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*Fish-Habitat Association
in a Large Dryland
River of the
Murray-Darling Basin,
Australia*

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Doctor of Philosophy*

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This thesis is dedicated to my brother David “Bonzo” Boys who taught me many things. Bonzo, by example, showed me what it really means to face adversity and repond with dignity, integrity, positivity and an unwavering respect for others. Bonzo you will be dearly missed by me and so many people, but never forgotten. The submission of this thesis is significant for me for so many reasons, but especially since it is the fulfilment of the last promise I made to you.

David “Bonzo” Boys
December 1975 – November 2005



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Table of Contents

CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP OF THESIS.....	II
COPYRIGHT IN RELATION TO THIS THESIS.....	III
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	IV
ABSTRACT.....	VIII
LIST OF FIGURES.....	XI
LIST OF TABLES.....	XVIII
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	XXI
1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1. FISH IN FLOODPLAIN RIVERS: THE IMPORTANCE OF IN-CHANNEL HABITATS.....	2
1.2. RESEARCH NEEDS REGARDING IN-CHANNEL HABITAT IN FLOODPLAIN RIVER SYSTEMS.....	4
1.3. THE DEGRADATION OF DRYLAND RIVER HABITATS.....	5
1.4. AIMS AND THESIS OUTLINE.....	7
2. LITERATURE REVIEW: THE STRUCTURE OF RIVERSCAPES AND FISH HABITAT ASSESSMENT.....	13
2.1. INTRODUCTION.....	14
2.2. META-ANALYSIS METHODS.....	15
2.3. THE VIEW OF RIVERSCAPES.....	16
2.3.1. <i>The multidimensional nature of riverine corridors</i>	16
2.3.2. <i>Dynamic patch mosaics</i>	20
2.3.3. <i>Spatial scaling and hierarchical patch dynamics</i>	24
2.4. FISH HABITAT ASSESSMENTS: WHERE HAS RESEARCH BEEN DONE AND WHERE IS IT REQUIRED?.....	35
2.5. CONCLUSION: PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE TO GUIDE FISH HABITAT ASSESSMENT IN LARGE DRYLAND RIVERS.....	39

3. STUDY AREA AND METHODS	42
3.1. STUDY AREA: THE BARWON DARLING RIVER	43
3.1.1. <i>Hydrology</i>	43
3.1.2. <i>Geomorphology</i>	45
3.1.3. <i>Fish assemblage</i>	46
3.2. STUDY DESIGN.....	50
3.2.1. <i>Scales under investigation and layout in the riverscape</i>	50
3.3. OVERVIEW OF FIELDWORK	55
3.4. FISH SAMPLING.....	57
3.4.1. <i>Daytime boat electrofishing and fish handling</i>	57
3.4.2. <i>Diel electrofishing</i>	58
3.4.3. <i>Flow conditions and water quality during electrofishing</i>	59
3.4.4. <i>Justification of fish sampling methods and related assumptions</i>	63
3.5. LOW-FLOW HABITAT ASSESSMENT	74
3.6. SURVEY OF IN-CHANNEL LARGE WOOD.....	76
3.7. BACKGROUND TO MULTIVARIATE ANALYSES	80
3.7.1. <i>Describing spatial patterns fish assemblage and mesohabitat composition</i>	80
3.7.2. <i>Discriminating amongst spatial groupings</i>	82
3.7.3. <i>Linking fish and habitat multivariate patterns</i>	84
4. MESOHABITAT USE BY RIVERINE FISH	88
4.1. INTRODUCTION	89
4.2. FIELD METHODS.....	91
4.3. DATA ANALYSIS	91
4.4. RESULTS.....	93
4.4.1. <i>Catch summary</i>	93
4.4.2. <i>Assemblage differences among mesohabitat patches</i>	93
4.4.3. <i>Size-related patterns in mesohabitat associations</i>	102
4.5. DISCUSSION.....	107
4.6. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS	116
5. DIEL VARIATION IN MESOHABITAT USE BY RIVERINE FISH.....	118
5.1. INTRODUCTION	119

