

Coverage of the Meander Dam proposal by Tasmanian daily newspapers

Media and Environment research project

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Background: a proposal to dam the Meander River

The proposal to build a 43,000 megalitre dam on the Meander River in northern Tasmania is one of the largest infrastructure projects and also one of the biggest environmental debates of recent times. It is not the first time that a large dam proposal has met with considerable controversy in Tasmania. Tension between the government and anti-dam campaigners divided Tasmania over the Lake Pedder and Franklin/Gordon power developments. However this conflict faded as the era of hydro-industrialisation reached its closing stages with the completion of the King River and Anthony power schemes in the early 1990s. It might have seemed that damming rivers was not to be an issue again.

Unlike earlier large dams proposed (and many built) in Tasmania, the Meander Dam scheme is for irrigation to enable intensification of agriculture in the Meander Valley, following the heralded success of the Coal Valley irrigation scheme implemented in southern Tasmania (DPIWE, *Why Tasmania needs the Meander Dam* 14). Although primarily an irrigation dam, the proposal includes a relatively small power station. The Meander Valley is no stranger to environmental conflict, the last instance of statewide prominence being the campaign against logging on the slopes of Mother Cummings Peak in 1998 (Mother Cummings campaign).

The major proponent of the dam proposal is the Tasmanian Government with the support of the Liberal opposition and the Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association

(the State's peak farming body). Opposition to the project has come from environmental lobby group, the Tasmanian Conservation Trust (TCT) and the Tasmanian Greens. Within local communities in the Meander Valley area are outspoken campaigners on both sides of the debate. In the middle of the debate, in an attempt to objectively assess the costs and benefits of the proposal and resolve the perceived conflicts, are statutory bodies involved in assessment processes in regard to relevant legislation. Among these are the Resource Management and Planning Appeals Tribunal (RMPAT, an independent statutory body existing under the *Resource Management and Planning Appeal Tribunal Act 1993*), and the Commonwealth Government's Department of the Environment and Heritage (previously Environment Australia).

In debate over the dam proposal, several key issues are apparent:

- the economic viability and profitability of the project;
- the role of the Resource Management and Planning Appeals Tribunal;
- introduction of new legislation to facilitate the dam proposal;
- potential impacts on a heath plant (*Epacris* species) of disputable taxonomy and threatened species status;
- potential impacts on the spotted-tail quoll, a mammal species listed as vulnerable to extinction under Commonwealth legislation.

Other issues that have been discussed include:

- the role of the Tasmanian Government as proponent and financial supporter;
- details of private investment in the project;
- loss of native forest at the proposed impoundment;
- hydrological changes in the Meander catchment;
- downstream environmental impacts on geomorphology and biology of the Meander River;
- potential geological problems with the dam site;

- recreational potential of the impoundment;
- flood mitigation for townships on the Meander River;
- improvements to town water supplies;
- and alternatives to a large instream dam.

Historically the idea to dam the Meander River is not new; it has been suggested and discussed in public and political arenas for several decades. The current proposal emerged from the State Government's Water Development Plan in 2001 and subsequent *Meander Dam Development Proposal and Environmental Management Plan* (DPIWE), released in February 2002. This "signalled the start of the formal public comment stage of the assessment of this proposal under Tasmanian law" (Tasmanian Conservation Trust). Several supplementary reports were released in May 2002.

In late 2002 the project received approval, subject to several conditions, from the Board of Environmental Management and Pollution Control (EMPC) and the Assessment Committee for Dam Construction (ACDC). The TCT appealed to the RMPAT to review the approval of the dam. The RMPAT ruled against the dam, effectively preventing the proposal from proceeding (RMPAT):

Upon the present state of evidence the Tribunal is satisfied that the certain and further likely environmental harm arising from construction of and the existence of the dam, clearly outweigh the less certain benefits. The Tribunal is satisfied that the proper decision is to refuse a permit for the dam.

In order to allow the dam project to proceed the State Government had to take the extraordinary step of introducing new legislation to effectively override the RMPAT ruling. The *Meander Dam Project Bill 2003* was passed by parliament in April 2003.

The dam proposal also came under Commonwealth jurisdiction, being a designated 'controlled action' in relation to the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* due to potential impacts on two species listed under that act. The Commonwealth assessment process considered economic and social benefits

against environmental impacts and in September 2003, after considerable lobbying by the Tasmanian Government, Meander Valley Council, TFGA and TCT, approved the project subject to conditions designed to mitigate and compensate for impacts on the threatened species.

The debate continued with the TCT lodging an appeal against the decision to the Federal Court of Australia. However, the continuing taxonomic debate about the *Epacris* plant species found on the Meander River appeared to be resolved in January 2004 when *Epacris* expert Ron Crowden claimed that the plants in question were actually populations of a more common *Epacris* species from southern and western Tasmania, therefore effectively negating any threatened species concerns (including Commonwealth obligations). Subsequently, conditions relating to *Epacris* aff. *exserta* 'Union Bridge' in the Commonwealth dam approval were removed; this damaged the TCT's strongest grounds of appeal such that the TCT decided in June 2004 to abandon the Federal Court appeal (Woodfield "Meander Dam Federal Court appeal").

