

# **Vegetation Dynamics of the Menindee Lakes with Reference to the Seed Bank**

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A thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

August 2004



# Contents

<b>Contents</b> .....	<b>i</b>
<b>List of Figures</b> .....	<b>vii</b>
<b>List of Tables</b> .....	<b>xiii</b>
<b>List of Appendices</b> .....	<b>xvi</b>
<b>Declaration</b> .....	<b>xviii</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	<b>xix</b>
<b>Summary</b> .....	<b>xx</b>
<b>1 Chapter 1: Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
1.1 The Seed Bank .....	1
1.1.1 Seed Bank Classification .....	2
1.1.2 Role of the Seed Bank in Vegetation Dynamics.....	3
1.1.3 Wetland and Floodplain Seed Banks .....	5
1.1.4 Methods of Seed Bank Assessment .....	6
1.1.4.1 Sampling .....	6
1.1.4.2 The Seedling Emergence Technique .....	7
1.1.4.3 Seed Separation Techniques .....	8
1.1.4.3.1 Sieving .....	8
1.1.4.3.2 Floatation .....	9
1.1.5 Asexual Reproduction.....	9
1.2 Water Regime .....	11
1.2.1 Ephemeral Wetlands .....	11
1.2.2 Effect of Water Regime on Germination and Recruitment from the Seed Bank .....	11
1.2.2.1 Consequences of Altered Water Regimes .....	13
1.3 Site Description.....	14
1.3.1 The Murray-Darling System.....	14
1.3.2 The Darling River .....	17

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1.3.3	The Menindee Lakes .....	18
1.3.3.1	Climate .....	19
1.3.3.2	Pre-regulation Water Regime .....	21
1.3.3.3	Post-regulation Water Regime .....	22
1.3.3.4	Menindee Lakes Operations .....	28
1.3.3.4.1	Water Regulating Structures .....	28
1.3.3.4.2	Filling and Surcharge Procedures .....	29
1.3.3.4.3	Emptying Procedures .....	29
1.3.3.4.4	Drought Operations .....	30
1.3.3.4.5	Flood Operations .....	30
1.3.3.4.6	River Operations .....	31
1.3.3.4.7	Flow Forecasting and Implementation .....	32
1.3.3.5	Water Quality .....	33
1.3.3.5.1	Temperature and Thermal Stratification .....	33
1.3.3.5.2	Dissolved Oxygen .....	34
1.3.3.5.3	Turbidity .....	34
1.3.3.5.4	Electrical Conductivity .....	35
1.3.3.5.5	pH .....	36
1.3.3.5.6	Nutrients .....	36
1.3.3.6	Sediments .....	37
1.3.3.7	Vegetation .....	38
1.4	Thesis Outline and Objectives .....	41
<b>2</b>	<b>Chapter 2: Reconnaissance Study .....</b>	<b>44</b>
2.1	Introduction .....	44
2.2	Methods .....	48
2.2.1	Study Sites .....	48
2.2.2	Sediment Sampling Protocol and Seedling Emergence .....	49
2.2.3	Plant Identification and Nomenclature .....	51
2.2.4	Data Analysis .....	51
2.3	Results .....	52
2.3.1	Germination Strategy .....	52
2.3.2	Seed Bank Density .....	52
2.3.3	Species Richness .....	54

2.3.4	Species Composition.....	56
2.4	Discussion.....	60
2.4.1	Germination Strategy.....	60
2.4.2	Seed Bank Density.....	61
2.4.3	Species Richness.....	63
2.4.4	Species Composition.....	64
2.4.5	Implications for Future Studies.....	65
<b>3</b>	<b>Chapter 3: Strandlines .....</b>	<b>66</b>
3.1	Introduction.....	66
3.2	Methods .....	68
3.2.1	Study Sites .....	68
3.2.2	Sediment Sampling Protocol .....	68
3.2.3	Soil Moisture.....	69
3.2.4	Seedling Emergence and Wetting and Drying Cycles.....	69
3.2.5	Plant Identification and Nomenclature .....	70
3.2.6	Data Analysis.....	70
3.3	Results.....	71
3.3.1	Seed Density .....	71
3.3.2	Species Richness.....	73
3.3.3	Species Composition.....	74
3.3.4	Favourable Microsites for Plant Establishment.....	84
3.3.5	Persistent and Transient Seed Banks .....	85
3.4	Discussion.....	88
3.4.1	Seed Density .....	88
3.4.2	Species Richness and Composition .....	89
3.4.3	Favourable Microsites for Plant Establishment.....	89
3.4.4	Persistent and Transient Seed Banks .....	90
<b>4</b>	<b>Chapter 4: Water Regime Requirements for Germination and Recruitment of Common Menindee Lakes Species .....</b>	<b>93</b>
4.1	Introduction.....	93
4.2	Methods .....	95
4.2.1	Sediment Sampling Sites .....	95

