

Stream water quality

Earth First

By Cilla Kinross

The streams around Orange provide the community with a wonderful natural resource, but they may be in a rather precarious state. Many have been polluted, dammed or had so much water extracted that they are considered highly stressed.

Maintaining water quality and quantity is critically important for the environment. A reduction in water flow due to excessive extraction will have impacts on aquatic fauna and flora, many of which are completely dependent on the river ecosystem. Floodplains need regular flushing to keep their vegetation hydrated and rivers need flush pulses to trigger native fish and bird breeding events. Pools shrink without regular flows and may fall below a critical size. The importance of drought refuges, particularly for internationally-protected migratory bird species cannot be underestimated.

If the water quality is poor, it will often look murky and there will usually be less oxygen in the water leading to fewer insects and other invertebrates, such as yabbies, living in the stream. Larger animals, such as platypus and water rats, dependent on such prey items, will starve or be forced to move to better quality streams.

Measuring the abundance and diversity of aquatic invertebrates is an important way to assess river health and it is simple to calculate from a sample taken from the water with a hand net. Data collected in this way can be sent to an organisation called Streamwatch, of which there are over 250 Streamwatch groups in NSW, including the Orange Field Naturalists and Conservation Society. Anyone interested in participating should contact the coordinator Jane Paul on 6362 3950 or janepaul@netwit.au. The next activity will be in October and everyone is welcome.

There are other ways you can help:

- Ensure that no rubbish ends up in the drains, as this ends up in our rivers.
- Make sure no live aquarium fish are dumped in the waterways.
- Keep an eye on the water policies of your local government to ensure that environmental flows are provided to local creeks.
- Join a local landcare group, such as Summer Hill Creekcure, that is working to improve the local creeks' catchments and water quality (for details of the latter contact Cilla Kinross 6365 8221 and for other groups contact Liz Davis, CMA, 6363 8603).

- And finally, support the work of the Inland Rivers Network, which is trying to address the degradation of our rivers in the Murray-Darling Basin – for details see www.irnsw.org.au.

For information on Streamwatch, see: www.streamwatch.org.au/streamwatch/ and for more information on the platypus visit www.environment.nsw.gov.au/animals/ThePlatypus.htm.