PEEL-HARVEY

The Decline and Rescue of an Ecosystem

Excerpt from book by Keith Bradby
1997

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Rivers, Wetlands & Drainage: Early days

Excerpts from Chapter 3 'Drained and Dammed: How Europeans managed the waterways and wetlands, pp. 47-59.

'In 1829, the Swan Coastal Plain was a wetland. Each winter it and the upstream jarrah forest would be hit by heavy and concentrated rains. Streams and brooks flowed onto the plain, dissipating their energy into a broad, interconnected chain of swamps many kilometres wide. Only the Murray and the Dandalups stayed in clear stream beds for all their length. In larger floods, even these streams strayed across the flats.

'One early settler described the North Dandalup as *"a beautiful river one time … you would catch cobbler, beautiful cobblers … you could swim anywhere in the river - it was more or less a meeting place for everybody".'*

'The other main rivers, the Serpentine and the Harvey, were well-defined watercourses in their upper and lower sections, but their middle reaches were a maze of swamps, with paperbarks, flooded gums and sedges. Here, the rivers would spread out in winter and join forces with the flow from all the smaller brooks and streams.'

'The Serpentine itself had a very small, shallow channel out to the 'Lowlands' property. Here, the main branch of the river spread out over the wide flats and joined with waters coming from the swamplands further north, in a long chain of wetlands known as the Folly or the Folly River. In winter it was virtually continuous wetland from just west of 'Lowlands' to the Spearwood sandhills flanking the Baldivis Road, with an outcrop of Spearwood sands known as Doghill standing as a dry island amidst the swamps.'

'Australia is a dry continent, yet on the coastal plain fresh water has long been seen as the major obstacle to settlement and farming. Throughout [last] century, engineers have toiled to drain away the winter rains. But as more land was cleared, the flow of water increased. The drains were then enlarged, so more land was able to be cleared – which resulted in more water.'

'It seems that even from 1890 onwards, the plain was becoming wetter. By the late 1890s, large areas of the jarrah forest in the Darling Range had been logged …Trees use lots of water. A single jarrah tree can transpire 100 litres of water in the course of a normal summer's day; a hectare of forest can lose tens of thousands of litres.'

'Clearing for new farms made the winter flooding even worse. The inevitable happened: properties were submerged, crops were destroyed … and the new wave of pioneers found their makeshift homes surrounded by water.'

'By the end of the 1890s, it was generally agreed that major action was needed, particularly in the West Coolup and Harvey settlements.' 'The Agriculture Department's Secretary was forced to admit in 1900 *"that as matters stand now, the settlers can do little more in the winter months than grow water cress and hope to become web-footed.""*

'Preliminary drainage works began in 1899, under the direction of the Lands Department … Initially, the series of small brooks north of Harvey – Weekes, Clarkes, Logues and Samson brooks – were converted into deeper and faster flowing drains'.

Soon after, work began on the lower Harvey River. In 1902, the Inspecting Surveyor noted: *"The work is now almost complete, and the effect has been to transform the Harvey River into a clear and continuous waterway from being a mere succession of timber choked pools connected by dense ti-tree swamps."*

Early holiday makers up the Murray River, courtesy of the Mandurah Community Museum

Chronology

1836: Lieutenant H.W. Bunbury noted the 'extensive and impenetrable swamps' through which the Harvey River flowed.

1899: Preliminary drainage works began in the Harvey area.

1900: At WA's Annual Agricultural Conference, growers from Coolup complained that a 'great deal of the land was under water for eight or nine months of the year'.

2011: "With declining rainfall you would think that we would pay a bit more respect for the water around us in wetlands, creeks and drains. But we have cleared or lost 80% of the wetlands from Byford to Harvey. These wetlands were the catchment's kidneys, so no wonder we have problems in the lower rivers. How do we encourage farmers, landowners and developers to bring these assets back to health?" (Andrew Del Marco, Peel-Harvey Drainage Reform Plan, 2008).