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4.2.2	Sediment Sampling Protocol.....	96
4.2.3	Experimental Protocol and Design .....	96
4.2.4	Hydraulic Regimes.....	97
4.2.5	Plant Identification and Nomenclature .....	99
4.2.6	Functional Classification .....	99
4.2.7	Data Collection and Analysis .....	99
4.3	Results.....	100
4.3.1	Water Regime and Species Composition.....	100
4.3.2	Water Regime Requirements .....	103
4.4	Discussion.....	121
4.4.1	Water Regime and Species Composition.....	121
4.4.2	Water Regime Requirements .....	122
4.4.3	Conceptual Model.....	125
<b>5</b>	<b>Chapter 5: Plant Recruitment during Drawdown in the Field.....</b>	<b>129</b>
5.1	Introduction.....	129
5.2	Methods .....	133
5.2.1	Study Sites and Hydraulic Regimes.....	133
5.2.2	Plant Surveying Protocol .....	137
5.2.3	Plant Identification and Nomenclature .....	138
5.2.4	Data Analysis .....	139
5.3	Results.....	139
5.3.1	Lake Malta .....	139
5.3.2	Lake Balaka .....	143
5.3.3	Lake Wetherell.....	147
5.3.4	Lake Menindee .....	151
5.3.5	Lake Cawndilla .....	155
5.4	Discussion.....	159
5.4.1	Window of Opportunity Model .....	159
5.4.2	Seed Bank Recruitment Model .....	161
5.4.3	Correlation of Vegetation with Environmental Variables .....	162
<b>6</b>	<b>Chapter 6: Flooding Tolerance of <i>Xanthium occidentale</i>, <i>Cyperus gymnocaulos</i> and <i>Ludwigia peploides</i>.....</b>	<b>165</b>

6.1	Introduction.....	165
6.2	Methods .....	168
6.2.1	Plant Establishment.....	168
6.2.2	Hydraulic Regimes .....	168
6.2.3	Data Collection and Analysis .....	169
6.3	Results.....	171
6.3.1	<i>Xanthium occidentale</i> .....	171
6.3.1.1	Survivorship and Relative Growth Rate .....	171
6.3.1.2	Above to Below Ground Biomass .....	174
6.3.2	<i>Cyperus gymnocaulos</i> .....	176
6.3.2.1	Relative Growth Rate.....	176
6.3.2.2	Above to Below Ground Biomass .....	179
6.3.3	<i>Ludwigia peploides</i> .....	181
6.3.3.1	Relative Growth Rate.....	181
6.3.3.2	Above to Below Ground Biomass .....	184
6.4	Discussion.....	186
<b>7</b>	<b>Chapter 7: Effect of Nutrients and Water Regime on Recruitment from the Seed Bank .....</b>	<b>190</b>
7.1	Introduction.....	190
7.2	Methods .....	192
7.2.1	Sediment Sampling Protocol .....	192
7.2.2	Experimental Protocol and Design .....	192
7.2.3	Hydraulic Regimes .....	192
7.2.4	Plant Identification and Nomenclature .....	193
7.2.5	Data Collection and Analysis .....	193
7.3	Results.....	194
7.4	Discussion.....	206
<b>8</b>	<b>Chapter 8: General Discussion .....</b>	<b>208</b>
8.1	The Menindee Lakes Seed Bank .....	208
8.2	Recruitment from the Seed Bank.....	209
8.3	Water Regime Requirements .....	218
8.4	Strategies of Persistence in Ephemeral Systems.....	219

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8.5	Non-hydrological Changes .....	222
8.6	Further Research .....	225
8.7	Conclusions.....	226
<b>Bibliography .....</b>		<b>227</b>
<b>Appendices.....</b>		<b>255</b>



## List of Figures

Figure 1.1: Major surface water drainage divisions in Australia (Murray Darling Basin Commission 2004).....	15
Figure 1.2: The Murray Darling Basin (Murray Darling Basin Commission 2004) .....	16
Figure 1.3: The Menindee Lakes Scheme (Tandou Pty Ltd 2003).....	21
Figure 1.4: Schematic diagram of the Menindee Lakes Scheme (direction of flow denoted by arrows), from Scholz <i>et al.</i> (1999).....	24
Figure 1.5: Lake Wetherell water levels from January 1st 1996 to August 31st 2003 (New South Wales Department of Land and Water Conservation 2003). .....	25
Figure 1.6: Lake Pamamaroo water levels from January 1st 1996 to August 31st 2003 (New South Wales Department of Land and Water Conservation 2003). .....	26
Figure 1.7: Water levels of Lakes Menindee and Cawndilla from January 1st 1996 to August 31st 2003 (New South Wales Department of Land and Water Conservation 2003)....	27
Figure 2.1: Sediment sampling transect locations. ....	50
Figure 2.2: Total number of seeds $m^{-2}$ in the Lake Malta seed bank (error bars = $\pm 1$ S.E.)	53
Figure 2.3: Total number of seeds $m^{-2}$ in the Lake Bijiji seed bank (error bars = $\pm 1$ S.E.)..	54
Figure 2.4: Total number of seeds $m^{-2}$ in the Lake Menindee seed bank (error bars = $\pm 1$ SE) .....	54
Figure 2.5: Lake Malta seed bank species richness. ....	55
Figure 2.6: Lake Bijiji seed bank species richness. ....	56
Figure 2.7: NMS ordination of all sampling locations in Lakes Malta, Bijiji and Menindee (stress = 18.9%) (MA = Lake Malta, BI = Lake Bijiji, ME = Lake Menindee, N = North, S = South, E = East, W = West and 59.42 - 61.32 = Elevation m AHD).....	57
Figure 2.8: NMS ordination of all sampling locations in Lake Malta (Stress = 6.8%) (for explanation of labels see Figure 3.11). ....	59
Figure 2.9: NMS ordination of all sampling locations in Lake Bijiji (Stress = 7.3%) (for explanation of labels see Figure 2.7). ....	60
Figure 3.1: A well developed strandline on the northern shore of Lake Cawndilla.....	68
Figure 3.2: Strandline sampling strategy. ....	69
Figure 3.3: Total number of germinations $m^{-2}$ (after five wetting events) for Lakes Cawndilla, Menindee, Tandure and Malta strandlines and adjacent sediment (error bars = $\pm 1$ SE, $n = 15$ ).....	72

