

Two Bays Forum

Old Ways, New Ways.

This event is being held on the traditional lands of the Kulin Nations and I wish to acknowledge them as the traditional owners. I would also like to pay my respects to their Elders and the Elders of other communities who may be here today.

I also would like to thank the City of Port Phillip for hosting and supporting the Indigenous Festival. I feel very honoured to be part of the opening night of such a wonderful, creative festival. I have been particularly impressed that it is also a sustainable festival and is consciously monitoring and auditing energy use and creating a carbon neutral event! Finally I would also like to thank Bo Svoronos - for embracing us and bringing us in as part of this event.

I want to give a brief potted visual history of Pelican Expeditions and share some ideas behind our work, before I launch into talking about the Two Bays project.

In 1997 a small group of people came together with the intention to make a documentary about homeless teenagers.

This group included the then filmmaker Garry McKechnie, now Pelican 1s skipper, Peter Malcolm, Tim Oddie and myself

The documentary, *If It Doesn't Kill You*, was filmed on an old pearling lugger called Redbill in the Bass Strait wilderness, with 6 teenagers on board.

This experience inspired our group to build a boat to create further projects at sea.

We took 5 years to build Pelican 1 and with the help of trusting shareholders, we were launched by our patron, Andrew Denton, in May of 2004.

As we were building we developed our intentions, which can be boiled down to the following vision:

- Provide an inspirational focus for the involvement of people with the sea.
- Integrate industry, government, scientific and cultural participation in marine conservation.
- Provide innovative marine education and promote a sustainable future for the world's oceans.

During this period we received a letter from a young woman from Hope Vale, an Aboriginal Community situated north of Cooktown in Cape York. She had seen *If It Doesn't Kill You* on TV and wanted to know if we could do a sea program with the youth from her community. At that time Hope Vale was

in the middle of a suicide epidemic and she felt a sea program could work with the kids as a suicide prevention program.

This idea has now evolved into an annual two - week event during the September school holidays, sponsored by the ANZ bank. We are currently heading into our 5th year there. The project is led by community Elders, who discuss the needs of the youth, and direct the focus of each year's project. The program involves connecting Elders and Youth on the traditional country of the Dingaal people on Lizard Island. The traditional owners had sometimes not been able to visit this country for up to 3 generations. The opportunity to visit Country and share stories with the young people has proved an important and healing one.

The program also includes a partnership with Queensland Parks and Wildlife and in particular with Dr Ian Bell. We work with Parks Rangers who engage the young men in a turtle -tagging. During the project a community camp is set up at Cape Flattery and Ian also gave talks in the evening about turtle conservation.

We are talking to Elders about further linking in with their sea country management plans and working with scientists studying water quality.

Last years project saw the community camp grow to include a weaving group, involving creating natural dyes and weaving bracelets and mats. We also started a digital story telling project which aims to give the kids the tools and means to begin to tell their own stories in their own way.

In 2006, Pelican Expeditions, in partnership with GBMPA, joined forces to study coral bleaching. This expedition was the most comprehensive ever undertaken on the Reef. At the same time we took on board 4 indigenous trainees. The young men were on board with the scientists and boat crew for 6 weeks. By the end of the project, the trainees were working alongside the scientists, diving and collecting data. The scientists, too, were given an insight into indigenous culture through sharing stories and working alongside the boys.

Pelican Expeditions also ran a website to link with remote schools on the Cape, so that other Indigenous kids could follow the project and join in the trainees adventures and learnings through an on-line blog. The science data was also posted online for schools in general.

I now would like to lead into Two Bays with a story from our very first project.

On board Redbill, the Pearling Lugger, we had an Aboriginal teenager, who had not had any contact with the Aboriginal side of his family while he was growing up. His father had died when he was very young and he had lived with his white mum and a series of step dads. Troy had a profound experience on Erith Island, a beautiful Island in the Kent Group in Bass Strait. On his return we asked him if he would like to connect with the Aboriginal side of his family. He wished to so we contacted Albert Mullet, a well- known

Gurnai-Kurnai Elder,. Albert immediately understood the nature of Troy's experience and said " But of course, he was on Country".

Troy's experience and Albert's understanding of it is not so obvious for a "white fella", as it spans the reality of a culture that lives way beyond the time of the pyramids. Eons ago or over 10,000 years ago, people could walk across Bass Strait, hunting and gathering. Implicit in Albert's response is the knowledge that his people's history is so woven into their beings that a young man with no cultural upbringing will be intuitively connected to it.

This story had a big impact on me and the team.

The story also connects with an ongoing vision of Two Bays to link the recent science work with the creation stories that have been told here tonight. I feel that these connections bring us all closer to the environment that is crying out for more understanding and protection. It is also important to give the vital recognition deserved to the Indigenous people as primary guardians and knowledge holders of this cultural heritage.

Two Bays is an initiative of Pelican Expeditions in collaboration with Parks Victoria and the EPA in partnership with the Agencies listed above.

