

PEEL-HARVEY

The Decline and Rescue of an Ecosystem

Excerpt from book by Keith Bradley
1997



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The First Protection

The first legal protection for Peel-Harvey fish stocks is outlined in the following excerpts from Chapter 2 'Claimed and Tamed: The process of European settlement', pp. 34-36, and Chapter 4, p.76.

'[T]here is considerable evidence that by the end of the century there were less fish, and they were smaller. The 1898 annual report of the new Fisheries Department reported: "Though these waters abound with almost every species of estuarine fish, indiscriminate netting, and the neglect of measures proper to maintaining the continuity of supply, were leading to so great a depletion of fish fauna that it became necessary to place such restrictions upon netting as would eventually restore these waters to their normal productiveness."

'With the decline in the fishery, boats had to travel further for a smaller load, and cannery operators that had filled a tin with just one mullet, with some left over, now needed two or three fish to fill a tin.' As one fisher noted [1906], "We have now to catch six or seven fish to equal one fish in the old days ... When I first came here (1874) 600 or 700 fish would be a boat-load. Now you have to catch 3,000 to load a boat."

'Local fishers came up with several reasons for the decline in the fishery: too many fishers, the use of small-mesh nets by Greek and Italian fishers (there were significant

racial tensions at the time [1906]), and the disturbance caused to fish schools by the increase in boating and fishing in the estuary.'

'The decline in fish numbers was probably not as simple as it might seem. Estuarine fish populations can be subject to long cycles of both scarcity and abundance. Most species are prolific breeders, and juvenile fish are recruited from the ocean each year. Within six months of concerns being expressed by fishery officials, it was reported that large quantities of fish were being dumped at sea by the canneries, due to a lack of markets. It seems likely that fish stocks, or at least fish sizes, had begun to decline, but that the inevitable seasonal variations were masking the impact. Fishing was also becoming less profitable, particularly through competition from imports and a cutthroat marketing system.'

'Specific regulations governing the Peel-Harvey ... were first gazetted in February 1898. Fishers and their boats were to be licensed, limitations were placed on net sizes, legal minimum sizes were introduced for fish, and, importantly, the rivers, deltas and entrance channel of the Peel-Harvey were closed to all netting. One of the State's first Fisheries Inspectors was stationed in Mandurah in early 1898.'

'[A] legal challenge to the regulations was mounted in 1898 by prominent fisher and cannery operator Charles Tuckey. Tuckey claimed a legal right to use nets in the rivers, based on agreement reached between him and a Mr Murray who, it seemed, owned the Serpentine River ... [having] purchased that section of Peel's Location 16. Murray contended that he owned the land and the river, and it seems that in law he did. The Crown Solicitor expressed the opinion that Peel's original grant included the "ownership in fee of the soil or bed of the Serpentine River" and that "the owners cannot be prevented from doing what they please with the fish in that river". The Crown Commissioner for Lands replied, in visible anguish, "Have the Government no Riparian Rights?"'



Peak catches of 5,000 tins a day from the Tuckey's cannery fed hungry miners on the goldfields and were exported from the colony, but catches soon dwindled – photo courtesy of the Mandurah Community Museum.

Chronology

Aug 1897: Chief Inspector of Fisheries, L. Thompson, visited Mandurah and noted that 'the canning works were idle owing to the scarcity of fish'.

Feb 1898: Gazetted of regulations banning fishing by means of a net or similar for a period of two years in Mandurah channel and estuarine reaches of the rivers.

Oct 1906: Joint Select Committee Appointed to Inquire into the Fishing Industry hears evidence in Mandurah.

2008-09: State of the Fisheries Report 2008-9 – New fishing restrictions have been imposed based on the fact that "the Estuary has been identified as being at severe risk due to external factors"

29 Sept, 2009: "The Western Australian Planning Commission purchased 7.5km of the Serpentine River between Lake Goegrup and the Estuary. The privately owned foreshore and riverbed was identified in the Peel Region Scheme as Regional Open Space to form part of the proposed Peel Region Park." Tim Hillyard, WAPC Property Services Manager