

# JERVIS BAY A VERY SPECIAL PLACE

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Perhaps the wonder of it all is that, 13 years after the 1973 special issue of *Operculum*, which was devoted entirely to Jervis Bay (virtually the Jervis Bay "bible" for most of that period), the Bay's renowned attractions largely remain. Certainly the principal growth centres have expanded, and plans for naval developments are in the offing, but those beautifully clear waters and whiter than white sands so far retain those qualities. However, to what degree can development be permitted to continue before its impact becomes intolerable? Must we bow to the inevitability of human excesses and condone another Botany Bay in the south?

So what has happened since 1973? The *Operculum* special issue "Jervis Bay - the Future?" was a response to a very major plan for heavy industrial development which threatened to virtually obliterate the Bay's northern shores and north-western hinterland. This plan was approved by the NSW (Askin) Government, and would have gone ahead had not world market forces been against the commencement of the Armco steelworks, the core of the development.

Urban expansion since the early 1970s has spread from the vicinity of the bayshore to the back blocks, and the line of the scenic crest beyond the heights of Vincentia and Hyams Beach is now interrupted by brick and tile and the inevitable clearing of the bush. Shoalhaven City Council plans a major service centre between Vincentia and St. Georges Basin, spanning the intervening high ridge. A big land developer in the Jervis Bay area hopes to persuade Council to rezone a large area of choice blocks so as to permit subdivision, of land which should be reserved for nature conservation. Council itself has acquired the land formerly owned by Armco Steel (north of Currumbene Creek), and has planned to subdivide a part of it near the creek and to permit another part to be quarried for sandstone (for possible breakwaters in the Bay) and to crush the hard rock underlying the dolerite for concrete aggregate and road materials. The State Government has proposed a major boat harbour at Huskisson, where the sandstone could be used. A multistorey hotel and 3-storey flats may be built at Huskisson. The renowned white sands of Callala Beach and the beaches at the top end of the Bay are viewed as potential sources of glass and foundry sands. Firewood and fence-posts are taken from Crown land forests and woodlands in the area.

The permanent population of the Jervis Bay area has topped 5,000, and is estimated to increase to 6,500 by 1991. But this moderate town-sized population pales into insignificance beside what may eventuate if the Navy settles 8,000 families "pepper and salt fashion" between Nowra and Jervis Bay: 25,000 people - a city! The Navy's proposed move of its armament depot and fleet base from Sydney is described in other papers.

Foreshadowed construction of an armaments depot wharf at Green Point, on Beecroft Peninsula, will require considerable shore modification and dredging of the Bay floor. From time to time, scallop dredging takes place in the Bay, and its full impact remains to be determined (but see Hamer & Jacobs in this issue). On Beecroft Peninsula, the armed services occasionally bombard cliffs and rock stacks, and set fire to the magnificent heathland with their incendiaries. 4WD users make new and unauthorised tracks across the moors, and the inevitable erosion scores deep gullies in the fragile soils.

And so it goes on, a once pristine area losing its integrity little by little yet still most impressive and crying out to be saved from the development imperative. What is it that the people of NSW are in danger of losing? Why did the 1974 House of Representatives Inquiry into the Development Pressures on Jervis Bay decide that the Bay be regarded as a natural area recreation resource with no major developments?

Jervis Bay itself is approximately 120 sq km of exceptionally clear seawater, fringed by cliffs, rock platforms, and the whitest sands in the world (so it is claimed). As a landscape, it is geologically unique, with its complex combinations of structural warping and faulting of Permian rock strata followed by post-glacial flooding by the ocean. The warping is in the form of a syncline, a saucer-shaped depression in the earth's crust of 230-280 million years old Permian sandstone. Evidence of this can be seen by visiting the sloping, deeply fissured rock platforms at Vincentia and on the Groper Coast of Beecroft Peninsula, and by observing the steep dip of the land surface behind Point Perpendicular from the south or from a boat in the Bay.

The Bay is enclosed by two rocky peninsulas - Beecroft in the north and Bherwerre in the south. Their seaward side is a line of sheer cliffs, which not only tower above the sea to a maximum of 135m north of Steamers Beach on Bherwerre Peninsula (highest sea-cliff in NSW), but also plunge to depths of up to 40 m straight down with no intervening rock platform. Deep down, they are festooned with sea-life of bewildering variety and beauty. This great wall is not merely the product of marine erosion. It follows the line of the Point Perpendicular Fault, which is named after the sheer sea-cliff which forms the northern portal to Jervis Bay, and is a notable landmark from both land and sea.

