

**The role of hydrology in determining the distribution patterns of invasive willows (*Salix*) and dominant native trees in the Lower River Murray (South Australia)**

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Faculty of Science

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( )

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DWLBC (2006) River Murray Monitoring Report – Below Lock 1 2002 to 2004.  
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## To the Willow-tree

1. Thou art to all love lost the best,  
The onely true plant found,  
Wherewith young men and maids distrest,  
And left of love, are crown'd.
2. When once the Lover's Rose is dead,  
Or laid aside forlorne;  
Then Willow-garlands 'bout the head,  
Bedew'd with teares are worne.
3. When the Neglect, (the Lover's bane)  
Poor Maids rewarded be  
For their love lost; their onely gaine  
Is but a Wreathe from thee.
4. And underneath thy cooling shade,  
(When weary of the light)  
The love-spent Youth, and love-sick Maid,  
Come to weep out the night.

Robert Herrick

(1648)

*Salix babylonica* (Weeping Willow)

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## Abstract

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This thesis explores the hydrological factors that may contribute to the observed distribution patterns of invasive willows (*Salix*) and native trees (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*, *E. largiflorens* and *Acacia stenophylla*) along the Lower River Murray (LRM) in southern Australia. An initial survey, establishing the diversity and flowering biology of *Salix* taxa was carried out to ascertain the extent of invasion, and the likelihood of hybridisation, which may accelerate invasion. *S. babylonica*, *S. fragilis*, *S. × chrysochoma* and *S. × rubens* occur in the study region, each represented by a single gender. None were present on floodplains, but the most dominant taxon, *S. babylonica*, occurred along the entire length of the main channel. No seed or seedlings were observed; hence reproduction is likely to be asexual.

More detailed survey work was then carried out to characterise the distribution patterns of the dominant *S. babylonica* and co-occurring natives (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*, *E. largiflorens* and *Acacia stenophylla*) along a hydrologic gradient produced by the extensive weir system in the LRM. In weir pools, variation in daily water levels of weir pools is low ( $\pm 0.1$  m) immediately upstream of the weir, but higher immediately downstream (0.2-1.0 m daily). The distribution of natives was uniform across weir pools, while *S. babylonica* was more abundant above weir structures, suggesting low tolerance to variable water regimes.

Hypotheses relating to the observed distribution patterns were then tested experimentally on juveniles of the *S. babylonica*, *E. camaldulensis* and *A. stenophylla*. The experiment was carried out in outdoor ponds using an orthogonal design, with four elevations in relation to water level (-25 cm, 0 cm +25 cm, + 50 cm) under each of three water regimes. Experimental water regimes manipulated the magnitude of daily water level changes (static, 0 m day<sup>-1</sup>; moderate,  $\pm 0.05 - 0.15$  m day<sup>-1</sup>; high,  $\pm 0.2 - 0.5$  m day<sup>-1</sup>) to mimic typical hydrological conditions across weir pools in the LRM. Final biomass and mean relative growth rates (*S. babylonica*,  $0.0403 \pm 0.002$  g m<sup>-2</sup> day<sup>-1</sup>; *A. stenophylla*,  $0.0249 \pm 0.0017$  g m<sup>-2</sup> day<sup>-1</sup>; *E. camaldulensis*,  $0.0204 \pm 0.0016$  g m<sup>-2</sup> day<sup>-1</sup>) of all 3 species were unaffected by water regimes (i.e. water fluctuations), but were affected by elevation. Survival of both *S. babylonica* and *A. stenophylla* was lowest at low elevations where inundation was high. At higher elevations (+25 cm, +50 cm) the RGR of *S. babylonica* juveniles was much higher than the native juveniles.

