

Windsurfing the Murray for charity



Journalist: Jenny Oldland

Former Yorketown vet, now Sydney resident, Rod McEwin has begun a 2,224 kilometre journey down the Murray, but not for him the comfort of a large boat or even a small tinny — he’s windsurfing! And it’s all in the name of charity.

The adventure is being tackled in stages, so the entire journey from Albury to the Murray mouth could take several years; however, he’s about to start a South Australian section of the trip, after four successful legs higher up the river.

“I’ve completed 7.4%, or 165 km, so far,” he said when we caught up with him last week. “There is no commitment to do the stages in sequence, hence the next planned stage in South Australia, rather than higher up the river. This first SA leg will start at Blanchetown and the target is Mannum, an estimated 135 km.

“I’ve spent many happy holidays on the river, waterskiing, fishing, sailing and yabbing. Riding the windsurfer board and camping amongst the red gums is a great way to enjoy the river and raise money for charity,” he said.

The paddling and sailing trip is raising funds for Aboriginal health, with the aim of raising \$22,240 to match the 2,224 km of the journey.

“I spent some time researching a suitable charity for the venture, and was touched by recent reports highlighting the poor state of Aboriginal health in Australia,” Rod said.

“Some evidence suggests improvements are occurring but more needs to be done. This little windsurfing venture will help by raising funds for the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Councils of NSW, the money earmarked for Aboriginal communities along the Murray,” Rod said.

“Some people are donating on a per kilometre basis, others have paid a single amount. Others have assisted the cause by helping in other ways, for example, Bob and Sue Warren, of Yorketown — who will join me for the SA leg later this month — are the foundation land crew and have already driven me to parts of the Murray for planning purposes.”

Inquisitive cattle and locals

Rod’s windsurfer has been adapted for the trip by the addition of 21 fibreglass loops so boxes of food, water, charts and sailing gear can be strapped to the board. His tent, bedding, cooking gear and clothes are towed along behind in two watertight barrels.

“It’s quite a circus, I can stop anywhere along the river and set up camp on the bank. I’ve already had some exciting experiences with inquisitive cattle and locals.

“People have been interested and supportive. I was elated after my first successful leg of the trip, from Albury to Howlong, and an elderly couple sitting on their chairs on the bank greeted me as I staggered ashore and asked me where I was going. ‘To the Murray mouth’ I answered proudly. ‘Oh, yes’ they nodded as if it was an everyday occurrence. I refused to be deflated!

“I continued on until I came to a beautiful old wooden bridge and pulled into the caravan park in Corowa, where the managers went out of their way to find a place for my tent near the water.



Former Yorketown vet Rod McEwin on his windsurfer during a Botany Bay training run, preparing to tackle a South Australian section of the River Murray to raise funds for Aboriginal health. Note the barrels being towed behind; these hold his tent, clothes, sleeping and cooking gear.

“Young rowers from the nearby rowing club helped me carry the board and the gear up the bank. They were interested and amazed when I told them about my little venture. ‘Some people might say you’re crazy’ one said as they wandered back into the water for a swim.”

Snaps and Short-cuts

There hasn’t been any problem with the “lack” of water in the Murray on the legs he’s done so far, which started in Albury, although low water levels have caused some uncertainty in the planning.

“The planning for Howlong to Corowa leg was woeful, and I guess the main reason was the uncertainty about the river levels. With the severe drought I wasn’t sure if the water would be deep enough to allow the windsurfer through the snags and sandbars, and whether the trip was feasible at this time.

“Occasionally I’ve pushed my luck with shortcuts,” he said. “Shortly after launching near Lake Mulwala I found a narrow waterway to the west of the river’s course. It was covered in overhanging branches and hard to see; however, the charts indicated it might provide a shortcut and rejoin the river downstream.

“I edged into the opening and followed the water, weaving around fallen trees and other snags, and it was difficult to tell if it would continue or be blocked by sandbars and trees, but I pushed on until I reached a dead end of sand and reeds. I secured the board and walked, checking for an alternative path to join the main body of water, which I could now see.

“Before long I found a tiny creek, rode and dragged the board along, lifting it over logs and lying flat at times to limbo under low branches. After more excitement dragging the board over 30 metres of sandbars I was relieved to re-enter deeper water and eventually paddled to the south side of the lake and the rendezvous point.”

Peaceful environment

Rod says he loves the peaceful river environment, its banks and wonderful river gums.

“On Lake Mulwala I saw an incredible variety of water birds - pelicans, royal spoonbills, Murray magpies, ibis, black swans, moorhens, sulphur crested cockatoos, ducks and several other species — all sharing the tranquillity with me.”

And there’s no doubt, Rod said, the river will benefit from the recent heavy rain in parts of the Murray-Darling Basin.

If you would like to support Rod’s unique charity adventure, donations can be sent to the Windsurfing on the Murray, The Accountant, NSW Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council, Box 1565, Strawberry Hills NSW 2012. 孀

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