

PEEL-HARVEY

The Decline and Rescue of an Ecosystem

Excerpt from book by Keith Bradby
1997

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Fishing in the Estuary

Excerpts from Chapter 2 'Claimed and Tamed: The process of European settlement', pp. 32-33, 36; Chapter 5, p.75.

'It was Thomas Peel's neighbour, Henry Hall, who first saw the commercial potential of fishing: "A favourite project of his ... was a fishery which he had actually commenced with the assistance of the natives". Little came of Hall's early initiative ... and he left Mandurah in 1836.'

'The problem for settlers was not catching fish; it was selling them. Apart from some sales to other local settlers, the markets were at Fremantle and Perth, and refrigeration and fast transport were a long way in the future.'

'Joseph Cox was probably the first full-time fisherman to come to Mandurah. In 1871, he worked for a Mr Bateman, catching and drying kingfish and big mullet for the markets in Singapore, which sold for the princely sum of £14 per ton.'

'From the available records, it seems that the estuarine fishery was largely based on supplying fresh fish to local, Perth and Fremantle markets, with canning, smoking and salting operating as a sideline to the main industry. The first fish cannery on Peel Inlet was established in 1878, by Charles Broadhurst, in a large stone building on the Mandurah foreshore. A second, the Peel Inlet

Preserving Works, was established in 1880, by Charles Tuckey, in a two-storey building by the water's edge, opposite the Brighton Hotel.

'Through the 1880s and 1890s, there was a thriving fishing industry at Mandurah. The opening of the Eastern Goldfields provided a ready market for canned fish. It was a boom time, and a number of smaller canneries were established, as well as a large iceworks on the Murray River and three small smokehouses on the banks of Harvey Estuary, mainly for smoking mullet. Sea mullet was the main species used for canning, followed by yellow-eye mullet (pilchard). Mandurah became famous throughout the State for its canned mullet – and for the stench of rotting fish guts piled next to the canneries.'

'At the turn of the century, the fisherfolk around the Peel-Harvey area were a distinct part of the local community. Some lived in the town of Mandurah, or out at the small settlement of West Murray (now called Yunderup). Because of the irregular hours they worked, and the need to check nets left set overnight, there were a number of fishing camps around the edge of the estuary, some of which served as a base for the whole family at various times of the year.'

Around the year 1900, May Vivienne wrote of her visit to Mandurah: "Across the ferry from the hotel is the Murray estuary, which is really

teeming with fish ... Very large kingfish are frequently caught with hand-lines ... I saw one caught that measured 5 feet in length and weighed 38lb. Black bream weighing 4lb are a common catch. Hosts of crabs are about, making the fishing more exciting than ever... In two days a visitor caught 17 dozen whiting, bream and mullet."

Not included in the book were Charles Tuckey's comments to the 1906 Joint Select Committee Inquire about mullet fishing in the Serpentine River: 'About 10 years ago at the native weir [fish trap] at Barrugup I filled 10,000 tins of fish in six weeks'; and 'In the olden times we used to go ... up the Serpentine to Hudson's Falls. There is a large lake there, and fish [large mullet] are to be found there all year round.'



Fisherman Jim Morfitt repairing his boat while drying his nets about 1910, photos courtesy of the Mandurah Community Museum.

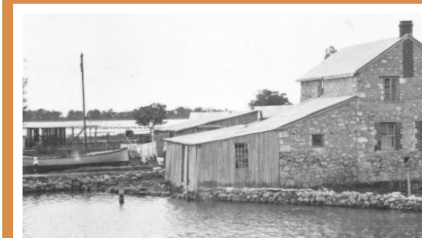
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Chronology

c.1895: First reported case of industrial pollution in the Peel-Harvey: Charles Tuckey complained to the authorities about the Jarrahdale sawmill dumping sawdust into the Serpentine River, which he argued had severely affected fish populations.

19 October 1897: WA Governor Sir Gerard Smith visited the Serpentine River *mungah* [fish trap], and there he met with local Nyungars who were upset at its recent destruction by fishermen and appealed for its restoration.

2010: "... differences in fish composition are now less than in the 1980s and there is dominance of 'weed' associated species." Dr. Fiona Valesini, Murdoch University, co-author of the PHCC Science Strategy, referring to the Peel Harvey Estuary.



Tuckey's fish factory in Mandurah in its heyday in the 1880s.