



Save the Murray

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Willows



Willows are not native to the Murray-Darling Basin and their introduction has caused widespread problems in parts of the Murray River.

Where did willows come from?

Willows were first introduced by European settlers in the 1860's. Willows were planted to assist with navigation along the River Murray during the riverboat trade. Other reasons for the introduction have been associated with their aesthetic appearance to Europeans. More than 100 species or varieties of willows have been introduced to Australia since European colonization. They are now a major pest of waterways as they have adversely affected the ecology of streams and rivers in the Basin.

How do willows spread?

Willows can reproduce asexually, meaning they don't need a female and a male plant to reproduce like many other plants. A single willow can produce hundreds of new trees on its own. Broken-off branches and twigs can easily grow into new trees. Since they take root so easily, willows are able to quickly take over an area. Some willows produce suckers that may separate into clones – allowing one tree to become many and quickly spread.

Why are willows a problem?

The river ecosystem did not evolve with willows and therefore is not able to naturally cope with their invasive

nature. Willows affect both the diversity and abundance of native plant species. Willows cast heavy shade which doesn't allow light to get to other plants on the ground, so river banks where willows grow are often bare and without an under story to provide food and shelter for wildlife.

Willows are deciduous and drop their leaves all at once during autumn. The leaves that fall into the river then release large amounts of nutrients in a short time encouraging algal blooms. Willow branches fall into the River and rot quickly unlike native wood which will does not rot, creating a habitat for aquatic animals like native fish. Willow bark is too dense to create hiding places for insects, therefore not providing native animals, birds and insects with shelter or food.

Why don't we remove them?

The removal of willows is a contentious issue. The sheer cost and effort involved in removing willows means that it is not practical to remove them completely.

Removing willows without replacing the area with native vegetation can cause bank erosion.

Are willows along the whole River Murray?

Yes. However, they are a major weed problem in SA, especially between Wellington and Mannum.

What can I do?

- Pull out shoots to control their spread.
- Be careful of spreading twig litter from willows – it can reshoot
- Don't plant willows near waterways, use local native species like native willow or river coobah, bottlebrush, bulrushes, reeds or sedges.