

# Gippsland Lakes a putrid mess

Ross Scott lives on an enviable part of the Gippsland Lakes.

The retired mechanical, civil and municipal engineer has had a holiday home on the Banksia Peninsula, which juts into Lake Victoria, since the 1960s.

From his back verandah he has views over Duck Arm, which opens onto Lake Victoria. After working on overseas aid projects, Mr

Scott would look forward to returning home and his special spot on the Banksia Peninsula, near Paynesville.

However, since a succession of algal blooms have begun appearing in the Gippsland Lakes in recent years, Mr Scott now feels very differently about it.

"I've been watching this stretch of water go down the gurgler," he said.

After assignments in Cambodia and other less developed parts of the world, the jetty is where Mr Scott would feel most at peace as he walked down to the water's edge, and sat on the jetty, to take in the tranquil surroundings of Duck Arm.

However, the 85-year-old no longer sits on the jetty. He rarely ventures out the back door of his home these days because of the

stench of rotten algae lapping at the water's edge.

Duck Arm is covered in thick layers of blue-green algae. Moldy crusts have formed on top of the rotting algae, which accumulates on the banks of the waterway. The smell is reminiscent of a dairy farm, a familiar rotten egg odour.

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## Calls for an audit of Gippsland Lakes

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Mr Scott believes the algae presently permeating the Gippsland Lakes, is being caused by a number of factors, but two in particular are a major irritant, and they have nothing to do with DELWP's argument that blue-green algae "is a natural occurring event".

"If you imagine it (Gippsland Lakes) as a human body equivalent, it's being poisoned at the head end and it's got a bloody big, cold saltwater enema up the rear end of it at Lakes Entrance," he said.

Mr Scott says deepening the entrance of the Lakes by three metres in 2008, has "increased the tidal speed by more than double and we increase what they call the tidal prism, the amount of saltwater entering the Lakes per tide".

He says this has changed the Lakes "from freshwater/brackish to marine in one hit", thereby killing the freshwater ecology.

Mr Scott says as a result of the marine water, the Lakes is now struggling to deal with marine intrusion. By way of example he says the European shore crab has destroyed food chains in the waterways and stingrays, Leopard and Draftboard sharks have now entered the Lakes system.

Mr Scott says the marine system has killed shoreline vegetation around the Lakes, "which (has) then facilitated shoreline erosion, which is very, very obvious around the Lakes".

He says the freshwater that has now entered the Lakes system has killed the marine intrusion which he argues is "why you won't find a mussel on a jetty".

"So, we have a situation where you have a kill if you go marine and a kill if you go fresh and when this freshwater goes out via the entrance, we will go back to marine again.

"So how long can you go kill, kill, kill, kill before you have completely screwed everything?"

Mr Scott says the current blue-green algal bloom is being fed by nutrients from as far away as West Gippsland.

It's this second point that Mr Scott shows a



Ross Scott lives on the Banksia Peninsula and is distressed at what he is witnessing in Duck Arm. "I've been watching this stretch of water go down the gurgler," he says. INSET: The mess in Duck Arm has sent shockwaves through the community. Bushes on the banks of the Lakes are dying from the contamination. K143-7051 (2)/7036 (2)

superior knowledge.

He argues that the nutrients are being washed off dairy farms from effluent produced by cow manure, mixed with an abundance of pharmaceuticals used by farmers on their herds, along with fertilisers regularly spread across paddocks.

Mr Scott says the nutrients are entering the Lakes systems via runoff into the Latrobe and Thomson rivers which intersect near Longford and flow into Lake Wellington.

As the former manager of the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority and the Lake Wellington Rivers Management Group, Mr Scott has intimate knowledge of the waterways system.

In the late 90s he set up the Lake Wellington Rivers Authority, which managed 300 waterways in West Gippsland and, as general manager, he had an insider's view of water quality.

Mr Scott said the products that come from intense dairy farming are contributing to the cesspool of toxic sludge entering the Gippsland Lakes.

"The dairy farms now are very much like a feedlot. You've got water, you've got irrigation, you've got fertiliser, you've got supplementary feeding, and you have a run of drugs - antibiotics, and god knows what," he said.

