Foreword

In Australia today, there is universal acceptance that the Murray–Darling Basin is an area vital to the nation’s food security and environmental well-being. Planning for the future of this waterway is one of the most complex public policy challenges we face, as evidenced by the breadth of issues covered in the ‘Guide to the Proposed Basin Plan’ released by the Murray–Darling Basin Authority in October 2010.

In response to this complexity, the Risk and Sustainable Management Group (RSMG) at The University of Queensland (UQ) convened a workshop of leading scholars in late October 2010 to ask the question: ‘Water policy in the Murray–Darling Basin: Have we finally got it right?’

This volume draws on the papers presented at that workshop to offer a broad range of answers to that core question.

As this book goes to press, with many of the key issues unresolved, I trust it will provide much valuable grist to the mill as policymakers and communities work together to find a balanced solution. Whatever policy is ultimately adopted, rigorous analysis, evidence-based critiques and a broad range of perspectives must be part of the solution.

I am particularly pleased that The University of Queensland was able to host the workshop that led to this volume because, in partnership with other Australian universities, we have international experience to share on restoring the health of river systems.

For example, through the International Water Centre – a joint venture between UQ, Griffith University, the University of Western Australia and Monash University – we undertook a project with the Yellow River Conservancy Commission in China to help restore the health of that vital waterway. The Yellow River is the second largest river in China, over 4500 km long, but it has only about a sixth of the flow of the Yangtze River. And in the 1990s it stopped reaching the oceans in the dry season. So in the late 1990s the Chinese Government formed the Yellow River Conservancy Commission and centrally controlled all major extractions from the river. It developed a model of the river’s flows, which was easier to do than for the Murray–Darling Basin for a multitude of reasons, including that the Chinese Government just told the people how much water they could have. But within two years of forming the Commission, the Yellow River flowed
the whole year and it has not stopped flowing since. Of course, the river still has issues, but all extractions are now controlled, and have been significantly reduced.

The starting point for the Murray-Darling Basin, as it was for the Yellow River in China, is to be absolutely truthful about what the current situation is. This book provides essential reading for those trying to understand these issues and respond with appropriate policies. It provides a critical analysis of the social context of the policy, and relates that context to the prevailing principles of closer settlement and resource exploitation. It tackles the complexity of balancing consumptive and environmental needs and it illustrates how the knowledge underpinning water resource use and management has grown in its sophistication over recent years.

I welcome this book and hope it will contribute to a better and greater understanding of the complexities in developing water policy in a modern pluralistic society located in a ‘sunburnt country […] of droughts and flooding rains’ (Dorothea Mackellar, ‘My Country’, 1908).

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