



# Chain reactions

A long-fought campaign to preserve a pristine and remote stretch of the South Australian coastline – home to the endangered osprey and white-bellied sea eagle – is highlighting the critical national issue of coastal development impacts. Local groups are rallying the state government over the need for a development management plan covering four largely undisturbed bays. **Christine Williams** reports.

The spectacle of a remote chain of bays glittering in the morning sun may be an uplifting and sought-after sight for humans, but for original wildlife inhabitants – like birds of prey and sea lions – it's the absence of people that means survival.

Corvisart, Sceale, Searcy and Baird Bays on the western Eyre Peninsula are the subject of a proposed management plan covering about 100 kilometres of spectacular, winding coastline, roughly 700 kilometres from Adelaide. It's a region of low rainfall and varied vegetation types, from mangrove to saltbush, which grow across wetlands, shifting dunes and bare sea cliffs.

With urban populations increasingly in search of a 'sea change lifestyle', the belief that everyone has a right to a scenic ocean view is more and more in conflict with the rights of precious species to have their habitats protected. This is the scenario now being faced by the local community of Streaky Bay.

Unlike other parts of Australia, the western Eyre Peninsula coastline does not have coastal forest, and osprey and sea eagles' nests are carefully perched on sea cliffs and open terrain. Any approaching humans tower above the top of a nest and are considered a threat by the bird, causing them to lift off the nest, leaving eggs to cool and young birds to become easy prey to predators.

The Friends of Sceale Bay lobby group, which since 1999 has been running a series of individual battles over

**Above: The previously remote 'Chain of Bays' region of the Eyre Peninsula is the subject of a long-running debate over human encroachment.**

Grant Hobson



attempts to develop in sensitive coastal areas, is alarmed by recent development proposal approvals. They include an application for a large home overlooking the bay, which would intrude on precious nesting areas. The residence – planned to be built by an American, being represented by a local real estate agent – has been given the go-ahead by a Council Development Assessment Panel, endorsed by the local Streaky Bay Council.

Council Mayor, Ian Gunn, would make no comment after explaining that he is not authorised to speak, as it was a decision by the Panel, whose members are also not able to comment publicly. However,



there is hope among conservationists that the Native Vegetation Council (a statutory authority reporting to the Department of Water, Land and Biodiversity Conservation on impacts to native vegetation) might rule against land clearance for construction on the site above Sceale Bay, which is within 'Coastal Zoning' and therefore subject to strict provisions.

A spokesperson for the Native Vegetation Council has confirmed it is familiar with the process that will be applied to the development application that has already received initial local planning consent.

'The Native Vegetation Group of the Department will be undertaking an inspection of the site and a report will be prepared for consideration by the Native Vegetation Council,' a Council spokesperson explained.

The Streaky Bay Council go-ahead came in the face of the South Australian Minister for the Environment, Gail Gago, urging the Council to consider the advice of her Department's Coast Protection Board, while acknowledging she did not have 'the power to override the Council's decision'. The Coast Protection Board had advised that the building development should be refused, referring to a coastal environment of high scenic quality and environmental value, which should not be threatened by further development.

'I'm very concerned that the Council's decision will

**Osprey build spectacular nests on precipitous cliffs to outsmart predators.** Grant Hobson

open the floodgates and lead to spot development along this pristine coastline,' Minister Gago said.

She also pointed out that in 2006 the Sceale Bay Conservation Reserve was upgraded to 'Park' status 'in recognition of the important environmental significance of the region'. About 30 000 tourists visit the region each year, and if development is allowed to proceed unchecked, the natural environment will likely be damaged by the pressure of increasing numbers – as has been the case in many other coastal areas.

Two years ago the Friends of Sceale Bay submitted a proposal for a development management plan for a 'Chain of Bays' and Ms Gago says this 'was an extremely valuable starting point'. Further comprehensive investigation of environment and land tenure is almost complete and due for her consideration, she says.

The fact that an island with a breeding colony of Australian sea lions was found by a researcher off the Chain of Bays as recently as 2002 is evidence of the remoteness of the area and its particular value as an isolated site suitable for habitat protection.

Dr Peter Shaughnessy of the South Australian Museum (and formerly with CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems) first heard of sea lions located on the unnamed island near Sceale Bay in 2001. During the next pupping season Shaughnessy was able to verify that the unnamed island, now called Nicolas Baudin Island, did indeed support a breeding colony of sea lions – with high pupping numbers.