The project is a marine science and community engagement program designed to improve understanding and promote awareness of the links between human activity in the catchment and the health of the bays. The work of the scientists and messages about the values of the bays and how to protect them were shared through a series of pier stops in both bays.

Pelican sailed around both bays over three weeks in December of last year, launching from Docklands.

The full-scale project followed a pilot Two Bays, held in January of 2007. The science program, developed by scientists from the EPA, Melbourne Water, the Freshwater Fisheries Institute and Parks Victoria, had much of its focus developed out of the earlier science work in January of the same year.

The scientists continuously monitored water quality in both bays and the results will be presented at a future forum when all the data has been calibrated and properly analyzed. Mark Rodrigue, from Parks, who is speaking after me will give a rounder picture of the science involved.

I can say that the early tests in January actually pointed to slightly better all round water quality than expected. Due to the drought there is less flow from the catchments and therefore less contaminants flowing into the bay. Also, due to the drought, the bays are hypersaline, making Port Phillip Bay, for example, saltier than Bass Strait.

Many people may be unaware of the very deep, now underwater, waterfall at the Heads. It was spoken of orally in Boonwurrung stories, but it was only when underwater mapping of the area was completed that scientists became

aware of the geological fact. The people around Pt Nepean used to be known as "The people in the mist" as it sent up a magnificent spray (this was over 10,000 years ago)

One hypothesis that came out of the early study was that perhaps the waterfall, at the heads, might be flowing again. This would be due to the fact that as the water flowing out of the bay was heavier (salty water being much heavier) it may be recreating the waterfall, rather than flowing closer to the surface, as the bay exchanges with Bass Strait, which has been the case in recent times.

I was rather excited about that possibility, as it linked with the bays creation story in such a tangible way! Our tests in December, only looked at one channel in one tide flow at the heads, and so we cannot conclusively say it is not. But the test performed suggests that the waterfall is not flowing as I imagined.

The bays are complex systems and the more we seem to understand, the more questions arise. One of the best aspects of the program, to my mind, was that it allowed many of the people, who are involved in managing and looking after the health of the bays, to interact and exchange ideas, while out on the water. Many members of the public are unaware of who has responsibility for what and Two Bays enabled people to come on board and gain some insight into those networks. It also allowed them to understand the science involved in monitoring, giving also the scientists a boost, who often work very quietly, in the background of things. It also enabled people within those agencies to interact and share information in a more informal way.

The best example of that was the Western Port Catchment tour, run by the Port Phillip and Western Port Catchment Management Authority. This involved a day circumnavigating French Island in Western Port Bay with a very diverse bunch of people on board. This included people from government agencies, local scientists, environmental groups, educators and local farmers. During the voyage much information was shared both formally from prepared talks and informally through networking.

The program included an evening, again lead by the PP and WP CMA, to discuss setting up of a full environmental study of Westernport Bay. The event brought together all the major stakeholders on Pelican. This study is much needed as the last major study was undertaken in the early 70s (The Shapiro report). There are a number of organisations that have been interested for some time in a new scientific study. Graeme Rooney, representing Melbourne Water's interests, is focused on better understanding the bay, so that it (Melbourne Water) can in turn, fine tune its waterway management in the bay's catchment

As most people will be aware Western Port is looking at being developed as a major port and a study needs to be undertaken way in advance to assess the

best way forward. The study also needs to engage with the knowledge and direction of local people and scientists.

Two Bays involved community directly in the science research through working with Sea Search, which is part of the People and Parks Foundation. This organization actively engages the public in data collection and involves a broad range of people. The data collected is placed on a website and becomes helpful public information. Sea Search was involved in looking at some of the seagrass communities in Western Port Bay and also helped with some of the Habitat mapping in Port Phillip Bay.

Finally we have scheduled to hold a mini forum about Port Phillip on Pelican, with some Primary school children, to be run by the junior Mayor of Kingston. She is mentored by the current mayor of Kingston, Topsy Petchey, who has a deep commitment to environmental issues. We plan to run the pilot event some time in the next couple of months.

I hope to be able to run Two Bays annually and develop more links with schools. This would also involve getting the data we collect more immediately on a website to allow for school kids to get involved and learn some science and cultural knowledge along the way.

As most people are aware we are holding this forum on the eve of the dredging of Port Phillip Bay and debate is raging on the potential damage that will be done to the Bay. People are also feeling at a loss with the broader perceived threats of climate change, making them feel powerless. There is plenty of room to worry on all those scores. But I think it is also important to remember that one of the biggest long-term threats to the bay's health and the future of all the creatures both big and small is our own unsustainable behavior in the catchments and population growth. In other words, there are many small actions that can be taken to help preserve the precious pool of biodiversity at the foot of our big city.

Bunjil's warning to his people 10,000 years ago is just as prescient today. We need to look after each other and the environment. And in the case of science, I hope, with our work, we can add to the store of knowledge that aids us in looking after and caring for country as well as we can.

Natalie Davey