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Red sand to orange oasis: Establishing Cooltong at the cusp of environmentalism

Taking the establishment of Cooltong in the South Australian Riverland in 1950 as a case study, this paper will explore how dominant notions of development and settlement changed in response to emerging concerns about the sustainability of resources, particularly in arid and semi-arid environments. Cooltong (a small, predominantly citrus-producing town in the semi-arid, inland Murray region of South Australia) was established as a soldier settlement, and an expansion of the Renmark irrigation area that had been developed in 1887. The Murray River is the 'lifeblood' of settlement in the Riverland region, continuing to supply most domestic and agricultural water requirements. Consequently, issues relating to the river's capacity to provide adequate water for expanding settlements and irrigation areas became more apparent as climate pressures and resource limits were identified throughout the twentieth century. Colonial notions of land settlement and economic development came into conflict with emerging concerns for ecology and the environment. These competing ideologies generated tensions and debate.

Newspaper articles, and written accounts of Cooltong residents from the 1950s are analysed to reveal how multi-scaled influences on growers in the semi-arid Murray Valley impacted their attitudes, actions, and farms. Cooltong, therefore, provides an insight into developing concerns over the vulnerability of resources in Australia, especially in the face of ongoing growth and climate pressures. These emerging narratives and ideologies generated new challenges, opportunities and tensions for horticulturalists and their communities.