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## Making Soil and Water Conservation Work: Scientific and Policy Perspectives

Marion Clawson

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## ISSUES IN THE MANAGEMENT OF AUSTRALIA'S WATER RESOURCES

J.J. PIGRAM.

Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1986. Pp. xvi, 331. \$24.95, paper.

Australia is popularly known as the driest continent, a perception which overlooks Antarctica. As this welcome volume points out, the island continent has the lowest precipitation and run-off in proportion to area of any inhabited continent, and this relative aridity is exacerbated by the fact that it can also lay claim to having the lowest proportion of run-off to rainfall. The average rate of evapotranspiration is eighty-seven percent, compared with about sixty percent for North American and Europe.

Given these statistics, it is surprising that so little scholarly attention has been devoted to issues relating to the management of Australia's water resources. Much of the attention which has been directed towards water has come from engineers, with less from geographers (who have shown some concern with social and political aspects), and economists, and almost none has been given from the discipline to which the reviewer belongs (political science). The lack of attention on the part of social scientists is part of a more general relative lack of research (compared with countries such as Canada) into natural resources policy, but it is surprising nonetheless given the political salience of water issues. For example, in the 1983 election campaign, Prime Minister Fraser promised to fund a study investigating the feasibility of diverting coastal rivers in Queensland and New South Wales inland into the Murray-Darling Basin. Given that much existing irrigation practised in the Basin is of dubious economic efficiency, the type of water resources politics this exemplifies should excite curiosity. Indeed, the promise of publicly funded civil works to make water available—to 'make the deserts bloom'—has been a recurring theme in Australian history, such that the divert the rivers proposal is only too typical. For this reason, Dr. Pigram's claim that "Australia has an impressive record in water resource development (page xiii) is rather curious. Certainly, there has been a record of successful civil engineering works construction, though really no more impressive than any other industrial nation, but the economics of that development has been highly questionable and the concern for ecological considerations often lamentable. Much irrigation water used involves substantial public subsidy, and has also caused problems with waterlogging or saline drainage. These factors have led to a growing concern with wise water management; there has been a growing awareness that Australia has been able

to afford poor management of scarce water resources only by virtue of a very low population density.

Pigram's book "seeks to explore the background to [this] profound reorientation of attitudes and relationships to water. . . ," and is "intended as a comprehensive study of the critical water-related issues facing [Australia]" (page xiv). While the book succeeds on the level of providing a comprehensive overview of basic information about water resources in Australia, it fails in this more important role of critically analyzing this period of transition. The overview role is less important because much of the information it provides has already been made available in the Commonwealth government report, *Water 2000*, with extensive consultants' report, released in 1983. While Pigram's book does go beyond that study, it could never lay claim to the issue-analysis role without sacrificing much of the fine detail of water resources information. Pigram would have done better to have claimed less for his book, for on the factual level it is a valuable addition to the literature. Because institutional important reforms are still taking place, the timing of Pigram's book is inopportune for a work seeking to deal with the transition.

Such an evaluation demands justification: a few examples will suffice. The first concerns Pigram's treatment of the 1983 decision to preserve a wilderness area in the Southwest, in the state of Tasmania, from hydroelectric development (one of the few times dam proposal in Australia has not proceeded on environmental grounds). Pigram states that the decision was made "in the face of compelling economic and social considerations" (page 82). The economic case for the dam was never compelling, being particularly weak on the issue of forecast demand growth—indeed, on the basis of extremely sluggish demand growth since work on the dam was originally scheduled to begin in 1980, construction of the dam would have proven most unattractive in economic terms.

One of the more notable errors resulting from the old engineering-dominated approach has been the Ord River project in the tropical north of Western Australia. This area is remote from markets and replete with economic and ecological problems, many of which were apparent after the first stage of the project. It tells us little about how and why the second stage was proceeded with, to state baldly as Pigram does, that "Despite heavily qualified survey reports querying the economics of the project, a decision was made to proceed with construction of the main dam further upstream" (page 66). Much more analysis of the politics of the Ord River project is necessary if we are to understand both the "old" and the "emerging" approaches to water management.

Similarly, the 1980s has seen the construction of a dam on the Burdekin River in North Queensland, providing for additional rice production and

another one million tons of sugar production at a time when severely depressed sugar demand is causing many dryland farmers in Australia to go "out of sugar." Pigram lamely concludes: "Where these vast amounts are to be sold is, of course, another matter" (page 63). That the economics of agricultural production has usually been "another matter" has been one of the problems with the old approach to water management in Australia. This book is prepared to let such issues remain "another matter" and cannot make any serious claim to constitute a comprehensive study of the critical contemporary issues in Australian water resources.

Aynsley Kellow  
Professor of Political Science  
Deakin University  
Victoria, Australia