5.2.	FIELD METHODS.....	121
5.3.	DATA ANALYSIS	121
5.3.1.	<i>Diel variation in fish assemblage composition</i>	<i>121</i>
5.3.2.	<i>Diel use of mesohabitat by bony herring and carp</i>	<i>123</i>
5.3.3.	<i>Daytime mesohabitat associations of gudgeons and Australian smelt</i>	<i>123</i>
5.4.	RESULTS.....	124
5.4.1.	<i>Diel variation in fish assemblage composition</i>	<i>124</i>
5.4.2.	<i>Size-related diel use of mesohabitat by bony herring and carp</i>	<i>124</i>
5.4.3.	<i>Daytime mesohabitat associations of gudgeons and Australian smelt</i>	<i>125</i>
5.5.	DISCUSSION.....	132
5.6.	SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS	136
6.	FISH ASSEMBLAGE AND MESOHABITAT COMPOSITION AMONG REACHES AND ZONES.....	138
6.1.	INTRODUCTION.....	139
6.2.	FIELD METHODS.....	141
6.3.	DATA ANALYSIS	142
6.3.1.	<i>Differences in fish assemblage composition</i>	<i>142</i>
6.3.2.	<i>Differences in mesohabitat composition</i>	<i>143</i>
6.3.3.	<i>Association between fish assemblage and mesohabitat composition... ..</i>	<i>144</i>
6.4.	RESULTS.....	144
6.4.1.	<i>Differences in fish assemblage composition</i>	<i>144</i>
6.4.2.	<i>Differences in mesohabitat composition</i>	<i>152</i>
6.4.3.	<i>Association between fish assemblage and mesohabitat composition... ..</i>	<i>153</i>
6.5.	DISCUSSION.....	159
6.6.	SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS	164
7.	FLOW-PULSE DYNAMICS: HABITAT AVAILABILITY AND THE EFFECT OF WATER RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT	165
7.1.	INTRODUCTION.....	166
7.2.	DATA COLLECTION.....	169
7.3.	DATA ANALYSIS	169
7.3.1.	<i>Calculation of in-channel large wood connectivity</i>	<i>169</i>
7.3.2.	<i>The impact of water resource development on large wood inundation</i>	<i>171</i>

7.4.	RESULTS.....	175
7.4.1.	<i>Connectivity of in-channel large wood.....</i>	<i>175</i>
7.4.2.	<i>Differences in large wood attributes among inundation groups and zones</i> <i>177</i>	
7.4.3.	<i>Impacts of water resource development on large wood inundation</i>	<i>181</i>
7.5.	DISCUSSION.....	185
7.5.1.	<i>Large wood habitat in the Barwon-Darling River.....</i>	<i>185</i>
7.5.2.	<i>Flow-pulse dynamics and large wood availability.....</i>	<i>186</i>
7.5.3.	<i>Ecological implications of flow-pulse dynamics.....</i>	<i>189</i>
7.5.4.	<i>Water resource development and its effect large wood availability</i>	<i>191</i>
7.5.5.	<i>Applying the inundation model to river rehabilitation.....</i>	<i>191</i>
7.6.	SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS	194
8.	SYNTHESIS.....	196
8.1.	INTRODUCTION.....	197
8.2.	DISTRIBUTION OF IN-CHANNEL HABITAT AND INSIGHTS INTO THE STRUCTURE OF LARGE DRYLAND RIVER SYSTEMS	198
8.3.	FISH HABITAT ASSOCIATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ECOSYSTEM STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONING IN LARGE DRYLAND RIVER SYSTEMS.....	201
8.4.	INSIGHTS TO IMPROVE THE DESIGN OF REHABILITATION PROGRAMS IN LARGE DRYLAND RIVERS.....	208
8.5.	INSIGHTS TO IMPROVE THE DESIGN OF FISH HABITAT ASSESSMENTS IN LARGE DRYLAND RIVERS.....	210
8.6.	CONCLUSION	214
	REFERENCES	216
	APPENDICES.....	256

