

10

Source of the rivers – alpine water resources

In eastern Australia, the Alps are a vital source of water: for people's lives, the economy and the health of the land. Water from the alpine catchments supports the domestic, recreational and industrial activities of 2.1 million Australians living in the Murray–Darling Basin, including those in major centres such as Albury, Wodonga, Wagga Wagga and Mildura. Outside the basin, Adelaide and many smaller towns in South Australia also depend on this water.

In economic terms, the returns on the water's use from agriculture are vast: the alpine area supplies 29% of the average annual inflows to the Murray–Darling Basin, which generates \$15 billion worth of Australia's agricultural produce annually, including 45% of Australia's irrigated production, 56% of its grape crop, 42% of fruit and nuts and 32% of its dairy production. The Basin includes 40% of Australia's farms.¹ As well as underpinning this wealth from irrigation, alpine waters supply reliable, sediment-free water to the impoundments and turbines of the power stations of the Snowy and Kiewa hydro-electric schemes. The electricity generated is worth about \$300 million per year.²

In land health terms, the alpine catchments are the efficient and reliable source of rivers whose flow is vital, not only for high mountains themselves but also for valleys and flood plains of the entire catchment. Alpine catchments provide environmental flows that maintain instream, riparian and wetland habitat for plants and animals and help to dilute the polluting effects of salt- and silt-laden waters sourced from other Murray–Darling Basin rivers. More than 80% of the