Figure 3.4: Number of germinations  $m^{-2}$  for the strandlines of Lakes Cawndilla, Menindee, Tandure and Malta for each wetting event (error bars =  $\pm 1$  SE) (only strandlines were plotted because the number of germinants from other samples in Lakes Cawndilla, Menindee and Tandure were extremely low) (Cawn = Cawndilla, Men = Menindee, Tand = Tandure and Mal = Malta) (1-5 = wetting event).....73

Figure 3.5: Total number of species detected for the strandlines and adjacent sediment in Lakes Cawndilla, Menindee, Tandure and Malta after five wetting events. ....74

Figure 3.6: NMS ordination of the species composition of the strandlines and surrounding sediment seed bank of Lakes Malta, Tandure, Menindee and Cawndilla (stress = 17.8%) (Ma = Malta, Ta = Tandure, Me = Menindee, Ca = Cawndilla, 1, 2 or 3 = transect, H = high elevation, SL = strandline, BSL = below strandline, L = low elevation) (data were pooled for clarity).....75

Figure 3.7: NMS ordination of the seed bank composition of the strandlines from Lakes, Cawndilla, Menindee, Tandure and Malta (stress = 4.2%) (for explanation of abbreviations see Figure 3.6) (data were pooled for clarity). ....78

Figure 3.8: NMS ordination of the species composition of the seed banks of Lake Cawndilla (stress = 10.9%) (for explanation of abbreviations see Figure 3.6) (data were pooled for clarity).....80

Figure 3.9: NMS ordination of the species composition of the seed banks of Lake Menindee (stress = 10.3%) (for explanation of abbreviations see Figure 4.6) (data were pooled for clarity).....82

Figure 3.10: NMS ordination of the species composition of the seed banks of Lake Tandure (stress = 9.6%) (for explanation of abbreviations see Figure 4.6) (data were pooled for clarity).....83

Figure 3.11: NMS ordination of the species composition of the seed banks of Lake Malta (stress = 6.4%) (for explanation of abbreviations see Figure 4.6) (data were pooled for clarity).....84

Figure 3.12: Soil moisture contents for the strandline and adjacent sediment for Lakes Cawndilla, Menindee, Tandure and Malta (error bars =  $\pm 1$  S.E.). ....85

Figure 3.13: Number of species detected in the seed banks (strandline and adjacent sediment) of Lakes Cawndilla, Menindee, Tandure and Malta for each wetting event (see Figure 3.4 for the explanation of the X-axis abbreviations).....86

Figure 4.1: Pond water levels (a. Static, b. Slow Drawdown and c. Rapid Drawdown) with respect to the different elevation treatments (+10 cm, -20 cm and -70 cm) over the experimental period. ....	98
Figure 4.2: Group average clustering dendrogram of each hydrology, elevation and sampling time for the Red Bank Creek seed bank (ST = static, SD = slow drawdown, RD = rapid drawdown, +10, -20 or -70 = elevation and 4, 8, 12, 16, 20, 24, 28, 32 or 36 = sampling time in weeks). ....	101
Figure 4.3: Abundance of <i>Myriophyllum verrucosum</i> through time for each water regime from the Red Bank Creek seed bank (error bars = $\pm 1$ SE) (ST = static, SD = slow drawdown, RD = rapid drawdown; +10, -20 and -70 = elevation). ....	105
Figure 4.4: Abundance of <i>Typha domingensis</i> through time for each water regime from the Lake Wetherell seed bank (error bars = $\pm 1$ SE) (for explanation of abbreviations see Figure 4.3). ....	107
Figure 4.5: Abundance of <i>Heliotropium curassivicum</i> through time for each water regime from the Lake Cawndilla seed bank (error bars = $\pm 1$ SE) (for explanation of abbreviations see Figure 4.3). ....	109
Figure 4.6: Abundance of <i>Sporobolus mitchelli</i> through time for each water regime from the Lake Malta seed bank (error bars = $\pm 1$ SE) (for explanation of abbreviations see Figure 4.3). ....	111
Figure 4.7: Abundance of <i>Cyperus gymnocaulos</i> through time for each water regime from the Lake Cawndilla seed bank (error bars = $\pm 1$ SE) (for explanation of abbreviations see Figure 4.3). ....	113
Figure 4.8: Abundance of <i>Epiltes australis</i> through time for each water regime from the Lake Menindee seed bank (error bars = $\pm 1$ SE) (for explanation of abbreviations see Figure 4.3). ....	115
Figure 4.9: Abundance of <i>Limosella australis</i> through time for each water regime from the Lake Menindee seed bank (error bars = $\pm 1$ SE) (for explanation of abbreviations see Figure 4.3). ....	117
Figure 4.10: Abundance of <i>Medicago</i> spp. through time for each water regime from the Red Bank Creek seed bank (error bars = $\pm 1$ SE) (for explanation of abbreviations see Figure 4.3). ....	119
Figure 4.11: Conceptual model of recruitment from the seed bank and response of the recruited vegetation when the seed bank is subject to the different hydraulic regimes and elevations (seed bank recruitment model). ..	127

