

Snowy River Story - The Grassroots Campaign to Save a National Icon Claire Miller. Sydney: ABC Books, April 2005, 270 pp. ISBN: 0 73331 533 X

Snowy River Story tells of the contemporary drama in Victorian politics over the flow of water, or lack thereof, within the Snowy River. Author Claire Miller writes of a small community group who took advantage of an extraordinary political situation which saw environmental flows and river health influencing the formation of a government for the first time in Australian history.

The Snowy River, straddling NSW and Victoria's border, occupies a sentimental place in Australian hearts. The river is the setting of Banjo Patterson's famous poem, *The Man from Snowy River*. Interestingly, it is this very sentiment that is evoked in the current debate opposing the Victorian Government's decision to close the Alpine High Country to grazing cattle (and therefore their human minders, to which "The Man" belonged). Earlier, however, this flexible iconic image was used to support the preserving of the river by a conservation movement, which gained momentum in the 1970s when the impact on the river's health by the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Authority's Jindabyne Dam stirred elements of the Dalgety and Orbost community into action.

The political backdrop against which this grass roots community campaign played out was the 1999 Victorian election which saw the Kennett Liberal Government attempting to stay in power after 6 years of government. The Liberals were up against a Labor Party with a newly appointed leader, Steve Bracks, whom most political commentators did not give a chance of even coming close. After votes were counted, there was the possibility of a hung parliament with both parties winning the same amount of seats. It was clear that three Independent candidates, who were aligned to issue outcomes rather than parties, would hold the balance of power and dictate the make up of the Victorian Government.

As two of the independents had issues that were accommodated by supporting either the Liberal or Labor Parties, the Victorian government was to be formed by the party that chose to meet the East Gippsland community demands of restoring water flow to the Snowy River. With Labor eventually coming to the party, Member for Gippsland East, Craig Ingram, succeeded in securing Victoria and NSW's commitment to finding 21% of the original flow of water down the Snowy in the next 10 years.

The intrigue, suspense, grit and determination in this tale make for a rollicking good read. Miller has used her relationships with many of the key players to get the inside story behind the big personal trade-offs, which was an integral part of the unfolding drama. Often the motivations for public decisions can be hidden behind sanitised "spin". Having insider knowledge on the personal impact of the protracted Snowy campaign on community activists, or the personal relationships and diplomacy across three states that ensured political decisions were made, makes for a compelling page-turner.

The bare facts of this story would be interesting enough in and of themselves. People like to hear about colourful characters, which Miller has obviously learnt through her 10 years as the chief environmental reporter for *The Age* in Melbourne. Whether it is the Orbost and Dalgety communities - whom we follow for years before the political resolution in 1999- or the NSW and Victorian politicians and bureaucrats trying to make sense of what was required to gain the support of this Independent Member of

Parliament, it is this character-driven human drama that makes this book particularly enjoyable.

Initially, I was keen to review this book because of my background in river management and was looking to assess the context for use by those working in education and community involvement in natural resource management. In *Watershed*, a book by Ticky Fullarton (who like Claire Miller is a journalist turned writer), I'd seen how commentators can significantly contribute to building community awareness of water issues, with mostly great results, but also have the potential to mislead with oversimplification of technical issues. *Snowy River Story* instead chooses to focus on the social and political elements of the story; the democratic process and the strength of a small community's connection to their river, rather than focussing on the more scientific and technical aspects of the Snowy River story.

As interesting as the book is, we return to the more serious question - is this book a useful resource for educators interested in questions of how we as a society learn to live more sustainably? What I like most about this book was the incisive way Miller provides the chance to gain insight into long-term community activism using both subjective and objective elements. Besides telling the personal stories of the struggle over the health of Snowy River, Miller also provides a "warts and all" picture from which there is much to learn. For example, she shows how the vision of the Snowy River idyllically "running free", much used in campaign communications, wasn't necessarily the vision motivating all members of the far-east Gippsland community. Miller documents that some members of the lower Snowy River catchment community were keen to get water down the river for further development rather than any environmental benefit.

A river's right to have water flowing down it to sustain the life that relies on it is a relatively new area of river management. The case study presented is made all the more worthy of study due to this cutting edge scientific concept. Recently in Victoria, for instance, the environment's share of water, an Environmental Water Reserve, will be provided for all rivers across the state. In other states of Australia, governments are still striving to "cap" water use in selected stressed rivers.

The challenge for managers of our water resources is to identify the variety of ways our community value rivers and how best to allocate water for these values. In order to make the trade-offs required, it is obvious that these social, economic and environmental values need to be documented and dealt with transparently.

I would recommend this book to educators looking to provide case studies of where grass roots community action with a great deal of commitment, hard work, passion and belief, can make a difference. These elements meant that the Orbost community was able to take advantage of any opportunities that were presented. The Snowy River case study also explores the community's attitude to science - arguments that the river was not flow stressed didn't match with regional intuition. This community organised one of the first expert panels to determine the environmental needs of the river - a method that has since been used to get the best results in the complex and multi-faceted river science area.

A vital question to ask when reviewing a book with such specific content, is obviously - will the book prove interesting reading for a more general audience, or, is it enjoyed only by those with specific background knowledge? What makes this question all the more significant, is that the educative process is particular aided by inspiring interest in content through an accessible format. Happily, *Snowy River Story* manages to entertain and inform in equal proportions.

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