Robyn Williams: Super. And, Paul, you've got about two and a half minutes, if I take one and a half minutes to introduce you. Just stand up and steel yourself. In fact, Paul is here today partly because his mum assured the conference organiser's that he's a very good speaker. He hasn't been in the room before with quite so many health professionals, and agreed to appear only after being assured that people in the rural health sector really are concerned about the sustainability of communities in which they live and work. Given the work he does with the Australian Conservation Foundation, he's well qualified to speak on the topic of planning for the R words: resilience and resources in rural Australia. Paul Sinclair.

Planning for the R words: resilience and resources in rural Australia

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Thank you. Thank you for the invitation to speak with you today, and I'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this beautiful country. I must remember never to tell Gordon those intimate things about my mother. We all know that we live in a time of unprecedented crisis, but also of opportunity. The connections between ourselves and nature are being broken. There is a collision occurring between the legacy of our past actions in the environment that have degraded our water, our oceans, our forests, and new challenges brought by climate change caused by our past emissions of pollution into the atmosphere.

There is an urgent need to tackle both forces; both the emissions that have gone into the atmosphere yesterday, today and tomorrow, but also of protecting the natural environments of our country. Unless we do this climate change has the potential to destroy those things that we care deeply about.

The scale of change that we see around us today, whether it's in environment or economics, can seem overwhelming. The scale of the challenges we face can reveal themselves in the smallest of moments, and I would like to recount one of those moments. I will talk largely about the Murray Darling basin, a place that I care deeply about and know well.

This is my daughter down at the Coorong, at the mouth of the Murray River, which is fed from the country up through New South Wales and southern Queensland and up into the Australian alps along the Victorian border. Now, when my daughter went for a swim a little while ago at the Coorong, she came out of the water looking like she'd just been to the fish and chip shop. She was covered in flakes of salt. The water in the Coorong that used to be fresh is now saltier than the sea. Now when people in that area walk around some of their creeks, they're at risk of having the skin on their feet burnt by the acid that is leeching from the soils.

We know that once our country starts to poison us that we are perhaps doing a few things wrong. The swim that my daughter took, those salt flakes that were on her skin, were caused by generations of clearing land, of over-using water, of not caring for the river. The salt on my daughters skin was caused by of generations people not recognising or respecting the interconnections between people and nature.

When you try and explain these things to people, it can get overwhelming. One of the things that I find really useful is to listen to the stories people tell, both as a source of hope and a source of understanding. When I read stories to my kids, great truths are revealed. One story I was reading to them recently called *One Fine Day* about a fox that tips over a pail of milk. The woman who had milked the cow was very angry. She cut off the tail of the fox. The fox was very upset. It's hard to be a decent-looking fox without a big, bushy tail. The fox says to the woman, “Woman, what can I do to get this tail sewed back on?” She said, “It’s simple. You just need to fill the pail of milk.”

So the fox goes to the cow and says, “Cow, cow, what do I need to do to get the milk to get my tail sewed back on?” and the cow says, “Simple. You just need to provide me with grass.” The fox goes to the field. “Field, field, what do I need?” And on and on it goes. There was a whole series of unintended consequences that the fox brought upon himself by tipping over the pail of milk. The fox felt he was trapped in a whole series of destructive connections that there was no way around and, in many ways, that’s same challenge that we have.

When conservationists talk about resilience, what we’re really talking about is trying to re-establish connections to break those negative feedback loops that lead us nowhere, and to create connections between each other and other species that give us some sort of hope.

Well, what happens when an environment loses resilience, when it loses the ability to bounce back from great shocks? A friend of mine, Henry Jones, who’s a professional fisherman down at the Coorong, is a living example of what happens when an ecosystem is pushed beyond its limits. Henry loves Murray Cod. He has fished for them most of his life. He can no longer fish for Murray Cod in the lower lakes of Coorong, because they no longer exist there. They are locally extinct. That has an impact on his livelihood. It has an impact on the way he sees his life now, and the way he sees his prospects for the future.

Resilience is a fancy way of talking about the ability of nature to bounce back from great stress.

You might remember this story, Storm Boy, a great film from the 1970s about a relationship between a boy and a pelican. It’s a story about how the environment is able to replenish itself. I’m going to give the story away. Mr Percival, the pelican, gets shot at the end of the story, and an Aboriginal guy who’s hanging out down at the Coorong says to Storm Boy, “Don’t worry. There’ll always be another Mr Percival,” that the world, given the chance, will replenish itself. That’s a resilient ecosystem.

But by taking over 75 per cent of the water from the Murray River system, by destroying many of the forests that were on its banks, we have destroyed the resilience of the river system that the world can no longer replenish itself, so that our waterbird populations have been reduced by about 80 per cent.

