

## THE MERSEY RIVER MAN

John Reed doesn't just look at the Mersey River - he looks into it. Years ago, when as a young man walking beside it, or swimming and fishing in it, the river on Tasmania's North West Coast seeped deep into his soul.

When the river began to dry up, so too did part of that soul. The sharp ache became his motivation to save the Mersey. He caught hold of disparate threads: the community, the Hydro, the government and the river; and he bound them together to start a new era for the Mersey River. For John, it has been the journey of a lifetime, from boy to man, to Mersey River Man.

"Well, I came here from King Island not being able to swim and I learnt to swim in the Mersey," he said.

"Then I saw the attraction of it so I started fishing in it and walking and exploring it, from the mouth right up through where the dams are now into the back lakes, and I basically fell in love with the whole thing.

"I had a very strong relationship to the land. It was first sewn into my mind when I was about eight years old by my father and my grandfather, who were farmers, and their fathers and mothers were farmers as well and they lived with the land not off it.

"They were very adamant that if we didn't take what they called 'Aboriginality' into the future, then this environment would destroy us. By this they meant by actually not owning the land, or living off it, by actually feeling that you belong to it, that you are a part of it. 'Cos once you get that feeling that you belong to it, if it's getting hurt, then you are getting hurt."

In the 1970s, when the Hydro diverted water from the upper Mersey catchment into the Forth River for power generation, John noticed a slow deterioration in the river.

"I was a bit gob-smacked to see a sign up on Parangana Ridge about 500 metres below the dam, warning people not to go swimming or diving, and there was no water there," he said.

"I backtracked down the river and there were a few little pools but no running water in the upper Mersey at all. I thought 'how can the river exist being fed by a few small streams like the Dasher and the Minnow?' The more I looked, the more I knew I was looking into a system that was dying."

In 1992, John Reed formed an important alliance with the Hedditch brothers, Ron, Colin and Phillip, keen trout fishermen who had also grown up knowing and loving the Mersey. With their families they formed the Latrobe Landcare Group and together removed a phenomenal 17,000 willow trees.

"I was very fortunate to strike the Hedditch brothers who were brought up on the river by their father as fly fishermen," said John. "It was a combination of my philosophy and theirs that made the Landcare group work.



“We had no vested interest other than knowing what was hurting the river was hurting us inside. Possibly for slightly different reasons, but having them with me, oh that was just the greatest thing I’d ever had because it was the first time since 1973 I’d actually come across people who were prepared to make a commitment.”

Despite improvements as a result of the Landcare work, John knew there was still something missing from the river. There was no water.

“That’s the one that drove me,” he said. “We had to have a flow of water return to the river, because that was the right of the river to exist, it had as much right as anything.”

In 1994 with the Landcare group’s support, John wrote to the Launceston Examiner, and had a response from a journalist, who he met out on the river.

“We had a look at McKenzie and the Fish and the Fisher and the Arm rivers, and the state of the Mersey River itself below the dam,” he said. “She took a very telling photograph of Colin and I sitting in the dry river bed with what appeared to be a 15 year old gum sapling growing there as well, and no water. And that story went into the Examiner newspaper.

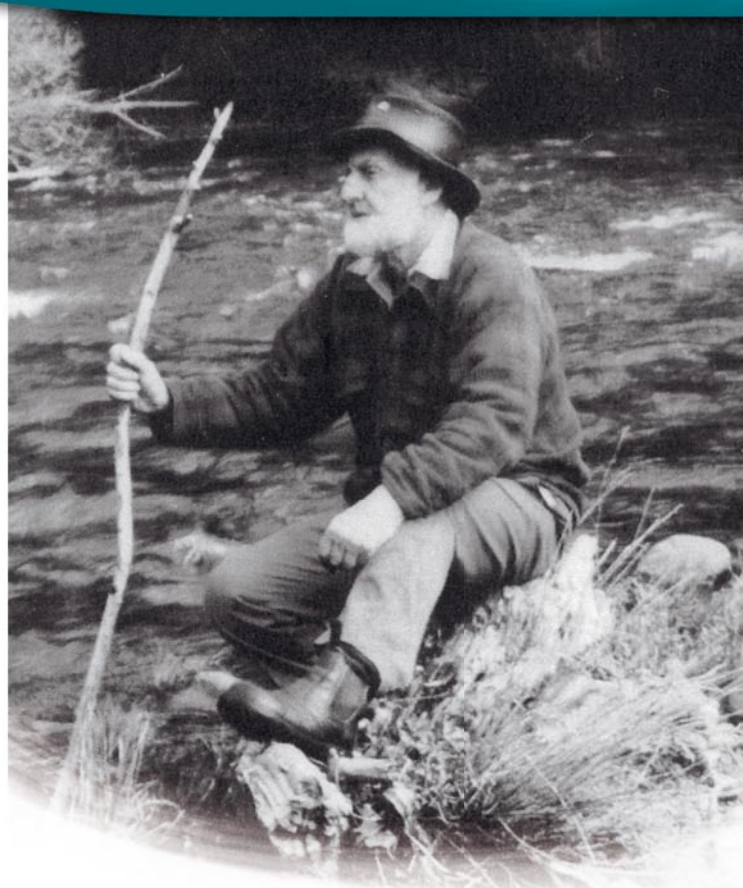
“It was deathly quiet for about a fortnight and then there was a knock on my door. I opened it and there were two gentlemen standing there and they introduced themselves as Rod Sullivan and Andrew Scanlon from the Hydro. They had papers with them and they said ‘we’d like to come with you and have a talk to you about your concerns on the Mersey’.

“I could see emerging here something the Hydro had never had before. I could sense an environmental arm being introduced into Hydro activities in a real way, not just motherhood statements.”

As a result of John’s lobbying, the Mersey River Working Group was formed in 1996. John sat as a community representative on the associated study committee that among other things, looked into setting an environmental flow.

“I had a good ally in Ian Bell from the Department of Primary Industry, who was convening the meetings,” John said. “I used to frighten him a bit, he’d say to me John stop getting so excited, I don’t think this is going to happen and I don’t want you to be too disappointed.

“Then one day we broke the meeting up at the Hydro, and we went down on the wharf area there in Hobart and Ian said ‘I don’t like the way it’s going’, and I said ‘Well I’m thrilled to bits because today Rod Sullivan said when the water is released not if but when’.”



In the winter of 1999 Hydro Tasmania, began releasing the environmental flow. The dry throat of the Mersey was wetted once more, slaking the river’s thirst and fulfilling John’s dream. He still finds it hard to talk about how he felt when the sound of water flowing down the Mersey was returned to his ears. His eyes fill up like the river.

“You’re standing on the bank of a river that’s been dead for so long, and they’re opening the valve and the water is coming down around the corner, and you can hear the river... sorta like it is singing,” he said.

“A knot comes up in your throat, I’ve heard about it before and I’ve read about it over the years in books, but it’s a very weird experience when it happens to you. It takes you one step closer to that invisible thread that ties you to the land and to the waterways. I think you could get immersed in it.

“I just feel ... I just feel very proud of it, of what has happened.”

Environmentalist, lobbyist, initiator and negotiator, John Reed is many things. But at a recent birthday celebration in his home town of Latrobe he was described in the most fitting way imaginable. He is simply: The Mersey River Man.

*Photos courtesy of John Reed and Department of Primary Industries and Water, story by Helga Grant*



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