

**Trees and groundwater on the water-limited
Eyre Peninsula: an ecohydrological
perspective**

submitted by

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Table of contents

Table of contents	3
List of figures	5
List of tables	10
Declaration of originality	11
Acknowledgements	12
Abstract	14
1. Introduction	18
1.1. General introduction	18
1.1.1. Global freshwater scarcity	18
1.1.2. Ecohydrology – linking vegetation and water	20
1.1.3. Eyre Peninsula water supplies: a historical perspective	24
1.1.4. Common vegetation associations	27
1.1.5. Hydrological implications of invasive species	29
1.2. Focus of thesis	30
1.3. Objectives	32
1.4. Journal publications	33
2. Water use strategies of two co-occurring tree species in a semi-arid karst environment	35
2.1. Introduction	35
2.2. Methods	40
2.3. Results	53
2.4. Discussion	63
2.5. Conclusion	71
3. Rainfall partitioning across two co-occurring, morphologically distinct tree species in a semi-arid environment	73
3.1. Introduction	73

3.2.	Methods	76
3.3.	Results	86
3.5.	Conclusion	98
4.	Comparing ecophysiological traits and evapotranspiration of an invasive exotic, <i>Pinus halepensis</i> in native woodland overlying a karst aquifer	100
4.1.	Introduction	100
4.2.	Methods	103
4.3.	Results	113
4.4.	Discussion	127
4.5.	Conclusion	130
5.	Final remarks	132
5.1.	Major contributions to knowledge	132
5.2.	Trees and the Southern Basins – what else have we learnt?	135
5.2.1.	Groundwater recharge – will it still occur?	135
5.2.2.	Scaling sap flux data – from xylem to stand	137
5.2.3.	Use of isotope tracers in karst systems – can it be done?	140
5.2.4.	Constraints upon evapotranspiration	142
5.3.	Roots and rocks – a perplexing association	144
5.4.	Potential for encroachment over the recharge zone	146
5.5.	Comparing groundwater flux using Australian studies	150
5.6.	Conclusion	154
	References	156

List of figures

- Figure 1.1.3.1 Map showing regional drinking water supplies supported by karst aquifers 25
- Figure 1.1.4.1 Groundwater level trends for the quaternary groundwater lens' of the Southern Basins Prescribed Wells Area, Eyre Peninsula 27
- Figure 2.2.1 Comparative Leaf Area Index (LAI) assessments at multiple 20 x 20 m *Eucalyptus diversifolia* and *Allocasuarina verticillata* plots at various locations across the Uley South groundwater reserve 41
- Figure 2.2.2 Project timeline and climate trends, including potential evapotranspiration rate (ET_p) (mm), depth to groundwater (DTW) (m), daily rainfall (mm) and mean monthly maximum temperature ($^{\circ}C$) 43
- Figure 2.2.3 (a) Influence of a $\pm 10\%$ soil water change on annual actual evapotranspiration (ET) and subsequent water balance (Q_{wt}) for *Eucalyptus diversifolia* (black symbols), *Allocasuarina verticillata* (white symbols) and the bare site (grey symbols) 46
- Figure 2.3.1 Components of evapotranspiration (soil evaporation, interception and transpiration) and the volume of rainfall received from July 2008 until July 2010 55
- Figure 2.3.2 Relative contribution of canopy interception, soil evaporation, stemflow and throughfall to total water flux (%) 57
- Figure 2.3.3 (a) Stable isotope ratios for all groundwater, surface soil water, subsurface soil water and twig water collected in March 2009, November

2009 and February 2010. Rainfall samples were collected monthly between
May 2008 and July 2010 59

Figure 2.3.4 Feasible twig (T) water source combinations for *E. diversifolia* (101),
A. verticillata (099) and *E. diversifolia* (099), based on groundwater (G),
subsurface soil water (D) and surface soil (S) samples collected in
November 2009 61

