

LOVING A RIVER TO DEATH – MANAGING URBAN DEVELOPMENT FOR LANDSCAPE VALUES AND WATER QUALITY

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The pressures facing the iconic Swan and Canning rivers are readily appreciable. But it should be remembered that generally, the community's experience of the Swan and Canning rivers will be a positive one. At one level, one can generally expect the waterway to be clean and uncontaminated, to see a diversity of river and estuarine plants, animals and birds. The rivers are generally accessible and land fringing the rivers are usually part of the public estate.

Urban and rural development over almost two centuries and deepening of the river entrance and diversion of freshwater inflows have changed forever, that nature of the Swan and Canning rivers. In addition, climate change appears to be having a substantial influence such that we have now come to expect that each Autumn, in the middle and upper reaches of the river system will experience extremely low oxygen levels, high counts of potential toxic algal blooms and out of bounds to the general public. This is not acceptable to the community.

Improving water quality and degraded foreshores of the waterway continue to be the key environmental issues facing the Swan and Canning rivers. Continuing high nutrient inputs feed algal blooms, low oxygen levels in the middle and upper river reaches put aquatic fauna at risk.

Urban development can contribute to deteriorating water quality through mobilizing historic nutrients or non-nutrient contamination, contributing new nutrient sources from gardens, disturbing acid soils destroying, catchment and foreshore vegetation and mobilizing sediments.

Urban development and redevelopment can also affect landscape and general amenity of the river environment. Higher density urban development, urban infill and a rising demand for commercial opportunities in and around the rivers are paradoxically both in response to and potentially counter to the rivers' community benefit and amenity values.

A new healthy river program is under preparation and new benchmark legislation – the Swan and Canning Rivers Management Bill – has been developed to improve integration of the range of actions required to address the river's health over the long term.