

Saving the Coast: the impact of women

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Human impacts on the coast of eastern Australia since 1788 have been dramatic if not devastating.

Estuarine waterways, golden sandy beaches, towering cliffs and rock platforms, combined with warm ocean currents, pleasant temperatures, the odd rain shower and persistent swell waves all together provide residents and tourists alike with a natural heritage that appears resilient to most human interference. Yet as a society we have been confronted with a range of activities that have modified that inheritance. Clearing of forests, drainage of wetlands, planting weeds, over-fishing, sand mining, building breakwaters and ports, and placing homes and other structures on dunes and cliffs all reflect ways colonial and post-colonial Australians have used and abused natural conditions. In many places, the uses are benign and have enhanced opportunities for society to live and enjoy the coast. But human impacts through government decisions, corporate investments and individual actions have led to a deterioration of our natural resources; it is how certain individuals have confronted these negative impacts that I turn my attention this evening.

Scientists and environmental managers are today confronting two major pressures on this coast: population growth and global warming. These pressures must be understood in the context of our natural inheritance and processes on the one hand and the way those conditions have been disturbed in the past. Changing forces of nature and humans have dual impacts. As climate changes, we will be forced to adapt to different natural conditions such as higher sea levels. However, as more people seek “sea change” lifestyles, the potential for adverse impacts to destroy beaches, pollute waterways and reduce marine and terrestrial biodiversity is increased.

Rather than review our knowledge of human impacts by location or by particular cases, I want to examine the impact of individuals who have made a difference in how we can protect natural values in the face of economic and social forces that have driven change in the past and are driving change today.

When looking at individuals who have made a difference, I am struck by the contribution of women in coastal science, advocacy and conservation. Although there are a few males who have done their bit, and here I must acknowledge the incredible efforts of John Sinclair of FIDO as one of our great coastal heroes; he

¹ A summary of this talk is also available at <http://realdirt.com.au>

fought valiantly against the conservative forces of the then Queensland Government to save Fraser Island from the ravages of sand mining at great personal cost. However, it is women who again and again stand out with passion and commitment for a better coast.

Let us first look at the role of some prominent women in coastal science. There have been a number of female biologists at Sydney University over the years. The recent death of Isobel Bennett (aged 98) reminded me of the pioneering nature of their endeavours as scientists and teachers. Isobel was inspired by Professor William Dakin. She made contributions to the ecology of the GBR and the shores of NSW. In recent tribute (SMH10/01/08), Professor Len Zell commented:

She achieved high standing as an Australian marine scientist, not by education, but by sheer hard work, determination, attention to detail and a never-ending curiosity that tired me out lifting boulders on many reef flat.

In later years she focused more on foreshore conservation and was the driving force behind the educational signage seen at many sites on Sydney's coastline.

The same traits of hard work, determination and dedication to teaching can be seen in a colleague of Isobel's at Sydney University over a forty year period: Ilma Brewer (nee Pidgeon). Ilma was a botanist. Inspired to work on the undisturbed flora of coastal dunes near Hawks Nest and on the Central Coast in the late 1930s, she published some of the first quantitative studies of sand dune plants. Some 60 years later she was to return to the Hawks Nest sites to demonstrate the effects of mining on dune ecosystems. Here she documented the impact of aggressive weeds such as Bitou bush. Such studies form the backbone of our understanding of the dynamics of plant succession following human disturbance.

The tradition of female interest in coastal biology lives on at Sydney and other universities. The efforts of Gee Chapman and her esteemed colleague, Tony Underwood, deserve mention. Their long-term ecological work on rock platforms near Sydney has provided science with great insights into the behaviour of animals on coastal foreshores. At the University of Queensland, Eva Abal working with another eminent mentor, Bill Denison, has been instrumental in developing the science behind one of Australia's most important efforts in coastal monitoring of Moreton Bay and its catchments (Healthy Waterways program).

Away from the world of science and into the combative world of conservation politics, the most prominent of all coastal advocates in eastern Australia is Judith Wright. Besides being one of Australia's greatest poets, she worked tirelessly in the 1960s to protect the Great Barrier Reef. Judith took on state and

federal governments; for a period she was an active opponent of the ACF which at one stage was not opposed to mining on the GBR. Her book The Coral Battleground (1977, 1996) is a reminder of what can be done by a few. As she stated in the Foreword to the 20th Anniversary edition in 1996:

There are not many success stories in the attempts we make to save especially important elements of the natural world from our own greeds and needs. Here at the end of the twentieth century, we have lost or destroyed a great deal already, and we know that much more is likely to vanish. But the story of the rescue of the Great Barrier Reef still throws a light on the present and gives hope for the future, and because of the rescue many people have been able to experience and enjoy the marvellous stretch of sea and reefs and islands, and the intricate patterns of living beings, which make up its existence (1996, p.ix).

These words encapsulate the experience of many who struggle with varying degrees for success against political and commercial interests seeking to exploit nature's gifts along our coast for short-term gains.