Having leaped, skirted and demolished several barriers to its progress, the dam proposal remains on the agenda. Three final tenders from prospective private investors have been received by the State Government (Kons), so dam construction could begin in early 2005.

The Meander Dam proposal and debate have received considerable coverage in local Tasmanian newspapers, including several front-page headlines, feature stories and editorials. Much of the media debate has been along the traditional battle lines of environment versus development. Analysis of media coverage of an environmental debate such as this can provide insights into the methods of production of news, the way the media is utilised by proponents, the aspects of a broad and complex issue that are reported and the way issues are framed by the media and its sources. This research examines a 15 month period of coverage in the three Tasmanian daily newspapers. The issue continues to feature in the print media.

Research Aim

This research aims to examine coverage of the Meander Dam proposal in three Tasmanian daily newspapers: the *Mercury* (and *Sunday Tasmanian*), the *Examiner* and the *Advocate*. Content analysis techniques were used to quantify and compare coverage between newspapers in terms of attitudes toward the proposal and reporting of the separate issues involved.

Research Methodology

Content analysis of the *Mercury* (and *Sunday Tasmanian*), the *Examiner* and the *Advocate* was conducted over a period of 15 months commencing 1st February 2002. This time period equates provides a relatively long-term analysis and a substantial sample size thus reducing the bias that may occur in relation to events or media coverage over a shorter time period.

February 2002 was chosen as a starting date because it represents the release of the Meander Dam DPEMP and a consequent increase in media coverage and public awareness of the issue. A large proportion of media coverage of the current Meander Dam issue falls within this period, amounting to some 136 feature articles, news stories, opinion pieces and editorials in the three newspapers. Newspaper coverage has continued since the end of April 2003, but has not been considered here.

The sample included every text in which the Meander Dam project is the main topic (i.e. it is mentioned in the headline or first paragraph). Editorial letters were not included. Taking a sample from the full range of articles was not considered necessary because it was feasible to analyse every text in the defined scope of the research and the nature of the issue was such that coverage fluctuated over short time periods, with a large proportion of articles occurring on only a few days out of the sample range.

Content analysis is a useful technique for analysis of texts such as newspaper articles and editorials. Although it is not entirely objective, content analysis is a rigid and replicable method of analysis to quantify relative differences in key characteristics, which provides a basis for informed inferences about the intentions and influences of the text (Hansen et al.). Data collection is conducted using a process called 'coding' which involves determining appropriate categories, units and systems of enumeration to enable collection of information relevant to the research question in a repeatable method (Holsti). Coding is a subjective process guided by the aim of the research and the researcher's familiarity with the subject and medium.

A coding schedule and a code book with guidelines on how to score the content of articles was devised for this research. Using the coding schedule to analyse each individual newspaper item in the sample provided information such as the frequency with which different players were represented in coverage (as indicated by quotes) and the frequency with which different issues were covered. The process also makes a classification of the overall context of the item, in terms of whether it presents a favourable or unfavourable impression of the dam proposal, or a mixture of both or is value neutral. This classification of 'value dimensions' requires considerable interpretation of the material and therefore clearly documented guidelines are necessary (Hansen et al. 114-5).

The *Examiner* is printed in Launceston and reaches 79.1 % of the population in its primary circulation area of northern and northeastern Tasmania, which includes the Meander Valley municipality. As at December 2003, the circulation of the *Examiner* was: Monday to Friday 84 000 readers, *Saturday Examiner* 101 000 readers, *Sunday Examiner* 107 000 readers (Roy Morgan Research figures).

The *Advocate*, based in Burnie and covering the north-west and west coast of Tasmania, has a Monday to Friday average circulation of 26 253 with an estimated readership of 62 200 people and a Saturday circulation of 30 076 with 68 500

(September 2002 circulation figures from Australian Bureau of Circulation; March 2003 readership figures from Roy Morgan Research).

The *Mercury* is based in Hobart and has a largely metropolitan readership, reaching 66 % of the Hobart population Monday - Friday. The Monday - Friday circulation of the *Mercury* is 48 630 with an estimated 110 000 readers. The *Saturday Mercury* has a circulation of 63 550 with 155 000 readers, and the *Sunday Tasmanian* has a circulation of 58 649 and a readership of 136 000 ("The Mercury: about this paper").

Results

Over the study period of 15 months (454 days) a total of 136 newspaper articles were collected and analysed using the coding schedule. At least 80 per cent of articles in each newspaper were classified as news stories, with a total of 116 news stories (including those which were predominantly opinion or press release) in the whole sample (table 1).

