

Can adaptive management help us embrace the Murray-Darling Basin's wicked problems?

Catherine Allan

Environmental Sociology and Planning
Charles Sturt University, Albury-NSW, Australia

Abstract

In this chapter I explore the potential value of adaptive management of wicked problems, using Australia's Murray-Darling Basin as a focus. The Murray-Darling Basin is one of the largest and most economically important catchments in Australia. Being large and eco-socially-politically very complex, resource managers face many 'wicked' problems- including dryland salinity, biodiversity decline, waterway eutrophication and competition for use of surface and groundwaters, all against the backdrop of climate change and increasing understandings of systems. Narrowly focused 'rational' approaches are proving insufficient to address these issues, so government policy discourse has turned, in part, to adaptive management. Adaptive management enables managers to learn about whole systems as they are managed, and so is expected to cope with complexity and uncertainty. As an observer of adaptive management of natural resource management in the Murray-Darling Basin I question whether adaptive management as it is currently practiced is reflecting the ideal. I suggest that current adaptive management projects are concerned with 'taming' problems to enable them to be addressed with conventional management. Ironically, this appears to be in response to complexity and uncertainty, a function of the risk averse cultures in which management operates. To use the full potential of adaptive management to address eco-socially-politically complex natural resource management issues requires an acceptance that risk and uncertainty are inevitable. The first step to achieving this could be to support leaders who can construct cultures conducive to more courageous adaptive management.