Since then Shaughnessy has visited the island and the Chain of Bays a dozen times and estimates the total sea lion population in the region at about 1300 – 12 per cent of the total estimated national population of 11 000.

But it's not only sea lions that depend on the Chain of Bays marine environment. New Zealand fur seals also feed offshore, hauling themselves onto rocks along the mainland shore at Point Labatt.

And the only place in the world that a unique 'diminutive' sea star, named *Parvulastra parvivipara*, has so far been found is a small localised area in the Chain of Bays. Described, like others in the region, as 'small range endemic', the sea star survives in and around rock pools on five outcrops of granite and basalt along the west coast of the Eyre Peninsula between Point Labatt

**Below: Majestic white-bellied sea eagles share the coastline with the osprey and peregrine falcon.** Grant Hobson





and Cape Vivonne, plus similar habitats around offshore islands in the region. Claimed as the world's smallest sea star, it has an average diameter of just 5 millimetres but exists in abundant numbers in this area.<sup>1</sup>

A specialist researcher into raptor habitats, Terry Dennis, says there's evidence of a 40 per cent decline in white-bellied sea eagles in South Australia since records have been kept, due primarily to the expansion of human habitation.

Dennis says that, in particular, most of South Australia's coastline has been degraded through a number of causes: agriculture, feral and domestic animals, exotic plants, inappropriate burning, uncontrolled recreational use of 4WDs, and expanding urbanisation.

'When the wilderness quality of remote coastlines is diminished, the habitat and survival of sensitive wildlife species can be seriously threatened,' he says.

'Eagles, for example, require large foraging territories and nest site sanctity with surrounding wilderness as buffer areas, for successful breeding.

'Both the osprey and the white-bellied sea eagle have recently been listed as "Endangered" in South Australia because they face population decline as a result of degradation of their habitats.'

Australia's foremost authority on raptors, Dr Penny Olsen from the Australian National University, agrees with Dennis's conclusion that the white-bellied sea eagle needs special protection in South Australia, saying they're 'thin on the ground' in that state.

'Top predators are very important in any ecosystem. If they're in evidence in good numbers it's a sign that everything below that order is in good environmental health,' she says.

'Apart from that scientific rule, these birds are simply magnificent creatures deserving of habitat protection.'

Dr Olsen is also concerned for the habitats of osprey in South Australia, since these are part of the southern-most osprey populations in Australia, and the world. Osprey are not found in Victoria or Tasmania, according to Dr Olsen.

Convenor of the Friends of Scaale Bay, Grant Hobson, emphasises the urgent need for a new linked

**Above: Dr Peter Shaughnessy conducting counts of Australian fur seals on Nicholas Baudin Island.**

Grant Hobson

**Top right: Under the SA Government's Coastal Viewscapes Project, the Eyre Peninsula is rated as having among the highest scenic value levels of the state's coastlines.**

Grant Hobson

**Right: Australian fur seal with an Australian sea lion.**

Grant Hobson



conservation park to protect 'intact' the series of ecological systems – both marine and coastal land habitat – which stretch along the Chain of Bays coast.

Hobson sees the Chain of Bays as 'a series of interconnected systems from marine to coastal to wetland to mallee, protected previously by its sheer isolation, harsh dry climate and vastness.'