The *Examiner* had the lowest proportion of genuine news stories out of the three newspapers (72 % of all *Examiner* articles), however if stories presented as news stories are included it has the highest proportion (88 %). This is attributed largely to the format of the *Examiner* whereby on some days when the dam issue was a major topic several smaller articles - each presenting a narrow, opinionated perspective on the issues - were grouped together rather than presenting the different sides to the issue in one large story. This makes it somewhat difficult to analyse the *Examiner* coverage in comparison to the other papers, although the range of issues covered and attitudes toward the dam should give an overall impression. Furthermore this increases the total number of articles concerning the dam in the *Examiner* and therefore partly accounts for the *Examiner* having nearly half of all the articles during the study period.

The newspapers contained similar numbers of opinion pieces over the study period, but the *Mercury* was the only newspaper not to publish an editorial about the Meander

dam (although the issue was mentioned briefly in a *Mercury* editorial lambasting then DPIWE Minister Bryan Green). A chronology of the history of the Meander dam proposal in the *Examiner* was the only article that did not fit into other categories.

Table 1. Classification of articles by type in the three newspapers.

	<i>Advocate</i>	<i>Examiner</i>	<i>Mercury</i>	All newspapers
News story	32	47	24	103
News story (opinion)	2	10	1	13
Feature	0	1	1	2
Opinion	5	4	5	14
Editorial	1	2	0	3
Other (chronology)	0	1	0	1
All articles	40	65	31	136

The number of articles fluctuated considerably over time in relation to relevant events and newsworthiness of the issue (figure 1). Only twelve of the 65 weekly periods examined contained 3 or more articles in all newspapers. Peak coverage was between 24th January and 6th February 2003 with around 30 articles per week; this corresponded with the RMPAT ruling and the fallout of this decision. Subsequent articles were mainly about attempts to progress the dam project following the RMPAT rejection of the proposal. The smaller peak in the 19th fortnight was in mid-October 2002 in response to the EMPC approval and news that the TCT would lodge an appeal with the RMPAT. A number of articles appeared in the middle of April 2003 (32nd fortnight) coincident with the introduction of the Meander Dam legislation.

All newspapers showed a pro-dam bias as demonstrated by articles classified as favourable toward the dam proposal being the largest category in each paper (table 2). Attitude toward the dam proposal was assessed subjectively based upon the balance of viewpoints presented, emphasis and language used within each article. The *Advocate* demonstrated the most bias with a ratio of nearly 5 pro-dam articles for every anti-dam article; in the *Examiner* the ration was 3:1 and the *Mercury* was the least biased with 2:1.

