

Rain revives town and its lost lake

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IT'S raining on the way to Lake Bolac - heavy, steady drops that sluice off cars and dimple the surface of dams.

Dark clouds and downpours have been familiar sight for residents this year, boosting crops and bringing the town's prized namesake back to life.

During years of drought its 1460-hectare freshwater lake changed from a lush playground and food source to a dry, cracked shell. Evaporation turned up all kinds of treasures: a boat and its anchor were found in the mud, as was a menacing tooth belonging to a long-gone animal.

But the novelty of an empty lake could not capture tourists like a shimmering expanse of water, which for generations had lured families and friends for camping holidays.

Now, after seven weeks of steady rain during August and September, Lake Bolac has returned to its best.

Development association president Karen McIntyre said there had already been an increase in local morale and visitor interest.

"We used to have a yachting regatta held here, probably for about 30 years, and for the last five years we haven't been able to hold that because of the depth of the water," she said.

"We're looking to encourage them to come back again (from Camperdown) and hold it here."

Long-term resident George Murray said the lake was last at its present level in 2001, when for five days a brimming edge trickled over into Salt Creek.

"(Before that) it was pretty good, very usable. And then just slowly, through the drought period, it just slowly went down, down, down," he said. "As it's gone down, the salt levels have risen in it, and they got to the point where they were skiing, still, but churning up the mud."

Along with its uses for recreation Lake Bolac has also become known as a home for eels, which travel down Salt Creek and along the Hopkins River before reaching the ocean to breed.

A yearly art, environment and cultural festival named after the creatures continued even after the hardening lake bed and rising salinity saw them eradicated.

"You could see them and you could smell them," said fellow resident John Malin.

"It was an absolute tragedy. Actually, there were probably in the vicinity of 80 to 100 tonnes of eels that died."

Nature's regenerative power is at work here, with baby eels known as elvers returning quickly to their transformed habitat.

"A lot of eels have come into the lake, amazingly; they've been up the Fiery Creek in holes," Mr Murray said, adding that a crumbling silt base on the lake floor had killed the fish in recent years by caving in on their refuges.

As secretary of the Eel Festival committee, Una Allender's main concern for the next event in March is where a central tent will be pitched.

"The only thing we'll have to think about is rearranging our site plan, because at the moment where we had our big marquee last year is under water," she said.

"It will be nice to have some water ? people will be able to enjoy the water as well as enjoying the festival and the music."

While the dry lake bed saw many summer visitors go elsewhere, Ms Allender said it prompted a stronger understanding of the area's health among locals.

"There's been a huge interest in the community. Now that the water's back in, the community are all back admiring the water and looking at what's happening.

"I really think people have taken far more interest in the whole system than they did before."

Hamilton resident Bill Sharp facilitates the Beyond Bolac Catchment Action Group, formerly H11 H12, which seeks to unite organisations and individuals interested in the health of the lake and its surrounding areas.

He said there had been some surprise over how rapidly the parched asset had recovered.

"(When the lake dried) it created a huge concern in the local community for the condition of the lake, and for the water that comes into the lake," he said.

"We talked a lot about salinity, we talked about catchment, we talked about land use and all the things that affect runoff.

"Seven weeks of good rainfall reinforces the fact that nature can do these incredible things." Salt levels remain higher than the group would like, a situation that has prompted consideration of a catchment salinity footprint to investigate past readings and causes for present measurements.

For Frank and Lorraine Deutsch, a lake bursting with water is a pleasant surprise and something of a reward.

The couple, former Gippsland residents, moved to Lake Bolac six months ago after buying the town's caravan and tourist park.

They've been busy overhauling many of its facilities since then and are hopeful their new business-purchased when the lake was still dry- will appeal to curious travellers.

"It's just amazing, not so much for us but the town ? everybody's smiling," Mrs Deutsch said.

"We didn't expect to make huge money; it was just a way to get to know people and hopefully help people out."

Brian O'Rorke, a volunteer at Lake Bolac's visitor information centre, said regular road users from Hamilton, Coleraine and Casterton often called in to chat about the changing landscape.

"When there's no water in the lake people just don't come," he said.

"It's made a big difference and it's made a big difference just to the general confidence around the district."

While there's been plenty of talk across the south-west over whether the lake would ever return to its former glory, many residents are adamant they never lost faith.

"I always believed water would come back and the lake had the potential to fill very quickly," Mr Murray said.

"In our records the Fiery Creek is one of the fastest rising creeks in Victoria, if they get the right rain up at Mount Cole, and I was convinced that it would fill again, there was no doubt about that."

Locals are hopeful of securing funds to provide wheelchair access to a boat shed and replace a toilet block at the lake's southern beach, both of which are costly projects.

"(The rain) has uplifted everybody. Even the farmers who have got the waterlogged crops are thinking it'll drain off eventually, and the good crops are looking good," Ms Allender said.

"You can sort of deal with being dry and dusty and having a dry lake for a certain length of time, but people have got to the point where they need a bit of encouragement.

"I think it's been a huge boost. People are happy to see water."



Lake Bolac - a lake once more thanks to recent rains.



Resident George Murray, front, is joined at a brimming Lake Bolac by Bill Sharp, John Malin, Karen McIntyre, Colin McKenzie and Una Allender earlier this week



Colin Cooper drives his hovercraft over the dry lake bed with John Malin and Peter Forster in 2006.