

INTRODUCTION

HISTORICAL COASTLINES (COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES)

Steve Mullins

Keppel Bay lies on the Tropic of Capricorn, tucked inside the southern terminus of the Great Barrier Reef. Its warm, sheltered waters lap Central Queensland's picturesque Capricorn Coast, where the seaside towns of Yeppoon, Emu Park and Keppel Sands offer residents and visitors alike a relaxed sub-tropical lifestyle in surroundings of great natural beauty. Ever since first settlement in the late 1860s the sea has been fished and the surrounding countryside farmed for marketable produce, but the towns were, nevertheless, founded to be resorts; places where the good citizens of the city of Rockhampton, some forty kilometres inland, could escape the summer heat. Indeed Emu Park and Yeppoon were two of Queensland's earliest resorts, and the first to be located on the shores of the Great Barrier Reef lagoon. Hotels, boarding houses, holiday cottages, billiard parlours, dance halls, picture theatres and shops sprang up, and by the 1930s local business could boast that it had created a 'Paradise of the Pleasure Seeker', a 'Mecca of the Merry-maker' (see Plate 1 in colour section).¹

But the Capricorn Coast did not grow at the pace of its famous southern counter-part, the Gold Coast, largely because after the Second World War the city it served failed to expand as quickly as Brisbane, or even Townsville to the north. While the bald hills that surround Yeppoon and Emu Park were soon grown over with weatherboard bungalows, and fibro beach holiday houses encroached upon the bays and beaches between, the towns retained a village-like atmosphere. The tropical fruit and fishing industries became reasonably prosperous, with local families putting down deep roots, but the tourist industry, largely serving the local and domestic market, had to wait, not always patiently, for the pace of development to pick up. From the 1930s to the early 1960s growth stagnated, with the population of Emu Park actually declining from 686 in 1921 to 349 in 1961.² By the 1970s there was an abiding sense of frustration among the region's promoters, aptly captured in

the novelty song, 'Where the Hell is Yeppoon?', written and recorded in 1982 by local businessman, and later mayor, Bill Ludwig.