Abstract

Many aspects concerning the association of riverine fish with in-channel habitat remain poorly understood, greatly hindering the ability of researchers and managers to address declines in fish assemblages. Recent insights gained from landscape ecology suggest that small, uni-scalar approaches are unlikely to effectively determine those factors that influence riverine structure and function and mediate fish-habitat associations. There appears to be merit in using multiple-scale designs built upon a geomorphologically-derived hierarchy to bridge small, intermediate and large spatial scales in large rivers. This thesis employs a hierarchical design encompassing functional process zones (referred to hereafter as zones), reaches and mesohabitats to investigate fish-habitat associations as well as explore patterns of in-channel habitat structure in one of Australia's largest dryland river systems; the Barwon-Darling River.

In this thesis, empirical evidence is presented showing that large dryland rivers are inherently complex in structure and different facets of existing conceptual models of landscape ecology must be refined when applied to these systems. In-channel habitat and fish exist within a hierarchical arrangement of spatial scales in the riverscape, displaying properties of discontinuities, longitudinal patterns and patch mosaics. During low flows that predominate for the majority of time in the Barwon-Darling River there is a significant difference in fish assemblage composition among mesohabitats. There is a strong association between large wood and golden perch, Murray cod and carp, but only a weak association with bony herring. Golden perch and Murray cod are large wood specialists, whereas carp are more general in their use of mesohabitats. Bony herring are strongly associated with smooth and irregular banks but are ubiquitous in most mesohabitats. Open water (mid-channel and deep pool) mesohabitats are characterised by relatively low abundances of all species and a particularly weak association with golden perch, Murray cod and carp. Murray cod are weakly associated with matted bank, whereas carp and bony herring associate with this mesohabitat patch in low abundance.

Nocturnal sampling provided useful information on size-related use of habitat that was not evident from day sampling. Both bony herring and carp exhibited a variety of

habitat use patterns throughout the diel period and throughout their lifetime, with temporal partitioning of habitat use by juvenile bony herring and carp evident. Much of the strong association between bony herring and smooth and irregular banks was due to the abundance of juveniles (<100mm in length) in these mesohabitats. Adult bony herring (>100mm length) occupied large wood more than smooth and irregular banks. At night, juvenile bony herring were not captured, suggesting the use of deeper water habitats. Adult bony herring were captured at night and occupied large wood, smooth bank and irregular bank. Juvenile carp (<200mm length) were more abundant at night and aggregated in smooth and irregular banks more than any other mesohabitat patch. Adult carp (>200mm length) occupied large wood during both day and night.

There is a downstream pattern of change in the fish assemblage among river zones, with reaches in Zone 2 containing a larger proportion of introduced species (carp and goldfish) because of a significantly lower abundance of native species (bony herring, golden perch and Murray cod) than all other zones. In comparison, the fish assemblage of Zone 3 was characterised by a comparatively higher abundance of the native species bony herring, golden perch and Murray cod. A significant proportion of the among-reach variability in fish assemblage composition was explained at the zone scale, suggesting that geomorphological influences may impose some degree of top-down constraint over fish assemblage distribution. Although mesohabitat composition among reaches in the Barwon-Darling River also changed throughout the study area, this pattern explained very little of the large-scale distribution of the fish assemblage, with most of the variability in assemblage distribution remaining unexplained. Therefore, although mesohabitat patches strongly influence the distribution of species within reaches, they explain very little of assemblage composition at intermediate zone and larger river scales. These findings suggest that small scale mesohabitat rehabilitation projects within reaches are unlikely to produce measurable benefits for the fish assemblage over intermediate and large spatial scales in the Barwon-Darling River. This indicates the importance taking a holistic approach to river rehabilitation that correctly identifies and targets limiting processes at the correct scales.

