

PEEL-HARVEY

The Decline and Rescue of an Ecosystem

Excerpt from book by Keith Bradley
1997



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Stories of hope

In the mid-1990s, when I was writing this book, many exciting environmental activities were underway in the catchment. Below I recap some of what I witnessed.

Excerpts from Chapter 9, 'Flowing into the Future: Stories of hope, stories of caution', pp. 203-6.

All the waterways now have their local champions – people prepared to repair the damage caused by past practices, and to develop new ways of farming and living on the coastal plain.

Farmers along the Serpentine have banded together to see a return of fish, particularly freshwater cobbler, to the river between Serpentine Falls and where the river becomes a constructed drain. The group includes farmers like Eric Senior, who witnessed the de-snagging of the river during the 1930s, and who remembers when the river was healthy and full of large fish. Work has begun on planting trees and shrubs along the drains that flow into the river, and an ecologist has been employed to assist the group re-create the river habitats that once existed.

West of Pinjarra, the Barragup Swamp is being restored by a small band of dedicated smallholders. The swamp, important as a breeding ground for yellow billed spoonbill and other waterbirds, started losing its trees in the late 1970s, as water-tables rose following clearing.

Adjoining the south side of Peel Inlet, the Robert Bay Drain is being modified to restore the Carrabungup wetlands, winter home to over 20 000 waterbirds, and part of the 'Duck Pool' that Owen Tuckey remembered so vividly from his boyhood. Degraded after decades of drainage and grazing, the wetland is being restored by government wildlife officers working in partnership with local farmers.

Fishermen's Road at Coolup is another example. All the larger drains are now fenced off from stock, and young trees and shrubs are showing their leaves above the fencelines. In wetland after wetland, waterbirds nest on small islands custom-built for their use. Road verges, once burnt annually, are now carefully tended to remove grassy weeds and restore the wildflowers and small shrubs.

By the end of 1995, there were over fifty landcare and environmental groups undertaking hands-on environmental work in the coastal plain section of the Peel-Harvey catchment. The approach being taken during the 1990s could hardly be more different than that promoted during the 1980s. The narrow focus on phosphorous and fertiliser management has been replaced by a broad environmental awareness. Catchment management has

changed from a concept focused on the health of the estuary to a series of loosely connected work programs that improve the health of the catchment. There is no single document or organisation, but a vigorous flowering of diverse groups and interests scattered across the landscape. Government agencies have changed their emphasis from providing direction to providing assistance.

It has been an exciting change to how we, as a society, regard and manage the landscape around us. But despite the effort and the visible achievements, the work of repair has only just begun. Dead and dying trees still dot the landscape; bare, eroded drains can still be found; and on the edge of the spreading towns, wetlands are still being filled and built upon.



Circa 1980 – Students at Serpentine Primary School plant trees designed to transform a derelict block. The results were being carefully monitored, and shared with schools around the world via the Internet. (Courtesy Alcoa of Australia)

Chronology

Feb 1992: Community Environment Officer appointed by the Shires of Murray and Serpentine-Jarrahdale – one of the first positions of this type in WA.

1993: With the backing of the wider community, fifteen young unemployed people were assembled into a Harvey River repair team, removing rubbish and weeds upstream and downstream of the diversion drain over a six month period. This was the first of a number of such programs in the catchment.

1994: Alcoa launched its 'Wetlands, Rivers and Habitats' funding program for local landcare groups, involving the annual distribution of over \$200 000 every year for practical projects.

2011: *There's much to be learnt from the 1980s and 90s. "Ecological repair needs time and persistence. The community is demonstrating long-term commitment and community champions old and new remain but, like the System, are almost in a state of neglect by Government. Assistance, both in people and funding, has declined enormously. The State no longer funds core monitoring. Only a long-term collaborative effort will ensure the ecosystem is healthy. We need it to support our lifestyle as well as the amazing wildlife that is part of it, including the migratory birds who fly 14,000km here for their annual summer holiday each year."* Kim Wilson, Program Manager, PHCC.