

PEEL-HARVEY

The Decline and Rescue of an Ecosystem

Excerpt from book by Keith Bradby
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Fumbling Forward

Excerpts from Chapter 6, 'Fumbling Forward: Tackling the problem, 1980s', pp. 109-111, 124.

'Just as a range of waterbirds wing in from Siberia each year to feed on and around the Peel-Harvey estuary, each summer during the 1980s a politician or two could be found on the water's edge, poking nervously at the piles of weed, and promising a solution would be found. To the local people, however, it seemed that the problem was being obscured by political, scientific and bureaucratic fumbling, and that action was still a long way away.

'In December 1981, more than twelve months after Ernest Hodgkin had delivered his report [*Peel-Harvey Estuarine System Study*], funds of half a million dollars were finally allocated for another two and a half years of investigations into the Peel-Harvey. This happened just in time, as far as Conservation and Environment Minister Gordon Masters was concerned. He told a 300-strong public seminar in Mandurah that he was "relieved" to be able to make the announcement. According to the local press, the announcement took much of the "steam" from those at the meeting, "many of whom were obviously unimpressed with the work done on the estuary and saw the seminar as an opportunity to vent their feelings".

'This feeling of discontent had emerged locally many times before, and was now strengthening. In 1972, local people had been keen to get the

government to 'do something'; to provide the funding that would 'fix the problem'. A decade later, studies were still continuing, while the weed problem was becoming worse.'

'The next decade was to be marked by an increasing gulf between local people, and the researchers and policy-makers who had control of the issue.' 'Researchers came and went, symposiums of academics and senior government officers decided on the next steps to take, Ministers searched for positive announcements to make, and occasionally a public meeting would be held in Mandurah to inform the local community of the progress being made.

'The people of Mandurah, with no role to play other than that of audience, became increasingly vocal and demanded visible results.'

'In mid-February 1982, the new Minister for Conservation and Environment, Ian Laurence, issued a press release reminding Mandurah residents that the government had already spent half a million dollars on the problem, and had committed another half a million for ongoing works. The Labor

Party, then in Opposition, responded to the Minister's press release with a pledge of \$1 million for a three-year research plan for the Peel-Harvey estuary. The bid for votes was on. The seat of Mandurah was marginal, and both parties saw winning it as crucial to their success in the forthcoming election.

'The only action being taken to reduce the weed growth was a fertiliser efficiency program under way with local farmers, and continued weed clearing.'

'None of this reduced local frustration at the continuing problem: *'... it is clear to us, the residents, that because the Department of Conservation and Environment say that they do not have a useful answer, they need to continue research indefinitely. The difficulty is that research is being conducted by academics and Government employees who are interested in problem definition, not in problem solution.'* Peter Beamond, Concerned Citizens of Mandurah, 1983.



Murdoch University researchers sampling fish by seine net in the shallows of the Peel Harvey Estuary. Photo courtesy of P.Coulson.

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Chronology

29 Jan 1982: *Mandurah Advertiser* front page story: 'Black Ooze Poison Gas Strikes – Sickness Where the Wind Blows'. Public Health Department confirms that health problems were associated with prolonged exposure to hydrogen sulphide from rotting weed.

22 Jan 1983: 1,000 people rallied on the Mandurah foreshore to hear politicians pledge to clean up the estuary.

6 Apr 1984: *Coastal Districts Times* front page story 'PIMA Losing Weed Battle': 'Coodanup foreshore looks like a giant septic tank.'

2011: Until we have the people and Governments prepared to realise the enormity of the damage being perpetrated to this precious system, little will be done to stop the pressure of urban sprawl. Sadly, we have yet to realise such areas are the life blood of

our planet and we cannot continue to allow them to be overridden by bad policy and political self preservation." (Pauline Beamond, Mandurah Resident).