Figure 5.1: Window of opportunity model (WOO model), which describes plant recruitment from the seed bank in the Menindee Lakes. ....	132
Figure 5.2: Water level in Lake Wetherell from November 1 <sup>st</sup> 2001 to February 28 <sup>th</sup> 2003 (New South Wales Department of Land and Water Conservation 2003).....	134
Figure 5.3: Water level in Lake Malta from November 1 <sup>st</sup> 2001 to February 28 <sup>th</sup> 2003.....	135
Figure 5.4: Water level in Lake Balaka from November 1 <sup>st</sup> 2001 to February 28 <sup>th</sup> 2003...	135
Figure 5.5: Water level in Lake Menindee from November 1 <sup>st</sup> 2001 to February 28 <sup>th</sup> 2003 (New South Wales Department of Land and Water Conservation 2003).....	136
Figure 5.6: Water level in Lake Cawndilla from November 1 <sup>st</sup> 2001 to February 28 <sup>th</sup> 2003 (New South Wales Department of Land and Water Conservation 2003).....	137
Figure 5.7: Vegetation sampling strategy as the lakes were drawn down, for a. November 2001, b. December 2001 and c. February 2002. The number of quadrats for each transect (A, B and C) increased as more lakebed was exposed until the lake dried....	138
Figure 5.8: NMS ordination of the quadrats through time from Lake Malta (stress = 15.2%), (the clay content of the sediment at different depths vectors were indistinguishable and grouped as one variable), (1- to 5- = quadrat number and 1101 to 0203 denotes sampling time e.g. 1101 = November 2001). ....	140
Figure 5.9: Sediment exposure time and species present in the extant vegetation of Lake Malta (* denotes exotic species). ....	142
Figure 5.10: NMS ordination of the quadrats through time from Lake Balaka (stress = 15.1%), (the clay content of the sediment at different depths vectors were indistinguishable and grouped as one vector as were the soil moisture 0-7.5 cm, 7.5-15 cm and 15-25 cm vectors), (see Figure 5.8 for explanation of abbreviations). ....	144
Figure 5.11: Sediment exposure time and species present in the extant vegetation of Lake Balaka (* denotes exotic species). ....	146
Figure 5.12: NMS ordination of the quadrats through time from Lake Wetherell (stress = 10.7%), (see Figure 5.8 for explanation of abbreviations). ....	148
Figure 5.13: Sediment exposure time and species present in the extant vegetation of Lake Wetherell (* denotes exotic species).....	150
Figure 5.14: NMS ordination of the quadrats through time from Lake Menindee (stress = 11.4%), (the clay content of the sediment at different depths vectors were indistinguishable and grouped as one variable as were the soil moisture vectors), (see Figure 5.8 for explanation of abbreviations) .....	152

Figure 5.15: Sediment exposure time, sediment type preference and species present in the extant vegetation of Lake Menindee (* denotes exotic species). .....	154
Figure 5.16: NMS ordination of the quadrats through time from Lake Cawndilla (stress = 10.6%), (see Figure 5.8 for explanation of abbreviations). .....	156
Figure 5.17: Sediment exposure time and species present in the extant vegetation of Lake Cawndilla (* denotes exotic species).....	158
Figure 6.1: Pond water levels with respect to the different elevation treatments over the experimental period (a. static, b. fast flood and c. slow flood).....	168
Figure 6.2: Relationship between stem length and biomass for <i>Xanthium occidentale</i> . ....	169
Figure 6.3: Relationship between stem length and biomass for <i>Ludwigia peploides</i> .....	170
Figure 6.4: Relationship between total number of stems and biomass for <i>Cyperus gymnocaulos</i> . .....	170
Figure 6.5: Relative Growth Rate of <i>Xanthium occidentale</i> over the experimental period when subjected to a. static water levels, b. flooded at 5cm day <sup>-1</sup> and c. flooded at 1cm day <sup>-1</sup> at three different elevations (error bars = ± 1 S.E.). .....	173
Figure 6.6: Above to below ground ratios (A:B) of <i>Xanthium occidentale</i> over the experimental period when subjected to a. static water levels b. flooded at 5cm day <sup>-1</sup> and c. flooded at 1cm day <sup>-1</sup> at three different elevations (error bars = ± 1 S.E.).....	175
Figure 6.7:Relative Growth Rate of <i>Cyperus gymnocaulos</i> over the experimental period when subjected to a. static water levels b. flooded at 5cm day <sup>-1</sup> and c. flooded at 1cm day <sup>-1</sup> at three different elevations (error bars = ± 1 S.E.).. .....	178
Figure 6.8: Above to below ground biomass (A:B) of <i>Cyperus gymnocaulos</i> over the experimental period when subjected to a. static water levels b. flooded at 5cm day <sup>-1</sup> and c. flooded at 1cm day <sup>-1</sup> at three different elevations (error bars = ± 1 S.E.).....	180
Figure 6.9: Relative Growth Rate of <i>Ludwigia peploides</i> over the experimental period when subjected to a. static water levels b. flooded at 5cm day <sup>-1</sup> and c. flooded at 1cm day <sup>-1</sup> at three different elevations (error bars = ± 1 S.E.). .....	183
Figure 6.10: Above to below ground ratios of <i>Ludwigia peploides</i> over the experimental period when subjected to a. static water levels b. flooded at 5cm day <sup>-1</sup> and c. flooded at 1cm day <sup>-1</sup> at three different elevations (error bars = ± 1 S.E.). .....	185
Figure 7.1: Pond water levels with respect to the different elevation treatments over the experimental period. ....	193