These relationships between people and nature are deep. The Ngarrindjeri people who live at the Coorong talk about pelicans as being the place that guides to them the places where they need to bury their dead. In European culture, where I’m from, pelicans are a symbolic animal used in many medieval churches as a sign of Christ’s love for people. They’re a symbol of our connection to the world, and in the Coorong, the pelicans are no longer able to breed as they once did. We’ve destroyed the rivers resilience.

Well, how are health, climate change, and the natural environment connected? They are connected in fundamental ways that many of us take for granted. When it rains on the land and the water runs into the rivers, the rivers take the nutrients and the goodies out to the estuaries and the oceans. It is one interconnected system. River systems need to rise up out of their banks onto their floodplains, the land next to them, to sustain themselves. They are an interconnected system, and they are fundamental to the health and wellbeing of our community. We know about what some of the direct impacts of climate change will be on human health, and you’ve been discussing these impacts over the last couple of days, and these are very well-known impacts. But I would like to just mention quickly perhaps some impacts of climate change on the environment that you may not have considered.

Something like a cone snail, for example—and there’s a beautiful sculpture of a cone snail down on the foreshore here in Cairns. Cone snails produce a peptide that biomedical researchers found is more powerful than morphine, but not addictive, and doesn’t have the tolerance features of morphine. Now, one of the challenges we have with climate change is that the oceans, because they are becoming saturated with CO2, may no longer be able to allow marine life to form shells and skeletons. So one of the impacts of climate change potentially on human health is this animal that could be very important in advancing pain relief in people will be lost because they can no longer build their own shells. No shell. No cone snail. No new wonder drug for people.

Now, we've all felt like this on some days. This is a Southern Gastric Brooding Frog. This frog was being studied by biomedical researchers to look at potential cures for stomach ulcers, because of the way that the frog gestated its young in its stomach. That research has now ceased because the frog has become extinct because its habitat has been lost. These are all connections between species, other species and environments that underpin our own health, but also our own identities.

If you remember that story *One Fine Day*, about connections that are broken, the fox that spills the pail of milk, and he can't find anyone to break the connection, the fox wanders along through the woman, the cow, the field, the stream to provide the water to the grass and, finally, he finds one person who is prepared to give something for nothing. That person gives a bead that he can give to a beautiful woman that enables him to get the water for the grass, milk from the cow, back goes the milk into the bucket, and his tail gets sewed back on.

One Fine Day is really a story about re-establishing connections. That is our fundamental challenge, about how we re-establish connections between each other and the natural world.

There are big things that are, at the moment, impediments to remaking these connections. There's an absence of the national and international architecture needed to actually tackle fundamental things like climate change.

There's a failure of State and Commonwealth governments to deliver co-ordinated action to address the causes of decline. We are very good at looking at symptoms but we are less good at tackling the causes of environmental decline.

We have an incremental approach to change that actually ignores the pace of ecological and social collapse We continue to think that change is occurring on a linear progression, that it is happening gradually, where we all know that, in many communities, change is happening dramatically right now, and our response needs to mirror the significance of that change.

So what can we do?

We need to get an international and national framework to deal with climate change. We need to reduce the emissions that are produced into the atmosphere by at least 30 to 40 per cent by 2020. I'm told that this is Copenhagen. There's a big meeting in Copenhagen where people will sit around a table and talk on and on in November/December this year. Our governments actually need to make an international agreement that can help the world reduce its greenhouse emissions.

We need also to look at economic opportunities from the valuation of carbon for remote and rural communities. There are significant opportunities to gain from the protection of our tropical savannas and our rangelands for their carbon storage and sequestration ability, their ability to draw down that carbon that you and I put up into the atmosphere yesterday.

The thing that will reduce our communities' ability to make the most of those opportunities is the capacity of those communities. People need to be able to care for the land to maximise the benefits that will accrue from carbon trading, and unless those communities have adequate health and education resources, they are not going to have the capacity to fully maximise the benefits from those changes.

Australia manages an area of ocean that is twice the size of the Australian continent. It is enormously important for a whole range of security reasons, for the fish we enjoy on our dining table. We desperately need to establish areas of marine-protected areas as beachheads against climate change. Marine-protected areas are areas where we may allow no fishing. We might create sanctuaries where fish are able to breed up again and move out of those sanctuaries back into the coastal areas where we can enjoy the natural replenishment of the ocean. These are fundamental changes where the ACF are working in the south-west of Western Australia, in the Coral Sea, to try and establish core areas that will be the sanctuaries from where our wildlife can move out from and survive climate change.

There are new opportunities to think about how we can reward people for caring for our river systems and our land that will mean that regional communities have an opportunity to generate new sorts of income, whether it's from stewardship payments or incentives for reducing the amount of salinity and nutrients that leeches from the soil.