Figure 2.3.5 Leaf water potentials (Ψ) (MPa) for each tree species showing (a)
predawn and (b) midday leaf water potentials measured during March 2009,
November 2009 and February 2010. *E. diversifolia* (099) represents trees
adjacent to the *A. verticillata* site 62

Figure 3.2.1 Collection of rainfall partitioning results from 31 studies across a
global scale (data from Table 3.2.1) plotted along a climate aridity index.
Tree form (single-stemmed tree, multi-stemmed tree, conifer, shrub) and
scaling method (plot scale *versus* individual canopies) are shown 81

Figure 3.2.2 Line drawing demonstrating the morphological differences between
Allocasuarina verticillata, which possesses vertical, thin phyllodes, rough
bark and a single trunk (left), and *Eucalyptus diversifolia* ssp. *diversifolia*,
which has smooth bark, true leaves and a multiple-stemmed habit (right) 82

Figure 3.3.1 Total volume of rainfall received during each download period
(approximately monthly) (P_g) (mm). Rainfall was measured using standard
rain gauges (columns), and daily potential evapotranspiration (ET_p)
(FAO56) (open circles) available through the Bureau of Meteorology
(2010) 87

- Figure 3.3.2 Relationship between tree basal area ($BAOB_t$) (m^2) and canopy projection area (m^2) for individual *Eucalyptus diversifolia* and *Allocasuarina verticillata* trees ($r^2 = 0.90$, standard error = 4.52) 88
- Figure 3.3.3 Relationship between ~ monthly total rainfall (mm) received and (a) total throughfall (mm), (c) total interception (mm) and (e) total stemflow (mm) for *E. diversifolia* and *A. verticillata* over the study period 90
- Figure 3.3.4 Relationship between tree size and average stemflow funnelling ratio for *Eucalyptus diversifolia* and *Allocasuarina verticillata* using total rainfall (mm), stemflow volume (L) and tree size (m^2) over the study period 91
- Figure 3.3.5 Difference in annual SF % of P_g when calculated using (a) a plot scale or (b) individual plant canopies. Plot scale ($400 m^2$) results in both species averaging 2.7 % of P_g as SF . Individual plant canopies increase *Eucalyptus diversifolia* SF average to 3.1 % and *Allocasuarina verticillata* to 7.9 % 94
- Figure 4.2.1 Location of Uley Wanilla groundwater reserve, showing production bores used for public drinking water supply, location of detailed study site, and 250 m grid locations for reference vegetation classes used for ET_a comparisons 105
- Figure 4.2.2 Aerial imagery of the grids for each reference vegetation class used to compare ET_a and Q_{wt} from 2001 – 2010. Site codes are: (a) Open area; (b) open area + *P. halepensis*; (c) open shrubland; (d) open shrubland + *P. halepensis*; (e) *E. camaldulensis*; (f) *E. camaldulensis* + *P. halepensis*; (g) *E. diversifolia* 111

- Figure 4.3.1 Project timeline showing daily rainfall (mm) and average sap flow velocity (cm hr^{-1}) for the six species instrumented with sap flow loggers. Potential evapotranspiration (FAO56) and actual evapotranspiration (ET_a , mm) are presented as 8-day composites 116
- Figure 4.3.2 (a) Sap flow velocity (cm hr^{-1}) averaged over replicate probes within each species. (b) Tree water use (mm day^{-1}) averaged across each instrumented species. T = Tree, S = Shrub 117
- Figure 4.3.3 Sapwood density of replicate twigs (g cm^{-3}) from multiple individuals of each of the species within the plot 118
- Figure 4.3.4 Plots of $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ (‰) versus $\delta^2\text{H}$ (‰) for groundwater (■), surface soils (●), *Pinus halepensis* (Δ), native tree (▲) and native shrubs (▼) collected on 28th April 2010. Rainfall samples are cumulative monthly samples collected from March to July 2010 120
- Figure 4.3.5 Diurnal pattern of leaf water potential (Ψ , MPa, mean \pm std dev) for native species (●) and *P. halepensis* (○) measured on 28th April between 5 AM and 5 PM. Multiple trees per species were sampled, except *P. angustifolium* and *A. longifolia*, where only one individual was sampled 121
- Figure 4.3.6 Annual net recharge (mm year^{-1}) for each year from 2001 to 2010. Received rainfall relative to the long term average of 564 mm year^{-1} is shown in brackets 122
- Figure 4.3.7 Annual net recharge over the period of 2001 to 2010, normalised by rainfall for each vegetation class and the extent of the Uley Wanilla groundwater basin 124

