

PEEL-HARVEY

The Decline and Rescue of an Ecosystem

Excerpt from book by Keith Bradby
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The Cut Happens

Excerpts from Chapter 8, 'From Estuary to Ocean: the Dawesville Channel', pp.183, 185-9, 191-2 and 195.

In July 1990, State Cabinet resolved to confirm publicly the government's intention of proceeding with the Dawesville Channel, with a five-year construction program due to commence in 1991. However, it stopped short of allocating funds for the work, leaving the project surrounded by a cloud of uncertainty.

The impetus for change came from two sources. The first was Dr Mike Paul, of the Department of Marine and Harbours, who had invested considerable departmental and personal effort in the concept since the early 1980s. The second was Merv Warren, who represented the main landowners, Wannunup Developments. From the time the government had first raised the Dawesville proposal publicly, in 1984, Merv had seen the potential, and had suggested joint development proposals to successive Premiers.

In November 1991, Transport Minister Pam Beggs publicly announced that Cabinet had agreed to accept a total construction package for the channel, as proposed by Wannanup Developments. Less than four weeks after the contract was signed, a yellow Caterpillar bulldozer started to shift the first of the coastal dunes in the path of the channel. Within weeks

of the first earthworks, the site of the channel resembled a huge battleground.

The channel contractors were fortunate in having a store of local goodwill to draw on during the construction phase: despite some lingering misgivings, the need for the works was well recognised. Nello Siragusa, as Project Manager, decided that he would take direct responsibility for community discussions concerning the impact of construction. In the three years leading up to the channel opening, he was to speak to over 200 different meetings, as well as holding many individual discussions.

When State Cabinet made the final allocation of funds for the channel's construction, the cost of overall monitoring and management of possible impacts was not included. As public concern heightened during the construction phase, small sums of money were found to investigate specific issues, and work began on an inter-agency submission to the government, seeking extra funds. On 8 April 1994, the government announced that it had allocated \$100,000 for studies on the effects of the channel. This was far less than the \$500,000 the agencies had been seeking.

On 23 April 1994, a huge crowd arrived for the official opening ceremony. Richard Court, the sixth Premier to hold office in Western

Australia since the Dawesville project had been officially mooted, paid homage to the effort that had gone on for so many years.

But within two months, the Auditor-General tabled a report in Parliament, recommending the establishment of adequate monitoring programs 'to assess, and if necessary correct, adverse impacts resulting from the channel construction'. The report pointed out that government had a legal obligation under the Environmental Protection Act to monitor and manage the aftermath of the Dawesville Channel.

This lack of intensive follow-up was even more surprising, coming as it did after almost two decades during which every step made by the government had been painstakingly researched.



5 April 1994, At around 8.00am Transport Minister Eric Charlton took over the controls of the dragline to remove the last few bucketfuls of sand, and ocean water streamed into the Harvey Estuary. Photo Courtesy of Mandurah Community Museum.

Chronology

6 Jan 1992: The government and developers signed Dawesville construction agreements.

7 Aug 1992: Mandurah Mail reported a visit by Opposition Environment spokesperson, amid local concerns at possible damage to wetlands and farmlands by high tide levels following opening of the Dawesville Channel.

Late 1994: The completion of the Dawesville Channel effectively marooned native animals on an island of land south of Mandurah. Their plight distressed many local residents and led to the translocation of a number of animals. (See p.194 of Decline and Rescue)

2011: "Successive governments have gradually forgotten their commitments until today the most basic monitoring is only possible because of Commonwealth grants, and the EPA has little interest. There is no authority clearly in control and no dedicated funding for the estuary, at the same time we know the rivers are still highly polluted and all indications are that the estuary is again deteriorating." Jan Star, AM, Chair PHCC.