Figure 7.2: Group average clustering dendrogram of each water regime for week 4 (S = static, D = drawdown, +10, -20, -40 and -70 = elevation and 100, 50, 25, 10 and 0 = nitrogen loading rate in $\text{g m}^{-2} \text{ year}^{-1}$ ). .....	195
Figure 7.3: Group average clustering dendrogram of each water regime for week 8 (for explanation of abbreviations see Figure 7.2) .....	197
Figure 7.4: Group average clustering dendrogram of each water regime for week 12 (for explanation of abbreviations see Figure 7.2). .....	199
Figure 7.5: Group average clustering dendrogram of each water regime for week 16 (for explanation of abbreviations see Figure 7.2). .....	201
Figure 7.6: Group average clustering dendrogram of each water regime for week 20 (for explanation of abbreviations see Figure 7.2). .....	203
Figure 7.7: Total final biomass (week 20) for each hydraulic regime and elevation combination (ST = static, DD = drawdown, +10, -20, -40 and -70 = elevation, 100, 50, 25, 10 and 0 nitrogen loading rate in $\text{g m}^{-2} \text{ year}^{-1}$ ), (error bars = $\pm 1 \text{ SE}$ ). .....	205
Figure 8.1: Conceptual model of plant recruitment from the seed bank for the Menindee Lakes (dashed arrows indicate process not investigated). .....	213

## List of Tables

Table 1.1: Differences between asexually and sexually produced offspring (from Williams 1975). .....	9
Table 1.2: Major headwater storage capacities of the Darling River (from Crabb 1997) .....	18
Table 1.3: Climate averages for Menindee (117 years of records) (Australian Bureau of Meteorology 2003). .....	20
Table 1.4: Sill, lakebed, full supply levels and surcharge levels of the Menindee Lakes, from Scholz <i>et al.</i> (1999) and New South Wales Department of Land and Water Conservation (1998b). .....	23
Table 1.5: Results of salinity monitoring 1995-96 ( $n=12$ ) (New South Wales Department of Land and Water Conservation Menindee Lakes Advisory Committee 1998). .....	35
Table 2.1: Sediment sampling elevations. ....	50
Table 2.2: Mean number of germinants from the seed bank of each lake (seeds $m^{-2} \pm 1$ S.E.) for weeks zero to two, two to six and six to twelve after the initial watering. ....	52
Table 2.3: $F$ statistics, power and least significant number (LSN) values obtained from comparisons of seed bank density for each transect and elevation from Lake Malta. ..	53
Table 2.4: $F$ statistics, power and least significant number (LSN) values obtained from comparisons of seed bank density for each transect and elevation from Lake Bijiji.....	53
Table 2.5: Indicator species analysis results comparing the seed bank species composition of Lakes Bijiji, Malta and Menindee (Type A, B or C denotes why the species was not a significant indicator). .....	58
Table 2.6: NPMANOVA $F$ statistics obtained from comparisons of seed bank species composition for each transect and elevation from Lake Malta.....	58
Table 2.7: NPMANOVA $F$ statistics obtained from comparisons of seed bank species composition for each transect and elevation from Lake Bijiji.....	59
Table 3.1: $F$ statistics obtained from comparisons of seed numbers for each lake and location within each lake. ....	71
Table 3.2: $F$ statistics obtained from comparisons of seed bank species composition for each lake and location within each lake. ....	74
Table 3.3: Indicator species analysis comparing Lakes, Malta, Tandure, Menindee and Cawndilla (Type A, B or C denotes why the species was not a significant indicator (Chapter 2)). .....	76

Table 3.4: Indicator species analysis of the seed banks of the strandlines of Lakes Cawndilla, Menindee, Tandure and Malta (Type A, B or C denotes why the species was not a significant indicator (Chapter 2)).....	79
Table 3.5: Summary of indicator species analysis for all lakes.....	81
Table 3.6: <i>F</i> statistics obtained from comparisons of soil moisture content for each lake and location within each lake. ....	85
Table 3.7: Seed bank strategy of species detected from the seed banks of Lakes, Cawndilla, Menindee, Tandure and Malta (* denotes exotic species).....	87
Table 4.1: Indicator species analysis of the Red Bank Creek seed bank (Type A, B or C denotes why the species was not a significant indicator (Chapter 2)).....	102
Table 4.2: Functional classification of the species from all seed banks modified from the system suggested by Brock and Casanova (1997) (* denotes exotic species).....	120
Table 4.3: Species that will germinate and potentially establish (depending on the amount of time the systems remains in a particular sub-state) in each of the different model sub-states for a: flooded sediment and b: exposed sediment. ....	128
Table 5.1: Desiccation tolerance indices, life cycle strategy (Cunningham <i>et al.</i> 1981) and minimum time observed for successful life cycle completion for common Menindee Lakes species. ....	160
Table 6.1: <i>F</i> statistics obtained from comparisons of Relative Growth Rate (RGR) and above to below ground ratios (A:B) of <i>Cyperus gymnocaulos</i> between hydraulic regime, elevation and sampling time. ....	176
Table 6.2: <i>F</i> statistics obtained from comparisons of Relative Growth Rate (RGR) and above to below ground ratios (A:B) of <i>Ludwigia peploides</i> between hydraulic regime, elevation and sampling time. ....	181
Table 7.1: Indicator species analysis for week 4 (Type A, B or C denotes why the species was not a significant indicator (Chapter 2)).....	196
Table 7.2: Indicator species analysis for week 8 (Type A, B or C denotes why the species was not a significant indicator (Chapter 2)).....	198
Table 7.3: Indicator species analysis for week 12 (Type A, B or C denotes why the species was not a significant indicator (Chapter 2)).....	200
Table 7.4: Indicator species analysis for week 16 (Type A, B or C denotes why the species was not a significant indicator (Chapter 2)).....	202
Table 7.5: Indicator species analysis for week 20 (Type A, B or C denotes why the species was not a significant indicator (Chapter 2)).....	204



