

PEEL-HARVEY

The Decline and Rescue of an Ecosystem

Excerpt from book by Keith Bradby
1997

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Assessing Dawesville

Excerpts from Chapter 6, 'Fumbling Forward: Tackling the problem, 1980s', pp. 135, 137-8; and Chapter 7, pp. 147-151.

The decision to proceed with detailed feasibility studies of the Dawesville Channel proposal left the government with an administrative problem. Obviously, a project of this magnitude would require rigorous assessment, to ensure that it did more good than harm to the environment.

A decision was made that the whole management strategy, and not just the engineering option of the Dawesville Channel, would undergo formal environmental assessment. This would enable the level of success of the fertiliser strategy to be balanced against the need for increased flushing of the estuary.

The EPA decided on a two-stage process. The aims of Stage 1 were to analyse the various management strategies, and to gain EPA 'approval in principle' for those considered viable, while Stage 2 would provide a more detailed assessment.

Stage 1, which would culminate in the production of a statutory document called an Environmental Review and Management Program (ERMP), began in 1985 and encompassed all the actions being taken to reach the EPA's stated aim: 'to produce and maintain an estuary system that is visibly clean and healthy and is ecologically healthy and resilient'.

Although the Stage 2 ERMP document was initially scheduled for release by the end of 1986, the document was not completed until May 1988. Farmers in the catchment became uneasy as the much-publicised deadline for the release of the ERMP passed, and a number were left wondering what would be expected of them if the Dawesville Channel did not go ahead.

On 23 May 1988 Premier Peter Dowding released the long-awaited Stage 2 ERMP. This document was based on the assumption that both increased flushing of the estuary and the reduction of nutrient loads to the estuary were necessary if the waterway was to be returned to health and resilience. It presented the case for construction of the Dawesville Channel, outlined a number of measures seen as necessary in the catchment area, and noted the need for continued weed clearing.

While construction of the Dawesville Channel was the major recommendation of the ERMP, only a few groups expressed concern. Local fishermen had always been worried about the impact of the channel. The Peel Preservation Group withdrew its earlier support for the channel, fearing a rapid increase in development pressure around the estuary before the necessary foreshore reserves had been finalised.

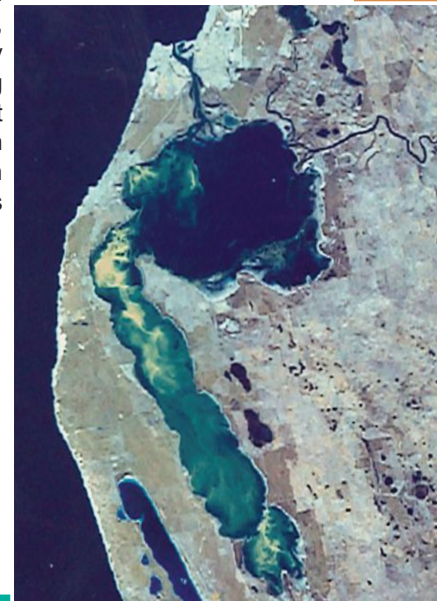
On 14 November 1988, Premier Peter Dowding announced that the EPA had found

the proposals 'environmentally acceptable', subject to a few minor modifications.

Following this announcement of formal approval, the government moved quickly. On 3 January 1989, State Cabinet approved a range of funding and management measures, including the purchase of land surrounding the Dawesville Channel and construction of the channel itself. The total cost of the package was over \$54 million.

On 5 January 1989, Premier Dowding announced that the next state election would be held on 4 February, thereby launching the shortest election campaign in the State's history.

Nodularia bloom in the Peel-Harvey Estuary on 14 December, 1980, before the opening of 'The Cut'. Shows the greatest concentration where the channel was proposed. Imagery courtesy of Peter Sanders of Landgate Satellite Services.



Chronology

Feb 1986: During the 1986 state election period, the dredge *Cooper One* worked its way through the ocean entrance - proof of the promised major engineering works.

10 Jan 1987: The *Western Mail* ran the headline: 'Farms May Go to Save Mandurah', a reference to the Department of CALM's farm forestry proposal, which it hoped would make a major contribution to the catchment effort.

22 Feb 1989: Following the state election, the Dowding Government was quick to reaffirm its commitment to the Dawesville Channel, announcing that excavation would commence by October.

2011: An ERMP for an integrated management strategy (rather than a specific project) was very novel. With the benefit of public input within a single process, the EPA provided advice to Government on a complex suite of issues and potential solutions. That advice proved fundamental to Government's decisions. (Dr Chris Whitaker, Deputy Chairman EPA)

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