

Top end off limits to irrigation

By David Dowling

The Daly River in the Northern Territory carries a lot of water by any standards. More water flows down the Daly in an average year (6.7 million megalitres) than the Macintyre, Gwydir, Namoi, Macquarie and Lachlan rivers combined.

The combined flow of the Daly and Roper rivers is greater than the total surface water use in the Murray-Darling Basin.

Of those 6.7 million megalitres, only 8,000 megalitres are currently diverted, mainly for some horticulture crops, cattle fodder and peanut trials.

The Daly is the only river in the Territory which flows throughout the dry season, being fed by springs in its tributary catchments of the Katherine and Douglas Rivers. The base flow rate in the Daly is about 2500 megalitres per day. And the highest recorded flow in the 1998 floods was almost 780,000 megalitres per day.

SUSTAINABLE YIELD

The sustainable yield of surface water in the system has been estimated at 1.1 million megalitres per year. This sustainable yield is just over 15 per cent of the total flow and takes into account massive environmental flows and the needs of the fish population, turtles and other threatened species. Irrigation water would only be extracted after flood flows had dropped at least one metre from their peak level.

And apart from the surface water, the Daly basin carries a huge amount of easily extractable, regularly recharged groundwater.

With this much water to spare, you could be forgiven for thinking the NT government would be encouraging some irri-

gation development to broaden a fairly narrow economic base. This has happened to some extent with some land being opened for clearing (mainly for cattle production) and support for the cotton trials at Katherine.

IRRIGATION OPPOSITION

But as soon as there were suggestions of using the sustainable 1.1 million megalitres for irrigation, the opposition came out of the woodwork:

- **The environmentalists** have presented a united front against any agricultural development and have found an unprecedented number of threatened fish, turtles, birds, plants and ecosystems.
- **The fishermen** (everyone in the NT) are aghast at anyone tinkering with the Daly — considered to be a sacred site by barramundi fishermen and probably the best 'big fish' river in the Top End.
- **The indigenous population** say that the Daly has been silting up since the 1960s when clearing first started on big properties such as 'Tipperary'.

Faced with this opposition, the NT government steered a safe political course and placed a moratorium on all land clearing in the Daly catchment. It also went further and placed an indefinite ban on cotton production in the NT — an interesting decision when no-one was seriously considering commercial production anyway.

The decision also seemed to overlook at the time that the government was funding cotton trials at Katherine and that cotton is still considered to be a prime candidate for any development of the Ord Stage II irrigation area — part of which is in the NT.

It seems that both of these situations have since been exempted from the blanket ban — possible the result of a Cotton Australia delegation visit.

With all this confusion, we decided to visit the area ourselves to get a feel for what the locals thought about cotton growing on the Daly. We did this incognito of course, cleverly pretending to be simple fishermen (see following story by Mick Allan).

The simple answer to our question was that, although no-one had the slightest understanding of the crop, cotton is a dirty word on the Daly. A view no doubt inspired by the negative press the industry has received over the past 20 years and fuelled by a very strong local environmental lobby.

They have no such problems with the large horticultural developments in the NT in recent years, even though they are much less environmentally friendly than cotton.

POLITICAL PROBLEM

There is a political problem with any agricultural development in the NT. Your average Territorian is far from the rugged individualist pioneer type that you would imagine. Most of the population live on indigenous communities or are public servants in Darwin or Katherine. They are more interested in lifestyle issues than economic development — especially agriculture. The politicians know which way the wind blows and act accordingly.

So, for the foreseeable future at least, the Daly River is probably off limits to any irrigation development. As a potential cotton production area it makes a great fishing spot and should be visited at every opportunity. 🐟



Posing as simple fishermen on a tributary of the Daly.



A huge amount of water flows off the floodplains into the Daly River at the end of the wet.