

FRAGILE

Greetings from Noosa

PARADISE LOST

When developers shifted the Noosa River some 30-odd years ago, they didn't predict a domino effect of ongoing environmental havoc. In a stark warning to other Australian coastal playgrounds, Frank Robson investigates the damage done.

Illustration John Shakespeare

JUST AFTER SUNRISE, WE STOP ON A HILL and pile out of the old surf wagon for our first look at the fabled Noosa Heads. Sculpted waves wrap enticingly around the headland, yet my eye keeps returning to the path of a bright blue river. It coils sinuously around a low, vegetated island before entering the sea at the end of a wooded spit that bears the fledgling resort's main street.

Seabirds rise in swarms from the island and follow the river's course across drying sandbanks and out over the glittering expanse of Laguna Bay. It's 1967, and at that moment (while feeding noisily from a two-day-old bottle of chocolate milk) I decide this has to be the most perfect river in the most beautiful place I've seen in my 16 years of worldly existence.

Over the next two weeks we surf so much our board bumps bleed. But we "see" almost nothing. At least, not in the way we see things now. We don't see the piles of rocks that panicky property owners have been dumping along the surf beach in front of the main drag, Hastings Street, because they've built too close to the sea. We don't see the council dredge nibbling away at sandbanks on the river side of Hastings Street, or the steady influx of well-heeled southerners whose big plans for this "sleepy village" fill most of the local newspaper, which we don't read.

We don't see the environmental activist and author Nancy Cato (an asthmatic refugee from Adelaide) preparing to defend her new-found paradise against gathering developers, and even if we did, we wouldn't know her from Gidget. We don't see the surveyors, or the real estate signs, or the *potential*. We don't see that Noosa, like us, has used up its innocence and is on the edge of a new and more complicated wave. We leave with barely a backward glance.

ON A BRIGHT SUMMER'S DAY 43 YEARS LATER, A DESCENDANT OF ONE OF Noosa's pioneering families slips an old documentary into his VCR and hits play. The historic views of Noosa Heads that appear on screen look familiar, yet strangely unlike the 2010 version spread out so prettily below Dennis Massoud's hillside home.

"The Noosa River meanders to the sea through a broad, sandy estuary adjacent to the main business centre," says the doco's narrator. (Give or take a meander or two, this is the course it followed for thousands of years.)

But the view from Massoud's window shows the river's path is now quite different. At first, it seems as though the ragged island it used to pass has been somehow removed, because nothing resembling it meets the eye. Instead, there's a canal estate, its concrete-trimmed shoreline so neatly delineated it might have been cut from cookie dough. The estate is packed to capacity with expensive waterfront homes.

The river entrance isn't where it used to be, either. These days, after making an enforced left turn halfway along the estate, it joins the sea 500 metres further north, at the end of a man-made spit extension grafted to the tip of what's seen as Noosa's financial engine, the Hastings Street shopping and resort strip.

How did this happen?

As Dennis Massoud and other locals describe it, the "rape" of the once-magnificent estuary and river, with all its continuing disasters and expense, sounds a lot like the nursery rhyme about the old lady who swallowed a fly. It began in the early 1970s when Hays Island (the low-lying fish and bird habitat behind Hastings Street) was bulldozed into a canal estate, and renamed Noosa Sound, with barely a protest from stunned residents. That was the "fly", and they still don't know why they swallowed it.

The spider came a few years later, when seas driven by successive cyclones ripped through the bar and damaged the new estate, scaring off potential investors. Instead of acknowledging their awful blunder in creating Noosa Sound, the developers (backed by the Bjelke-Petersen government and the local council) opted to dust off the bulldozers and move the entire river mouth north, thus sheltering their valuable investment behind the artificially extended spit.

The old doco shows this happening in 1978. Made for the now defunct Noosa Beach Protection Authority (which backed the project), it tells how heavy machinery worked around the clock for seven months to cut the new 100-metre-wide channel, while trucks rumbled up and down Hastings Street delivering boulders for the first of two groynes, or "training walls".

When the film ends, Massoud, a long-time green activist whose grandfather helped start the local fishing industry, turns off the VCR and flops onto a sofa. "That was the beginning of the end," he says, peeling a lychee. "After that, it was just one disaster after another. Noosa Sound and the wrecking of the river mouth were the death knell for commercial and recreational fishing, and for Noosa's natural beauty. It brought us ugly rock groynes and led to the endless scourings of the surf beach and the endless pumping of sand to replace what used to return naturally."

NOOSA'S MAIN BEACH NEVER DID DEVELOP "A MORE NATURAL SHAPE" WITH time, as supporters of the river mouth move had confidently predicted. It had always been vulnerable to scouring, but before human meddling began it unfailingly returned to its former glory. Not any longer. Within a couple of years of the bar relocation, all that was left of Main Beach was the rock protection wall – a council-built version of the one begun by property owners in the 1950s.

"The essence of the problem," says local conservationist Darryl Fry, "is that the old river mouth used to flow south [towards Main Beach], naturally replenishing sand removed by a current that runs north up the Queensland coast. The new river mouth doesn't do this, which is why Main Beach lost the ability to restore itself."

As Hastings Street evolved into one of the most expensive concentrations of beachfront real estate in Australia, pressure from its traders for authorities to "fix" the beach became almost as irresistible as the forces that periodically swept it away. Collectively, the traders' influence now drives the endless cycle of sand pumping to replenish the beach and keep the tourists happy. "Their agenda is that we must have a beach, even if it's an artificial one," says Fry, a former president of the Sunshine Coast Environmental Council.