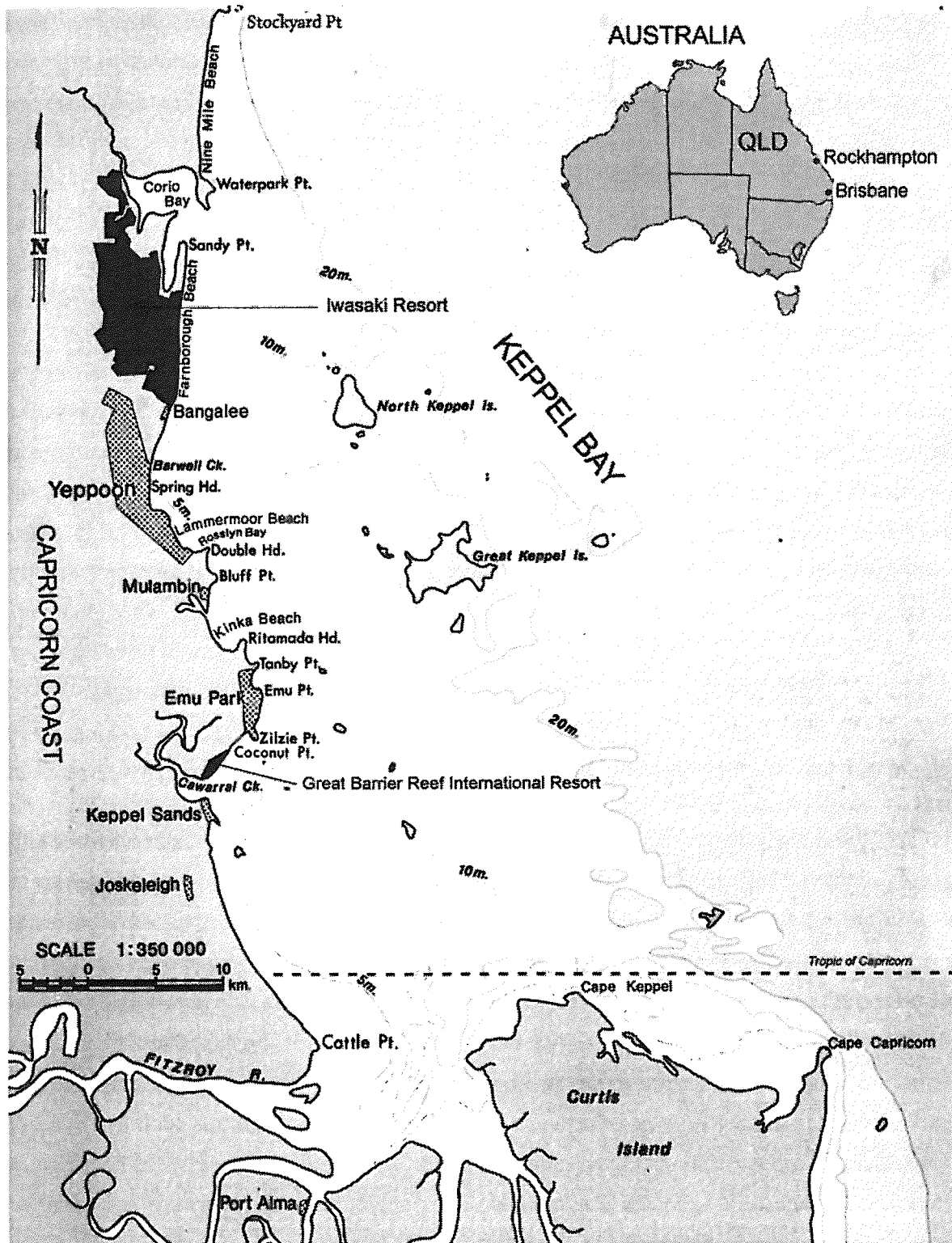


Fig. 1: Keppel Bay
(Adapted from Beach Protection Authority 1979)

Nevertheless, development began to accelerate on the Capricorn Coast in the 1980s and 1990s, albeit unevenly, not so much because of the expansion of local tourism—though it drew a benefit—but as a result of Australia’s ‘Sea Change’ phenomenon that also prompted the production of the popular 2001 ABC television series of that name. Australians have always preferred to live by the sea; indeed that is where more than 80 per cent of us now are, but since the 1980s spiralling property values and increasing congestion in major cities and tourist centres have combined to give Australians the desire and the wherewithal to relocate to places by the sea that are relatively unspoiled, where the pace of life is slower, which are more affordable, but where there is also the prospect of a healthy capital gain when the seemingly inexorable wave of coastal development finally catches up. Between 1981 and 2005 the population of Livingstone Shire, centred on the Capricorn Coast, increased by over 12,000 people—almost doubling.³

Yet, as most of us are now aware, rapid population growth comes at an environmental cost. Pressure of urban sprawl threatens to cause irreversible biophysical change and degrade natural habitats. It alters the river, creek and tidal flows that shape and nourish coastal ecosystems. This often results in the loss of sand dunes and the erosion of beaches, while stormwater, domestic and industrial sewage contributes to declining water quality. Coastal development also sometimes occurs on inappropriate soils which, when disturbed further, contribute to the degradation of the ecosystem.⁴ Hillside residential developments, desirable investments because of their valuable sea views, are difficult to undertake without substantial clearing of natural vegetation, and this often results in serious erosion and a significant loss of scenic amenity, as the once-attractive scrubby slopes are concreted over.

Everyone wants to live in healthy natural environments and, in Australia, coastal communities are responding to the environmental challenges posed by rapid development. At the grass roots, the Capricorn Coast is home to a number of volunteer environmental groups dedicated to the maintenance and restoration of local eco-systems, among them Capricorn Coast Landcare, the Emu Park Community Urban Bushcare Group, the Livingstone Remnant Vegetation Group, the Wildlife Carers Network and the Sustainable Development Group. An Envirolink Centre exists to assist with the coordination of all these activities and to disseminate the flow of information emanating from peak groups such as Greening Australia and the Australian Conservation Foundation, as well as from government natural resource management agencies. But coastal development has other, perhaps less obvious, effects. It alters the social profile of local communities: as property values escalate the gap widens between rich and poor and becomes ever more difficult to bridge; when arable land

is lost to housing estates, the resulting communities are more urban in outlook, with the loss of social cohesion that that often implies. Landscapes and significant sites, both natural and built and which have served as cultural markers and cues to local identity for generations, are often obscured, degraded or lost. This, along with the influx of new arrivals, can corrode the vital connection of people to place.