Figure 4.3.8 Annual net recharge (Q_{wt}) as a proportion of rainfall received before (2001 – 2008) and after (2009 – 2010) removal of *P. halepensis* within an *E. camaldulensis* stand (Site f) **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Figure 5.2.1.1 *Eucalyptus diversifolia* and *P. halepensis* sap flow velocity response to rainfall received on 25th May 2010 137

Figure 5.4.1 Remnant *Allocasuarina verticillata* trunks lying across the low lying recharge zone of Uley South groundwater reserve 147

List of tables

Table 2.3.1 Plot water balance between 17 July 2008 and 19 July 2010. Rainfall (P_g), potential evapotranspiration (ET_p) (FAO 56), actual evapotranspiration (ET), canopy interception (I), soil evaporation (E) and transpiration (T) residual flux (Q_{wt}). Values are means \pm 95% confidence intervals (CI)	56
Table 3.2.1 Review of rainfall partitioning studies demonstrating the influence of tree morphology and measurement method on gross precipitation fractions into throughfall, stemflow and interception	78
Table 3.3.1 Total stemflow volume (l) and overall funnelling ratio (F) for each of the instrumented stems, including corresponding stem basal area (m^2) and contributing canopy area (m^2)	92
Table 3.3.2 Estimated stemflow funnelling ratio and volume of stemflow generated in the study site scaled to a plot estimate using the regression from Figure 3.3.4 and volume of rainfall received	93
Table 4.3.1 Plot and sapflow tree site details, including wood and water fractions (%) and number of sap flow probes, used to calculate median sap flow velocity ($cm\ hr^{-1}$) and species water use ($mm\ day^{-1}$)	115
Table 4.3.2 Net recharge (Q_{wt}) across Uley Wanilla and the seven reference vegetation classes, shown for each year as (i) a proportion of received rainfall, and (ii) as cumulative net recharge spanning 2001 – 2010	123
Table 5.5.1 Comparison of studies linking vegetation and groundwater flux dynamics to the water balance results presented in Chapter 2	152

Declaration of originality

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate, without acknowledgement, any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any other university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief does not contain any material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

The contribution for the authorship of the three published journal papers which are presented in this thesis as Chapters 2, 3 and 4 are declared to be as follows:

- **Chapter 2:** Water use strategies of two co-occurring tree species in a semi-arid karst environment (Swaffer 70 %, Holland 5 %, Doody 5 %, Li 15 %, Hutson 5 %).
- **Chapter 3:** Rainfall partitioning across two co-occurring, morphologically distinct tree species in a semi-arid environment (Swaffer 85 %, Holland 5 %, Doody 5 %, Hutson 5 %).
- **Chapter 4:** Comparing ecophysiological traits and evapotranspiration of an invasive exotic, *Pinus halepensis* in native woodland over a karst aquifer (Swaffer 90 %, Holland 10 %).

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Abstract

This thesis investigated the ecohydrological linkages between native and exotic tree species and karstic groundwater systems on Eyre Peninsula, South Australia. It focuses on two issues of global importance: the declining status of fresh water resources in water-limited environments and the rate of evapotranspiration from native and non-native trees encroaching across groundwater recharge areas. The work focussed on karstic groundwater systems, a geological setting where the water flux dynamics from the surface through to groundwater is a complex process involving storage in the unsaturated zone and diffuse and preferential recharge pathways. This geological complexity and the processes associated with this behaviour are not well understood, despite karst aquifers often being the source of drinking water supplies. As a result, uncertainty regarding the ecohydrological processes in this environmental setting remains large.