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Table 8.1: Species list for each model state a. Flooded, b. Exposed: window of opportunity open for germination and c. Exposed: window of opportunity for germination closed (\*denotes exotic species). .....214

Table 8.2: Strategies for persisting through inundation and desiccation for all species detected in the extant vegetation and seed banks of the Menindee Lakes (\*denotes exotic species).....221

## List of Appendices

Appendix 1: Soil texture for each quadrat and sampling depth for a. Lake Malta, b. Lake Balaka, c. Lake Wetherell, d. Lake Menindee and e. Lake Cawndilla (Chapter 5).....	255
Appendix 2: Indicator species analysis summary tables for the strandline study (Chapter 3) a. Lake Cawndilla, b. Lake Menindee, c. Lake Tandure and d. Lake Malta (Type A, B or C denotes why the species was not a significant indicator (Chapter 2)).	260
Appendix 3: Group average clustering dendrogram of each hydrology, elevation and sampling time for the a. Lake Cawndilla, b. Lake Menindee, c. Lake Wetherell, d. Lake Balaka and e. Lake Malta seed bank (ST = static, SD = slow drawdown, RD = rapid drawdown, +10, -20 or -70 = elevation and 4, 8, 12, 16, 20, 24, 28, 32 or 36 = sampling time in weeks) (Chapter 4).	264
Appendix 4: Indicator species analysis of the a. Lake Cawndilla, b. Lake Menindee, c. Lake Wetherell, d. Lake Balaka and e. Lake Malta seed bank (Type A, B or C denotes why the species was not a significant indicator (Chapter 2)) (Chapter 4).	269
Appendix 5: Sediment exposure time for each quadrat and survey in a. Lake Malta, b. Lake Balaka, c. Lake Wetherell, d. Lake Menindee and e. Lake Cawndilla (Chapter 5).....	273
Appendix 6: Relationship between sediment exposure time and soil moisture content for each sampling depth for a. Lake Malta, b. Lake Balaka, c. Lake Wetherell, D. Lake Menindee and e. Lake Cawndilla.	275
Appendix 7: Relationship between the elevation of the quadrat relative to the water level and soil moisture content for each soil sampling depth a. Lake Malta, b. Lake Balaka, c. Lake Wetherell, D. Lake Menindee and e. Lake Cawndilla.	278
Appendix 8: Total numbers of seeds m <sup>-2</sup> from ungrazed and grazed areas of the Lake Tandure bed (UG = ungrazed, G = grazed, 5, 10, 20, 50, 100, 200 and 500 = distance in metres from Tandure Creek) (error bars = ± 1 S.E.).	281
Appendix 9: NMS ordination of the seed bank composition of the grazed and ungrazed sites in Lake Tandure (stress = 13.5%), (UG = ungrazed, G = grazed, 5, 10, 20, 50, 100, 200 and 500 = distance in metres from Tandure Creek, 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 = replicate number).	282
Appendix 10: Indicator species analysis for the ungrazed area and each of the distances sampled from the ungrazed area in the grazed area of the Lake Tandure bed (Type A, B	

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or C denotes why the species was not a significant indicator (Chapter 2)) (\* denotes exotic species).....283

## **Declaration**

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any other university or other tertiary institution and to the best of my knowledge and belief contains no other material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

I consent to this thesis being available for copying and loan, if accepted for the award of the degree.

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Jason M. Nicol

18 / 8 / 2004

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to take the opportunity to thank the following people for their help and support over the past four years:

My supervisors George Ganf, Keith Walker and Ben Gawne. I have been extremely fortunate to have three such brilliant scientists as mentors. I am definitely a better scientist because of your efforts.

The Murray Darling Basin Commission for providing the major funding for the project.

The Faculty of Science and CRC for Freshwater Ecology for also providing funding.

My Wife Kelly who is just the best person in the world.

My parents Imelda and Michael Nicol.

Ben Taylor, Grant Pelton, Katherine Bitzer, Caroline Chong, Kane Aldridge and Che Biggs for their help with fieldwork.

The staff at MDFRC Mildura especially Oliver Scholz and Iain Ellis.

The staff at the Menindee DIPNR office especially Mike Arandt.

The staff at the NSW NPWS Broken Hill office especially Joshua Bean and Mark Fletcher.

Don Poulton, Dave Barnes and Wayne Barnes for access to field sites on their property.

The past and present staff and students of the Benham Building especially Grant Pelton, Sue Gehrig, Ben Smith, David Cenzato, Paul van Ruth, Kane Aldridge, Ben Taylor, Todd Wallace, Rudi Regel, Mark Siebentritt, Tanja Lenz, Melissa Barrett, Marilyn Saxon, Lydia Mischis, David Ladd, Helen Brown, Karen Westwood, Sean White, Leon Linden and Brian Deegan.

