



Conversations that count

BEN GAWNE DISCUSSES THE VALUE OF RELATIONSHIPS FOR THE SUCCESSFUL ADOPTION OF SCIENCE INTO PRACTICE.

Scientist and communicator Peter Cullen, described the boundary between research and management as ‘turbulent’. This turbulence arises from differences in cultures and expectations between managers and researchers that create both positive and negative tensions. There are also challenges in synchronising research outputs with manager’s needs, as the two realms move at different speeds, with managers having to deal with situations that arise over days and weeks, while developing new knowledge may take years. There are also challenges in applying new knowledge across different locations because of natural variability, and the uncertainty associated with applying knowledge to different systems.

These challenges present fertile ground for the Murray–Darling Basin Environmental Water Knowledge and Research (MDB EWKR) project as it strives to ensure the research it undertakes is relevant to managers. To understand how best to do this, the MDB EWKR team asked managers how they access information to support their decisions, and where they feel effort needs to be made to improve the science to practice link.

What became clear as a result of these discussions, is that while similar environmental water planning decision-making processes are used across all jurisdictions, information is accessed from multiple technical, corporate, and local sources, with no single source to which all managers turn to for advice. Personal contacts and networks are extremely important and, unsurprisingly, favoured over Decision Support Tools (for example, flow response models) that are rarely used due to the complexity of issues being addressed, and the uncertainty associated with applying the same model to different situations.

For MDB EWKR, these findings have resulted in the project using a variety of techniques to maintain engagement and collaboration over the longer term. Within the context of an ever-evolving Basin Plan, MDB EWKR is now using a series of filters developed with managers that, when applied to new knowledge, ensures it can be used.

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The filters are:

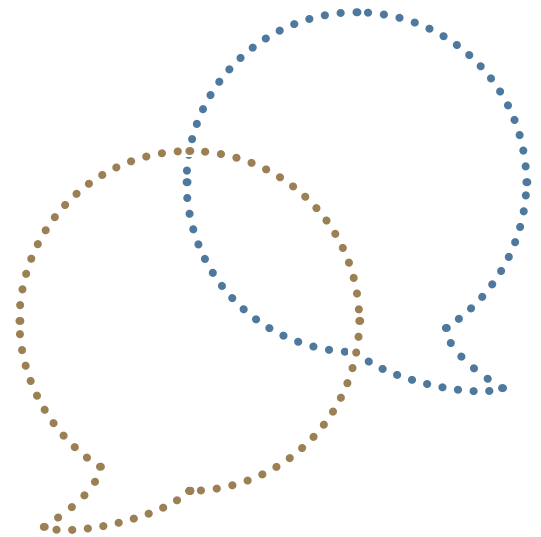
1. **Accessibility:** If managers can't access the information it can't be used.
2. **Relevant:** The information must be relevant to the decision the environmental water manager needs to make.
3. **Applicable:** In many instances, the information will need to be adapted to the specific situation or integrated with other information in order to inform a decision.
4. **Feasible:** Applying the information must yield a feasible solution, that is, one that can be achieved without unacceptable risks.
5. **Credible:** The information needs to be trusted and conform with the managers' existing understanding of the system.

The filters enable the MDB EWKR team to interrogate the relevance of their research before recommending it be applied. They also provide excellent 'jumping off' points for conversations with managers and their networks.

Valuing conversations

Many managers said that one of the main ways they access information is through conversations with trusted experts. The relationships between managers and experts are more likely to develop with experts who make themselves available (Filter 1) and if the information they provide leads to success, then trust develops (Filter 5). The other major advantage is that the conversation gives the manager an opportunity to ensure the information is relevant (Filter 2), and provides a process whereby it can be applied (Filter 3) in a way that leads to a feasible solution (Filter 4). This approach is much more likely to yield positive outcomes than the manager sourcing answers from the internet or scientific literature that has little connection to 'real-life' environmental water challenges.

Understanding the opportunities and challenges presented by on-ground environmental water delivery and how new knowledge can assist in this process, is the subject of conversations across the MDB. Building relationships of trust within which these conversations can occur, and creating new scientist and manager networks is a priority for MDB EWKR, along with sharing new knowledge in multiple ways.



Over the next few months a new online MDB EWKR Story Space, social media, workshops, and this edition of *RipRap*, will enable anyone with an interest in environmental water to access our work. While these communication outputs are important, our main focus will remain on building trusted relationships and networks between scientists and managers, as it is these relationships that underpin the successful management and delivery of environmental water.



FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Ben Gawne — ben.gawne@latrobe.edu.au
 MDB EWKR Story Space — www.ewkr.com.au

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Inspiring and supporting people passionate about rivers



Creating and distributing *RipRap* magazine



Sharing knowledge in multiple ways



Collaborating and networking with a range of organisations



Managing on-ground and science communication projects

www.rrc.com.au

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RipRap is ONLY available for purchase through the Australian River Restoration Centre.

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