

PEEL-HARVEY

The Decline and Rescue of an Ecosystem

Excerpt from book by Keith Bradby
1997

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Catchment battlelines

Excerpts from Chapter 7, 'Solve the Problem: implementing management strategies', pp. 152-155.

By 1989, farmers were the campaign veterans of the Peel-Harvey saga. Even though they represented only one of the many land uses in the area, they had received much of the blame for increasing weed growth. But they had also responded positively to calls for changes to their use of fertilisers.

Exhaustion, fear, paranoia, and the genuine concern of goodwilled citizens were all present during 1989. Farmers felt they were being targeted by increasing restrictions introduced as part of the ministerial conditions [see Chronology]. Of particular concern was the moratorium on clearing and drainage, which was seen as inequitable while major clearing and drainage were being allowed for the expanding suburbs of Mandurah.

The Serpentine-Murray Rural Landholders Committee had formed in March 1987, in order to be a 'united front' through which farmers could prepare their submission on the [government's] Environmental Review and Management Program. In May 1989, the group tried a direct approach to the new Minister for Agriculture Ernie Bridge, and was delighted with the result. Bridge invited the farmers to Perth for a personal meeting, and later in the year accepted their offer of a bus

tour around the district. In November, Bridge offered farmers the opportunity to participate in an independent analysis of the issues concerning them.

In January 1990, Bridge appointed a consultant, Keith Bradby, to work directly with the farmers and to report back to him on the situation. The Minister made it clear that he wanted a direct link between the farmers and himself. By May that year, a brief report was presented to him, recommending a change of direction in the catchment program. Instead of an emphasis on government developing and marketing major solutions to the problems of the estuary, it was proposed that the emphasis should be *'on co-operative development and implementation of a myriad of small solutions'*.

The report's main recommendation was to establish a Community Catchment Centre: *'friendly, inviting and approachable, right in the main street and looking as unlike a government department as we can make it'*.

During 1989, the Department had already started a more cooperative dialogue with farmers, by holding a two-day interactive workshop in Pinjarra involving farmers and heads of the main departments involved in the Peel-Harvey issue. The development of Land Conservation District Committees had been another step in the right direction.

The Minister's insistence on a meaningful community dialogue gave the Department the opportunity it needed to discard the formal processes stipulated by the EPA, and brought efforts in the Peel-Harvey catchment into line with the community-focused approach being taken by the Department elsewhere in the State. By this stage, the Minister was technically in breach of the ministerial conditions, with a number of the required documents not being produced by the set dates while staff gave greater attention to working with landholders. Bridge gave little heed to this technical concern, merely insisting that the farmers' viewpoints be treated with greater respect than in the past.



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Chronology

4 Jan 1989: Environment Minister publishes legally binding Environmental Conditions, including the requirement for an 'integrated catchment management plan' to be prepared by a set date.

3 July 1990: Department of Agriculture circulates draft Environmental Protection Policy for the Peel-Harvey coastal plain catchment to local government for comment.

2011: "The collaborative work with the community was empowering and saw over 56 groups formed in the Peel,

giving rise to a community driven approach to landcare supported by professional facilitators." Thelma Crook, former employee Department of Water (previously Water and Rivers Commission).

14 Sept 1990: Murray Shire President Mike Greenup and Agriculture Minister Ernie Bridge jointly conduct the opening ceremony for the Community Catchment Centre in Pinjarra. Courtesy Mandurah Telegraph.