Thus, environmental change encompasses more than the natural ecosystem and, as we shall see in Chapter 13, this is acknowledged in legislation; the *Queensland Environmental Protection Act 1994* includes social, cultural, and aesthetic conditions within its definition of environment. Sound environmental management therefore goes beyond the achievement of basic biophysical sustainability, with its rather blunt economic emphasis. The residents of coastal communities recognise this, if almost intuitively. It is often expressed as the urge to preserve a locality's 'character', a notion inclusive of nature and culture. Often it is understood rather amorphously as the desire to maintain a local 'lifestyle' or to protect an area's 'quality of life'. While a good deal of this impulse is directed specifically against the human congestion that accompanies urban sprawl, it also reflects rising concerns about environmental degradation in the broader sense.

On the Capricorn Coast, in March 2003, this impulse inspired a street demonstration to protest against the proposed construction of a twelve storey commercial and residential development on the esplanade facing Yeppoon's main beach. It involved some 1500 people—surely the largest protest meeting ever held on the Coast—and politicians representing all levels of government felt obliged to address the crowd. At the time the local authority, Livingstone Shire Council, was in the throes of developing a new town plan that restricted building heights in a zonal system, but there was a chance that this particular development, which well exceeded the proposed limits, might be granted approval in the interim. Moreover, the Shire Council previously had conducted a survey on building heights that indicated strong community support for limiting structures to five storeys.⁵ As it turned out, the Shire was able to avert the twelve-storey development, but the issue continues to be contentious even with the new Town Plan in place, as new development proposals exceeding the limits come forward.

The controversy over building heights on the Capricorn Coast certainly reflects a preference among a large and vocal proportion of the local community for low-density housing and environmentally sustainable development. However, the March 2003 protest also highlighted the significance of aesthetics as an environmental issue. The

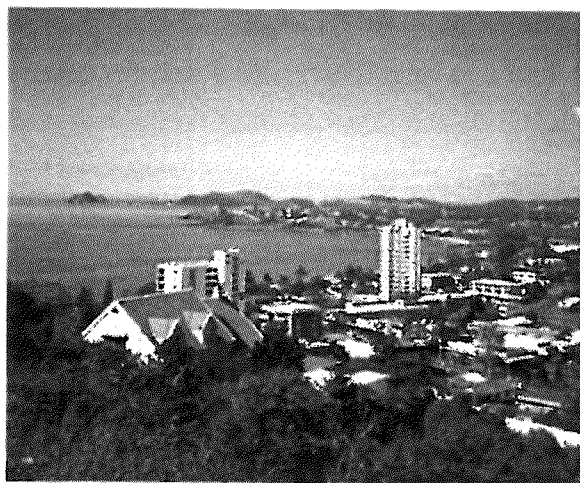


Fig. 2: Yeppoon 2003, with proposed twelve-storey tower superimposed on the landscape (R Kennedy 2003)

campaign that culminated in the protest featured a photograph circulated by email showing a twelve-storey residential tower superimposed on the existing landscape at the proposed site (Fig.2). The point was to graphically illustrate just how such a building would look once erected; to emphasise that it was 'out of character' on the Coast and not 'in harmony' with the local environment. Public comments on the day confirm that the image did have that effect. Thus, while over the years a number of controversial environmental issues have

emerged on the Capricorn Coast, none have elicited so strident a community response as this one over building heights which, to a large degree, concerns aesthetic values, in this case what town planners call 'visual amenity'. It emphasises that environmental management is about more than the preservation of fragile flora and faunal assemblages, that environments are culturally constructed, that humans are integral to most environments, and that the attachment of people to place carries within it the potential to be a powerful tool for environmental management.

