



Bridget, Maddi and Charlotte McCredden enjoy the water views at Beulah Creek.



FOR LIFE

keeping water flowing

LIFEstory

Water gives small communities a new lease on life

By Melissa Pouliot for GWMWater

Yarriambiack Shire councillor Helen Ballentine has her roots planted deeply in the Wimmera-Mallee.

Born at Hopetoun and raised at Turriff West near Wathe Reserve, she grew up hearing pioneering tales before experiencing her own, with water at the heart of a harsh life many would find hard to comprehend. The Wimmera Mallee open channel system is the consistent thread through stories of water shortages, dust storms, mouse plagues and carting water.

So it is no surprise Helen speaks passionately about the benefits water savings from the Wimmera Mallee and Northern Mallee pipelines deliver to the heart and soul of the region.

"The Millenium drought had a huge effect on our farms and towns, and water shortages in the storages became serious with the lack of rain and catchment. A realisation that decades of water had been lost in the channel system via seepage became well documented, and demands for water priority between the environment and liveability for humans became an issue." Helen says.

Helen's water story starts with her grandfather's family, who were dam sinkers and land clearers in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Helen's forebears relied on the Wimmera Mallee Water open channel system, built in the early 1900s. Long before electricity, Helen's grandmother would bucket water from the channel into a tank on a cart, then transport it back to the house.

Helen's grandfather, and then her father, cleaned the channels to earn off-farm income.

Helen has memories of pipes and windmills from their house dam delivering precious water to the garden. The arrival of power in 1965 meant they could pump dam water to the house and stock troughs. She says sometimes the dam water was good, other times it was clay coloured and would stain their clothes. She could never get her high school socks as white as the 'townies'.

Helen has lived at Goyura East near Hopetoun for 37 years with her husband and three children, experiencing similar challenges to days gone by such as drought, mouse plagues, dust storms and water shortages.

But now, thanks to the piped water from the Wimmera Mallee pipeline, Helen can grow roses. She says the pipeline also gives quality water for crop spraying with no more blocked nozzles, mud and hard water reducing the effectiveness of chemicals. This also enables them to reduce the amount of chemical they use.

The pipeline project promised environmental, economic and recreational benefits. Helen says it's delivering all three in her part of the world.

She has photographs of a dry Lake Lascelles from the early 2000s, and finds it difficult to look at them. She says ongoing debate over which lakes should get recreational water needs to take into consideration the Hopetoun story, which demonstrates how water can bring a community to its knees or to life.

“Water at Lake Lascelles is a welcome sight and people are inspired to undertake their fitness walks around the lake, families have barbecue and picnics, and it’s a great place to teach children to ski. It’s a fantastic meeting place, and greatly improves the liveability of the area plus has untold benefits for the emotional and mental health of our community.”

She also sees economic growth in her community, with a boom in accommodation and extra confidence in the business community with new businesses starting and those that stuck it out through the tough drought years expanding.

Chris Holmes and Robyn and Leon Huf have set up a visiting catering service called 'Lake Lascelles Sunset Tapas'; Danny and Leonie Naylor have set up a food van called 'Dan's Van' which visits Lake Lascelles and other special events around the region. Wellington Butchers in Hopetoun have tested the need for another coffee shop and after 12 months trial have expanded into a neighbouring shop to provide coffee, cake and snacks. Hopetoun Newsagency has diversified into selling a wider range of goods, including camping gear.

The manned service station in Austin Street has re-opened and new owners have revamped the fuel and nursery. An investor purchased Thornton's Cafe building on the corner of Lascelles and Austin streets and has since renovated the shop and house into B&B accommodation.

Business at The Bon Bon Cafe has been booming, giving the owners confidence to reopen the Woomelang Café and General Store. Bow Bakery has invested in upgrades to cater for the increase in visitors.

“The economic gain for Hopetoun has come about with a steady increase of visitors and campers at the lake itself, who then utilise the facilities and shops in the town.

People stay in the Mallee Bush Retreat buildings, powered sites or free camping sites on the north, east and south edges.

Families hold reunions all year round, many staying at the retreat and utilising the camp kitchen for catering.”

Several new houses have also been built since 2009. Helen says Hopetoun has come to life.

“This all links back to water in the lake – a place for people to enjoy and visit. Water brings new people to the town and reinvigorates those who have lived here their whole lives. There are so many more opportunities, and although we still have empty shops in the street, Hopetoun is a perfect example of how water can turn a community around.”

Helen says she’s seen similar changes in other towns in the region such as Warracknabeal, Beulah and Brim. She also sees great opportunity in Murtoa, with the community beautifying and upgrading around Lake Marma.

“Water gives a community incentive that it is worth spending money and taking a risk because people will be drawn to visit. The birds, frogs and other creatures also benefit. On a hot blustery and dust storm day, of which we still have many, there is nothing more pleasant to look at or as nice as water.”