To test if the persistence of adults of each species along hydrologic gradients were associated with differing tolerances to water deficits and water use characteristics, *S. babylonica* and native species were examined under typical hydrological conditions in the field and during an unusual drawdown. *S. babylonica* occurring at the lowest elevations on riverbanks, had the least negative predawn

shoot water potential ( $\psi_{\text{predawn}}$ ), followed by the natives, which were at higher elevations. *A. stenophylla* had the lowest stable carbon isotope ratio ( $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ ) values (by 1.7 ‰) on the riverbank; suggesting more profligate water use than *S. babylonica* and *E. camaldulensis*. However, all riverbank trees had significantly less negative  $\psi_{\text{predawn}}$  and lower  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  than native trees on floodplains, consistent with higher water availability on riverbanks. The position and stable oxygen isotope ratio ( $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ ) values were consistent with riverbank *S. babylonica* sourcing their water directly from the river or from shallow soil-water sources (<0.25 m). In floodplain habitats, depth to water was > 2.5 m, and groundwater was 5 times more saline ( $4.97 \pm 0.88 \text{ dS m}^{-1}$ ) than river-water. Native trees with deep roots, the ability to lower water potentials and alter water use efficiencies may be at an advantage in this habitat relative to *S. babylonica*.

Extreme low flows in the LRM, over a 6-month period, provided an opportunity to assess how *S. babylonica* and *E. camaldulensis* responded to a river-water drawdown. During the drawdown, river-water levels fell at a rate of  $\sim 2 - 2.5 \text{ mm day}^{-1}$  and dropped to a minimum of 0.42 m below the designated pool level. *S. babylonica* and *E. camaldulensis* maintained high  $\psi_{\text{predawn}}$  across the drawdown period, most likely because riverbank soil water availability was not limited; as depth to water table only decreased marginally ( $\leq 0.15 \text{ m}$ ) and soil water content and soil water potential were high (<1.1 MPa). However, an above average rainfall in February 2003 significantly increased soil water potential in the upper 0.25 m of the riverbank, which correlated with a significant increase in  $\psi_{\text{predawn}}$  in *E. camaldulensis*, suggesting they were able to use shallow, precipitation derived soil-water sources whereas *S. babylonica* were not. Also under hot, dry conditions, *S. babylonica* had higher transpiration rates and lower instantaneous water use efficiencies than co-occurring *E. camaldulensis*. This suggests that *S. babylonica* may consume larger volumes of water per unit leaf area than natives, if access to water is maintained.

## Dedications

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For my grandmother, *Elsie 'Carney' Logue*

NOTE:  
This figure is included on page 14 of the print copy of the thesis held in the University of Adelaide Library.

I could not begin a study of willows without first consulting the extensive work done by Kurt Cremer. He was renowned for highlighting the magnitude and impact of willow infestation in Australian streams and rivers. We met at the Dunkeld Arboretum, Victoria where I spent days learning firsthand all the intricacies of willow field identification. Kurt's passion originally inspired many aspects of this thesis and his ongoing updates, advice and

encouragement was invaluable. Unfortunately Kurt passed away on the 2nd June, 2005, and I hope this work honours him.

Nor could I begin a study on the Lower River Murray without consulting the 'River Legend' - Jack Seekamp. Jack was born and bred on the Murray River, so not only did he remember a time before the weirs were built, but he also had firsthand experience of the system as a soil scientist and hydrologist. Whenever I was up in Renmark he always made time to catch up and until his passing on February 11th, 2007, he never failed to let me know what those 'pesky willows' were up to. I miss my raconteur of the river.

NOTE:  
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And Jarrod Stebhens, who was sadly taken from us on August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2005. "Wherever I travel I think of you and remember your passion for life, for people, for science & learning and most of all – the sea. I understand there is no better way to leave this world than doing what you love, but I still wish you were here to join us when we get together...calling out 'Susie' from across the bar and dashing over to give me one of your big hugs."

Photo by Maya Linnell

## Acknowledgements

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I am deeply indebted to my co-supervisors Dr Jennifer Watling and Assoc. Prof. George Ganf for their ongoing advice, support and guidance. I would also like to acknowledge the University of Adelaide (School of Earth and Environmental Sciences), the Co-operative Research Centre for Freshwater Ecology and the Department of Water, Land and Biodiversity Conservation (DWLBC), for their financial support. I also wish to extend my heartfelt appreciation to Assoc. Prof. Keith Walker for sharing his extensive knowledge about the Lower River Murray and to Jose Facelli and Sean White for their valuable advice regarding statistics.