The cliffs, which on the north side also extend around the entrance into the Bay, are outstanding in their great diversity of form and feature, sculptured by the searching wind, rain and sea. There are comb-like profiles caused by differential weathering of the strata's alternate harder and softer layers; sea caves, blowholes clefts, arches, and tunnels. All this makes exploring exciting, strenuous, sometimes dangerous. One can be awed by the might of the sea here, or in any weather feel that this is one of the great coasts of the world, a fit environment for excursions of the imagination into old romantic tales of heroic exploration, high adventure and piracy in strange far-off places when the earth was still vast and mysterious.

But Jervis Bay is more than any of these factors. The combination of syncline, faulting, and Permian rocks makes it unique at least on the East Coast of Australia. Add to this uniqueness the remarkable state of preservation of the Bay and much of its environs to date, and you have a national heritage which must not be allowed to deteriorate simply because its protection is given a lower priority than its development.

James Cook noted Jervis Bay in 1770, but did not actually sail into it, as he was keen to press on with his exploration northward. The first European to enter was Lieutenant Bowen, 21 years after Cook. In 1811, Governor Lachlan Macquarie realised that the comparatively deep waters and entrance offered "a most excellent safe anchorage", but his plan for a settlement was later abandoned because access by land was too difficult. Thenceforth, settlement up to the end of World War II was slow. To this, and to the presence of the Navy from 1915, we owe the comparatively low impact of European man upon the area.

The marine waters of Jervis Bay owe their clarity and purity to several factors:

1. No large river draining heavily disturbed or densely settled lands enters the Bay.
2. The entrance is flanked by miles of rocky coast with no beaches of any size and the cliffs plunge straight into deep water for much of their length.
3. There is no heavy industry around the Bay, an only (as yet) moderate degree of urban development, with tertiary-treated sewage discharged at only one point, no great movement or tonnage of shipping, and only a small fishing industry.

A cruise on the Bay, particularly if one keeps fairly close to the shore, is most rewarding. It will probably start at Huskisson, which is spreading from its original location on the south side of the mouth of Currumbene Creek, the largest stream to enter the Bay, at its mouth a boat haven, with its source somewhere west of the Princes Highway. It is a most interesting and environmentally valuable stream and associated wetland, well endowed with mangrove and *Casuarina* fringes, wide marshlands, and some beautiful saline billabongs.

Our craft is now passing Vincentia, south of Huskisson and the largest settlement of the area. It was originally subdivided under the name of St. Vincent in 1919-20. Vincentia now sprawls up the steep backdrop and is set to fuse with a similar spread from Errowal Bay on St. Georges Basin. The large development company concerned has since 1970 proposed a close settlement of 8100 lots, which could bring the population capacity of Vincentia, at present occupancy rates, to 26,000. Its present population is probably around 2400, based on Council's estimates of future growth (from 1981). Of approximately 1800 lots of a pre-1918 subdivision on the south side of Vincentia called Pacific City, 1700 have been acquired by Council for purposes as yet undisclosed. On the heights, mercifully hidden from below and from the Bay and Point Perpendicular, is a large sandstone quarry from which sand for roadmaking is obtained by ripping.

Hyam's Beach is the smallest of the bayside villages. Here, of all places, the Council of the day should have resolutely refused to allow the march of houses up the back slopes. The bushland of this area and of the Crown land south of the village is a fine example of the typical Jervis Bay environment, established on coastal sands and the country rock (Permian sandstone) behind them. There is a flowering understorey and outstanding white barked scribbly gums (the taxonomy of these trees in the Jervis Bay area is unresolved). With variations, this woodland community surrounds the Bay, enriching the plateaux and slopes with its diversity and scenic appeal. It is fine bushwalking country, and some long and short distance tracks through it would add considerably to the passive recreational advantages of the area.

The beach south of Hyams extends to the boundary of the Jervis Bay Territory at Captains Point, site of the naval training college HMAS Creswell, which was opened in 1915, the year the Territory was ceded to the Commonwealth from N.S.W. so that the former could have independent access to the sea. The Territory covers the whole of Bherwerre Peninsula. So far, its main use by the Commonwealth have been HMAS Creswell and an airfield for defence use, but there is also an annexe to the Canberra Botanic Gardens situated around picturesque Lake McKenzie, which is south of its larger companion Lake Windermere. Local Aborigines have recently been granted title to an extension of the existing settlement at Wreck Bay. The historic remains of the Cape St. George lighthouse, built in 1859, provide a point of interest for tourists. To its great credit, the Commonwealth in 1971 set aside 62% of the peninsula to establish the 4, 318 ha Jervis Bay Nature Reserve, which is administered by the Department of Territories (following the 1987 General Election the Department of Territories is included within the "super" ministry of Arts, Sport, the Environment, Tourism and Territories headed by Mr. John Brown). The remainder, to the north and including the southern shore of Jervis Bay except for the HMAS Creswell site, is "managed in sympathy with" the Nature Reserve. This latter area also includes the waters of the Bay south of a line drawn between the northern tip of Bowen Island and Captains Point.