The variable nature of flow-pulse dynamics in the Barwon-Darling River creates a shifting habitat mosaic that serves to maintain an ever-changing arrangement of habitat

patches. The inundation dynamics of large wood habitat described in this thesis highlights the fragmented nature of mesohabitat patches, with the largest proportion of total in-channel large wood remaining unavailable to fish for the majority of the time. At low flows there is a mosaic of large wood habitat and with increasing discharge more potential large wood habitat becomes available and does so in a complex spatial manner. What results in this dryland river is a dynamic pattern of spatio-temporal patchiness in large wood habitat availability that is seen both longitudinally among different river zones and vertically among different heights in the river channel. Water resource development impacts on this shifting habitat mosaic.

Projects undertaking both fish habitat assessment and rehabilitation need to carefully consider spatial scale since the drivers of fish assemblage structure can occur at scales well beyond that of the reach. Fish-habitat associations occurring at small spatial scales can become decoupled by process occurring across large spatial scales, making responses in the fish assemblage hard to predict. As rivers become increasingly channelised, there is an urgent need to apply research such as that conducted in this thesis to better understand the role that in-channel habitats play in supporting fish and other ecosystem processes. Habitat rehabilitation projects need to be refined to consider the appropriate scales at which fish assemblages associate with habitat. Failure to do so risks wasting resources and forgoes valuable opportunities for addressing declines in native fish populations. Adopting multi-scalar approaches to understanding ecological processes in aquatic ecosystems, as developed in this thesis, should be a priority of research and management. To do so will enable more effective determination of those factors that influence riverine structure and function at the appropriate scale.

List of Figures

- Figure 2.1. 16-20 year hydrographs (based on monthly averages) demonstrating contrasting levels of flow variability from rivers in different climatic regions. Discharge is shown for Mekong River in Laos 1948-1963; Amazon River in Brazil 1928-1947; Mississippi River in USA 1935-1954; Danube River in Romania 1921-1940; Syr Darya in Kazakhstan 1959-1978; Barwon-Darling River in Australia 1985-2004; Paroo River in Australia 1985-2005; Cooper Creek in Australia 1946-1957. Cooper Creek data from NRM (2005), Barwon-Darling and Paroo River data from DIPNR (2004), all other data from SHI and UNESCO (1999). Refer to Figure 2.7 for location of rivers..... 18
- Figure 2.2. (a) Hydrograph of the Barwon-Darling River at Walgett (Dangar Bridge Gauging Station – No. 422001) for the period of 1919-1997. Note: data are modelled under current water resource development conditions. Data source: QLD DNR IQQM. (b) Flow duration curve based on daily discharge at the Dangar Bridge Gauging Station. Data source: NSW DIPNR..... 23
- Figure 2.3. A patch hierarchy showing the relationship between encompassing and component patches and the top-down and bottom-up processes that span them. Multi-scalar studies have the capacity to bridge multiple scales and have more interpretive power than uni-scalar studies in delineating patterns and processes that bridge scales and interact with biotic assemblages. Modified from Poole (2002). 26
- Figure 2.4. The spatial scales adopted in the studies reviewed as part of the meta-analysis. (a) Reported length of sampling site; (b) the largest spatial scale at which fish and habitat were associated (i.e. extent); and (c) the scale at which fish were sampled (sample unit). 33
- Figure 2.5. The range of spatial scales over which dryland river fish of south-eastern Australia are believed to move during their lifetime (excluding larval drift), as shown by the black bars. The column graphs demonstrate the number of reviewed studies (from the meta-analysis) conducted at each scale both internationally (white) and in Australia (striped). Full species names are given in Table 3.1. The white arrow highlights the intermediate and larger scales that are under represented in the literature. Sources: a) Llewellyn 1973, b) Davis 1977, c) Beumer 1979, d) Cadwallader 1979, e) Backhouse and Frusher 1980, f) Reynolds 1983, g) Lloyd and