## Summary

The Menindee Lakes are a series of shallow floodplain depressions on the Lower Darling River, approximately 300 river kilometres upstream from the confluence with the River Murray, in southeastern Australia. The system is the fourth largest water storage in the Murray-Darling Basin (1,680 Gl) and comprises of seven shallow deflation basins: Lakes Malta, Balaka, Bijiji, Tandure, Pamamaroo, Menindee, Cawndilla, and Lake Wetherell. Lake Wetherell was created by the construction of the Menindee Main Weir and subsequent flooding of the main channel of the Darling River and surrounding floodplain. Each deflation lake is individually connected to the Darling River with the exception of Lake Cawndilla, which is connected to Lake Menindee by Morton Boolka Channel.

The climate of the Menindee area is arid with a mean annual rainfall of 243.7 mm, average maximum temperature in January of 34.1° C and in July of 16.9° C. Due to the flat topography, local runoff is negligible and the impact of precipitation on the water budget of the lakes is negligible in comparison to evaporation, which exceeds 2.5 m year<sup>-1</sup>. Prior to regulation, the Menindee Lakes would fill when river levels were higher than the sill level of the feeder creeks. When river levels receded, the lakes drained back to the Darling River leaving a residual pool, which would evaporate. The Darling River is one of the most variable rivers in the world and prior to regulation the Menindee Lakes were often dry for extended periods. The large lakes (Cawndilla, Menindee, Pamamaroo and Tandure) would fill on average every once every one to two years and the longest droughts lasted five years. The small lakes (Bijiji, Balaka and Malta) filled on average every two to three years with the longest droughts lasting eleven years.

Construction of the Menindee Lakes Scheme was completed in 1968 and is a series of small dams, regulators, weirs, channels and levees designed to conserve Darling River floodwaters. The main structure is the Menindee Main Weir, which raises the level of the river 12 m above the bed level, creating Lake Wetherell and filling Lakes Tandure, Bijiji, Balaka and Malta. This hydraulic head is used to gravity feed Lakes Pamamaroo, Menindee and Cawndilla. The hydrologic regime is now dictated by the operating procedures developed by the New South Wales Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources. The priority of operations is to maximize the potential supply of water for all users and to maximize water quality within the lakes and Lower Darling River for human

uses. Now the lakes are inundated for longer periods; rates of drawdown are more rapid and small to medium sized floods downstream of the scheme and in the Darling Anabranch have been eliminated. Despite increased permanency, large water level fluctuations are still common and drying cycles have not been lost entirely. Since the completion of the scheme Lake Malta has dried four times, Lake Balaka three times, Lake Bijiji twice, Lakes Tandure and Pamamaroo once, Lake Menindee five times and Lake Cawndilla four times. Of all of the lakes, Lake Malta is least impacted by regulation.

The vegetation dynamics and role of the seed bank have not been extensively investigated in ephemeral systems. The seed bank provides a mechanism for species persistence through unfavourable conditions and colonisation during favourable conditions. In ephemeral lakes, large and aseasonal water level fluctuations are common which may result in long periods of unfavourable conditions. Plants growing in these environments must be able to persist through unfavourable conditions for growth and survival. The main objectives of this study were:

- To investigate the seed density, species richness and composition of the seed banks of selected lakes.
- To determine if there are any within lake patterns in seed bank density, species richness and composition.
- Examine the effect of different water regimes on germination and recruitment from the seed bank.
- Determine water regime preferences for germination and recruitment of common species.
- Investigate vegetation change during an extended drought.
- Determine flood tolerances of *Xanthium occidentale*, *Cyperus gymnocaulos* and *Ludwigia peploides*.
- Investigate the interaction between nutrients and water regime on recruitment from the seed bank.

No information regarding the seed banks of the Menindee Lakes was available; therefore, a reconnaissance study was undertaken. The aims of this study were to determine the seed density, floristic composition, zonation with respect to elevation, differences between and

within lakes and germination strategy (pattern through time) of Lake Malta, Bijiji and Menindee seed banks. Results showed that the seed bank of each lake had a different floristic composition and Lake Menindee had a depauperate seed bank (Lake Malta 27 species and 6,300-43,983 seeds  $m^{-2}$ , Lake Bijiji 24 species and 2243-27,417 seeds  $m^{-2}$  and Lake Menindee one species and 117-233 seeds  $m^{-2}$ ). Within each lake, the seed density, species richness and composition was spatially variable but no zonation with respect to elevation was observed. In Lake Bijiji, the sampling site on the northern shore of the lake had a significantly less dense and less species rich seed bank than the other locations; however, this was not present in Lake Malta. Over 90% of the total germination from the seed bank from all lakes occurred in the first six weeks. This study also provided evidence that the seed bank around the edges of the lakes was concentrated in zones of organic matter deposition (strandlines).

The seed bank density and species composition of the strandlines and adjacent sediment was investigated in Lakes Cawndilla, Menindee, Tandure (large highly regulated lakes) and Malta (a small lake minimally impacted by regulation). Three hypotheses were tested in this study:

1. The strandline will have a denser and more species rich seed bank.
2. The strandline provides favourable microsites for germination and recruitment.
3. All species present in the seed bank will bet hedge.