For the hearty ones that offered me their assistance in the field (e.g. especially when there were pre-dawns to do), the pond experiments (e.g. who'd have thought 300 seedlings would get so big in 10 wk?), and the lab (e.g. tediously measuring leaf areas) – many, many, many thanks! Just in case you have wiped all memories from your mind – I mean you: Tanja Lenz, Gael Fogarty, Ben Smith, Melissa Barrett, Todd Wallace, Jason Nicol, Nadine Kilsby, Brenton Ladd, Leon Linden, Dale Godfrey, Katherine Cheshire, Augustino Facelli, Anna Donaghy, Judy Bellati, Amy George, Aaron Kernbach, Ben Taylor, Sean White and Carol Walker.

Thanks to Barry Porter (DWLBC) and Peter Clemett (Bureau of Meteorology) for providing essential data. The Department of Environment and Heritage, especially Phil Straun (SA National Parks Office, Riverland) for permission to undertake research within Loch Luna Reserve and Katarapko National Park. I would like to thank 'Strawb' Drogmüller (Lock Master: Locks 3 & 4), Margaret George (Silverlea Wetland) and Chris and Linda Hausler (Cordola Station) for allowing site access to their properties. Also thanks to Punnyleroo Caravan Park (Swan Reach) and Riverbend Renmark Caravan Park for always providing accommodation to the girl with the odd collection of field equipment that needed daily charging! And an extra-special mention to Don & Trish Gomer (Devon Downs) who generously invited me to join them on their verandah to watch the sun set over a hot cuppa (with licks from 'Archie the wonder dog' an optional extra); plus Harold and Wendy Willcourt (Cobdogla Station Caravan Park) for cruises through the backwaters in their tinnie at the end of a long day in the field!

For analysis, technical assistance and/or the loan of equipment, many thanks to CSIRO Land and Water Laboratory (especially Megan Lefournour, Fred Leaney and Kate Holland), West Australian Biogeochemistry Centre Isotope Analysis Laboratory (especially Lidia Bednarek) and Stephen Tyerman (University of Adelaide). I would also like to thank the anchors of the School of Earth &



Environmental Sciences: David Ladd, Helen Falconer, Lidia Mischis, Richard Norrish, Julie Francis and especially Marilyn Saxon for their support regarding cars, field gear, computers, instrumentation and administration.

Throughout my studies I was part of a Discipline that consists of amazing souls whose passion for research remains inspirational. I want to not only thank my supervisors again for all their encouragement, but also Jose 'El Supremo' & Evelina Facelli, Sean Connell, Bronwyn Gillanders, Rob Reid and David Paton. Thanks to Russ Sinclair, Mike Geddes, and Russ Shiel because even though they are allowed to go and grow roses now, they still choose to keep doing what they love. I'd also like to thank Dorothy Berner for championing the message that at 70+ years of age you are never too old to travel the world to learn.

A big thank you to Jan Walker, John Goodfellow, Helen Falconer, Velta Vingelis and Elisa Bone for encouraging me to enrich my postgraduate life through teaching because the reality is I received more than I ever gave. Without those opportunities I would never have known how good it feels when Alys Stevens, Leah Panakera-Thorpe, Jonno Bray, Kelly Marsland, Katherine Cheshire, Jacqui Street, Craig Marsh, Anthony 'Olli' Olesnicki, Ally Hughes, Matt Cusick, Angelo Alboino, Max Barr, Adam Grogan and Cara Bourne still make it a point to catch up with their old tutor.

