

PEEL-HARVEY

The Decline and Rescue of an Ecosystem

Excerpt from book by Keith Bradby
1997



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Issue 11 of 22

Local Concern Grows

Excerpts from Chapter 5 'The End of Certainty: Tackling the problem, 1970s', pp. 90-94.

'In the Peel-Harvey area, the crisis in the estuary led to a rise in local environmental awareness. But the process of turning that awareness into action was a difficult one.'

'By the early 1970s, everyone knew the estuary was in decline. Theories on the causes for this had been expounded and discussed for decades. Virtually all came down to three major concerns. First, water flow had been altered through widespread drainage works on the Swan Coastal Plain and the construction of large dams in the Darling Scarp. Second, the Mandurah Channel, that pathway between estuary and ocean, did not flush the estuary sufficiently to cope with the changes occurring in the catchment. And third, animal manures and chemical fertilisers were washing in from the farmlands and polluting the water.'

'While there was local anger at the construction of the Serpentine Dam and the changes to river flow this had caused, people were generally not trying to place any blame. Instead, they were seeking some certainty in their understanding of what was going wrong, and what might be done to remedy it. Overall, the feeling was that 'someone needed to do something'.'

'In November 1970, the problem escalated when thick green sludge covered more than 6 kilometres of the Serpentine River at Barragup. Analysis of river water confirmed that another species of weed had entered the estuarine system: *Nodularia*, one of the [toxic] microscopic blue-green algae. It bloomed in mid-November, and the waters were filled with dead algae that floated downstream to form a crust over large parts of Peel Inlet.'

'From 1970 onwards, the state of the estuary became the focus of numerous dramatic front-page stories. When the summer of 1972 came along and still no concerted action had been taken, Mandurah's *Coastal Districts Times* took it upon itself to launch a public campaign. That January, the smelly weed season was graced with a major article entitled "Deathknell Warning by Fishermen", followed shortly afterwards by a story on farmer outrage at the Public Works Department's clearing of trees along the Murray River.

'With still no commitment from the government, the following summer was launched with the front-page story "Waterway Becoming a Quagmire". This article was the first of a flurry of press stories on the decline of the estuary. Within a month, other local papers, as well as Perth newspapers and television and radio stations, covered the issue, and the matter was aired in State Parliament.'

'While politicians and public servants expressed their concern, and assured the public that action would be taken, none was, and there was a growing sense of frustration and disillusionment locally. As one resident wrote in December [1972]:

"I have spoken to individual government officials and have had varying replies – all being very disinterested and negative. Most have claimed that they don't even know what the pollution is or what is causing it and one gets the impression that at this stage they couldn't care anyway. Surely in this day and age when we can land a man on the moon someone could analyse a bucketful of muck to determine at least what it is and how to eradicate it."

1972 Front page articles in Coastal District Times a) 21 January; and b) 17 November. Courtesy of Mandurah's Coastal Times

DEATHKNELL WARNING BY FISHERMEN

"MANDURAH'S tourist and fishing industries in the future are doomed if the weed and silt build-up in the estuary continues to go unchecked."

Chronology

24 Nov 1972: Minister for Environmental Protection informs the Legislative Assembly that rotting algae is a serious pollution problem in the Peel Inlet.

30 Nov 1972: Major *West Australian* story on the 'Decline of the Peel Inlet' and an editorial calling for action.

1 Dec 1972: Peel Inlet Conservation Advisory Committee adopts a three step action program.

2011: "Proposed actions to protect the Estuary have been described during the past 20 years. Now is the time to stop talking and make some real changes that will protect our waterways." (Coral Richards, Chairwoman Regional Development Australia [WA])

WATERWAY BECOMING QUAGMIRE

Says Howard Wilcockson

MANDURAH: Decaying weed which is rapidly turning the State's best inland waterway into a stinking quagmire can be expected to be even worse this summer.

a)

b)