Walker 1986, h) Lloyd 1990, i) Gehrke 1992, j) Mallen-Cooper and Harris 1993, k) Mallen-Cooper 1994, l) Mallen-Cooper <i>et al.</i> 1995, m) Koehn 1996, n) Koehn and Nicol 1998, o) Crook <i>et al.</i> 2001, p) Mallen-Cooper 2001, q) Baumgartner 2003, r) Balcombe and Closs 2004, s) Crook 2004.....	34
Figure 2.6. The number of studies in the meta-analysis that were conducted in different: (a) years; (b) geographic locations and; (c) climatic regions.....	36
Figure 2.7. World climatic map using the Köeppen Climate Classification System used to classify river systems in the meta-analysis. Labels refer to the rivers whose hydrographs are presented in Figure 2.1: M=Mississippi River, USA; D=Danube River, Romania; A=Amazon River, Brazil; SD= Syr Darya River, Kazakhstan; ME=Mekong River, Laos; C=Cooper Creek, Australia; P=Paroo River, Australia; BD=Barwon-Darling River, Australia. Adapted from original map by FAO – SDRN – Agrometeorology Group – 1997.....	37
Figure 3.1. The Murray-Darling Basin showing the Barwon-Darling River system (green) and the Murray River system (yellow).	44
Figure 3.2. Aerial photo of the Barwon-Darling River showing the expansive semi-arid floodplain and thin riparian strip (Photo: Neil Sims).....	47
Figure 3.3. The Barwon-Darling River near Walgett. This photo shows the river corridor restricted to the lower stages of a largely incised channel (Photo: Mark Southwell).	48
Figure 3.4. Hierarchical design used in the present study showing the three scales of spatial organisation that were used to study fish-habitat associations within the Barwon-Darling River (4 zones x 3 reaches x 6 mesohabitat types). 10 replicate electrofishing shots were performed for each each mesohabitat type (giving 10 distinct sampling patches for each type of mesohabitat). The approximate spatial scales that each of these levels occur at in the present study are also given.....	51
Figure 3.5. Location of study reaches nested within geomorphological zones (identified by Thoms (in press) in the Barwon-Darling River.....	52
Figure 3.6. In-channel features that provide potential habitat to fish in the Barwon-Darling River during low-flow conditions: a) smooth bank, b) matted bank, c) irregular bank, d) large wood, e) open water habitat either being mid-channel or deep pool.	54

- Figure 3.7. Conceptual diagram showing the relationship among chapters, objectives, research questions and the fieldwork program..... 56
- Figure 3.8. (a) Daytime and (b) night-time electrofishing of mesohabitats in the Barwon-Darling River. Two dipnetters were actually used during the fish sampling. 60
- Figure 3.9. Location of 3 study reaches used for diel comparisons of size related fish-habitat associations in the Barwon-Darling River. 61
- Figure 3.10. Sub-set of the study design used to test for diel-differences in fish-habitat associations 62
- Figure 3.11. Performance of different gear types in sampling run and pool habitats in the Barwon-Darling River and other lowland rivers in New South Wales during the New South Wales Rivers Survey. Numbers of fish caught represent data collected only from Barwon-Darling River, whereas numbers of species data were collected from unregulated lowland rivers throughout New South Wales (i.e. Barwon-Darling, Murray, North and South Coast). Data source: Faragher and Rogers (1997) 66
- Figure 3.12. (a) Summary of the different types of fish sampling gear used in the fish-habitat association studies reviewed in Chapter 2, (b) the types of electrofishing method used and (c) the number of electrofishing passes carried out. 70
- Figure 3.13. Species accumulation curves over 10 boat electrofishing operations at three different sites surveyed as part of the NSW Rivers Survey (see Faragher and Rodgers 1997 for consideration of sampling efficiency as part of the NSW Rivers Survey). Data source: NSW DPI 2007..... 71
- Figure 3.14. Major intensity-dependent electrofishing response zones. This is a schematic representation only and the size and shape of each zone will differ depending on anode design, electrofishing output settings, water conditions (e.g. conductivity and velocity), presence of a cathode and size and species of fish. 72
- Figure 3.15. Method used to survey commence to inundation heights of large wood structures within the Barwon-Darling River channel. 77
- Figure 3.16. (Top) The Barwon-Darling River near Walgett, showing the low-flow conditions during which large wood was surveyed. The large wood pictured was positioned in water <0.5m deep. Sampling at such low-flows minimised the