Kylie Tennant is another great Australian writer whose words have captured the intensity of such struggles. In 1970 she wrote in a foreword in a brochure for the 13 female "Battlers for Kelly's Bush" (published 1996). These words and the work of the Battlers are on display in the State Library's IMPACT exhibition. Let me repeat those words, as powerful today in a coastal context as they were in 1970. Then the middle-class Battlers took on the Askin Government and the builders, A V Jennings, with the aid of the union movement led by Jack Munday and their 'green bans'.

The Battlers fought for protection of green foreshores of Hunters Hill against developers seeking to alienate what was seen as community space. In 1970 Tennant stated:

The beaches are being ploughed up, the hills chewed out to made roads and the prospect of a gibbering concrete jungle advances. So that the struggle to preserve this place to unspoilt land becomes more significant. It is a confrontation of values. Kelly's Bush is a symbol of our lost land. Take away Kelly's Bush and you take away one more assurance that in man is left a possibility for the future. The unborn Australian will ask for his birthright and be handed a piece of concrete.

Askin and Jennings lost and Kelly's Bush at Hunters Hill on the foreshores of Sydney Harbour was won for the public good.

Some other battles were fought and lost, or compromises reached. Other women have been determined activists in striving for protection of coastal values, some at particular treasured localities, others more generally. Kylie Tennant mentioned beaches “being ploughed up”. One person who observed this was Gwen Piper. In 1980, in her book My One Fourteen Million Share, she lamented the emergence of “ugliness, destruction and loss of public rights”. Gwen travelled the east coast seeing changes for the worse:

They are the results of several factors, lack of proper town planning, greed by business interests, and probably by local government officials, and ignorance of the needs and methods of conservation of soil, fauna and flora and of landscape beauty.

She added the words if only we could say “As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be” about the beauties, the naturalness and availability of our coastline.

Fran Kelly, the coastal advocate for The Total Environment Centre in 2003, made similar comments in Concreting the Coast:

In the past three years on the NSW coast there has been a rush by speculative landowners and developers – aided by local councils – to rezone, develop and generally reap the rewards of spiralling land prices.

So 23 years apart two women, Gwen and Fran, demonstrate that compelling local commercial imperatives continue to impact negatively on the coast.

From the ‘50s to the ‘80s, sand mining for rutile and zircon destroyed much coastal ecology and many sites of geomorphological significance. Inquiries and conservation arguments backed by science, led to the effective closure of this industry and the conversion of non-mined dunes into National Parks. Gwen Piper would be proud of this outcome. She may also have been happy with the banning of canal estates in 1997; the steps to protect coastal wetlands and littoral rain forests; the continued acquisition of private land along the coast for public use; and plans to reflood or better manage drainage channels in coastal deltas, the source of acidic flows that periodically poison the estuaries.

These were achievements of the 80s and 90s, but Fran Kelly’s concerns about bulldozing and concreting remain. She reviewed 450 inappropriate or controversial developments and land clearing activities in 2003 and noted the continuing devastation through cumulative impacts arising from what she saw as the actions of greedy and ignorant individuals often conniving with local councils. Many of those she interviewed, such as Frances Bray of Culburra, continue to maintain the rage against excessive development proposals in

environmentally sensitive locations. Some, like Jill Walker of Sandon Point fame, are prepared to take major developers like Stocklands and the Minister for Planning to court. Jill scored a memorable achievement in 2007 with the Land & Environment Court recognising climate change as a factor for consideration by consent authorities.

There are many like Frances and Jill who are prepared to confront business and governments over new developments proposals. Women and men form local action groups to oppose what they see as inappropriate. It is fair to say that governments at times do recognise their efforts and conservation and public access outcomes are achieved. But not always and this is why community activists are so important in debates over coastal values at particular places.

Another important female advocate of a very different type is Professor Sharon Beder. She is now recognised by Engineers Australia as one of Australia's most influential engineers. Her present interests are more in issues of sustainability and environmental communication, but in the early 80s she challenged engineering orthodoxy with her publications on what she termed "sewer surfing". She was aware of engineering practices and made it clear that sewer outfalls into coastal waters constituted an unacceptable polluting process. Her work contributed to rethinking of how Sydney Water and other authorities discharge wastes to the sea.

Two other writers on coastal matters have had an impact. Lenore Coltheart was engaged by engineers through the old Public Works Department to write the history of ports and coastal waterways of NSW (Between Wind & Water, 1997). Without her vast scholarship we would not have that grand synthesis of coastal engineering history which demonstrates how engineers (all men?) built structures that modify the entrances and harbours of this coast.

A different contribution has come from the pen of Leone Huntsman. Her book, Sand in Our Souls (2001), captures the role of the beach in Australian history. Leone quite beautifully depicts the way our beach/coast culture has emerged and is displayed in art, literature and our lives as Australians.

It would be remiss of me not to mention one other group of heroes who have had a continuing impact on the coast. Although not exclusively female, there are many so-called "care" groups which have been led by women. They have recognised the curse of coastal dunes, Bitou bush, requiring sustained investment of human resources to rid the coast of this menace.

