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Sharing the Wimmera's experiences with a changing climate



Wimmera people might not know it - but they are climate change experts.

The lengthy Millennium Drought meant residents in the region began managing climate change long before it made the headlines in national media.

From perfecting low-water gardens and no-till farming, to turning dry lake beds into concert venues, the resilient people of the region learned to roll with the punches, and importantly to deal with the mental health difficulties that go with a long-running crisis and the need to ask for help when things were not OK.

A new Wimmera Southern Mallee project called **Climate-eyes** will capture residents' observations and stories of surviving and adapting in tough climatic times. What they saw, what changes they made and how it helped the whole region forge ahead regardless of the weather.

The Wimmera Development Association-lead project has support from Wimmera Catchment Management Authority, Federation University Australia, Wimmera Primary Care Partnership, the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning and the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

Wimmera Development Association executive director Chris Sounness said all Wimmera Southern Mallee residents had rich stories to tell about drought, flood, fire, frost and even plagues – especially from the decade when the region ran within a whisker of going dry in the Millennium Drought.

“The classic drought story was the hairdressers who sought lessons in how to listen to and refer distressed clients for support – this marked a turning point in the regional understanding and accepting the reality of mental illness,” Mr Sounness said.

The hairdresser in question, Robyn Kelm, said she did not set out to get involved in mental health advocacy but identified a need.

“I saw what people were like when they came in and I knew we needed to do something,” she said.

Mr Sounness said there were other practical innovations

“We recycled household water from washing machines and baths to continue producing vegetables and learned the value of shade,” he said.

He said the difficulties enduring a protracted drought stretched through every aspect of life.

“There was also discovery of injuries that came with carting heavy buckets or playing sport on hard footy fields – all things we can share with other communities who have not faced such water shortages,” Mr Sounness said.

Participants have a chance to share their thoughts in a survey which is open to all residents via <https://wda.surveyparrot.com/s/living-and-learning-in-drought/tt-69d05e>

The project team is also seeking any official reports or recollections written during droughts, fires or floods and any photographs that highlight activities and lessons from these times. These can be sent to climateeyes@gmail.com and will form an archive of drought reports and information to share with other researchers.

The project will produce a *Little Green Book on changing with the Climate*, which highlights lessons, tips and ideas for surviving and thriving in tough climatic times.

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