

PEEL-HARVEY

The Decline and Rescue of an Ecosystem

Excerpt from book by Keith Bradby

1997

Proudly brought to you by



www.peel-harvey.org.au

Prawning and Crabbing

Excerpt from Chapter 2, 'Claimed and Tamed: The process of European settlement', pp. 37-39.

'Another dimension of the Peel-Harvey fishery is its population of crustaceans, mainly crabs and prawns. They were largely ignored by commercial fishers during the early years, presumably because there was no market for them – and little hope of transporting them fresh anyway.'

'While prawns have been prized locally as far back as anyone can remember, commercial harvesting does not seem to have started until the 1930s. There are two species in the estuary: the western king prawn (*Penaeus latissulcatus*) and the river (school) prawn (*Metapenaeus dalli*). Catches have always been highly variable, with an abundance in some years and virtually nothing in others. But there have been long-term changes: an increase in the king prawn fishery and a decline in river prawns.

'River prawns were the main commercial catch up until the 1980s. They spend their entire life cycle in the estuary and rivers, and used to be caught in the estuarine reaches of the Murray and Serpentine rivers, using hand-operated dredge nets. Fishers would position their launch at right angles to the bank, hang lights on the boat, and scatter poultry pellets on the water to attract the

prawns. The net would then be thrown into the water and dragged across the bottom. However, this species virtually disappeared for more than a decade after 1980, particularly in the Murray River, even though it appears to have increased again in the 1990s. Many local people blamed the construction of the Yunderup Canals, but it is more likely that the river prawn has been a victim of the general decline in the estuary's health.

'Up until the late 1970s, catches of king prawns were small compared to the river prawn harvest. Then the numbers increased significantly, for reasons that are not at all clear. It may be that the change in the predominant algae, from *Cladophora* to *Ulva* and *Chaetomorpha*, favoured king prawns. Both species are prolific breeders: under the right conditions, a female river prawn is capable of producing 300 000 eggs; a king prawn, over a million. King prawns breed in the ocean and, like many fish, use the estuary as a nursery area. They enter the estuary in spring-summer, grow to maturity and then migrate back to the ocean in summer-autumn. Or at least they try to: the Mandurah Channel is, by this time, lined with recreational and commercial fishers using beam tide nets hanging from the side of their boats to sweep the waters. A few commercial trawlers continue to fish near-shore areas for prawns and crabs.

'There has always been fierce competition between commercial and recreational fishers for the prawn catch. But this has not been the case with the crustacean most readily identified with the estuary, the blue manna crab. In the early years, the crab was viewed largely as a menace by commercial fishers, and to some extent it still is. Crabs are attracted to the thrashings of fish caught in gill nets, and often move in to feed on the trapped fish, damaging sections of the net in the process. Years when large numbers of crabs entered the estuary were considered 'plague' years by commercial fishers, and boom years by recreational fishers. Crabs slowly became a marketable catch during the 1950s, and are now caught by a number of commercial fishers.'

Chronology

4 May 1935: Department of Fisheries and Wildlife noted enormous quantities of prawns and crabs in the estuary.

3 Nov 1950: A meeting of the Mandurah Licensed Fishermen's Assoc. moved to have crabs declared vermin.

25 April 1984: *West Australian* newspaper reported large numbers of "giant king prawns" in Peel Inlet.



Picture from *Art of Fishing, A Fishers Logbook*, kind permission from Patricia Negus 2003 Cape to Cape Publishing