"So where does the waste go? Well the waste accumulates and then when we have intense rain, we wash off the paddocks, we scour out the drains and it all goes into the rivers and it all goes into the Lakes.

"That is what is feeding the algal blooms

- we're talking phosphorus and we're talking nitrogen."

Mr Scott says farmland waste enters the Latrobe and Thomson rivers via a series of drains.

He says "there's a whole drainage system" which goes into the two rivers, "so when we have these high-flow events that's the path".

Mr Scott says the Latrobe River is "affectionally" referred to as the "Latrine River" among those who work in waterways. It flows directly into Lake Wellington, which has seen the deaths of 20 dolphins in recent years.

"It (Lake Wellington) has been described by scientists as a witch's brew because we don't know the products flowing into the Lakes because we're not monitoring and we're not testing."

### AUTHORITIES FEARFUL

Mr Scott says there needs to be an ecological audit of the Gippsland Lakes but he believes DELWP, who has overall responsibility for the Lakes, is blocking the move for fear of what it could reveal.

"How do you manage (the Lakes) if you don't have the data?" he questioned.

A 2019 report by Friends of the Earth on the Gippsland Lakes - 'What is actually flowing down the catchments?' arrived at the same argument.

"No one has any real data on what wastes are being discharged from West Gippsland into Lake Wellington and what is the quality of water going into Lake Wellington," the report posited.

Mr Scott says "comprehensive water

quality monitoring and testing of what's going into the Gippsland Lakes" is needed as a matter of urgency.

He claims there is "limited coordination" between the authorities charged with looking after the waterways.

Southern Rural Water (SRW), in Maffra, has jurisdiction over the Macalister Irrigation District (MID), which is located in Central Gippsland, and covers an area of more than 50,000 hectares of predominantly dairy country.

MID admits that "excess nutrients has (sic) been recognised as a major contributing factor to increase the risk of algal blooms".

Of those dairy farms in the MID, many have frontage on to river systems which feed into the Gippsland Lakes.

During periods of heavy rainfall and flooding, which the region has experienced in the past two years, excess runoff and spillover into the Lakes system is inevitable.

Alan Wolford's dairy farm was one of several that went under water during widespread flooding in June last year.

His farm, along with neighbouring properties, was inundated with water after the Thomson River burst its banks, following a spill from the Cowwarr Weir.

The floodwaters flushed his property and even washed away some of his dairy cows.

Jon Ryan farms at Dennison on the Thomson River, near Maffra. His commercial dairy farm spreads out over about 500 acres, of which three kilometres has frontage to the river.

In recent months, Mr Ryan has been flooded

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## over ongoing contamination concerns

three times.

In conjunction with the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority he is now busy planting 6500 trees on seven hectares of his land, including a lagoon, to help restore ecology.

"The goal is to create more space for habitat to control things in the environment," Mr Ryan said.

### EPA AUDIT

In 2003, the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) was commissioned by the Gippsland Lakes Taskforce to conduct an audit of dairy farms in the Macalister Irrigation District (MID) that had access to Central Gippsland Drain No. 2.

Southern Rural Water had become aware of "an upwards trend of nutrients leaving some catchments within the MID".

The idea of the audit was to protect the Gippsland Lakes from animal wastes discharged to water and improve water quality, including the reduction of pathogens within the tributaries of the Lakes.

Its other purpose was to "improve dairy effluent management practices within the Gippsland Lakes".

A staggering 71 per cent of those audited had "unacceptable effluent management systems".

The report found "it was evident from those farms audited, that there was a general lack of awareness by the majority of farmers of the importance of good waste management practices".

"The low level of awareness and high level of poor environmental management in this catchment would suggest that EPA and DPI (Department of Primary Industries) extension services need to be upgraded to raise the level of performance of dairy farms across the region," the report said.

Just 16 farms (29 per cent) "were found to be operating satisfactorily at the time of inspection".

EPA found that where farmers had installed effluent systems "a significant percentage are

failing due to poor management practices and a lack of ongoing maintenance".

Blue-green algal blooms were identified as one of the main hazards in the Lakes system from irrigation run-off, fertiliser run-off and dairy effluent discharges.

