

“two sides of a river”

Text of a review of *River of Dreams* by Asa Wahlquist, first Published in *The Australian 'Media Section'* October 14, 1999.

While dam-building has been a cornerstone of Australia's regional development, *River of Dreams* presents a very different way of seeing dams, water and land. Only about three-quarters of the way through the documentary, however, does the real point become apparent: that whoever controls the water controls the land.

River of Dreams is ostensibly about local response to plans to dam the Fitzroy River in the Kimberley region, though curiously the viewer is not told until well into the film that those plans have been abandoned – in part due to pressure from Aboriginal interests and environmentalists.

It is a great subject for a documentary: it is about land and wealth, dispossession and belonging; history and passion; and two very different ways of seeing the country.

On the one side there is the push for development: the damming of the waters of the Fitzroy River, and using that water to create wealth (in this case through growing cotton); the drive to realise the great Australian settler dream of making the desert bloom.

On the other side are the indigenous people, once enslaved, who unsung and largely unpaid, helped create the wealth of cattle stations. They were not consulted about the damming of the Ord in the 60's. "They just built it and flooded it, and we had to swim out, way out," says Miriuwung-Gajerrong man Ben Ward. Thirty years later, they say they are still not being consulted about the management of the land, the proposed dam and the planned use of underground water.

It is a fascinating, complex subject. The film is narrated by Ningali Lawford, who grew up on a Kimberley cattle station. Her narrative holds the documentary together as it wanders through scenery, interviews and old newreels. The old footage is extraordinary viewing complete with English-accented commentary: "The land is bigger than California, nearly two times the size of Victoria and almost entirely untouched by human hands...in the vastness and emptiness only a few white men live here..." Ningali, however, tells a different story.

River of Dreams is really about water. Pastoralist Michael Curr, whose land would have been under the dam had it gone ahead, makes the link between money and water. He describes attending a water auction in Kununurra, "I thought they were swapping phone numbers, one million, one million and a quarter...I couldn't believe it." And that was just for the entitlements, not for the water itself.

Under Prime Minister John Howard's 10-point plan, water was effectively excluded from native title, allowing State governments to grant water licences without any negotiation with the native title owners. And this surely is the point of the documentary. As Ningali says: "What is happening on the leases today is the completion of the land grab started in the 19th century." Her point is reinforced by footage of Noel Pearson, speaking at the beginning of the documentary. "We are saying you should negotiate with us in relation to those things, because you are affecting our title, but you see they've got visions."

With so many stories to be told, it is not surprising the documentary is uneven, and at times unfocused. Some strands are less explored than others. The developer, John Logan, is fleetingly on screen, putting his case that water running into the sea is an untapped resource. His partner, Alan Brimblecombe, is just a disembodied voice announcing the dam will not go ahead.

On the environmental side, Australian Conservation Foundation spokesman Tim Fisher points out the possible damaging consequences of damming the Fitzroy, or using underground water for irrigation. With the nation now celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Snowy Mountains Scheme, Fisher makes the timely comment that although the Snowy scheme was a remarkable feat, "Many people don't understand the [environmental] cost of these feats."

It is almost certain the Snowy Scheme could never be built today, in a climate where any new dam must be environmentally sustainable and economically viable.