

Concerned scientists and environmental politics

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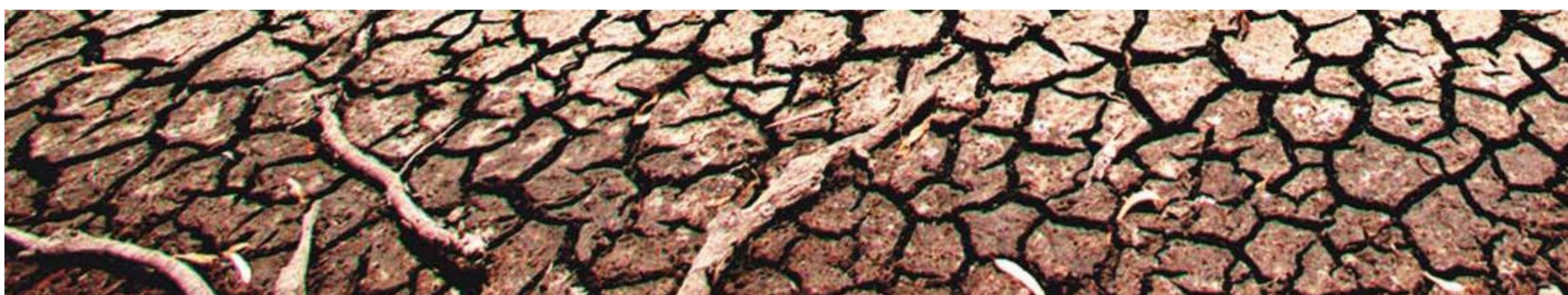
Drought in Australia, 2002



- Drought impacting rural industries and communities
- Media and political attention
- Farmhand Appeal charity to provide relief to farmers
- Media personality calls for more dams to 'drought-proof Australia'

'Turn the rivers inland'

Alan Jones, talk-back radio host



Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists

- WWF Australia arranged a dinner meeting of leading environmental scientists and journalists at the Wentworth Hotel to respond to irrational public debate
- The 'Wentworth Group' devised a five point plan and received national media coverage
 1. Clarify water property rights
 2. Restore environmental flows
 3. End broad-scale land clearing
 4. Pay farmers for environmental services
 5. Incorporate environmental costs into food prices
- Formed the basis of the *Blueprint for a living continent* which was released to Federal cabinet and the media
- Further documents and high level policy advice contributed to the reform of catchment management in New South Wales

'You can't drought-proof Australia'

Peter Cullen, ecologist

Science communication

The Wentworth Group became an exemplar of science communication and policy influence. They attributed their success to:

- Clear and simple language
- No equivocation or qualifiers
- Close relationships with journalists
- Clear articulation of the problem and links to solutions
- Media interest in conflict with radio announcer Alan Jones

They deliberately and positioned their recommendations within the market based approaches which dominate policy making so that they were easier for government to adopt.

'good science will be surprisingly compatible with economics'

Mark Wooden, economist



Science, the public and environmental politics

The Wentworth model of science communication was successful in achieving widespread influence over government policy. However, this model raises serious questions about the relationships between science, the public and politics in Australia. In particular key issues are:

- 'Good science' came to be defined as simply communicated, without qualifiers and easily compatible with government policy and conventional economics.
- Simple, unequivocal science communication masks the complexity and uncertainty inherent in science and reinforces a 'deficit' model of the public understanding of science which has been discredited in other contexts.
- Scientists providing policy advice using the language of politicians reinforces and naturalises dominant political ideologies, rather than encouraging more critical public debate.
- Close relationships between self appointed 'independent experts' and governments undermines more open and participatory forms of democracy.

Find out more...

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