

PEEL-HARVEY

The Decline and Rescue of an Ecosystem

Excerpt from book by Keith Bradby

1997

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Issue 1 of 22

How Good it Was

Keith Bradby, author of 'Peel-Harvey: The Decline and Rescue of an Ecosystem' (1997), draws together excerpts from Chapters 2 and 4 of the book to reflect on the estuary and its rivers in the early years of European settlement.

While researching this book I was amazed at how hard it was to find appreciative words written by explorers and early settlers about the natural beauty and abundant wild life of the estuary and its rivers. Life must have been much tougher then: I remember one early diary entry that ignored the beauty of a flock of swans at sunset, but noted what a good dinner they would make. In the book I drew on the few words I could find that gave a window into the former serenity and richness, like those describing Alexandra Hasluck's childhood holidays on the Murray around 1918:

It had a quality of absolute pristine freshness, belonging to the morning of creation. We bathed in the greeny-brown water, delicious bathing as there were warm springs rising here and there from the river bed to titillate and caress the body. We fished. We sailed on the estuary, coming home before the wind, backed by fiery-fingered sunsets, the water chuckling as we flew, and dolphins frolicking round and under the bows... prawning parties at night on the snow-white estuary sands, the driftwood fires flaming, lighting up the strange shapes of the tea-trees... [p. 39]

In 1915 another child's memorable experience, probably at the entrance channel, was recorded by Ruby Fairbridge:

One evening after dark Kingsley [Ruby's husband] took Snowy Wilkinson with him to the sea-shore and they each threw in heavy lines with big King-fish hooks. After a very few minutes Kingsley saw Snowy, who was very small and light, being hurled down to the water, calling anxiously "I can't hold it, Sir." Kingsley rushed to the rescue, caught hold of the line, and at the same moment felt a tremendous tug on his own. Then began quite a struggle and between them they landed a 58lb Kingfish and a horrid looking Tiger shark weighing about 130lb. [p. 41]

Other statements in the book describe, from a more utilitarian perspective, the sights we will never see:

'Fish were caught in both the sea and estuary. In their heyday, the canneries and iceworks were an impressive sight. A group of Parliamentarians visiting the area in 1898 was taken into a preserving factory which... was simply a mountain of tins. Huge pyramids of schnapper cutlets, whiting, herring and bream, to say nothing of a ton of vegetables, and a few thousand wild duck enclosed in metal...

'At the Murray River Freezing Works, they entered the cold storage rooms and saw some great pike... like

novelties in walking sticks... stacked like so much firewood; and there, leaning up in the corner, are a few dozen gigantic kingfish... Big flathead and skipjack and taylor [sic] are hanging about the walls and from the ceiling, and herring and pilchard and trout have all places set apart for them.' [p. 33]

In the face of such abundance, what an empty place our crowded estuary now seems. As I note in the book, 'The rivers, the wetlands and the flocks of waterbirds that we marvel at today are only a pale shadow of what once existed.' [p. 77]

There are people alive who remember the natural riches of the Peel-Harvey - perhaps there is some unfinished business here: gathering stories from our oldest citizens to appreciate the Peel-Harvey we once had, and the one we have now.



Chronology

1829-30: settlement begins with the discovery of the Serpentine River and Thomas Peel's selection of Serpentine farm, Peel's first attempt at agriculture, before focusing in the Mandurah area.

1836: Lieutenant Bunbury writes of 'The great Rock Cod', probably the Kingfish, constantly seen making their way up the Inlets from the sea towards the estuaries of the Murray. The Natives spear them in great numbers as they cross the shoal bars.'

2011: 'There are 11 of the original 200 commercial fishing licenses left in the Peel-Harvey. I have seen a huge change in fish numbers and biodiversity, particularly since the opening of the Dawesville Channel, but very little monitoring has been done despite it being a condition of its construction. How can we plan for future usage without this data?'

B. Tatham, commercial fisherman 1974 to current

Photo, courtesy of Mandurah Community Museum, is a morning's catch at McCulloch's Jetty in 1916 that is ready to go into Tuckey's Cannery. It is checked by Fisheries Inspector Wally Edwards (L) and the fishermen (L-R) are Scottie Rodien, Sam Renfrey, John and Eric Eacott