

LEX LOCI'S TRAVELS

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An ad-hoc one-pager from The Public Land Consultancy

Winton Wetlands (Or is it Lake Mokoan? Or maybe Mokoan Swamp?)

This may not be the Somme, but Winton wetlands have been a battleground of cultures, of hydrological analyses, and of political values.

In the 1830s this was a food bowl capable of supporting perhaps 2000 people gathered for a corroboree. Then came the Europeans: squatters, missionaries, surveyors and legislators. Dispossession of the Aboriginal people continued for 170 years, right up to the 2002 decision of the Federal Court which denied the Yorta Yorta's Native Title rights.

For white settlers, the purpose of a wetland was to be drained and farmed; the purpose of a river was to be dammed. Their aspirations were voiced by Henry Lawson, in verses we now find disconcerting, even with the blatant racism excised:



Returning: sea eagles, koalas, wombats, turquoise parrots; departing: foxes, feral cats, European carp.

*Let others make the songs of love
For our young struggling nation;
But I will sing while e'er I live
The Songs of Irrigation;
For when we've made our long canals,
And lakes in every quarter,
The two most precious things for us
Shall still be wheat and water.*

Then along came the State Rivers and Water Supply Commission with a novel idea: instead of draining this ephemeral wetland, let's turn into a permanent storage. Seems they got their sums wrong: much of the water 'saved' for irrigation was lost through evaporation. The rest of the Winton-Mokoan story is well-known: the decommissioning and the ongoing restoration has been a celebrated environmental success.

It's also a governance success. The Crown land Committee of Management is amongst the most forward-looking and professional in the State - due in no small part to government funding. If only all Committees got a \$20million grant.

But back to the Nineteenth Century bureaucrats and legislators. Believe it or not, six pages of the *Land Act 1958*, still on the statute books, are devoted to the drainage of certain swamps, one of which is (you guessed it) the 'Mokoan swamp.'

While the world has moved on around it, great slabs of our Crown land legislation have stayed stuck in the mud.

See you there! Lex Loci