

PEEL-HARVEY

The Decline and Rescue of an Ecosystem

Excerpt from book by Keith Bradby
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Sifting Options

Excerpts from Chapter 6, 'Fumbling Forward: Tackling the problem, 1980s', pp. 125-128, 130-131.

Further funding for the Peel-Harvey had been approved by State Cabinet in December 1981, on the basis that while an important phase had been completed [Hodgkin's Peel-Harvey study of 1976-1980], two further phases of action were required. Hodgkin and his team had identified the causes of the problem; Phase 2 would 'Examine the various options for over-coming the algal problem and to identify those which are most effective and practical'. Once this was done, the long-awaited Phase 3 would begin, a phase succinctly described by the Minister for Conservation and Environment as 'Solve the problem'.

The Department of Conservation and Environment and the Public Works Department decided to conduct a feasibility study of suggested management options. A group from The University of Western Australia was commissioned to undertake a detailed analysis of over 100 options. At the same time, economic evaluations of the most likely options were conducted.

The management options were then reviewed by a Policy Advisory Group, and nine options were approved for implementation or final evaluation. In February 1984, Cabinet approved the next phase of the Peel-Harvey

program. Cabinet also established a three-person Project Team from scientists already involved in the program. This group was charged with the responsibility for investigating the nine management options: weed clearing; evaluation of algicides; reduction of phosphorous fertiliser use; addition of bauxite residue; change of land use; an end to further clearing and drain construction; control of other nutrient sources; enlargement of the Mandurah Channel; and construction of a new channel.

In February 1984, at a special function in Mandurah, Premier Burke pledged that extra funds would be made available immediately for the fertiliser efficiency program. He also announced that computer modelling studies carried out during 1983 had shown the problem to be so serious that other actions might also be necessary. *'The most favoured of these involved improving the water exchange of the estuary by major engineering works.'*

The decision to investigate engineering options to flush nutrient-rich water from the estuary was a popular one. Local people had been making such proposals for many years, and a solution of this nature would provide a bonus to the boating community.

By August 1984, the Project Team had prepared its report. On 28 August, the Premier held a meeting with the Mandurah Shire Council, to outline the new plans.

He presented two options and wanted the Council to make a choice. Did it want the government to commit to the \$26 million Dawesville option, or to an \$8 million program of dredging the Mandurah Channel, which it was believed would only partially solve the weed problem. He asked Council to make its decision within two weeks, and stated that if the Dawesville option were chosen, a \$900,000 feasibility study of the proposal would be undertaken.

It was only after extensive and heated argument that the Council agreed to an investigation of the Dawesville option, in a carefully worded motion that stopped short of actually supporting the proposal.

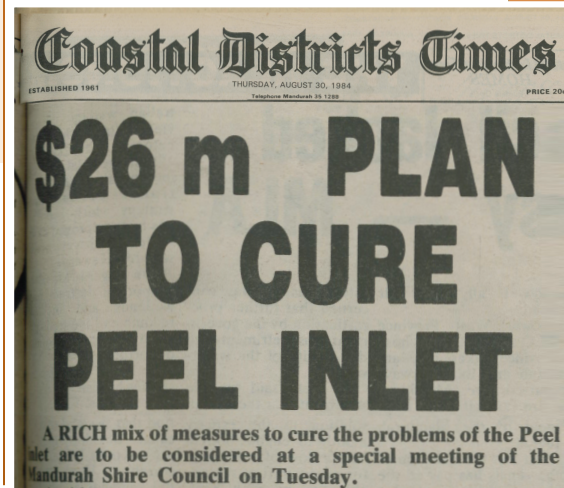
Chronology

8 May 1958: The Minister for Works met with a deputation from Mandurah, who 'desired to know whether there was any prospect of obtaining a permanent opening of the Mandurah Estuary'.

Nov 1982: After listening to a talk by Ernest Hodgkin, Laurie Brown, an engineering assistant in the Public Works Department *'went home ... and developed the concept of putting a "ditch" through the sandhills at Dawesville'*.

30 Aug 1984: *Coastal Districts Times* reported that Len Howard, president of the Peel Preservation Group, supports the Dawesville option: *'Desperate situations call for desperate remedies.'*

2011: *'I believe that the Dawesville Cut decision was the right one. Unfortunately, an important condition to develop a Catchment Management Plan to address the cause of the problem, has still not been fulfilled'*. J.Read, former MLA for Mandurah [1983-89]



1984 front page article in Coastal Districts Times. Courtesy of Mandurah's Coastal Times