania.

Saltmarshes are now considerably restricted in Victoria. Many are listed in international migratory bird treaties such as the Ramsar Convention.

What happens with climate change?

Because coastal saltmarshes are generally very low lying, they will be among the first Victorian natural areas

to be affected by rising sea levels and/or storm surges.

These days, saltmarshes are more often than not backed by developed land, roads or farmland, so they cannot easily retreat inland as waters rise.

This is known as the “pincer effect”.

Other sea-level impacts

Many other coastal areas will be impacted by predicted rising sea levels and increased storm surges.

Low-lying Snake Island east of Wilsons Promontory, for example, holds a valuable remnant of once-common coastal Sheoak and Banksia woodlands. Mangroves will also be hit.

Freshwater aquifers can suffer saltwater intrusion, especially where recharge is reduced, or extraction for human use increased.

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