Recognising the urgent need to plan for environmental change on Australia's coasts, in 1999 the Commonwealth agreed to fund the Cooperative Research Centre for Coastal Zone, Estuary & Waterway Management (Coastal CRC). In collaboration with a number of research partners, including the CSIRO, five government agencies and five Australian universities, the Coastal CRC's aim was to develop the knowledge and decision-making tools to enable the effective environmental management of the coastal zone. The organisation focussed its research activity in three regions, one of which encompassed the estuary of the Fitzroy River and the Capricorn Coast. Water quality was a principal concern and a 'source to sea' approach meant that much of its scientific research concentrated on the Fitzroy River estuary that drains into Keppel Bay. In 1970 a tidal barrage was built in the Rockhampton reaches of the river to supply the city with water, halving the length of the estuary and altering its biogeochemical processes. While some data had been collected about sediment, nutrient and contaminant flows, in 1999 very little was known about how the Fitzroy estuary actually worked. To properly understand this, the Coastal CRC embarked on a number of coordinated multidisciplinary research projects with a strong biophysical focus.

However, in keeping with its integrated science philosophy, its research program also involved projects oriented more towards understanding the relationships between local people and the environment. This book is the result of one of those projects, *Historical Coastlines* (community perspectives).

Historical Coastlines has been a collaboration between the Coastal CRC and historians from Central Queensland University's School of Humanities. It commenced in 2001 with three objectives: to foster an awareness of the past states of local environments and of environmental change; to try to assess intergenerational attitudes to environmental change, what shaped them and how they shifted over time; and to encourage the view that effective environmental management is an intergenerational concern. Most of the more intractable environmental problems are the result of human action over generations and almost all environmental solutions will benefit future generations. Therefore, local communities should be encouraged to take the long view, to see themselves as implicated in an ongoing process of change, and thus be prepared to grasp the nettle and if necessary borrow from future generations to invest in timely environmental solutions.

History can be useful to environmental management in a variety of ways, apart from being an obvious method of gathering biophysical baseline data. It can help explain how environmental management regimes emerged, and allow us to critique past policy regimes, providing 'policy lessons' to factor into future planning,⁶ or what environmental historian Stephen Dovers describes as antidotes to 'policy amnesia'.⁷ It can convey a deeper and more textured understanding of things like changing patterns of land use, or the significance of evolving farm technologies. Also, because it often relies on 'local knowledge', it tends to encourage community participation in environmental management, and contributes to community capacity building in this regard.

Yet, at its core, history is about understanding human motivation, so the *Historical Coastlines* team looked to investigate issues that promised insights into the attitudes that shaped the way people in the past interacted with their local environments. In keeping with the CRC's focus, we were drawn to the Fitzroy River estuary, and it soon became apparent that there was considerable local curiosity about the origins and purpose of the approximately 30 kilometres of stone walls, in various states of repair, that line the estuary's banks. Some believed the walls had been built by United States troops; more than 70,000 of them had been stationed in the area during the Second World War and contributed to a number of infrastructure projects. Others told us the walls were constructed during the Great Depression, that they were the product of 'susso' schemes designed to alleviate

the terrible unemployment of those times. Still others insisted that some sections were hand-built by South Sea Islanders, thrown out of work when the local sugar industry collapsed at the end of the 19th century. Very few people were aware of the real purpose of the walls; it seemed lost to popular memory.

Historical Coastlines was directed as much as possible by community interest, so research began on the engineering of the Fitzroy River estuary. As we shall see in Chapter 4, the mysterious structures are ‘training walls’, designed and built over a period of sixty years from the 1870s to the 1930s to narrow the river and increase its velocity. In this way the river would scour its bed and maintain depth enough to allow ocean-going ships to make the Port of Rockhampton, located in the city reaches until the mid-1960s. It was an enormous engineering effort, costing hundreds of thousands of pounds. Constant dredging removed sandbanks and islands, and others disappeared, lost under the millions of tons of spoil dumped behind the newly constructed walls. Mangroves, vines and eucalypts rapidly colonised the spoil until signs of the river’s natural contours were largely obliterated. To the modern eye, the artificially created land appears natural but, in truth, the estuary is an historical artefact, a product of human intervention.