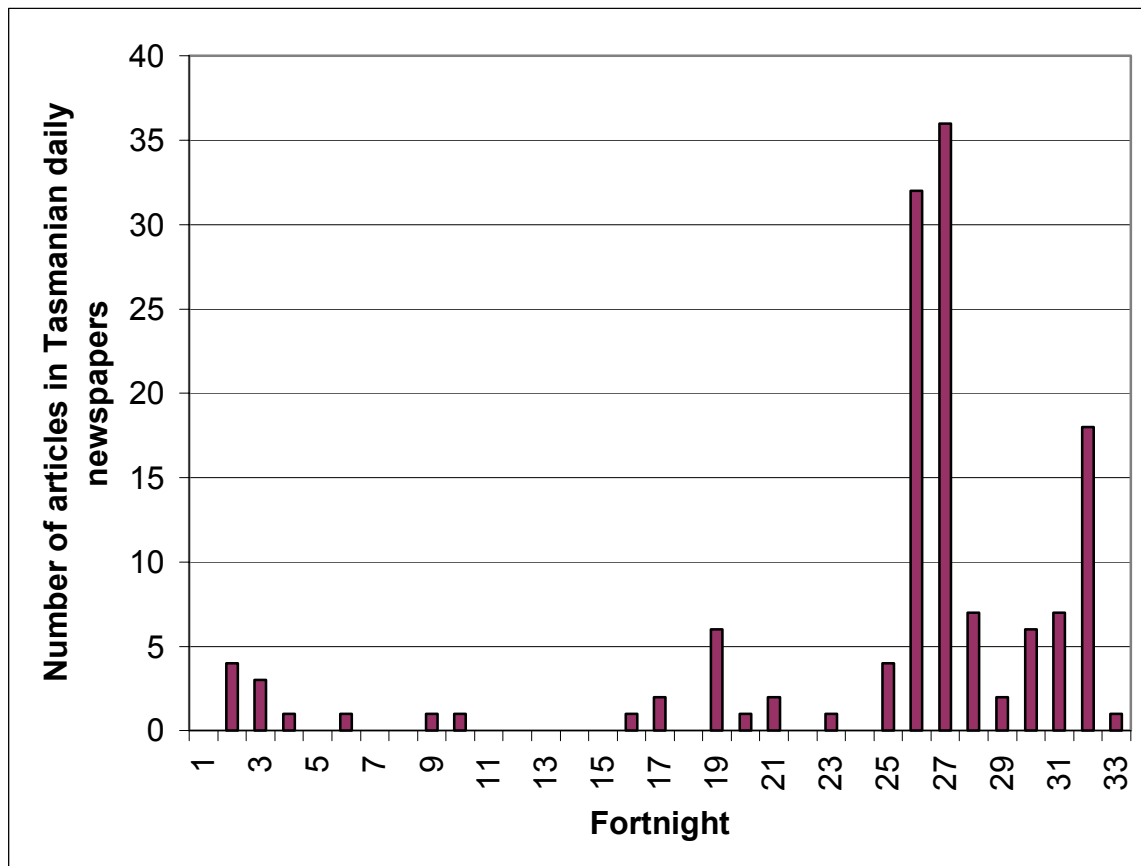


Figure 1. Coverage of Meander dam issue over time, 1st Feb 2002 - 30th April 2003.

If only genuine news stories are considered the differences between the newspapers are less and the proportions of favourable articles is lower because opinion pieces which were typically favourable toward the dam are excluded from the analysis (table 3). The proportions of articles considered unfavourable toward the dam or with a balance of mixed attitudes is remarkably similar between the papers, with one in every eight news stories unfavourable and three in eight mixed.

Opinion pieces were in favour of the dam, mostly authored by various politicians, with the exception of two columns in the *Mercury* which presented anti-dam cases (Woodfield "'Quick and dirty' option"; Thorne). The two editorials in the *Examiner* were supportive of the dam, whilst the *Advocate* editorial presented a neutral attitude. The *Examiner* contained the largest number of pro-dam opinion pieces.

Table 2. Attitude toward dam proposal, all articles.

	<i>Advocate</i>		<i>Examiner</i>		<i>Mercury</i>		All newspapers	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Favourable	19	47.5	30	46.2	12	38.7	61	44.9
Unfavourable	4	10.0	10	15.4	6	19.4	20	14.7
Mixed	12	30.0	19	29.2	9	29.0	40	29.4
Neutral	5	12.5	6	9.2	4	12.9	15	11.0
All articles	40	100	65	100	31	100	136	100

Table 3. Attitude toward dam proposal, news stories only.

	<i>Advocate</i>		<i>Examiner</i>		<i>Mercury</i>		All newspapers	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Favourable	14	43.8	18	38.3	8	33.3	40	38.8
Unfavourable	4	12.5	6	12.8	3	12.5	13	12.6
Mixed	12	37.5	18	38.3	9	37.5	39	37.9
Neutral	2	6.3	5	10.6	4	16.7	11	10.7
All articles	32	100	47	100	24	100	103	100

For each newspaper, approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ of all articles quoted anti-dam sources, whilst $\frac{3}{4}$ quoted dam proponents. The most frequently quoted sources in all newspapers were Tasmanian Government politicians, principally DPIWE Minister David Llewellyn and his successor Bryan Green (table 4). The vast majority of quotes in all newspapers were from dam supporters, with very similar proportions of pro- and anti-dam protagonists evident in the *Mercury* and *Advocate*, which differed somewhat from the *Examiner's* coverage having the least quotes from supporters and the most from opponents.

Despite the overall bias toward supporters of the dam, the Tasmanian Conservation Trust was the second most widely quoted source in the *Examiner* and *Advocate*, although apart from the Tasmanian Greens there were very few other anti-dam voices. The Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association was the most widely reported non-government organisation in support of the dam, while several other lobby groups were occasionally quoted.

Amongst the dam opponents, the TCT was more widely quoted than the Tasmanian Greens in the two northern newspapers whereas the situation was reversed in the *Mercury*.

Table 4. Sources of quotations in Meander dam coverage, 1/2/2002 - 30/4/2003*.

