

Ecosystem decline,

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1963-present

I've known Shoreham since before I remember it-I was born in 1963. My family started camping there each summer when I was a toddler and my memories of it begin later, when I was a bit older. We kept camping there all through my childhood and teens, in the campground on the foreshore. We had friends we met every summer and we ran around, always slightly coated with salt from swimming whenever we could. Eventually Mum and Dad bought a beachhouse, then retired to that house-an old, small house with spectacular views of the Westernport and the islands.

Meanwhile, I moved overseas. I made my own family and we'd visit every year, going 'home' to Shoreham. When our daughter got sick, we stayed there for nearly a year and she learned to love the beach as much as I do, as did my German husband who grew up in landlocked Bavaria (mountains are his 'home'). My sister in Melbourne and her kids spent a lot of time there and my sister in London and her kids came 'home' every year as I did. Our Mum and Dad loved this and they had a big map of the bay next to one of the windows looking out on it. Dad loved to gently tease the kids with the Melways page which showed the Nobbies as one of the greatest concentrations of great white sharks in the world. And Mum would feed us fish she bought from her local fisherman friend, saying 'this was swimming out there this morning!'

Our parents got too old to stay there-it's a little township, and the small houses had nearly all been pulled down and replaced with big, big holiday houses that usually stand empty. Their community of retirees and beach families had been obliged to move and so they felt they needed to as well-it was too risky to stay there with their health issues and no neighbours. Efforts to save the store from a scandalous 'development' had not worked, so they had to drive for every essential task. Dad had to leave his beloved CFA and we all had to say goodbye, at least, goodbye to a fixed point, a 'home.' But we always had the beach. And we talked about it a lot and make a lot of trips down and loved it and looked at photos, especially when Dad died a couple of years later.

But then we started talking about the changes. Yes, the current community are doing a great job at looking after what's there-the bittern protection at Pt Leo, the new walkways to protect the dunes, the removal of many of the weedy pines in the foreshore. There are clearly a lot of committed individuals working really hard. But the big, big change, the one that really worries me is the change to the rockpools at Honeysuckle Point.

These Westernport beaches are a series of coves, often quite deeply curved that form a string of half-circles along that bit of the bay. The points between each cove are nearly all marked by rocks-rockpools in the water and rocky sections on the sand, bleeding up to rocky cliff faces. We intimately know the section from Balnarring to Flinders (at the end of the bay) because it was a favourite walk-you have to time it right for the tide, otherwise you either get stuck or have to scramble up the cliffs. We'd go as a pack, then a grown-up would pick us up at Flinders where we had an ice-cream when we were young or a beer at the pub when we were older.

The Honeysuckle Point rockpools are a particularly rich instance of these pools. When we were kids we'd see starfish and live anemones, all sorts of fish, and, of course, all sorts of birds feeding off them, and seahorses. It's the seahorses that most stick in my mind because we'd sometimes find dead, dried ones which were truly fascinating to me-this astonishing cross between fish and horse

and somehow a bit like a greyhound (it's the beaky face). This has pretty well all gone. I'll say that again-this has pretty well all gone. Nowadays I see limpets and other sucker creatures and an occasional fish-that's it. All the anemones, all the seahorses, all the starfish-none.

How on earth did this happen? I can take a guess:

- heavy industry at Hastings, near the head of the bay
- container ships
- unfettered development of expensive holiday housing making it hard for locals to live
- excessive tourist industries which produce far too much waste

The Westerport has become a tourist playground at the expense of the local community and Hastings is seen as an extension of the port cities in Port Phillip. How can starfish and seahorses, bitterns, dolphins and great whites, survive in that kind of environment? And what would happen if, heaven forbid, there was an oil spill? It would be an ecological disaster.

Even though the water looks clean and there's not a lot of obvious pollution, all I can think is that the habitat is no longer viable for these creatures. I know pretty well nothing about marine ecology, but I can tell you that this environment has been radically changed in the last fifty years. And not to the good, to my mind.

Our children are nearly all adults now. Every one of them all still loves Shoreham just as much as we did but they cannot experience what we did. And the way things are going their children may well see a dead beach, which breaks my heart.

What needs to happen?

- An immediate halt to all damaging industry, especially the planned AGL gas terminal
- Prioritize a bay-wide environmental study, of both water and land
- Put significant environmental controls on tourism
- Make it possible for locals to live and work there and maintain the environment

This should include significant spending on environmental programs and projects. If the kids who grow up in places like Shoreham can aspire to a career in environmental protection, because they've been taught it in school and they see their parents making a living out of it themselves, what a better place we'd have.

I strongly believe that local communities-the people who walk the paths, who observe the vegetation daily and hear the bird calls, who know where the local echidna nests and make sure it's protected-are the ones to look after it. They need to be given the tools and support to do that. And industries need to be stopped through legislation from destroying our beautiful world. All the agitation in the world isn't going to stop companies like AGL if they have government support.

Will the current state government members be able to live with themselves if the gas terminal goes ahead and there's an oil spill or other disaster and the Westernport is killed? And will they be able explain to their kids and grandkids why they let it happen?

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