Summary: Case study Lake Victoria Murray Darling Basin Australia

This will be a case study of the successful resolution of an eight year conflict between water management agencies (and the various stakeholders that benefit from water extractions) and Aboriginal or Indigenous people in the region of Lake Victoria, one of the major storages in the southern section of the Murray Darling Basin. In 1994 the Murray Darling Basin Commission emptied the lake in order to undertake repairs for the first time since the original natural lake on that site was enlarged in the 1920s. This revealed a large number of exposed graves in the bed of the lake. The regional Aboriginal community immediately demanded that the storage be permanently decommissioned so that the graves could be treated appropriately. Against these demands the water agencies backed by their state governments argued that this was an essential storage for the operation of the water distribution agreement between the southern states, South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales. The resulting controversy took the storage offline for eight years and caused severe dislocation. In earlier decades the Aboriginal demands would have been ignored but in the changed political climate of the 1990s that was not possible. Eventually through the use of facilitators and the influence of the wider political context a new management plan was negotiated that achieved most of the water management objectives of the previous operating system but which also satisfied Aboriginal concerns. Under the plan the graves were protected through a four million dollar restoration program undertaken using Aboriginal labour and directed by Aboriginal consultants. A crucial policy change was that instead of filling the lake and holding it full at the beginning of winter for release in summer it was now to be filled for only short periods. This allowed the lower inner slopes of the lake to be vegetated with plants able to survive short inundation, thereby further protecting the graves and improving environmental conditions. Aboriginal representatives were also placed on the storage management board. A significant factor which made it imperative to reach a negotiated solution which satisfied all stakeholders was that this situation is likely to recur elsewhere in the Murray Darling Basin. Aboriginal people have lived, died and been buried along its rivers for at least twenty to thirty thousand years and it is a certainty that there are many graves elsewhere. The negotiation of an acceptable compromise for Lake Victoria provides a well developed and tested response of wider relevance.