	<i>Advocate</i>			<i>Examiner</i>			<i>Mercury</i>			
	Number articles	Number paras	%age of total quotes	Number articles	Number paras	%age of total quotes	Number articles	Number paras	%age of total quotes	
Dam supporters	Labor MHAs	15	64	23.4	20	73	16.5	14	56	28.0
	Liberal MHAs	10	30	11.0	11	50	11.3	11	40	20.0
	Tasmanian Senators	3	6	2.2	4	10	2.3	6	15	7.5
	Tas Govt DPIWE	4	11	4.0	4	15	3.4	1	4	2.0
	Meander Valley Council or Councillors	2	6	2.2	7	19	4.3	3	6	3.0
	Meander Valley Council document	0	0	0.0	1	3	0.7	0	0	0.0
	Greg Hall MLC	5	29	10.6	4	7	1.6	0	0	0.0
	Other MLCs	1	4	1.5	4	12	2.7	1	1	0.5
	TFGA	5	13	4.8	5	21	4.8	4	16	8.0
	MVDAG	1	3	1.1	5	22	5.0	0	0	0.0
	MRMG	1	4	1.5	1	3	0.7	1	4	2.0
	MV Enterprise Centre	0	0	0.0	1	3	0.7	0	0	0.0
	Northern Midlands mayor	0	0	0.0	4	17	3.8	0	0	0.0
	Councillors (other than Meander Valley Council)	1	5	1.8	1	1	0.2	0	0	0.0
	Tas Agricultural Productivity Group	1	3	1.1	2	7	1.6	0	0	0.0
	Nthn Tas Regional Development Board	0	0	0.0	3	9	2.0	0	0	0.0
	TCCI	0	0	0.0	0	0	0.0	1	5	2.5
	Local farmers	3	23	8.4	4	32	7.2	1	4	2.0
	Agricultural companies	1	6	2.2	0	0	0.0	0	0	0.0
	TCA media release	1	1	0.4	0	0	0.0	0	0	0.0
Total pro-dam	54	210	76.9	82	317	69.0	43	151	75.5	
Dam opponents	Greens MHAs	4	9	3.3	10	36	8.1	8	18	9.0
	Meander Valley Councillors	1	2	0.7	1	1	0.2	0	0	0.0
	Tasmanian Conservation Trust	11	40	14.7	15	64	14.5	5	12	6.0
	Tasmanian Senator (Bob Brown)	0	0	0.0	1	2	0.5	1	3	1.5
	WWF economic consultant	0	0	0.0	0	0	0.0	1	2	1.0
	Quoll expert	0	0	0.0	0	0	0.0	1	3	1.5
	Community dam opponent	0	0	0.0	1	13	2.9	0	0	0.0
Total anti-dam	15	49	17.9	27	115	26.0	16	38	19	
Critical of dam legislation	Planning Institute of Aust	1	7	2.6	0	0	0.0	1	2	1.0
	LGAT (Lynn Mason)	1	2	0.7	0	0	0.0	0	0	0.0
	Sue Smith MLC	2	5	1.8	2	7	1.6	1	6	3.0
	Tony McCall, lecturer Public Policy, UTas	0	0	0.0	1	12	2.7	0	0	0.0
	Total critical of legislation	4	14	5.1	2	7	4.3	2	8	4
Neutral	Federal Govt politician	0	0	0.0	0	0	0.0	0	0	0.0
	RMPAT spokesperson	0	0	0.0	2	3	0.7	0	0	0.0
	RMPAT documents	0	0	0.0	0	0	0.0	2	2	1.0
	Hydro CEO	0	0	0.0	0	0	0.0	1	1	0.5
	Total neutral	0	0	0	2	3	0.7	3	3	1.5
Total	73	273	100.0	113	442	100.0	64	200	100.0	

*acronyms: MHA = Member House of Assembly, DPIWE = Department of Primary Industries, Water & Environment, MLC = Member of Legislative Council, TFGA = Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association, MVDAG = Meander Valley Dam Action Group, MRMG = Meander Resource Management Group, TCCI = Tasmanian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, TCA = Timber Communities Australia, WWF = Worldwide Fund for Nature, LGAT = Local Government Association of Tasmania, RMPAT = Resource Management and Planning Appeals Tribunal

Individual local farmers in the Meander Valley received a significant amount of coverage, more so in most cases than representative groups such as the Meander Valley Dam Action Group and the Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers association.

At the time the Government introduced the Meander Dam legislation there was some reporting of sources concerned about the process but not commenting on the dam project per se, such as Sue Smith who was the only MLC to vote against the legislation.

Table 5 shows the numbers of articles which covered each of the defined topics within the broad issue of the Meander dam proposal. The six most widely covered subjects by this measure were all related to either government/statutory assessment processes or the purported social and economic benefits of the project or debate over economic viability. The RMPAT rejection of the dam proposal and the subsequent State Government response, which culminated in the introduction of new legislation to enable the dam, were the most frequent topics, reflecting the key events during the study period.

Coverage of the range of issues was similar across the three newspapers. The *Examiner* appears to have the broadest coverage of issues, but the differences are relatively small and the *Examiner* did have a greater coverage of the entire issue in terms of numbers of articles and paragraphs.

Of the threatened species issues, most coverage was devoted to the spotted-tail quoll, followed by general threatened species topics which tended to include both the major threatened species issues (i.e. the quoll and the heath plant).

Table 5. Coverage of topics in Meander dam articles.