The southern shore of Jervis Bay is one of those idyllic coastal environments with alternating small beaches and rock outcrops and platforms, backed by a forest of giant old eucalypts, melaleucas, and other trees, which must be preserved for posterity, even though it is fairly intensively used by holiday-makers with car access and camping facilities. The establishment of fleet base facilities along this shore would obliterate it as a natural area and recreational setting. Even if this never happens, management must remain at a high level. It is extremely pleasing to observe the splendid condition of the elongated lagoon east of Creswell, undoubtedly due to the lack of vehicular access mainly, but perhaps also to some care by the Navy.

Murrays Beach was proposed as the site of a nuclear power station proposed in the early 1970s. The proposal was dropped when the Whitlam Government came to power in 1972, and the circular, flat-floored excavation is now a carpark and starting point for walking tracks. However it has been mooted that the Lucas Heights nuclear reactor be relocated to this site.

We now leave the southern shores and steer north across the Heads, past Bowen Island, named after the first European to sail into Jervis Bay, Lieutenant Bowen, in the "Atlantic". Bowen Island has only recently been added to the Nature Reserve.

After crossing the deepwater heads of the Bay, we come abreast of Beecroft Peninsula, whose remarkable rock features and diversity of vegetation make it a bushwalkers' and tourist's delight. The rock formations alone, and the dramatic scenic settings in which they occur, would make Beecroft an exceptionally worthy coastal national park, and Australia will be the poorer if this degree of protection and management is not sooner or later given to the peninsula. However, the present position is that the Commonwealth Government, through the Department of Defence, owns the entire peninsula save Currarong Village and Abraham's Bosom Reserve in the north. A substantial band of its coastline is actually Commonwealth territory, while the balance, being NSW territory, is owned as freehold by the Commonwealth as the result of a land swap deal in 1981.

Since 1950, parts of Beecroft Peninsula have been used as a range for bombardment and air weapons exercises (shelling and bombing) for RAN ships and aircraft. Damage is certainly caused by the impact of shells and bombs on the moorland, and occasionally on the coastal cliffs and the rock stacks known as the Drum and Drumsticks, but to date this has been a fairly small price to pay for preservation of the area from urban, rural, or industrial development. (Remember Kurnell !). Beecroft's extensive woodlands and flowering heathlands remain essentially intact. The main problems are bushfires caused by incendiary armaments and vehicular access which has led to proliferation of tracks, with consequent deep erosion of the very fragile soils. The Department of Territories manages the area on behalf of the Department of Defence, and attempts to control the use of vehicles. Camping is limited to one place - Honeymoon Bay, a delightful cup-shaped inlet on the Bay's north-eastern shore.

Does the Navy really need Beecroft Peninsula any more? Damage sustained so far may be tolerable, but it should not continue, and the area needs the type of management the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, in conjunction with the Australian NP&WS, can and would give it. If ever a great natural area was made for national park status, it is Beecroft Peninsula.

The declaration of Beecroft Peninsula as a national park should be just part of a wider move to protect and manage the natural surrounds of Jervis Bay together with parts of the water body and seabed. Both the Fisheries Division of the N.S.W. Department of Agriculture and the Jervis Bay Protection Committee have proposed marine reserves. In July 1984, the National Trust of Australia (N.S.W.) made a submission to the N.S.W. National Parks and Wildlife Service which it entitled "A Proposal by the National Trust of Australia N.S.W. for the Permanent Protection of Natural Areas in the vicinity of Jervis Bay". This was circulated to ministers and departments of both the State and Federal Governments. The proposal calls for a set of national park and nature reserve areas around the northern and western parts of the Bay. The proposed nature reserves cover the northern estuarine wetlands and Lake Wollumboola (Lake Wollumboola Nature Reserve) and an extension of Gurumbi Nature Reserve in the south. The Currumbene National Park (some consider it should be Jervis Bay NP) covers an extensive area between the two nature reserves, extending well to the west in the north, enclosing the "Armco land" and taking in the bayshore east of Gurumbi. The total proposal covers about 6850 hectares, of which perhaps 30% is vacant Crown Land. The total area demanding of national park and nature reserve status would be much larger if the Beecroft peninsula (minus Currarong village) were added to the proposal, in the hope of the Navy eventually relinquishing its hold on the land.

Whilst other protective measures have been taken (National Estate and National Trust listings; Coastal Protection Act zonings; Local Government planning zonings), the only surety for adequate protection and management is gazettal of reserves under the National Parks and Wildlife Act. All who are concerned for the future of Jervis Bay should regularly urge the environment ministers of both the NSW and Federal Governments to take steps to provide that security for this important part of our natural heritage.