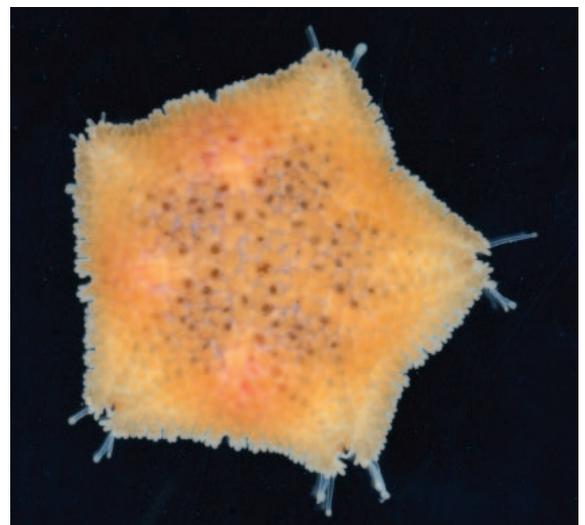
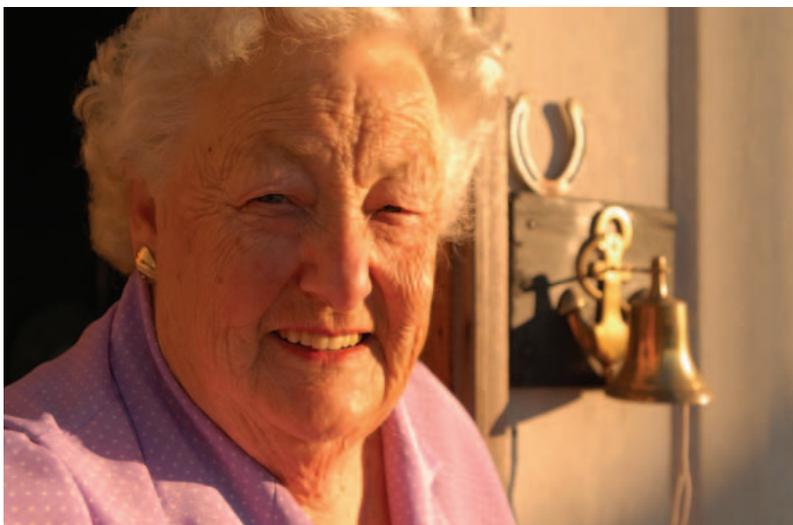
'The state government has a Marine Protected Area (MPA) policy which is being rolled out over five years, but we also see the need for a coastal land component to be included urgently,' he says.

'All the state funding and administration which is being expended on sustainable development and protection of biodiversity habitat is useless if it continues to break down at the level of local government decision-making, which allows inappropriate development to go ahead.

'The Streaky Bay Council is running roughshod in approving houses which pose a significant threat to pristine remnant coastal habitat.

'The state government needs to urgently provide effective conservation management and development controls through legislation which cannot be

<sup>1</sup> See Byrne M, Cerra A, Hart MW and Smith MJ (1999). Life history diversity and molecular phylogeny of the Australian sea star genus *Patriella*. In *The other 99%: The conservation and biodiversity of invertebrates*. (Eds W Ponder and D Lunney), pp. 188–195. Transactions of the Royal Society of NSW.



circumvented by local bodies,' Hobson explains.

In early November, *Ecos* was advised that the Department of Environment and Heritage had begun working with Planning South Australia to determine a proposed Coastal Conservation Zone, including taking expert advice from Terry Dennis on appropriate buffer distances for osprey, white-bellied sea eagles and peregrine falcons.

Meanwhile, the SA Environmental Resource Development Committee – a Parliamentary Standing Committee – recently completed a year-long inquiry into coastal development and its effects on the environment. The Committee's report,<sup>2</sup> which was tabled before Parliament rose in late November, included recommendations and proposals to close loopholes which allow residential and other development on areas of high environmental and scenic value – such as on pristine dunes and coastal cliff tops.

The Committee highlighted serious weaknesses in the advice, approval and legislative processes around coastal development applications in South Australia, and cited the Scaale Bay cases as an example of where there was not a referral process for issues of wildlife impact.

**Lisa Baker, resident, local historian and former Streaky Bay Council Member, disapproves of houses in the local sand dunes. 'No way would I give my approval to the sort of things that are happening now.'**  
Grant Hobson

**Above right: The world's smallest known sea star, *Parvulastra parvivipara*, lives abundantly in localised spots in the Chain of Bays region.** Maria Byrne

Among the research projects to which the inquiry referred was the Coastal Viewscapes Project,<sup>3</sup> initiated by the Department for Environment and Heritage in 2005, which included an internet survey on the importance of coastal visual amenity of more than 2000 respondents and covered 4000 kilometres of the state's coastline. The survey gave the Eyre Peninsula its highest score for scenic value.

South Australia's Urban Development and Planning Minister, Paul Holloway, says he supports the strengthening of planning policy along the state's coastal areas. In regard to the Eyre Peninsula, he says he is currently working with local councils to determine the best course of action towards a plan for the coast – without giving specific dates for its likely adoption.

Meanwhile, as the Friends of Scaale Bay hope for the talk about planning protection for the Chain of Bays to be converted into specific legislation, their community continues to wrestle with the same competing pressures for coastal developments being felt all around Australia.

In recent years there have been approximately 55 Commonwealth government enquiries and reports into coast and marine management, all with recommendations and advice. In this real-time case study, however, the outcomes have much more than just local precedent at stake.

<sup>2</sup> Environment, Resources and Development Committee of the Parliament of South Australia (2007). Inquiry into Coastal Development.  
<sup>3</sup> <http://www.environment.sa.gov.au/coasts/viewscapes.html>