potential of missing large wood in the lower extremities of the channel. (Bottom)	
Large wood at three different commence to inundation heights.....	78
Figure 4.1. Two-dimensional nMDS ordination of mesohabitat patches based on the similarities among fish assemblages (stress = 0.13). Mesohabitats with similar assemblage composition (ANOSIM: Table 4.1) are encircled in the legend.....	94
Figure 4.2. a) Two-dimensional nMDS ordination (taken from Figure 4.1) of mesohabitat patches based on the similarities among fish assemblages (stress = 0.13). (b) The same nMDS ordination with reach numbers labelled (see Figure 3.5 page 35 for reach locations). (c-f) Superimposed ‘bubbles’ of increasing size represent increasing abundance for four species in relation to the overall assemblage pattern at each mesohabitat at each reach. Bubbles are scaled only for within species comparison and not for between species comparison (species totals are given).....	97
Figure 4.3. Results of SIMPER analysis highlighting the species contributing most to the assemblage similarity within mesohabitat patches. The percentage contribution gives the average contribution that each species makes to the total similarity within each mesohabitat. Consistency ratio values are also given and indicate the consistency with which each species contributes to assemblages, with larger ratios (approximately >1.0) indicating a reliable consistency as a characteristic species.	98
Figure 4.4. Proportion of total catch of 4 abundant species found associated with each mesohabitat patch across the whole Barwon-Darling River and for each individual zone.	101
Figure 4.5. Length-frequency histograms for carp caught across all six mesohabitat patches.....	105
Figure 4.6. Length-frequency histograms for bony herring caught across all six mesohabitat patches.	106
Figure 4.7. Summary of the fish-habitat associations in the Barwon-Darling River during low-flow conditions.....	108
Figure 4.8. Daily hydrograph for Brewarrina gauge (black) showing two flood peaks 1 year prior to sampling. The source of flood water is shown using the Mogil Mogil gauge in the upper Barwon-Darling River (green) and gauges in the Namoi (red) and Macquarie (blue) Rivers.....	113

- Figure 5.1. Two-dimensional nMDS ordination of mesohabitat patches based on diel differences in fish assemblage composition. Points in black represent night samples whereas those in white represent day samples. 127
- Figure 5.2. Length-frequency histograms for bony herring and carp at smooth bank, irregular bank and large wood during the day and night. The two-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test statistic (D_{ks}) is given for each day versus night comparison, with significant diel differences accepted at the Bonferroni corrected alpha value of 0.008. 129
- Figure 5.3. Mean abundance (caught only) + SE for juvenile (<200mm) and adult (>200mm) carp and juvenile (<100mm) and adult (>100mm) bony herring at different mesohabitat patches at day and night. 130
- Figure 5.4. Mean (\pm SE) abundance (caught plus observed) of gudgeons and Australian smelt from different mesohabitats during the day. Letters associated with each mean in the gudgeons plot represent groupings identified by pairwise Tukey tests. That is, means with letters in common are not significantly different at $p=0.05$. 131
- Figure 6.1. Two-dimensional MDS ordination of Barwon-Darling River reaches based on Bray-Curtis similarities among fish assemblages. Symbols denote the different *a priori* defined river zones and lines between reaches show their longitudinal relationship within each zone. Reaches in (a) are grouped based on ANOSIM (Table 6.2), whereas reaches in (b) are grouped based on classification. Triplots (c-f) show how different species contribute to the ordination space. Bubbles of increasing size represent increasing abundance for carp (*Cyp car*), bony herring (*Nem ere*), golden perch (*Mac amb*) and Murray cod (*Mac pee*) in relation to the overall assemblage pattern. Bubbles are scaled only for within species comparison and not for between species comparison (species totals are given). Radial PCC regression vectors provide directions and strengths of correlation between different species and the ordination space. Only those vectors with $R^2 > 0.7$ are shown and the R^2 are provided. 148
- Figure 6.2. Length-frequency histograms for carp, bony herring and carp caught at all four Barwon-Darling River zones. 150
- Figure 6.3. (a) Two-dimensional SSH ordination biplot of Barwon-Darling River reaches based on Gower metric dissimilarities of mesohabitat variables. Symbols denote the different *a priori* defined river zones. Radial PCC regression vectors

