

MOONBI 107 (20th November, 2004) 4

Alarm Over Scallop Farm

Hervey Bay is a waterway under siege. It becomes the target for a plethora of aquaculture projects. In addition to the very traditional oyster leases, there are now proposals to establish pearl and beche-de-mer farming operations. However, the most alarming project involves the establishment of two “scallop ranches” one covering an area of 30,000 km² and the other in the Hervey Bay Marine Park, covering 27,500 km².

There hasn't been enough openness on the part of the Queensland Government over the proposed scallop farm. Initially it was thought that there would be only a 1-km² trial plot for scallops in the Hervey Bay Marine Park area off Wathumba Creek. However, this has turned into not one but four separate 1 km² trial plots. These have been provisionally approved by the Queensland Government for three years of trials. If the trials prove the proposed venture viable, then the area of seabed to be ploughed in the harvesting process will expand by to more than 6,000 times the area of the trials.

FIDO is not opposed to aquaculture. However we believe that it must be done with much more openness and with much more environmental sensitivity than this cowboy attempt to develop 57,500 ha of scallop ranch in Hervey Bay.

Four of the trials are not only within the Hervey Bay Marine Park but are within the area proposed to be included in the expanded nomination for the Great Sandy Region World Heritage Area. The Queensland Government is currently preparing not only to add Cooloola to the Fraser Island World Heritage Area but also Breaksea Spit and Platypus Bay (in a line from Rooneys Point to Moon Point).

The sensitivity of the site of the location of the trial plots off Wathumba, indicated by the coincidence of many special occurrences, seems to have been completely ignored by both the proponents and the decision makers who have agreed to allow this project to proceed to this stage. FIDO is not expert on marine matters but these are just some of the considerations which have been ignored or discounted:

1. The area was judged to have World Heritage properties by the Commission of Inquiry into Fraser Island and the Great Sandy Region led by Tony Fitzgerald who reported to the Queensland Government in 1991 after a comprehensive inquiry into the whole region's World Heritage values. This finding has been recently endorsed by a panel of very eminent scientists. Yet the Queensland Government in 2003 endorsed the project without any kind of environmental impact study.
2. The area is used extensively for whale watching by a large fleet and from July to October each year about 100,000 tourists going to see whales but may soon have to avoid a small flotilla of trawlers ploughing up the sea floor to harvest scallops. This is not to mention the impact that this operation may have on the movement of whales through the area.
3. The impact on the whales isn't known but whales have already become entangled in shark nets off the Queensland coast and can easily be adversely affected by the intensive trawling effort necessary to harvest the scallops.
4. For some inexplicable reason, the majority of Loggerhead turtles in the South West Pacific area coming from as far away as Arnhemland and the Solomon Islands and planning to breed that season, gather off of Rooneys Point each October November for a mating orgy. This is perilously too close to the scallop ranch to be ignored.
5. For some reason this is the very same area which is the epicentre for the occurrence of Ciguatera poisoning. No mackerel from Hervey Bay can be sold anywhere because of this potentially lethal and certainly debilitating effect on humans who consume affected fish. (It is now believed to have contributed to the death of Captain Cook).

6. The adjacent map shows the path of dugong passing right through the very centre of the ranching area to pass from their main feeding grounds off Burrum Heads to “hang out” in water which may be up to 3°C warmer between Rooneys Point and Sandy Cape. This migration takes place between July and September each year. Apart from the risk to dugong being caught in the trawl operations (as could turtles and whales), there is a major concern about what is going to happen if 60,000 ha of some of the best dugong habitat in Australia is ploughed up for a scallop ranch.

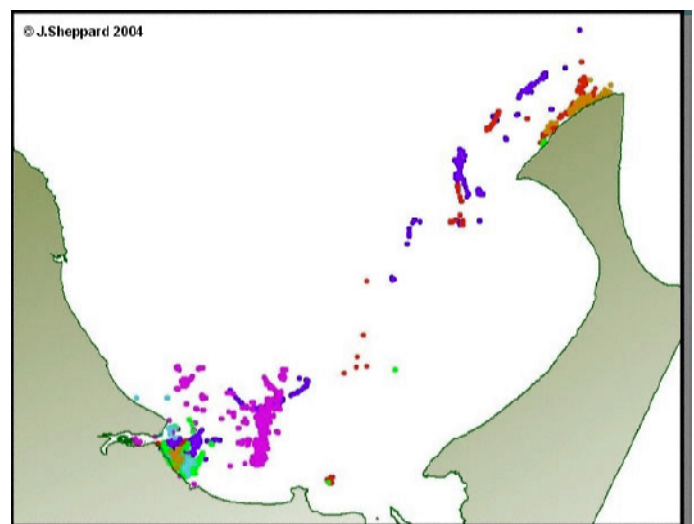
With this sort of information confronting decision makers, FIDO believes that it is time that there was a much more open review of this whole project before it becomes a *faite accompli* which some in the Queensland Fisheries Service hope it has already become.

With the Queensland Government apparently solidly supporting this project, much rests on the Commonwealth Government exercising powers under the EPBC Act to review this very critical decision which impacts on a very important World Heritage area.

Tracking Dugong

Through satellite technology dugong researchers from the James Cook University have made some stunning discoveries about the movement of these amazing animals in Hervey Bay. The research team is led by marine biologist, James Sheppard. Of seven dugong fitted with tracking devices near Burrum Heads, most stayed on the Hervey Bay seagrass meadows. However, averaging 62.5 kilometre per day, one animal went on a remarkable 500 kilometre swim to near Mackay.