	<i>Advocate</i>			<i>Examiner</i>			<i>Mercury</i>			All newspapers		
	Main topic	Subsidiary topic	Total	Main topic	Subsidiary topic	Total	Main topic	Subsidiary topic	Total	Main topic	Subsidiary topic	Total
RMPAT process and decision	7	2	9	13	17	30	7	9	16	27	28	55
State Govt intent to override RMPAT incl. dam legislation	13	3	16	12	10	22	11	5	16	36	18	54
Economic viability (incl. cost of water)	2	8	10	5	13	18	2	6	8	9	27	36
Economic, social, agricultural benefits	2	6	8	0	13	13	1	8	9	3	27	30
Commonwealth Government assessment	4	0	4	4	10	14	6	5	11	14	15	29
State Government assessment	5	2	7	7	3	10	2	1	3	14	6	20
Potential impact on spotted-tail quoll	1	3	4	1	2	3	0	8	8	2	13	15
Threatened species issues (general)	0	5	5	0	9	9	0	1	1	0	15	15
State Govt water development plans	0	3	3	3	4	7	0	4	4	3	11	14
Downstream effects (geomorphological, biological, water quality and quantity)	1	3	4	1	7	8	0	1	1	2	11	13
Govt consideration of Supreme Court appeal	1	1	2	2	7	9	0	2	2	3	10	13
Meander Council assessment and support	1	1	2	5	0	5	0	0	0	6	1	7
State Govt role as proponent and financial supporter	1	1	2	0	3	3	0	2	2	1	6	7
Potential impact on heath plant (<i>Epacris</i> species)	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	5	5	0	6	6
Flood mitigation and 'drought proofing'	1	1	2	2	1	3	0	1	1	3	3	6
Private investment in project	0	2	2	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	4	4
Alternatives to large instream dam (on-farm storage)	0	0	0	0	3	3	0	0	0	0	3	3
Call for local councils to support dam project	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	2	0	2
Potential impacts on catchment hydrology	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	0	2	2
Potential geological problems with dam site	0	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	0	1	1	2
Pro-dam public meeting	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	1
Hydro-electric power scheme	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	1
Loss of native forest at proposed impoundment	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Recreational potential of proposed impoundment	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Improvements to town water supplies	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Some of the topics identified in the preliminary examination of the Meander dam issue, such as benefits to town water supplies, inundation of native forest and the trout-fishing potential of the proposed impoundment were not mentioned or were not counted because they very minor topics in some of the more extensive articles. However these topics did rate a mention in editorial letters during the study period.

Discussion

It is not surprising that all three Tasmanian daily newspapers showed a prominently supportive attitude towards the Meander dam proposal and the State Governments promotion and facilitation of the project since the Labor Government and Liberal Opposition both supported it and there was strong lobbying by other Tasmanian politicians and lobby groups. This is no excuse, however, for the lack of balanced reporting. Much of the material devoted to the Meander dam issues was opinionated and confrontational and there was an apparent lack of objective and thorough discussion of the issues.

This perhaps compares with other newspapers and other environmental issues. In a content analysis of environmental issues reported in the *Advertiser*, a daily newspaper in South Australia, Jenkin found an “absence of detailed and informative discussion” (72) and framing of articles so as to serve the social creation of a narrow environmental reality.

Despite the availability of extensive documentation from the various assessment processes the newspaper coverage did not provide any in-depth reporting of the science and economics, except to some extent the feature article in the *Sunday Tasmanian* (Bevilacqua) which also was the only article to discuss the newspaper coverage of the issue. This may be due to journalists’ lack of time or expertise to consider these information sources, or it may be because reporters are responding in a reactive manner to groups who present the issues and agendas, or else such objective and informative discussion is not considered newsworthy.

Although fundamentally an environmental and economic issue, most of the coverage concerned the politics of the dam proposal, which reflects the predominance of politicians in the debate and the political nature of events such as the RMPAT decision and the Meander Dam legislation. However, even in coverage of environmental issues, it was politicians – who frequently either misused or misunderstood the

environmental issues – who dominated the debate (e.g. see discussion of the spotted-tail quoll, below).

Experts, such as ecologists and hydrologists, were very rarely represented, perhaps due to a reluctance of these experts to engage with the media as postulated by Kirkpatrick. However since expert opinions were occasionally presented in the letters to the editors, it may be that a reluctance to engage with experts came from the media more so than vice versa.

The *Examiner* is the local newspaper in the Meander River catchment and the Meander Valley municipality, hence the greater coverage of the issue afforded by this newspaper. This also explains the greater range of sources quoted by the *Examiner*, since there is considerable coverage given to local legislative councillors and municipal councillors and local lobby groups.

The *Advocate* is the most regional and rural of the newspapers and as such it has presented the most pro-dam coverage, however the *Examiner* had a pro-dam editorial position as evidenced by the two editorials during the period and the large number of pro-dam opinion pieces.

The current Tasmanian Government has been criticised for its close relationship with the local media and its extensive media and public relations efforts (e.g. Simpson, Snell, Hay et al). A public relations campaign is evident in the colourful pro-dam propaganda produced by the State Government (DPIWE, *Why Tasmania needs the Meander Dam*) and the decision of Meander Valley Council to allocate \$10 000 to a fund for promoting the benefits of the dam and countering 'misinformation' to convince the Federal Government to approve the project (Pattie).