- provide directions and strengths of correlation between different mesohabitat variables and the ordination space. Vectors with $R^2 < 0.7$ are shown as a dashed line. The groupings encircled in the ordination were obtained from classification (b). 154
- Figure 6.4. Scatter plots of mesohabitat variable pairs showing the Pearson product moment correlation coefficient (r) between every pair of variables. Data points correspond to the variable value at a reach 156
- Figure 6.5. Mesohabitat variables (mean (median for depth) \pm SE) measured at each reach in the Barwon-Darling River. 157
- Figure 6.6. Scatter plots showing the relationship between the abundance of four fish species and mesohabitat variables at each reach in the Barwon-Darling River. Each data point corresponds to a reach. The Pearson product moment correlation coefficient (r) between every variable pair is given. 158
- Figure 6.7. Percentage of total abundance of fish in each river reach that was native and introduced. 160
- Figure 7.1. Method used to convert CTI heights into a measure of connectivity 173
- Figure 7.2. Schematic diagram showing how the upper threshold of an inundation group is run through a Flow Spell Analysis to determine the total number of days that the inundation group is inundated for, the number of individual wetting events and the duration of each event. This was done for each zone using hydrographs modelled from IQQM data simulated under reference and current flow scenarios. 174
- Figure 7.3 Cumulative frequency plot of large wood duration of inundation for Zones 1-4. Inundation groups were identified where a large increase in the number of large wood inundated resulted from a relatively small change in the duration of time spent inundated. Group 3 in Zone 2 was an exception to this, as a steady increase in abundance occurred across a large range of percentage time inundated. This group was therefore sub-divided into the lower and upper 50 percent of large wood pieces to better account for inundation in this group. 178
- Figure 7.4. Percentage change in large wood availability scores* resulting from water resource development (modelled under 'reference' and 'current' hydrological conditions). *The availability score is calculated by multiplying the number of large

wood pieces in the particular inundation group by the proportion of total simulated days spent inundated between 1919 and 1994. 184

Figure 8.1. Schematic digram showing the mesohabitat associations of Murray cod, golden perch, bony herring and carp in lowland rivers of the Murray-Darling Basin. Data on larval and juvenile associations are included from the findings of Koehn (1996), Gilligan (2003) and King (2004). Stars represent larvae, light colour circles represent juveniles and dark coloured circles represent adults. The size of circles signifies abundance at a particular mesohabitat patch relative to all mesohabitat types (i.e high moderate or low). 207

List of Tables

Table 2.1. Conceptual framework of the hierarchical organisation of riverscapes. This framework highlights how each level of organisation persists over distinct spatial and temporal scales. Adapted from Frissell <i>et al.</i> (1986)	27
Table 2.2. A comparison of the classification system of Frissell <i>et al.</i> (1986) for small rivers in the USA and that of Thoms <i>et al.</i> (2004a) for large rivers within the Murray-Darling Basin. The organisational framework as applied throughout the meta-analysis was based in that of Thoms <i>et al.</i> (2004a).	28
Table 2.3. Prevailing climatic condition of reviewed studies presented by continent (based on climatic map shown in Figure 2.7).	38
Table 3.1. Fish species expected to occur in the Barwon-Darling River study area, including notes on their likely occurrence and distribution.....	49
Table 3.2. Description of mesohabitat patches that provide potential habitat to fish in the Barwon-Darling River during low-flow conditions	53
Table 3.3. Multivariate dataset used to describe the low-flow, in-channel “mesohabitat composition” of a reach	75
Table 3.4. Structural complexity classes used to describe large wood (after Hughes 2001)	79
Table 4.1. Summary of two-way ANOSIM on the Barwon-Darling River fish assemblage with river zone and mesohabitat patch as factors. Only global and pairwise comparisons for mesohabitats are reported here (see Chapter 6 for river zone comparisons). Degree of group difference established according to criteria of Clarke and Gorley (2001) and is as follows: <i>ns</i> = <i>not separable</i> ($R < 0.3$), * = <i>overlapping but clearly different</i> ($R > 0.3$), ** = <i>well separated</i> ($R > 0.75$).	95
Table 4.2. Species contributing most to differences in fish assemblages between mesohabitat patches (SIMPER analysis). The mean dissimilarity indicates the magnitude of difference in assemblage composition in each pairwise comparison between mesohabitats. The percent contribution indicates the average contribution each species makes to the dissimilarity between mesohabitat patches. The consistency ratio is a measure of the reliability of using the particular species to discriminate between two mesohabitat patches, with larger ratios	

