PEEL-HARVEY

The Decline and Rescue of an Ecosystem

Analysis Paralysis

100 - 105

Excerpts from Chapter 5, 'The End of

Certainty: Tackling the problem, 1970s', pp.

'In 1970, the Health Surveyors of both

the Murray and Mandurah Shires had

commenced regular water sampling, partly

because of concern at increasing bacterial

contamination of river water, but also as

part of their involvement with the Peel Inlet

Conservation Advisory Committee. Several

small studies were conducted in the early

1970s, and by 1974 some definite conclusions

had been drawn. In July that year, a report

prepared by the Department of Fisheries and

Fauna confirmed that phosphorous levels in

the estuary were high by world standards, and

were probably responsible for the increased

algal growth. Samples from the Serpentine

and Harvey rivers held the most phosphorous

the highest levels being recorded during the

'So by the end of 1974, the immediate cause

of the estuary's decline had been reasonably

hindsight, it seems curious that programs to

reduce the amount of nutrients reaching the

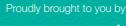
With

well established and documented.

estuary were not quickly put in place.'

months of greatest river flow.'

Excerpt from book by Keith Bradby





www.peel-harvey.org.au

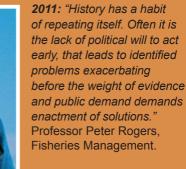
Issue 12 of 22

Chronology

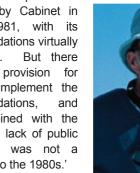
Nov 1970: President of the Mandurah Professional Fishermen's Association guoted in the local press: '...fishermen were convinced the use of superphosphate and fertilisers on farm land and the water run-off in winter accelerated algae growth'.

Dec 1972: Peel Inlet Advisory Committee calls for 'a long term biological and hydrological study of the estuary and its associated waters to work out remedial action'.

leads more than 20 senior scientists in a study of the estuary, published as the Peel-Harvey Estuarine System Study.



1976 - Nov 1980: Dr Ernest Hodgkin



Sir Charles Court, reporting that he was: "... greatly dismayed at the apparent lack of interest shown in the report, despite the fact that Dr Hodgkin had stressed the urgency of the situation during his address"." 'With the prodding of Tuckey and others, the EMAC report was approved by Cabinet in

relevant to the study.

meeting of Cabinet Ministers holding portfolios

'Owen Tuckey, by then chair of the Peel Inlet

Management Authority, also attended this

briefing, and it left him very concerned that

positive action was as far away as ever. He

sent a long and detailed letter to Premier

August 1981, with its recommendations virtually unchanged. was no provision for funds to implement the recommendations. this, combined with the delays and lack of public discussion. was not a good start to the 1980s.'

that the main cause of the weed problem was the excess of phosphorus in the estuary water, and that superphosphate used on coastal plain farmland was the principal source of the phosphorus. Much of this annual nutrient input stayed in the estuary, with very little flushed to the sea. The critical conclusion of the study was that "The only satisfactory long term solution to the problem will be to substantially reduce the availability of nutrients, especially phosphorus, to algae".'

the study, together with a number of firm

to focus on coastal issues. 'Unfortunately, recommendations for management.' 'In there was not a similar level of interest early June 1981. Ernest Hodgkin and other scientists involved in the study, along with in the catchment of the estuary. Despite members of the EPA, briefed a special the obvious conclusion that changes in

the estuary were the result of changes in the catchment, the initial studies were to concentrate largely on the waterbody itself.'

'In 1976, the EPA finally commissioned a major study of the Peel-Harvey estuary, and Dr Ernest Hodgkin was appointed to head it. The study ran for four years. Its objectives were "to further our understanding of the working estuarine ecosystems in south-western WA ... and to determine the cause and mechanisms of weed growth and accumulation in Peel Inlet".'

'By the final year of the study, it was concluded

In 1973, the Environmental Protection 'EMAC prepared its summary report on Authority had established an Estuarine and Marine Advisory Committee (EMAC)