

Single-species growth is not natural abundance



Evocative image of Byron wetlands and coast from Ian Walker's mural on the Paterson Street water tank. Photo Mary Gardner

Mary Gardner

The growth plan for Byron Bay? To be economically viable, I am told that we need to expand from village to town. The NSW government definition of 'town' has a population over 20,000. To my mind, 20,000 koalas is ambitious. Does this goal include more oystercatchers, curlews, wonga-wonga pigeons, goannas, dingoes and dusky flatheads? Given the historical abundances of pipi and other shellfish, 20,000 would be an under-target but nevertheless it's a start.

Seafood haven

Ask your grandparents about their parents' lives. The late 1800s and early 1900s? Vintage dates for another coastal Byron lifestyle. Catches of local fish were shared among neighbours. Families on the economic fringe relied on fishing. Byron and Mullum oyster saloons warred with each other to present Brunswick shellfish, considered the finest in the country. In the high season, thousands of holiday makers expected to eat seafood daily.

Many looked forward to making an outstanding catch that was reported in the newspaper. Snagging one of the two-hundred-pound marine turtles would merit a front page photo. As for freshwater turtles, they were so common they were considered a nuisance.

What happened to such marine abundance? Was there a change in the fertility of the coast? With eyes only on one type of economic progress, seeing only dollars, the value of many coastal lives was at the lowest ebb. Not only animal and plant lives, but human ones, too. Actions against peoples such as the Aboriginals, Chinese, Pacific Islanders and Southern Europeans played out in the region. Different classes of 'whites' were ranked by convict heritages as well as poverty and employment prospects.

Place-based

The history of these people and the species they knew holds part of the answer. Outside of the cash economy, their day-to-day lives depended on what is now called 'place-based food'. The edible and medicinal wild biodiversity. These species and their needs, as well as knowledge about their lifecycles and habitats, were not economic priorities. The coastal wetlands themselves, with their peats, sedges, mangroves and seagrass supporting all these birds, reptiles, mammals, insects, fishes, sharks, dolphins, dugongs – most were drained. The forests cut. The first industrialisation of the landscape was export agriculture: tallow, maize, sugar, dairy, slaughterhouses. The seascape was valued according to the prices set at the Sydney Fish Market.

Now, Byron coastal living relies on little, if any, place-based foods. There is some agriculture for local sales, but not as much as there is need. The ocean is only a playground, not the generous and terrifying source of sustenance for body and spirit.

Now, the cash economy is fixated on coastal real estate, as 'wealth' and tourism generators. The con is to level all places to serve only as building sites. The latest targets are the most degraded and floodprone places (West Byron, Belongil Estuary and adjacent coast north and south), fertile places (Ewingsdale) and wild places (Belongil Estuary, Taylors Lake and its sources in Suffolk Park and the quarry).

No future

This type of cash economy imagines no future for them as abundant with wildlife and fertile with foodstuffs. It doesn't see its own limitations: there is only a three-day supply of food at the supermarkets. It doesn't safeguard against its difficulties or decay: which alternative systems is it supporting?

Without growth plans for wildlife, places of Byron Bay will host the usual ecological collapses. We need not only the likes of koala management plans but expansion targets across the species.

We need transformative development. This values West Byron first as an opportunity for extensive revitalised coastal ecology based on a newly productive wetland and floodplain. It grows our own economy of healthy foods, cultivated and wild throughout the shire. It offers

more options in the unknown future by working with Aboriginal Australians, residents and scientists in renewed forms of 'caring for country'.

Global financier Brad Orgill writes that 'in a world obsessed with economic activity and monetisation, [Byron Bay] is rare... [one of] fewer and fewer such places in the world... where we can walk in forests and swim in clean oceans. It is a massive credit to the Byron Bay community and council...'

Once again, Byron Bay community and Byron Shire Council, here's our chance. Let's reject single species humans-only growth targets as the base for our local economy. Let's invest in our point of difference: coastal livings, not only housing. Let's transform and go rewilding.

By Mary Gardner

Source: <http://www.echo.net.au/2014/11/single-species-growth-natural-abundance/>

The life and times of the local oyster



A bed of oysters at Brunswick Heads. Photo Mary Gardner

Mary Gardner

In some daring moment, you may have proclaimed ‘the world’s my oyster!’ But exactly what is an oyster’s world? Salty wet morsels on a half shell, what sort of life leaves them finally exposed on a plate at a fancy dinner?

Pearl oysters, a separate group from the edible oysters, live in the tropics of Australia. Here in the northern rivers, the rock oyster and flat oyster were foodstuffs of the Aboriginal people for thousands of years. Large middens hint at centuries of bygone meals. Most of these are hard to find now because, from the mid 1800s, many were dug up and burned to create lime. This product was used partly in farming but more urgently for building. The British, wanting the type of housing they knew best, needed lime for mortar and cement. When the more obvious middens were used up, they pulled up live oyster reefs. This process was called ‘skinning’.

Another word that makes a person think. ‘Skinning’ meant peeling away from river banks and coastal areas kilometres of structures made over centuries by oysters. These reefs were like coral reefs: layers of dead shells glued together and topped with a living layer of animals. (A variation of this communal living was the oyster bed.)

In either setting, these animals are filter feeders. They open their shells and circulate water across their gills for both oxygen and particles of food. In great numbers, they once cleared vast amounts of water. Individual oysters are clocked at clearing up to 190 litres of water a day.

Adult rock oysters change sex several times a year. Rock oysters simply shed eggs and sperm into the waters. Flat oysters are also sex changers but in a female mode the oyster collects sperm and broods the young inside the shell. About a week later, the youngsters are sent off. By either process, a new generation swims away, attaches somewhere and grows.

Either type of oyster reproduction en masse was also an opportunity for a feed by different schools of fish. Reefs were generally good for a meal of oysters or of other animals that made their homes there. The complexity is hard to picture. Different predators were a hazard for different sizes of shellfish. Certain sharks also ate oysters.

Still, many oysters survived. Oral histories suggest that Aboriginal people encouraged settlement of oysters by deliberately placing old shells or sticks in the water. Shellfishing was often considered women's work. Is it possible that coastal regions were partly shaped by generations of women 'gardening' young oyster spat?

Back to 'skinning'. Since shellfish doubled as everyday foodstuff for Aboriginal people and immigrants alike, laws tried to stop the destruction of live reefs and beds. 'Skinning', along with deforestation, literally muddied the waters. One place after another 'lost' their oyster reefs or beds. Marine food webs changed, as did water quality.

By the turn of the 20th century, legislation formalised oyster farming as a strictly commercial industry. Farmed shellfish were served in the oyster saloons of Lismore, Mullumbimby, Byron Bay and Brunswick Heads. The best oysters in the country were said to come from 'the Bruns'. They were sent to Sydney, Brisbane and overseas. The question today is which species of oysters were they? The ones now found at the markets are rock oysters. Old photos from before the cyclone of 1954 suggest that flat oysters were more abundant.

There isn't an ending to this story. Exactly what happened in Brunswick Heads? How extensive were the oyster beds and reefs from Richmond River to the Tweed? An oyster on a plate may be two or three years old. Given the chance, they can live for decades, building reefs and beds, feeding fish and filtering water. Would we give these small animals such an opportunity?

Do you know about local oysters past? I would love to hear from you.

By Mary Gardner

Source: <http://www.echo.net.au/2014/02/life-times-local-oyster/>