The strandline seed banks of Lakes Cawndilla (strandline 25,753 seeds  $m^{-2}$  and adjacent sediment 2,730 seeds  $m^{-2}$ ), Menindee (strandline 7,427 seeds  $m^{-2}$  and adjacent sediment 646 seeds  $m^{-2}$ ) and Tandure (strandline 8,006 seeds  $m^{-2}$  and adjacent sediment 2,178 seeds  $m^{-2}$ ) were significantly denser and more species rich than the adjacent sediment, whereas there was large, species rich seed bank outside the strandline in Lake Malta strandline (70,180 seeds  $m^{-2}$  and adjacent sediment 54,266 seeds  $m^{-2}$ ). The organic component of the strandline may act to reduce evaporation from the soil and provide a favourable microsite for germination and recruitment. Of the 58 species present in all seed banks 37 bet hedged (had persistent seed banks).

The effect of water regime on recruitment from the seed bank and the optimal water regime for germination and recruitment of common species were investigated in a pond experiment. This experiment had three aims:



1. To test the hypothesis that different water regimes will give rise to different plant communities from the same seed bank.
2. Determine optimal water regimes for germination and recruitment of common species.
3. To formulate a testable conceptual model describing recruitment from the seed bank under different, controlled water regimes.

Different water regimes did give rise to different plant communities from the same seed bank. *Myriophyllum verrucosum* was the only species that germinated whilst submerged. All other species required exposed soil with high soil moisture to germinate. All terrestrial and floodplain species died if flooded, however several amphibious species were present that persisted whilst flooded, despite requiring exposed soil for germination. The conceptual model consisted of eight states (dependant on whether the soil was exposed or inundated, soil moisture content, duration of inundation and species present) that predicted which species would be present in each of the states (providing they were present in the seed bank).

A series of surveys to investigate recruitment from the seed bank in the field during a period of extended drought was undertaken over 488 days. This study had four aims:

1. To investigate the relationship between the extant vegetation and selected environmental variables.
2. To test a conceptual model that predicts how the environment changes with fluctuating water levels. The model consists of five states (windows of opportunity) that the system switches between; depending water level, elevation and the species present in the seed bank and extant vegetation. The five states are: window of opportunity closed due to inundation, window of opportunity open for germination establishment and reproduction (exposed soil with high moisture content in the top 7.5 cm), window of opportunity closed for germination but open for establishment and reproduction (low soil moisture in the top 7.5 cm), window of opportunity closed for germination and establishment but open for reproduction (top 15 cm low soil moisture) and all windows of opportunity closed because the soil is dry (low soil moisture to 40 cm).

3. To test the part of the conceptual model derived from the pond experiment.
4. To investigate the change in the germinable seed bank as the window of opportunity for germination opens, plants recruit and replenish the seed bank. This aim tests the hypothesis that the species that recruit will reflect the seed bank before the window of opportunity for germination opens, then when the window of opportunity for germination opens the seed bank will become less similar and then recover (reflect the recruited vegetation) after the species present have replenished the seed bank.

The floristic composition of Lake Malta was correlated with sediment exposure time and clay content, Lake Balaka with sediment exposure time, soil moisture and clay content, Lake Wetherell with elevation, canopy cover and elevation of the water relative to the quadrat and Lake Menindee with sediment exposure time, soil moisture, elevation and clay content. The floristic composition of Lake Cawndilla was not correlated with any of the measured environmental variables. As water levels fell the window of opportunity for germination opened once the sediment was exposed and closed when the sediment surface dried. The window of opportunity for establishment and reproduction did not close until the sediment dried further. For the most desiccation tolerant species the window of opportunity for growth and reproduction remained open. If the species composition of the seed bank was known, the pond model predicted the potential floristic composition. However, it did not take into account sediment exposure time.

Extended drought in the Darling catchment meant that the lakes did not fill during the study period and the effect of flooding could not be investigated in the field. Therefore, a pond experiment to test the effect of flooding on *Xanthium occidentale*, *Cyperus gymnocaulos* and *Ludwigia peploides* was undertaken. Three hypotheses were tested:

1. *Xanthium occidentale* when top flooded for more than two weeks will die. Plants partially flooded will survive, increase above ground to below ground biomass ratio and grow when water levels fall.
2. *Cyperus gymnocaulos* when top flooded for two weeks will show no adverse effects and grow when water levels fall. When top flooded for more than two weeks the above ground biomass will senesce and resprout when water levels fall. Plants partially flooded will show no adverse effects.

3. *Ludwigia peploides* when top flooded will rapidly increase above ground biomass in order to reach the water surface.

Each species generally responded as hypothesised. *Xanthium occidentale* also produced adventitious roots and lost stem rigidity when partially flooded. *Cyperus gymnocaulos* showed reduced growth rates when partially flooded compared to plants that were not flooded.

Water regime is only one factor that may influence the floristic composition derived from the seed bank. A pond experiment was undertaken to test the hypothesis that the combination of different soil nutrient concentrations and water regime will give rise to different plant communities from the same seed bank. The effect of different nutrient loadings however, had no effect on floristic composition and the differences could be explained by differences in water regime.

The sediment seed banks of the Menindee Lakes provide a mechanism for survival through droughts and floods. They are spatially variable and the strandline accounted for the majority of seed around the edges of the large regulated lakes. All but one species present in the seed banks of all lakes sampled required exposed sediment with high soil moisture to germinate and many species were very desiccation tolerant (especially terrestrial and floodplain species). Most species were intolerant to flooding as juvenile or adults; however, there were a few amphibious species present. Water regime influences the floristic composition derived from the seed bank but soil texture is also an important factor, whereas nutrients appeared to have no effect.

