A sunburnt country?

Australia is the driest inhabited continent on earth. Regardless, our water consumption is one of the highest in the world – over 350 litres per person per day. Historians have described white Australia as having a pioneers’ attitude to water – adapt the landscape rather than adapt to it. Is the real issue behind Australia’s water crises one of attitudes?

Investigation

Examine document 1. What does this photograph mean to you? Write a caption to describe the photograph.

Examine document 2. What does this poem tell you about Lawson’s attitude to water? Do you agree?

Examine document 3. When this map was created in the 1920s, it was very unpopular with industry and government. Why do you think this was? What does it tell us about how Australians perceived their country?

Examine documents 4 to 6. The media plays a strong role in how we perceive the Australian landscape. What messages were we receiving about the Australian landscape in 1966? Create a list. What bias can you detect? List words and phrases that support your assessment.

Examine documents 7 to 12. Select two images that you most associate with the Australian landscape. Then select two images that represent your ideal Australian landscape. Are the images different? If so, why do you think this is?
Reflection
Do your ideas about the Australian landscape influence how you use water? Since European settlement, Australians have used more water than the environment can provide. Why is that? What do you think needs to change? Has there been a recent change in how we use water? Provide examples to support your answer.

Extension
Imagine you are in charge of managing water nationally. List five changes or strategies you would bring about. How would these changes impact on other areas of our lives? How would you motivate people to adopt your management strategies? How would you enforce your strategies?

Select a drought from Australia’s history, such as the Depression drought or the Federation drought. How did the drought affect people on local, state and national levels? What were people’s attitudes to the drought? What were the short-term and long-term effects of the drought? Have our attitudes to drought changed? Use primary and secondary sources to support your answer.
Document 1

Sign pointing to water

River Murray, 1946
Document 2

A poet's dream

THE BRADFIELD AND IDRIESS PLAN
OF WATER FOR THE INLAND.

"The dream of the poet of the Southern Cross
will never be realised,
until the country is IRRIGATED
and the people HUMANISED."

Henry Lawson.

That means WATER and CULTURE - Australia's two most pressing needs.

Quotation by a proponent of a scheme to water inland Australia, 1947
Habitability map of Australia

Produced by a geographer in the 1920s

N.B. The boundaries between regions represent lines of population density.
After the great drought what?

Advertisement for Hardies Fibrolite Pipes, 1966
Homes will soon have no water

By a Special Reporter

Parched inland areas will lack water even for essential stock and domestic uses unless substantial rain falls in the next few months.

All inland river systems except those in the southern Riverina are fast drying up.

One coastal river, the Hunter, is also drying up. Many rivers and creeks without regulating storages have ceased to flow and farm water storages vary from empty to only partly full.

Major storage dams are getting perilously low—even those least affected are more than half empty.

Controlled discharges from these dams alone keep our vast river systems flowing, or rather trickling.

These discharges are being restricted to urgent domestic, stock and irrigation needs.

The State Government has taken drastic steps to meet the great water crisis.

The end of water for irrigation purposes is imminent on the Macquarie, Lachlan, Namoi and Hunter Rivers and irrigation is restricted in most other areas.

Only a dramatic change in the weather can save the irrigation dilemma.

Facing ruin falling really heavy falls are thousands of graziers, horticulturists, vegetable and cotton growers and others who rely on irrigation water for their survival.

Water resources, in relation to demand, are reduced to the lowest level in their history.

The State is relying on drenching winter rains and runoff from heavy snow to avert disaster.

Conservation Minister Beale, with officers of the Department of Conservation and the Water Conservation and Irrigation Commission, has tried to counter the drought with measures based on weather information and facts from men in the field.

Mr. Beale's grim assessment is that unless substantial rains fall, more than half our major storage dams will be empty by the end of September.
Rivers drying up

This map shows the State's serious water shortage. All major storage dams are well down. Most rivers, which are drying up, are being kept flowing only by the release of dwindling dam storage water. The end of irrigation is imminent.

Extract from article, Sunday Telegraph, 1966
Rain comes to the Centre

I believe that no section of the Australian community has ever had to live through a worse climatic period than that from which the Central Australians now appear to be emerging.

The eight-year drought, they tell you, is not yet over, although it has taken a thorough wetting.

In the last few days I have flown over thousands of square miles of this country. I have seen lakes of water lying everywhere, rivers and creeks flowing, and encouraging patches of green grass.

But I also flew through rising dust that is already beginning to blow again on the still red landscape—in places where flood damage is being repaired. This reminded me that recently I had flown from Woomera to Tennant Creek—about 1,000 miles—without once sighting the ground. We were at 15,000 feet and the cushion of terrifying dust was at 14,500 feet.

Few southerners who have not been here can appreciate what it has meant to be a Central Australian in the last decade. Living with blanket dust for days and weeks and years has been a fearful ordeal, especially for the housewives. It has helped that many of the storms have not originated in Central Australia but in Western New South Wales and Queensland. They have had enough red dust of their own without having to put up with imported white stuff.

From DOUGLAS LOCKWOOD
at Alice Springs

At Reners Rock Station the manager’s wife, Mrs Judy Reidy, keeps a spare room in its dust-laden condition to show visitors. The rest of the homestead is spotlessly clean. She estimates it takes three hours a day to cope with dust alone. After a bad storm it has taken anything up to eight hours. Every surface has had to be washed down repeatedly.

Dust got into food and even into refrigerators. The children’s bathwater turned to mud. This has been the common lot.

Extract from article, Sydney Morning Herald, 1966
Document 7
Murray River, Echuca

Victoria, 1970
Document 8

Brunswick River, Brunswick Junction

Western Australia, 1970
Document 9

Kempton area

Tasmania, 1973
Document 10

Hume Dam, Murray River

Victoria, 1957
Document 11

Brunchilly Creek

Northern Territory, 1958
Document 12

Poison Creek, south of Agnew

Western Australia, 1971