In addition to the complex nature of the karst substrate, the presence of vegetation growing above the groundwater lens will further influence recharge and discharge dynamics. Water use by trees, as well as the partitioning of precipitation into interception, stemflow and throughfall, was considered to be an important ecohydrological process affecting this groundwater system.

This study examined whether groundwater level decline could be attributed to changes in land cover, reflecting differences in evapotranspiration rates and pathways of water flux across morphologically distinct, locally common tree species. Pre-European settlement the region was characterised by a grassy woodland dominated by *Allocasuarina verticillata* (Lam.) L. Johnson (drooping sheoak). Since the establishment and subsequent cessation of grazing across

groundwater recharge areas, *Eucalyptus diversifolia* ssp. *diversifolia* Bonpl. (coastal white mallee) has expanded in range. Furthermore, the non-native *Pinus halepensis* Mill. (Aleppo pine), originally planted as a wind-break, has since naturalised and invaded significant areas of the rocky, shallow, calcrete soils often characteristic of karstic systems. Invasion by an aggressive exotic plant species into this water-limited environments was commonly believed to further exacerbate water scarcity issues.

Fundamentally, this thesis seeks to address concerns regarding the effect native trees, or encroachment by exotic trees, exerts over groundwater flux in a water-limited environment. The belief that the vegetation will detrimentally affect the groundwater charge rates inevitably attracts debate regarding the ability of active management of vegetation to improve water yield.

I applied both plot-scale and remotely-sensed methodologies to examine total evapotranspiration (*ET*) flux, and used these to construct a water balance for the three tree species in question, as well as for a grassland site. Water use strategies and ecophysiological characteristics were examined using leaf water potential and soil matric potential, and twig water sources were traced using the stable isotopes of water. The funnelling of water from canopies via tree surfaces to enhance infiltrate around the base of tree boles was explored as a mechanism through which soil water content could sustain transpiration during dry periods. Global literature suggested that variability in methodological approach significantly affected the reported results, which I demonstrated using two years of rainfall partitioning data.

The results of this study indicated that *ET* losses from native vegetation associations were equivalent to long term precipitation. Despite a shallow groundwater depth of < 5 m, use of groundwater to sustain transpiration requirements was not clearly demonstrated by the studied tree species, suggesting that while recharge will be reduced by the presence of these trees, *ET* was most likely supported by soil water stores rather than groundwater extraction. The reliance on soil moisture, rather than groundwater, was further supported by actual *ET* remaining well below (one third of) potential *ET*, therefore a significant constraint was evident on the system. However, the encroachment of the invasive *Pinus halepensis* was considered likely to have contributed to declining groundwater levels, based on higher rates of sap flux per unit sapwood area compared to the native species. Comparison of *ET* rates before and after removal of *P. halepensis* suggested an annual water saving of ~ 50 mm; however it was recommended more than two years of post-removal data be used to assess the likelihood of realising long term water savings.

Irrespective of stand and morphological differences, the water use characteristics of the native *E. diversifolia* and *A. verticillata* were remarkably similar , demonstrating the evolutionary capacity of these species to maximise the use of the available precipitation. Furthermore, rainfall channelled as stemflow is believed to play an important ecohydrological role in this environment. Infiltration directly adjacent tree root systems provides a water store which can be used during times of precipitation deficit. In addition, I suggest that the water holding capacity of porous geological substrate has played an important role in buffering inter- and intra-annual rainfall variability and needs to be considered when characterising karstic groundwater systems.

The findings described in this thesis add to our knowledge of evapotranspiration rates of vegetation in semi-arid systems. I have demonstrated the value of using both plot scale field investigation and remotely sensed data to address important knowledge gaps and improve the management of regionally significant groundwater supplies. The results of this research are expected to inform water resource policy as competition for fresh water increases, expected to intensify following predicted climate change scenarios.