The State Government (DPIWE, *Why Tasmania needs the Meander Dam*) and Meander Valley Council in collaboration with the TFGA (Meander Valley Council & Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association, "The Meander - A river of lost opportunities" and

“The Meander Dam Fact Sheet.”) both presented the dam proposal as a *fait accompli*, with clear benefits and no major problems.

From a textual analysis of three regional newspapers coverage of the Lake Cowal gold mine proposal in mid-western NSW, McGregor found that the issue was powerfully framed by three distinct myths rather than the actual environmental concerns. By ‘myths’ McGregor refers to widely accepted cultural truisms, which may or may not be ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, fiction or reality (193). The ‘rural identity’, the ‘glories of development’ and the ‘duties of democracy’ were the three myths cited by McGregor as framing the Lake Cowal issue in regional towns of the agricultural district. It was these myths that helped to rationalise and contextualise the State Government rejection of the gold mine and also to galvanise resistance to that decision.

The same myths are drawn upon to some extent in the Meander dam proposal, however in this case it is the State Government supporting the development, with the RMPAT and conservationists challenging the power of these myths. The rural-urban divide was not so evident in Tasmania and nor was the coverage so extremely one-sided, particularly since the newspapers concerned covered broad demographics including rural and urban regions. However, *Tasmanian Country*, a rural newspaper produced by the *Mercury*, appeared to frame its Meander dam coverage this way, although a textual analysis would need to be performed before conclusions can be drawn.

In government literature (DPIWE, *Why Tasmania needs the Meander Dam*) and in much of the media coverage, particularly opinion pieces by various politicians (e.g. Green “Why Meander Dam is a goer”; Hall; Barnett), the Meander Valley was presented as a struggling rural community being denied the social and economic benefits of the dam by the whim of bureaucrats and greenies. The dam was presented, as was the mine at Lake Cowal, as a saviour for the district (McGregor 198-99). The Tasmanian

Government, in its *Why Tasmania needs the Meander Dam* publication (DPIWE 6), suggests that the Meander Valley will actually decline if the dam is not built.

Based on a resourcism philosophy, development such as the gold mine or dam is commonsense (McGregor 200). In Tasmania, this philosophy places the Meander Dam in the context of the state's water development plan which is seen as a major part of an ambitious attempt to increase agricultural production (DPIWE, *State of Growth*). Consequently criticism of the Meander Dam is portrayed as an attack on the whole Water Development Plan and the ideal of development itself. These views were articulated by DPIWE Minister Bryan Green, referring to "anti-development" groups (Lowe), and Opposition Leader Rene Hidding who called members of the TCT "perennial anti-development zealots" (Spurgeon, "Libs weigh in to revive dam plan").

The TCT had expressed concerns about environmental impacts of other proposed irrigation developments in Tasmania, however this was given little coverage except for a number of attacks on the TCT, "I am sorry to say their strategy appears to be opposing for opposing [sic] sake," claimed Bryan Green (Green, "Dam project 'too important'").

Greg Barns, in his discussion of the Meander Dam proposal and the media coverage thereof, implies that the TCT is opposing dams for the sake of opposing dams on the basis of two different representatives of that organisation citing different concerns about different irrigation projects.

The decision by the RMPAT was characterised by some as un-democratic since the tribunal is a statutory body composed of unelected members. The Labor party, having been elected on a platform that included damming the Meander River, appeared to have a mandate to see the project through. To this end Bryan Green presumptuously claimed that the tribunal had "erred in their decision" and "I'm sure it is one [project] which the vast majority of Tasmanians support" (Stubbs, "Dam fury"), with

no evidence to justify this claim, and proceeded to override the decision by introducing enabling legislation.

This, however, was seen as undemocratic and an abuse of power by others who were concerned about the disregard to due process by the government regardless of the merits or otherwise of the dam, leading Greens parliamentarian Peg Putt to describe the Government as “authoritarian” (Stubbs, “Dam fury”). Interestingly this situation was widely reported as a failing of the government to adequately convince the tribunal of the merits of the dam, rather than a failing of the dam proposal on an objective basis (e.g. Randell; Spurgeon “Stronger argument needed to convince Commonwealth”).

Dam supporters frequently referred to the benefits to the river provided by the dam in the form of ‘environmental flows’, thereby constructing the dam as a win-win situation for everyone with the environment being improved in addition to the benefits for the local community and the Tasmanian economy. The Lake Cowal gold mine debate was framed in the same way in that the development was claimed to “help save the lake from becoming a stinking swamp” in addition to its supposedly irrefutable economic and social benefits (McGregor 200).