I would like to give you one example of where the ACF is working to try and put resilience into practice.

There community is up near Swan Hill, between Swan Hill and Kerang in the Torrumbury irrigation area on the Murray River. Now, this community has thought long and hard about its future, and it sees its future as fairly bleak, given the impacts of climate change on the amount of water that's going to be available for irrigation in their area, and they've sat down as a community to develop a plan for how they can change their irrigation practices, change the way that they use land and water, that will give their community a fighting chance to deal with the environmental degradation and climate change challenges.

What they've done is sit down and look at, "How is that we can close down parts of our irrigation system that are no longer viable, and make sensible investments into the areas of our irrigation systems that are viable?" They've seen an opportunity. There's over $10 billion available from the federal government to make these sorts of changes, and they want to position their local community to get hold of that money to help them make the change they need, to be genuinely sustainable

Now, to do that, they worked hard to build relationships with the Australian Conservation Foundation, but also with other people, because they recognised that they had to work beyond their immediate scale of influence. It was no good just trying to influence the people who lived in their area. They needed to build relationships with other people who could move their plan through the political decision-making process to bring about change. And, importantly, this community also recognised that they actually had to lead government to solutions. They had to tell government what the solution for their regional community was, not wait for government to tell them.

The thing that is missing from this project is the investment into the people of the area. We can't pretend that we can solve the environmental problems without addressing the capacity of local communities. What the ACF is interested to see is, if we have $10 billion sitting there for reform water management in Australia, how can we co-ordinate that investment in a way that improves the opportunity of people to be sustainable into the future, but also think about how we can make investments into the towns of this area so that the people will be available in the area to manage the land and the water.

All these landscapes are deeply human places. The most unnatural Murray River system that you could have would be one that didn't have people living next to it. The Murray has always sustained people for thousands and thousands of years. We need to think about how we can work together to leverage government resources and resources from private enterprise to improve our health, education and environmental outcomes. We need to lead governments to solutions.

The Australian Conservation Foundation can't do that alone, and that's one of the reasons why I'm here today. The health sector can't do it alone. The education sector can't do it alone. It's an integrated problem. It requires an integrated solution. We know that we need to see large-scale government investment to build the resilience of priority ecosystems in communities, not over the next 20 years, over the next three years. If we're serious about the impacts of climate change, then we need to act now. We don't need lots and lots of reports to tell us what's wrong. We know what's wrong. We need on-the-ground action to actually make change happen.

Communities need to be supported to build regional-scale solutions. This is a problem that starts locally, moves through regional levels, national levels, and international levels. If we're serious about tackling climate change, and we need solutions that are able to move from the top to the bottom, from the bottom to the top. And regional communities are absolutely critical in making sure that the solutions that are developed by government are relevant, are real, and can be delivered.

We actually need co-operative federalism—agreement between the commonwealth and states—in a way that actually works. I think one way that the health sector and your IT people could make money is setting up a dating service between the commonwealth and the states, where they could come together online, meet each other and build a bit of love in the room. The amount of hostility and chest-beating that goes on between the state and commonwealth on these issues is appalling. We actually need people to work together. We need unprecedented co-operation to make change happen.

I'd like to finish by reminding you about the story *One Fine Day*—a story about a fox who has its tail cut off, who finds one good person who gives something for nothing and who changes a set of negative feedback loops, a whole lot of destructive connections. By giving something for nothing, a whole series of positive connections are re-made, and the world is set right.

And I'll return to my friend, Henry Jones, as an example, and it's an example, I think, of why remote and regional Australia continues to be a source of inspiration and hope for the Australian Conservation Foundation. Recently, I was at a meeting with Henry with a whole lot of irrigators from New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria, and we were having a large and animated discussion and debate—some would even call it an argument—about how much water we should put back into the river system so that places like Henry's environment could continue to live.

Henry argued all day with these people then, that night, he went out fishing. He fished all night, and he caught a good catch of Coorong Mullet. He brought those fish back the next day, and he and his wife Gloria cooked up a barbecue. It was a beautiful barbecue. They cooked up the Coorong Mullet with a couple of nice salads. And people who were at the meeting arguing with Henry the day before sat there and politely took their plate of Coorong Mullet and started eating it, as you do, in unusual company. But the taste of the fish exploded in their mouth, and they started cawing at it. It was so beautiful.

The meal that Henry and Gloria had cooked for these people was extraordinary. And when I got to Melbourne, I rang Henry and I said, "That was a really extraordinary thing that you did." It was an act of generosity to other people that left open the possibility of positive change. It was an act of generosity to other people, that kept open the possibility we could also be generous to other species who depend on the river and its environment.

Thank you for the invitation to speak with you today.