And to my large community of peers who supported me – even though they love bugs (Peter Hudson, Sylvia Clarke, Tim Mould, Colin Clay, Judy Bellati), or all things salty (Paris Goodsell, Matias Braccini, Bayden Russell, Andrew Irving, Travis Elsdon, Andrew Munro, Simon Hart, Justin Rowntree, Melita de Vries, Jodie Haig), rather than getting fresh (Sean White, Karen Westwood, Todd Wallace, Jason Nicol, Dave Cenzato, Nadine Kilsby, Scotte Wedderburn, Leon Linden, Alys Stevens, Ben Smith, Anne Jensen, Paul van Ruth, Kane Aldridge, Brian Deegan, Amy George, Melissa Barrett, Rudi Regel, Zoe Dreschler, Caroline Chong, Ben Taylor, Chris Bice). Or they love parasites (Kate Hudson, Rissa Williams, Allan Mooney, Vanessa Glennon), or all things dirty and dry (Tanja Lenz, Gael Fogarty, Greg Hay, Alice Dewar, Jessica Moyle-Croft, Grant Williamson, Jane Prider, Graeme Hastawell, Martine Escoto-Rodriguez, Richard Williams, Udani Sirisena, Kelly Marsland, James Weedon, Grant Pelton, Angela Renfrey, Emma Ginman) or machines that go beep (Mansour Mahommadian, Nicole Grant, Bec Miller) or even things that move (Colin Bailey, Dan Rogers, Tina Bentz, Mark Zeimbicki, Matt Ward, Paul Koch, Janet Newell, Bec Duffield, Emma Coates, Leah Kemp, Meredith Brown and Josh Griffiths) or things that are long since fossilised (Rosemary Paull, Jo Shrapnel) or things we can't see (Carol Walker, Belinda Luciani).

I cannot finish without acknowledging those who journey with me regardless of the destination. Thank you Nicci Lewis, Paris, Judy and Katherine Sykes for being there right from the very start and encouraging me to dance till I make it! Thanks Emma (aka CL), for sharing a love of all things stationery orientated and for always bringing that touch of grace to everything we do (even if it is Shakti). Thanks Brenton – my eco-bro – for the long chats about ecology and research over home-grown, home-cooked feasts. Thanks Karen for reminding me that the spirit feeds on a little mischief occasionally (poor Santa). Thanks Sue Graham for the legendary world dinners and world festivals. Thanks Toddy for teasing me – it kept it real! Thanks to Aaron Kernbach for support as we traversed the same path. Thanks Melita for contemplating how ‘love and life are merely a madness’. Thanks Colin for always being so thoughtful (like that time you saved me a pygmy possum to cuddle) and for being a breath of fresh air with your latest tales of absurdity. Thanks Alys, Kat and Kelly for reminding me that sometimes when you are scanning the crowd – you just know which ones are going to be silly, honest and kind! Thanks Sean W. for your steady presence in times of vacillating, whimsical chaos. Thanks Olivia Kininmont Allen for sharing our love of outdoors with some of your crazy cowgirl moments. Thanks Darin Williams for reminding me everything in life has a song – sometimes even written for me. Thanks Rose for the wisdom that a girl can never have enough wigs, tiaras or feather boas when there’s a party. Thanks Jason for confirming that some people don’t carry any malice in their whole being (oh yeah – and for sharing the ordeal of organising 700 potting bags and 24 tonnes of soil). Thanks to my ladies, Marilyn and Sistine Barretto – our time studying French together was the epitome of elegance (sometimes)! Thanks Gael for making sure we giggled away our shared agony of the CIRAS and for the ever-so brief discussions on life, love and happiness. Thanks Anna Donaghy for the life-sustaining slices of chocolate mud-cake and for always being up for a song, but sorry about that eye twitch as a result of the leaf area meter! Thanks Sean Donaghy for reminding me to take time out to ROCK (although I’m still not very good on my guitar). Thanks Tanja for your heart of gold because I love how you were always up for an adventure – especially if it involved predawn bike rides or anything crafty! Thanks Carol because everything you do you shows me that the good guys really do win, and for the time I get to share with your beautiful little girl, Sonya. Thanks Dunja Ganama, my soul-sister, because it isn’t every day I meet someone who shares an aversion to the colour mustard plus the same love of ridiculousness. Speaking of ridiculous – thanks to my immediate family: Simone, Mark, Morgan, Toby, Jill, Jim and little Grace because ironically you keep me sane! But most of all – thanks Mum because you always understand why I do – what I do – before I know I do. do.