What is more remarkable is that the dugong migrate right across Hervey Bay from Burrum Heads to the top of Fraser Island and stay there from July to September when the water temperatures there are up to three degrees warmer than they are in the Bay around Burrum Heads. This new information has very significant implications for the Hervey Bay Marine Park and the proposal to incorporate Platypus Bay and Breaksea Spit in the expanded World Heritage nomination for Fraser Island. (see “Alarm Over Scallop Farm” article).



Map, courtesy James Sheppard, JCU, shows Hervey Bay dugong movement from Burrum Heads to warmer waters off Sandy Cape in the cooler months.

Other Marine Inroads Under Consideration

Hervey Bay is one of the most important embayments on the Australian coast. The extensive inquiry by Tony Fitzgerald in 1991 into Fraser Island and the Great Sandy Region concluded that it should have World Heritage status. Although this was not fully supported by the Commonwealth Government at the time the then Queensland premier Wayne Goss undertook to nominate the remainder of the Great Sandy Region at a later date. In the mean time opportunists are rapidly moving in.

Hervey Bay and the waterways of the Great Sandy Region under siege. They are targets for a plethora of aquaculture projects. Great Sandy Strait has been suggested for a tidal power station which would obstruct all boating through the channel, destroy a vast part of a major Ramsar site, and disturb vast amounts of acid sulphate soil with enormous biological and corrosive consequences.

The Tidal Power Issue

The Australian Business Council for Sustainable Energy wants the Queensland Government to look into the possibility of generating electricity from the tidal flow between Fraser Island and Inskip Point. The Council asserts that projects overseas have proven the technology works. However a spokesperson added, *"Demonstrations around the world such as in the US and in Europe have proved that the technology does work, but if the infrastructure costs are too high it makes the project itself prohibitive."*

The Council's Jenny Gregory says Great Sandy Strait is a good location because it is close to where there is demand for electricity and the strait is not too deep. *"Once you get off the continental shelf wall and you get into deeper water, the costs associated with putting in the footings and the pylons to hold the structure become very expensive,"* she said.

FIDO's Response: This prospect is extremely alarming because the impacts which would be alarming anywhere are likely to be most heavily focussed on the central part of Great Sandy Strait which is biologically the richest part. It would also probably involve two huge barrages across the Strait which would totally disrupt all marine traffic.

Because the Kimberley's King Sound has a 13 metre tidal range and the remoteness adds to the price of fossil fuel, a serious proposal was developed to construct a tidal power station at Doctors Creek near Derby. Despite the ostensible benefits of using renewable energy and the rabid urgings of the then "Conservation" Minister, Wilson Tuckey, the Western Australian Government rejected the proposal on many grounds:

1. The scheme was prohibitively expensive.
2. The power would not be generated for at least four hours per day when the tide was turning. This would mean that conventional generators would need to be able to generate all the power needed during those periods of tidal slack. Their existing power supplies would need to remain and the project would have to be backed up entirely at a huge capital and operating cost.
3. There is a huge engineering problem in building the weirs necessary in an area of almost bottomless mud (silt) deposits and in salt water, where any disturbance of the substrate is exposing acid-sulphate mud which could start a chain reaction of releasing sulphuric acid into King Sound.
4. It involved an extensive area of incredibly rich biological diversity and productivity which would have to be destroyed.

The difference in the tide times between the flow from Hervey Bay and the flow from Inskip Point may make this one more commercially attractive than Doctors Creek. The two different tides may mean that the need for a fuel powered back-up could be obviated. .

FIDO will strenuously defend Great Sandy Strait. It is an integral part of the Great Sandy Region and part of the long-standing Great Sandy Region World Heritage proposal. Already that part 500 metres from Fraser Island's high water mark has World Heritage status. It is also part of a Ramsar Wetland because of its outstanding biological significance. Most of Great Sandy Strait is also covered with a Fisheries Habitat Reserve status which would preclude any interference with the substrate that a tidal power scheme would imply.

Great Sandy Strait is a major recreation and commercial waterway with a large amount of through traffic of all classes of boating. Tidal power would involve a major dislocation of all of this boating traffic.



Feds Finally Give Funds for Fraser

In July the Commonwealth Government announced they would give \$300,000 from the Natural Heritage Trust to be spent on Fraser Island. Unfortunately this very rushed, pre-election announcement decision failed to seek advice from the Fraser Island Advisory Committees which the Commonwealth was a part of. It was obsessed with by-passing the Queensland Government entirely. Even the NHT body which is supposed to identify spending priorities was not consulted before this announcement which seemed aimed to gain electoral support after years of financial neglect for this national icon.

The money to be provided to the Maryborough and Hervey Bay City Councils will be spent on projects which are low priority in improving the sustainability of Fraser Island visitation. At Happy Valley, a defined pedestrian path will be built to link the beach and the village to prevent erosion in the dunes and to separate people from vehicle traffic for safety. The Maryborough Council will receive funds to build new toilets at Hook Point and Eurong. Although the Commonwealth tried to by-pass the Queensland Government, they have provided funds by giving money to the local authorities instead, Maryborough Council requires State permission to construct the toilet, for which there is little demand within the National Park at Hook Point.

Feds Funds for Weeds: The Commonwealth though, did at the same time as the above provide a grant of \$54,000 to address the Fraser Island weed problem. The Burnett-Mary Regional Group (BMRG) which is responsible for implementing this project was caught completely unaware. This administrative body now has the dilemma of how to spend the money it hadn't sought. While FIDO welcomes the recognition of weeds being a major problem on Fraser Island \$54,000 will go almost nowhere to achieving the stated aims of *"prioritising weed species to be targeted, mapping of infestations and a community education campaign"*. FIDO suspects a large amount will end up in administrative costs while weeds continue to run rampant Fraser Island.