

Reporting drought

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The challenge of reporting climate science and climate forecasts can most simply be summed up as the collision between a detailed, and information packed body of knowledge, which talks in probabilities, and the media which wants 30 second sound bites with certainty.

Reporting drought is never straightforward. Indeed the word drought, I would argue, is a highly politicised word in the Australian context. When farmers say 'drought' the next words are usually 'government aid'.

Drought reporting has changed over the past two decades.

For a start, farmers are becoming more self-sufficient. But by far the greater change is the public understanding of El Niño.

In the 1994/95 drought, a quick library search of *The Australian* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* files, threw up only a couple of dozen mentions of El Niño.

The 1997 El Niño tested the relationship between the media and climate scientists. A poster for the NSW rural publication, *The Land*, carried the mocking words, 'what El Niño ?' after that state received timely spring rains.

The 2002/03 El Niño came on top of the best year for farm incomes in ABARE's 26 year history. The farm sector had largely been deregulated, and farmers had deposited over \$2 billion in the Farm Management Deposit Scheme. This is significant because drought is largely reported in the social/economic context. Farmers had never been in a better position to survive a drought.

In May 2002, I wrote the first in what was to become a lengthy list of articles about El Niño . But the media uses El Niño as a blunt instrument, synonymous with drought. The reality is far more complex, as I will illustrate with the following story.

I wrote an article, run on June 12th, that began "The warning bell rang at the end of May. The main Southern Oscillation Index, which had been negative for three months in a row suddenly dived". That story, incidentally, like most others, carried a link to the Bureau's website and the long paddock website.

This prompted a letter from Bill Kininmonth, who, very nicely, pointed out there was much, much more to El Niño forecasts than just the SOI. I rang him, and said, yes I knew this, but the SOI is so handy. You can put up a graphic and when it is up, it's good, and when it's down, it's bad.

That conversation resulted in a feature on research into ocean temperatures and El Niño . The first thing to say about that feature is that every time it was raised at the editors conference, everyone had their own pet snippet about El Niño. The second was that it was judged too difficult for the features page. It ran, in the end, on the Resources page on Saturday, which is not afraid of solid science.

This incident reflects two important factors: that, on the one hand people are genuinely fascinated by El Niño ; but the real science is seen as just too hard for a daily newspaper.

In January 2003, *The Australian* launched a weekly Droughtwatch, in which we focussed on a town in drought, tying in its rainfall figures with the state of El Niño . It peaked with a big spread on Saturday February 21st, after widespread rains fell, but El Niño was still rating mentions into June.

It was the first drought we had tracked El Niño throughout.

It was also the first drought in which Australians accepted the country cannot be drought proofed. Both, I think, mark a huge change in the nature of our understanding of our country.