

## “will they cotton on?”

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Text of a review of *River of Dreams* by Jane Freeman, first Published in *The Sydney Morning Herald 'Preview Guide'* Monday October 11, 1999.

Cotton seems to be the villain on everyone's lips at the moment. This impressive documentary looks not at the cotton quarrels of the Murray-Darling basin but of the Kimberleys.

As cattle farming gives up the ghost in the great north-west, farmers are scrabbling for other ways of making money, and one of the most popular is cotton, Australia's third largest export. But this water-intensive, chemical-rich method of agriculture has local Aborigines, environmentalists and tourist operators crying foul.

Written and directed by John Hughes, the film starts in 1997 when the developers happily announced their plans to dam the Fitzroy River to channel water to stations South of Broome.

Environmentalists and indigenous traditional owners were indignant, especially in the light of the Ord River damming in the 1960's (back then, the Argyle homestead of the Durack family – *Kings in Grass Castles* – was relocated to dry land, but the indigenous people's living areas, sacred sites and burial grounds were flooded without consultation). Now chemicals and nutrients used by farmers are being poured back to pollute the Ord River, according to a local operator of barra fishing tours.

This fascinating documentary tells the story of the clash between indigenous and white man's values and attitudes to “land”, narrated by the Aboriginal performance artist Ningali Lawford in a bitingly acerbic style.

The film uses a lyrical blend of filmic styles and montages as well as archival footage (including one darkly funny old newsreel footage from the '60's extolling the virtues of the white man coming in to take over the big, “empty” north-west).

While there's a minor victory in the resolution, developers are still busy draining water from subterranean basins. The battle goes on.