

POSITIVE NEWS ON THE ENVIRONMENT

**Good Weekend
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2003 may well prove to be a watershed year for the Australian environment. The worst drought to hit our continent in over a century seems to have galvanised Australians to a new understanding of our land. We now recognise that the European agricultural systems used to build our nation also created profound environmental challenges. Those systems do not belong in Australia, and with that understanding traditional adversaries are coming together to find new solutions.

Earlier this year, NSW Premier Bob Carr adopted a radical reform of native vegetation across NSW. That replaced a system where billions of dollars were wasted building bureaucracies instead of helping farmers plant trees and repair damaged rivers.

Later in the year, Deputy Prime Minister John Anderson drove a historic deal for a \$500 million National Water Initiative which will, for the first time, put more water put back in the Murray River and create a water title system to suit our unique environment.

In May, Queensland Premier Peter Beattie and Federal Environment Minister David Kemp stood together in Brisbane and released a joint proposal that would end the seemingly intractable problem – the practice of clearing 5,000 square kilometres of native bushland in Queensland every year.

Then there was the proposal by David Kemp to secure one of the world's great natural treasures – the Great Barrier Reef - by expanding its protected areas from less than 5 per cent, to cover one-third of the reef. That makes the Great Barrier Reef by far the largest marine protected area on earth, and secures the jobs of thousands of Australians who make their living from this great tourism asset.

These are pretty remarkable outcomes for one year. But there are also challenges ahead.

Our cities, particularly Sydney and Melbourne, are running out of water. Over the next 20 to 40 years, we are going to have to find room and more water to support another four million to six million people.

Do we cram these people into our existing overcrowded cities? Do we simply dump them on an unsuspecting landscape along the east coast of Australia? Or do we plan for the future and create urban settlements which live with nature rather than fight against it?

There is no reason on earth why the eastern seaboard cannot become the model of sustainability. We have the wealth and we have the knowledge.

Once we make that choice, anything is possible.