

# Gladstone's marine catastrophe – havoc in the harbour

Sue Arnold

Gladstone is probably a write-off.

A sacrifice on the altar of Australia's destiny as a gigantic quarry. It's heart breaking to witness the devastation wreaked on the magnificent harbour, wetlands and surrounding islands.

In 26 years of environmental activism, I haven't seen such a monumental environmental and social tragedy. The Gladstone saga qualifies as an international environmental emergency because it threatens the World Heritage status of the Great Barrier Reef marine park and demonstrates a terrifying template of future mining developments along the east and west coasts of Australia as well as the top end.

## Acid barges

The once beautiful harbour is now a sea of industrial machinery, cranes, smokestacks, wharves and a scarred, scraped-clean waterfront. Dredges go back and forth digging up the seagrass beds, turning the waters of the harbour into pea soup. Huge barges full of acid sulfate soil dotted around the foreshore, dredging, recreational and fishing vessels on the water.

Commercial fishermen are still catching sick fish covered in lesions. On the day I visited Ted Whittingham, head of the beleaguered Gladstone Fish Market, some fishers had brought in a shark, its flesh now bright pink, bleeding from its back passage. I was shown a live crab with half its shell eaten away as though by acid. To the layperson, all

the shell erosion and extensive pink flesh found on many marine creatures looks like burned flesh. Ted explained, 'They're dredging up acid sulfate soil and loading it into barges. If the soil isn't disposed of within 24 hours, it becomes sulphuric acid. We've seen barges left for days before dumping their loads into the harbour.'

Although a recent desktop study undertaken at the request of the Queensland minister for fisheries gave dredging the all-clear in terms of damage to fish, the terms of reference did not include any impact from dredging. Nor was any cause found for the reddened skin seen on many fish, sharks, stingrays, turtles and other species.

## Savage blow

Commercial fishing in Gladstone has been dealt a savage blow. Gladstone Fish Market once provided 50 per cent of all mud crabs in Queensland; the catch is now down by between 50 and 70 per cent. A lucrative export and domestic scallop fishery is on its knees with the catch reduced from around 1300 tonnes down to 300. Fishers are suffering from appalling stress as they watch their industry in its death throes.

Ted Whittingham describes the harbour as a 'dead sea.' He says there's zero recruitment. To date, 2,856,000 cubic metres of dredging has occurred. Just a smidgin of the 46 million cubic metres to be removed over the next 20 years. 'Put it in perspective,' says Ted, 'most people can't imagine what 46 million cubic metres looks like. If you stretched it out in a line,



A diseased fish from Gladstone's harbour. From <http://gladstonefishingresearchfund.org.au>.

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it would go half way round Australia!

I met with Leo Zussino, CEO of the Gladstone Port Corporation, who has responsibility for the dredging to service four LNG terminals. Born and bred in Gladstone, Leo Zussino is a powerful man who casually drops the names of federal and state government ministers like confetti. A lifetime member of the ALP, Leo is very well connected. He also chairs the Australia Maritime Safety Authority, which some say is a conflict of interest.

Not content with the massive workload, Mr Zussino also

chairs the Gladstone Economic and Industry Development Board which has as its focus a vision of Gladstone as 'the model 21st Century City,' according to the board's literature.

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signed to adequately protect or monitor any threatened or endangered marine species.

Leo acknowledges but dismisses the fact that dredging is damaging Gladstone Harbour, insisting that seagrass beds are coming back and that the diseased fish is a result of the 2011 flooding over the Awonga Dam which washed some 30,000 Barramundi into the Harbour system.

## Dredging impact

This assertion ignores the evidence from overseas and within Australia that dredging damages the marine environment. Many scientists liken dredging to strip mining. Ironically, on the day of my meeting with Leo Zussino, the Department of the Environment and Resource Management (DERM) halted dredging because of turbidity. However, only the big dredge stopped, smaller ones continuing their destructive path.

Along with other Gladstone supporters of the massive industrial development, Leo believes the Gladstone Fish Health Scientific Advisory Panel Report released on January 5 gives dredging a clean bill of health. In fact, dredging is only mentioned once in the 47-page report and is ignored as a stressor. But one sentence in the report says it all.

'The Panel noted the current parameters measured may not provide an appropriate trigger for ecosystem health problems that may be responsible for the observed fish health issues in Gladstone Harbour.'

The crux of the debate is the failure to take into account the extent of damage to

endangered dolphins, turtles, dugongs, pelagic and coastal fish, prawns, scallops, sharks, rays and other marine species. American scientists say the sheer numbers of species affected are an indication of a major ecosystem crisis. Water tests fail to take into account the full range of contaminants allowing state and federal governments to ignore a marine catastrophe.

In spite of growing evidence in Gladstone, the federal government plans to double the amount of dredging inside the Great Barrier Reef's world heritage area.

## Increased levels

Senate estimates figures, released last week by Greens senator Larissa Waters, show plans to increase seabed dredging by 17 times the October 2010 levels in order to allow super tankers to remove oil and natural gas from Queensland ports.

Undeterred by these events, Gladstone Area Promotion and Development Ltd, publisher of fancy brochures found at hotels, airports and tourism places, writes, 'Gladstone: unique, unforgettable and truly special. With such contrasting features of industry, nature and the world heritage listed Great Barrier Reef, Gladstone creates an unlikely, exciting and interesting destination.' And further down, 'the shimmering water of Gladstone Harbour continues to attract people to the city from around the globe and encourages further exploration.'

A UNESCO World Heritage team will visit Australia to inspect Gladstone and the Reef from March 6 to 12.