(approximately >1.0) indicating a reliable consistency as a discriminating species.	99
Table 4.3. Results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests for significant differences in pairwise comparisons of length frequency distributions among mesohabitat patches for carp and bony herring. Insufficient catches of carp in deep pool and mid-channel habitat excluded these mesohabitat patches from the carp analysis. Comparisons in bold represent those found to be significant at the Bonferroni corrected alpha value of 0.0023.....	104
Table 5.1. Total number of fish sampled (caught and observed) at each mesohabitat and time of day pooled across all replicates in all three reaches.	126
Table 5.2. Species contributions to difference in fish assemblage composition between day and night (SIMPER analysis).	127
Table 5.3. Summary of two-way ANOVA for juvenile and adult carp and bony herring, with mesohabitat and time (day versus night) as factors. Analyses performed on log(x+1) transformed catch data. * Indicates a significant result at the Bonferroni corrected alpha level of 0.0125.	128
Table 6.1. Number of each species caught and observed at each reach surveyed in the Barwon-Darling River.....	146
Table 6.2. Summary of two-way ANOSIM on the Barwon-Darling River fish assemblage with river zone and mesohabitat patch as factors. Only global and pairwise comparisons for zones are reported here (see Chapter 4 for mesohabitat comparisons). Degree of assemblage difference established according to criteria of Clarke and Gorley (2001) and is as follows: <i>ns</i> = <i>not separable</i> ($R < 0.3$), * = <i>overlapping but clearly different</i> ($R > 0.3$), ** = <i>well separated</i> ($R > 0.75$).	147
Table 6.3. Species contributing most to differences in fish assemblages between zones (SIMPER analysis). The mean dissimilarity indicates the magnitude of difference in assemblage composition in each pairwise comparison between zones. The percent contribution indicates the average contribution each species makes to the dissimilarity between zones. The consistency ratio is a measure of the reliability of using the particular species to discriminate between two zones, with larger ratios (approximately >1.0) indicating a reliable consistency as a discriminating species.	149

Table 6.4. Results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests for significant differences in pairwise comparisons of length frequency distributions for carp, bony herring and golden perch among Barwon-Darling River zones. Comparisons in bold represent those found to be significant at the Bonferroni corrected alpha value of 0.0033.....	151
Table 6.5. Summary of one-way ANOSIM examining among zone differences in mesohabitat composition based on Gower similarity metric. Degree of assemblage difference established according to criteria of Clarke and Gorley (2001) and is as follows: <i>ns</i> = not separable ($R < 0.3$), * = overlapping but clearly different ($R > 0.3$), ** = well separated ($R > 0.75$).	155
Table 7.1 Large wood (LW) inundation dynamics and availability.....	179
Table 7.2. Summary of large wood attributes (length and complexity), expressed as a percentage of all large wood within each group and a percentage of all large wood within each zone.....	180
Table 7.3. Results from Flow Spell Analysis showing changes in large wood inundation dynamics under IQQM modelled ‘reference’ and ‘current’ flow scenarios.	183

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