



COAST & WETLANDS
SOCIETY INCORPORATED



A free public seminar will be presented by

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Sucking the planet dry and making the wetlands disappear

Tuesday 9th May 2006, 6.30pm

Room 456, BioSciences Building
University of New South Wales

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Summary

The world is rapidly running out of water. Burgeoning human populations are placing tremendous stress on rivers and groundwater aquifers. Many of the world's rivers are severely regulated by dams installed for hydroelectricity generation, irrigation supply or domestic supply. Much of the world's river water now captured in these dams used to sustain some of the more diverse ecosystems in the world – the floodplain wetlands. These are disappearing at an accelerating rate. The effect of diverting this water is particularly severe on the ecology of rivers that flow through arid regions of the world and Australia is no exception. Australia is now experiencing the most serious ecological consequences of rampant river development of the 1950s to the 1980s. Exacerbated by the current dry period, iconic wetlands such as the Macquarie Marshes are disappearing. River red gums, hundreds of years old, are dying in large numbers. Waterbirds are declining in abundance and diversity and periods between large breeding events are increasing. Such a story is being played out on many of the world's rivers, particularly in arid regions. To reverse such trends requires significant financial resources and political will because powerful irrigation industries are totally dependent on river water. Exports of food and fibre from Australia can be dependent on access to irrigation water. Northern Australia potentially provides opportunities for river development. The ecological consequences will be predictable. Rehabilitation of rivers and their dependent wetlands will depend on strong policies and initiatives for water management. Government buying of water licences, improved water use efficiency and protection of undeveloped rivers are policy options that could be rolled out. Otherwise, the wetlands will keep disappearing, taking their biodiversity with them.