Fig. 3: Intrepid historians, Satellite Wall, Fitzroy River estuary, 2003
(R Packett 2003)

Historical research into the engineering of the river has shown us how this particular environment was physically altered by human intervention. But more significantly it revealed a great deal about local attitudes to the human-nature relationship and environmental change. As Barbara Webster writes in Chapter 4:

Nature was perceived as an uncooperative, wilful and undisciplined child who required a firm disciplining hand. Nature was also female, but far from today's notion of a benevolent or fragile 'Mother Nature'... 'Dame Nature', as one editorial put it, should not be allowed to 'follow her own laws'... Solving the enigma of the river through the application of human knowledge was part of the process of colonisation, of empire-building, and, in the martial spirit of the day, a gallant feat. 'Wrestling with the great forces of nature with due intelligence and skill is a noble enterprise and worth all the money expended on it', the *Morning Bulletin* averred, adjacent to an article promoting 'Dynamiting the Clouds' as the solution to droughts.

While a number of writers have pointed out that late 19th century discourse about control over environment was driven by these kinds of metaphors,⁸ it is surprising to see how enthusiastically they were marshalled at the local level, and how effectively they influenced debate. The expensive and ultimately futile engineering effort to maintain a navigable river went on long after the hey-day of Queensland's river ports had passed.

Infrastructure projects are obvious examples of attempts by humans to control nature and, because they are costly and often paid for out of the public purse, generate debates that are revealing about attitudinal development drivers. With research on the engineering of the Fitzroy River estuary proving so fruitful we looked for a coastal infrastructure project that might also reward historical investigation and settled on the construction of the Scenic Highway. This coastal road was built in the late 1930s to connect Yeppoon and Emu Park and, by opening up the beaches in between, led to the creation of what we now call the Capricorn Coast (Chapter 3). Like its more spectacular predecessor, Victoria's Great Ocean Road, the Capricorn Coast's Scenic Highway was not conceived solely as 'an artery of commerce', certainly not in the way the Fitzroy River estuary was. A prime consideration in the decision to go ahead and build the road, and in its design, was how views of Keppel Bay might best be presented to the motoring public. This reminds us that there was another side to past human-nature relationships in Australia; it was not all slash and burn. As Tim Bonyhady explains in his book, *The colonial earth*, there is abundant evidence that settlers demonstrated a deep affection for the Australian landscape and, in many cases, a desire to preserve it.⁹ The construction of the Scenic Highway raises intriguing questions about the role aesthetics played in the interaction between humans and nature on the Capricorn Coast, and alerted us as researchers to the possibilities emotional attachment to place might hold for the practice of effective environmental management.

As Peter Hay reminds us, there is a powerful congruence between empathy with place and a commitment to the protection and maintenance of local natural ecosystems. A deep sense of place instils a desire to act ethically towards that place, and usually it is grounded in a concern for the life, human and otherwise, that has been integral to it.¹⁰ It is also formed out of emotional attachments to scenery; land and seascapes, built up, as Simon Schama puts it, 'as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock'.¹¹ We are more familiar with how these sentiments shape indigenous relationships to country, and this is addressed here in Chapter 2, 'Colonising Keppel Bay'. Yet they also influence the wider community to not only pro-environment but also to pro-social behaviour; the two are linked.

With these principles in mind we entered a new phase of the Historical Coastlines project; the wide-ranging exploration of the environmental history of Keppel Bay that resulted in this book. We came to the task conscious of another use of history that had not been so apparent to us before. If memory plays a crucial role in emotional attachment to place, and if this influences us to act ethically towards our environment, then history has a role to play, especially in coastal areas that are experiencing rapid demographic change, where the steady flow of generations has been interrupted. As pointed out in Chapter 13, history and memory are not the same thing. But memory informs history and history stimulates memory. They often doubt each other, interrogate each other, not a bad thing because by that process they sustain and nourish each other. In this volume, we try not so much to paint a picture of what the past was like, although we are interested in how and why things change, but to cultivate a deeper and more textured appreciation of place.