

PEEL-HARVEY

The Decline and Rescue of an Ecosystem

Excerpt from book by Keith Bradby
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Working with farmers

Excerpts from Chapter 7, 'Solve the Problem: implementing management strategies', pp. 156; 160-161.

As he opened the new Community Catchment Centre, Agriculture Minister Ernie Bridge was confident enough to claim that: *'Where a few years ago it was even suggested that agriculture might be phased out of the catchment because of environmental pressures, the Government and the community are now securing a solid future for farming, by giving farmers a chance to develop their own solutions.'*

Drain management was the first major issue to be tackled by the new alliance of farmers and Community Catchment Centre staff.

Within a month of their opening day [Sept. 1990], Centre staff were faced with a choice: either to side with the farmers, or to behave in the careful and cautious manner expected of them by their colleagues in government. They chose to work with the farmers, and in mid-October helped construct two unauthorised locks across Mealup Drain. This style of direct action had a number of immediate effects. Water banked up for almost 3 kilometres behind each lock, creating a haven for ducks and other waterbirds just as the local wetlands were drying up with the advent of summer. In fact, the water banked up beyond

the boundaries of the farm on which the locks had been constructed, and the owner, Andrew McCormack, found himself having to visit his neighbours and explain where all the water was coming from. To his delight, he found they were also keen to improve the drain, and within the week a small band of neighbours had voted to become the Mealup Catchment Group, and to work on improving the environmental and agricultural management of the drain.

There was some resistance from the Water Authority to this wave of activity. The engineering traditions that had formed since the swamplands of the Harvey had first been drained were finally being challenged, and for many in the Water Authority it was a difficult period of adjustment. Andrew McCormack, who had taken over as chairman of the influential Serpentine-Murray Rural Landholders Committee, was quick to press home the farmer's viewpoint: *'We are continually told that the weed in the estuary is caused by nutrients from farmland. It is a simple fact that these nutrients can't get to the estuary unless carried there by water. The bulk of that water moves through a drainage system developed many years ago without due regard for its environmental implications.'*

At a time when farmers are being asked to change their traditional farming systems to

help the estuary, we think it appropriate that the Water Authority also review its traditional operations.'

Before long, other groups had formed, with colourful names like the Bandicoot Brook Landcare Group and the Green Stream Team. Within four years, more than thirty such groups had come together to work on their landcare issues, with most effort focused on improving environmental management of local drains.

Even with this high level of community support and enthusiasm, the task may take many years. By 1995, only about 150 kilometres had been streamlined [rehabilitated], and there is more than 2 000 kilometres of waterway in the coastal plain section of the catchment.



By the 1990s, community science had displaced the earlier emphasis on highly technical monitoring programs. Data collected by groups such as this were passed directly to local government and other land managers, empowering the local community to design its own management solutions. (Courtesy Thelma Crook).

Chronology

June 1991: Launch of the 'Starve the Autumn Slug' campaign, which injected a lighter tone into catchment management efforts. This character was named after the 'slug' of nutrient-rich water that flows after the autumn break.

26 Nov 1991: Major forum of landholders and agencies held with the aim of developing a cooperative approach.

Dec 1992: Peel-Harvey Environmental Protection Policy gazetted.

2011: "I'm very pleased in the change in farming culture that is seeing farmers working to solve their part of the problem.

Soil testing is leading to better management of pasture through a decrease in fertiliser usage and increase in liming programs. The lock in Mealup Drain is still in place and continues to sustain farming and wetlands well into the Autumn. It is a pity the Community Catchment Centre has gone, it could help with emerging urban development problems, including the increase in small lifestyle blocks." Andrew McCormack, local farmer.