Ruth Readford worked for years regenerating and rescuing the degraded dunes near Ballina. Her story is published in Ballina Lighthouse Beach Community

Dune Care (2000). She inspired people up and down the coast with her vision of improving the environment of dunes for the benefit of the whole community. She was in turn inspired by the techniques of the Bradley sisters of Mosman in dune restoration. Support from Ballina and other councils for many Dune Care and later Coastcare groups flowed from efforts of leaders like Ruth who persisted in their long-term endeavours to combat the weeds left behind by miners and others, and the unthinking or wilful actions of dune destroyers. Wycare on the Central Coast led by Marlene Pennings is a continuing example of female leadership in dune restoration as is the phenomenal work of Kay Jeffery at Illuka on the NSW North Coast.

The Illuka Landcare and Dunecare group was established in 1997. It received a Coastcare grant under NHT 1 to assist in restoring the native vegetation in the Illuka littoral rain forest and adjoining areas. The group continues to undertake restoration works in this area under the leadership of Kay in association with the NPWS. In 1999, its efforts became internationally recognised as a threat to the status of World Heritage for this type of rain forest emerged. The UNESCO World Heritage Committee acknowledged these efforts in 2000:

In my opinion, what has been done at Illuka is an inspiration to all in caring about World Heritage natural sites (Joylan Nove, Convenor)

I have had the privilege of working closely with a number of women (and men) in the NSW public service. Many will remain unsung heroes, but I must use this occasion to acknowledge those whom I worked with in the old Coastal Council of NSW between 1989 and 2004. In particular, Julie Conlon, who now faithfully administers the Coastal Lands Protection Scheme that obtains private land for public use, and Noni Ruker whose creativity, is so dramatically displayed in the Coastal Design Guidelines (2002). Within government departments, Sara Williams, Mel Bradbury and Hilary Cherry have both made significant impacts in guiding and encouraging dune care groups to achieve better environmental outcomes, especially in fighting the weed menace. Paula Douglas, who made substantial contributions when working with Peter Crawford in the former Healthy Rivers Commission, continues to seek positive outcomes for the coastal domain in sometimes quite difficult circumstances.

I would like to now turn to two women who work at both national and regional levels. They have shown me and others what it takes to make a difference. Di Tarte helped establish the Littoral Society which later became AMCS. Some 14 years ago she lobbied hard at a national level to get federal funds to form the Marine and Coastal Community Network or MCCN. She served as national coordinator for many years and made sure that this “voice of the sea and coast” did its job of informing marine and coastal folk of what is going on. Through her initiatives there are now over 10000 subscribers to MCCN news. More recently

she serves as an advisor to federal government on the NHT Advisory Committee and is a key person in driving NRM outcomes through the Healthy Waterways program in SE Queensland.

The other woman is Pam Green. Pam has served on local council and for some years was Mayor of Eurobodalla Shire. Pam has played a major role in the establishment of regional NRM bodies in NSW and coordinates the national regional coastal entities. She is now chair of the Southern Rivers CMA. Like Di Tarte she serves on the federal NHT Advisory Committee and a host of other committees which have coastal interests. Pam and Di have committed their professional lives to the improvement of coastal and marine values and for that we must be extremely grateful.

Political action at the state level on coasts has been sporadic. But again there is one woman who stands out. I refer to Pam Allan. Prior to the 1995 state election she prepared and campaigned on a very powerful platform for the ALP on how we must protect the coast from excessive development. She became the Environment Minister in the new Carr Labor Government in March 1995. This government then proceeded to ban canal estates, introduce marine parks, enlarge coastal national parks to incorporate areas rich in rutile and zircon, and introduce the 1997 NSW Coastal Policy which is still alive today. Pam got this all started.

Finally, I must mention three female local government councillors who have dedicated years of political endeavour to improve our coast. The late Joy Matthews of Clarence Valley (formerly Maclean Council) and Patricia Harvey of Mosman showed leadership at state and regional as well as local levels in advocating improved coastal management and planning. Both endured criticism and ridicule from less enlightened colleagues, but stuck to their respective positions. Jan Barham, the Green mayor of Byron is another woman prepared to engage in a “confrontation of values” using Tennant’s words. Very few men have persisted in local politics with such strong coastal environmental advocacy as Jan, Joy or Patricia.

In conclusion, the beautiful coast of eastern Australia offers enormous challenges to those who seek to protect its environmental assets. Population expansion and changing climates make the endeavours of those who think in terms of the broader public and ecologic good that much more difficult. Commercial and political interests driven by short-term gains are not going to easily give way to public benefits. The coast is full of “contested spaces” and “death by a thousand cuts”; conflicts will continue and require some form of solution or issues will fester for others to fight over. Natural resources must be better understood, and should never be sacrificed for private ends.

Our discussion of the contributions of some female scientists, poets, writers, historians, public servants, engineers, urban designers, dune carers/managers, and politicians highlights how those with passion and commitment can have an impact. These women have made our coast a better place. We must all recognise their achievements and strive as individual men and women to build on what they have done. The coast needs us.