The EPA report made 26 recommendations, of which the first two would be considered the most critical in ensuring the Lakes system was afforded ongoing protection.

They were that:

1) EPA continue to audit/inspect all dairy farms within the Macalister Irrigation District and

2) EPA continue to carry out audits/inspections of all dairy farms within the Gippsland Lakes catchment.

Despite those findings, the regional manager for EPA Gippsland, Zac Dornom, said last week that "blue-green algae occurs naturally and is common in the Gippsland Lakes".

Mr Dornom did, however, say "should any member of the public have evidence of an agricultural or industrial spill that might be aggravating an algal bloom" to report the location and provide relevant details to the EPA's 24-hour pollution hotline.

He said EPA responds to reports by "investigating and where there is actual evidence of an industrial or agricultural cause, can provide the duty holder with compliance advice, or make use of a legally enforceable remedial notice, fine or prosecution, where necessary".

As to further audits of dairy farms as recommended by its own 2003 report into the issue of nutrients entering the Gippsland Lakes, the EPA is yet to comment.

### RAMSAR OBLIGATIONS

The president of the Gippsland Environment Group, Mary Connor, says "there's a history of a lack of monitoring within the Gippsland Lakes system".

"What they don't measure, they don't know," she said.

"They don't want to be seen to be in

contravention of the Ramsar obligations," Ms Connor said of government bodies charged with responsibility of Gippsland's waterways.

The Gippsland Lakes, which covers an area of more than 60,000 hectares, is a Ramsar listed site, designated to be of international importance under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.

The Convention is an intergovernmental environmental treaty established in 1971 by UNESCO and provides for national action and international cooperation regarding the conservation of wetlands.

Ms Connor says East Gippsland Water's recent discharges into the Forge Creek from its Paynesville sewerage treatment plant, which ultimately entered the Lakes system by the Newlands Arm backwater, would have "a direct influence on the Lakes with a massive amount of nutrients entering the waterways".

"Overall, there was a lack of monitoring when that sewage was let go when there should have been massive amounts of monitoring," she said.

EPA has formally warned East Gippsland Water (EGW) about the environmental breaches and directed it to make necessary modifications to its wastewater management system by April 28 (2022).

Newlands Arm residents, Judy Leadoux and John Kramme, are especially concerned about the treated effluent being discharged into Forge Creek.

"East Gippsland Water should never have been allowed to do it," Ms Leadoux told the Advertiser.

She says Newlands Arm and Duck Arm are both backwaters and don't have any freshwater flowing through so the blue-green algal bloom, combined with EGW dumps of treated effluent from its Paynesville facility, essentially has nowhere to go.

Ms Leadoux also remains critical of EGW "putting treated effluent onto land around Forge Creek that they own and lease".

"When we have a rain event that treated effluent finds its way into the Lakes," she said.

### BLACK GLUE

Mr Kramme is a keen fisherman who regularly fishes Newlands Arm but is numb with shock at what he is witnessing.

"I have been at the top of Newlands Arm where it's like a black glue," he said.

"It's just a putrid mess."

Mr Kramme says the waterway where Forge Creek enters the Lakes system is thick with sludge.

"To put treated effluent into Newlands Arm is the same as putting it into Duck Arm," he says. "There's nowhere for it to escape."

"They don't want to test it because what they'll find up there is a terrible mess," Mr Kramme said.

He said irrigating the effluent onto land was a nonsense "because the run-off from the land is going into the creek".

East Gippsland Shire councillor, Jane Greacan, lives on the Banksia Peninsula.

She says the algal bloom "is the worst I have ever seen".

"At the end of Duck Arm it doesn't wash out so it's just going to stew," Cr Greacan said.

"We really need to undertake a full review of the Lakes, what is going into them, run-off from land, including farms, industry etc."

Cr Greacan said the impact on the Lakes becoming a marine environment also needed to be examined.

"It's a complex ecosystem and we need to manage it a lot better."

"Is the clear felling of the forests also impacting?"

Cr Greacan said with "so many factors potentially impacting, we need a good, independent scientific evaluation".

The Advertiser contacted the Victorian Farmers Federation who declined to comment.

Southern Rural Water and DELWP have also been approached for comment.