In this context opponents of the dam were ridiculed as not being true to their environmental ethos. In effect there were no rational grounds for opposing the dam, the only motivation for such a position was being ‘anti-development’. The impression was that not only would the Meander Valley miss out on its potential to prosper, it would actually decline without the dam. Opposition leader Rene Hidding went so far as to claim “the proposition now is that we revert to a medieval agriculturist future” (Hidding). Conversely, Greens MHA Kim Booth stated that dam proponents “have to move out of the Dark Ages in regards to sustainable water development in Tasmania” (“Greens blast dam as an economic loser”).

Hansen et al (110) point out that in environmental issues, environmental groups tend to be given less legitimacy than science and government. A common tactic in environmental debates is to ridicule and isolate the conservation lobby as irrational extremists intent on stopping all development and unable to compromise. The implication is that no rational, decent person would share these views, and indeed that nothing short of commonsense and democracy are threatened by the lunatic fringe of green extremists. This was evident in quotes from Liberal politicians Rene Hidding and Jeremy Rockliff, e.g. "Radical green groups must not be allowed to scuttle this important project," stated Rockliff in *The Advocate* (Bavage, "Dam vital for future: farmers"). Meander Valley Councillor Jenny Dornauf described the TCTs actions as "un-Australian" and the organisation as "environmental and economic thugs" (Williams).

The concept of 'sustainability' seems to be bastardised to the extent that in some cases it is applied whenever some environmental impact mitigation is conducted even if the net impact on the environment is negative. Along with this is a myth that human intervention in natural systems is necessary for ecological sustainability. Hence we have the damming of the Meander River actually improving the health of the river by providing environmental flows (with no consideration of the natural fluctuations in flow, migration of aquatic fauna, sediment transport, floods to replenish flood plains, etc).

Rejection of the dam was frequently trivialised as a project of irrefutable benefit being stopped by a small marsupial: "Mr Green let a couple of pairs of spotted-tailed quolls defeat a project of critical significance to Tasmanian agriculture," claimed Liberal MHA Jeremy Rockliff (Stubbs, "Court may rule on dam"), while headlines proclaimed "Marsupial sinks dam" (Bavage) and "Quoll halts Northern Dam" (Stubbs).

A similar situation was observed concerning a proposed gold mine at Lake Cowal in New South Wales where a local newspaper reported: "If a few birds might suffer in

order to help humans, we've got to take that risk" (McGregor 200). This simplistic argument, where the glories of development are seen to be prevented by a few animals, effectively ignores any concerns about the more widespread and long-term impacts on the ecology and hydrology.

The quoll debate became even more ridiculous when Timber Communities Australia, a forestry industry front group, embarked on a cynical attempt to diminish the impact the dam might have on quoll populations. The TCA statement was taken up by the *Advocate*, claiming that four quolls had been killed on roads in the Meander area recently (Brown).

Rene Hidding's claims on quoll ecology during the Meander Dam debate, have verged on crackpot. Anyone with any understanding of animal ecology knows that if you displace an already dense population of a peak carnivore into another area, or reduce its habitat size, overpopulation and deaths will occur. Indeed such was the apparently uncontested RMPAT evidence of quoll experts in dismissing the Government's proposed quoll habitat areas adjacent to the Dam as nowhere near sufficient (Bonham).

Although the impacts of the dam were considered to be more severe on the heath plant than the quoll (DPIWE, *Meander Dam DPEMP*), it was the quoll which received far more coverage, probably owing to the 'cute and furry' element and the familiarity of the marsupial compared to a non-distinct, unfamiliar heath plant.

On several occasions the Meander Dam proposal was compared to the successful Craigbourne Dam and Coal River Valley irrigation project (e.g. Scott; Barns; Johnston). However these comparisons are somewhat simplistic and none of them call on expert opinion. It is drawing a long bow to infer similar benefits to an area with a different climate and soil. No mention was made of the potential environmental problems such as salinity in the Coal Valley and, indeed, it is too early to assess the sustainability of irrigated agriculture in the Coal Valley.

The Coal Valley was a marginal agricultural region whereas the Meander Valley has long-established agricultural enterprises as determined by the local climate. Most of the economic benefits from the Craigbourne Dam are from new industries –viticulture and stonefruit. In the Meander Valley the irrigation is expected to allow intensification of existing dairy farming and cropping which will necessarily have impacts on water quality in the Meander catchment. It is a case of comparing apples with oranges in order to reinforce the myth that irrigation is fundamentally beneficial.

The three daily newspapers were surprisingly similar in the content, sources and context of their coverage of the Meander dam issue over the study period. This suggests a reactive rather than proactive form of journalism where the form of the news is created at a statewide level by lobbying from various groups. Political parties and 'peak' lobby groups were typically represented in accordance with existing power structures.

In Tasmania, as the forestry debate has shown, with government and opposition and mass media all pro-development there is a great deal of inertia to achieving environmental outcomes when these are in conflict with development. It also highlights the inherent biases that media and government have in a capitalist system, where continual economic growth is vital to their very existence. In this regard, independent media provide a vital alternative but are far less prominent and influential.

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