Many millions have been spent on this process since man sought to impose his will on the river. For more than 20 years, the Noosa Shire Council (recently amalgamated into the Sunshine Coast Regional Council) "nourished" the disappearing beach by pumping sand to it via a pipeline from inside the river entrance. Hundreds of thousands of cubic metres were dredged from a so-called inactive, or non-mobile, sand area within Noosa Inlet, at the rear of Hastings Street.

When that source became "depleted" in 1996, the council – driven by the howls of traders whenever pumping fell behind erosion – began dredging active sand from an area (right next to a declared fish habitat) just inside the river entrance. These desperate measures continued until 2003, when environmental concerns led to the council's permits to dredge there being withdrawn by the Queensland government.

By then, erosion was already occurring along the inner shoreline of the man-made spit grafted to the end of Hastings Street. Now a popular corridor of public parkland known as Noosa Spit, this low barrier is still the only thing standing between the cause of all the trouble, Noosa Sound (where property values range from \$2 to \$8 million), and the wrath of the ocean.

After discarding the idea of sheltering Main Beach behind an artificial reef, the council and the Hastings Street Traders Association came up with a new dredging/pumping system that continues today. As sand from Main Beach moves towards the river mouth (along the ocean side of Noosa Spit), it is caught in a deep sinkhole between the two rock groynes, then promptly pumped back to where it came from. The bizarre merry-go-round operates each Tuesday and Thursday, while beach-goers loll near the humming, above-ground pipeline, and "traffic controllers" guard the emergence point to stop kids sinking into the slurry of sand and water.

When rough weather accelerates erosion, pumping runs flat-out every day while earth-moving equipment pushes sand into the seven-metre deep sinkhole to accelerate the process. Council engineers say the system can move about 40,000 cubic metres of sand a year. Impressive, but not enough: the beach loses about 80,000 cubic metres of sand a year.

"But if we bleed too much sand off this beach [near the sinkhole], it could undermine the nearby rock wall, and we'd end up with erosion in this area," engineer Dave Shing tells me during a tour of the area. "Then we'd have to seriously look at backing off."

Are there other known sources of sand?

"Not currently, no."

But finding sand for Main Beach may soon be the least of the council's problems. Because Noosa Spit itself is now so badly eroded there are fears the river may break through and return to its original course. If this happens, explains Shing, it would not only expose Noosa Sound to destructive seas (again!), but endanger Hastings Street itself.

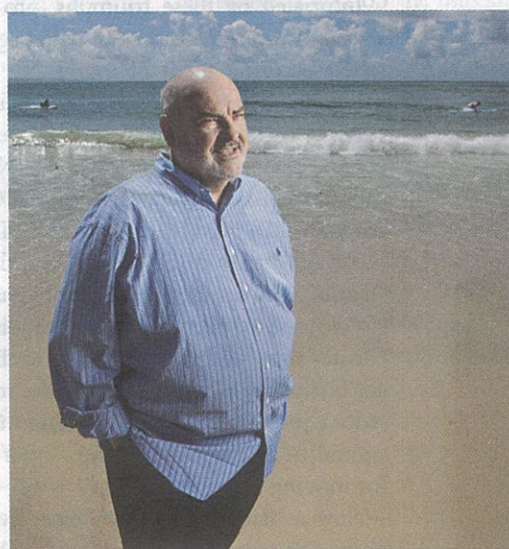
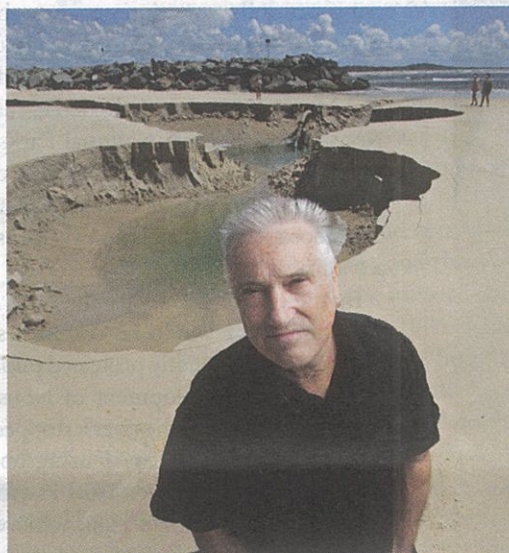
In some parts of Noosa Spit the river has carved about 100 metres off the foreshore, swept away trees and left concrete footpaths suspended in mid-air. Shing admits none of this can be restored. "We knew we'd crossed a line in the sand there," he says, without apparent irony, "and now it's gone. We wanted to extend rock walls to protect it, and we told the [Department of Environment and Resource Management] it was our last line of defence, but they still haven't given us the go-ahead."

The worst damage is close to a powerful pump that sucks water from the estuary to carry sand, as a slurry, through the pipeline to Main Beach. "Over the years," says Darryl Fry, "[the water extraction] has created a deep hole, and a current that is directed at the pump and the foreshore just behind it ... So now they're losing the beaches on the inside of Noosa Spit to save the beach on the surf side."

As soon as it can, the council intends to extend rock walls around what's left of the vanishing foreshore, with groyne offshoots to try to keep currents at bay. Amazingly, given all this, it's also about to double the capacity of its sand-pumping pipeline to Main Beach to achieve that missing 40,000 cubic metres. No one seems to know where all the extra sand will come from.

THE PRESIDENT OF THE HASTINGS STREET TRADERS ASSOCIATION IS Jim Berado, who owned private hospitals and medical schools in the US before moving to Noosa in the late 1990s and opening two restaurants. "In Noosa," he tells me over coffee at Berado's Bistro on the Beach, "most everybody is green ... or naturalists like myself. You know, [we] love nature, love animals, and that sort of thing ... and we think the [current sand-pumping system] is probably the most sensitive to the environment."

Soon after Berado arrived, Noosa had one of its worst seasons in recent memory, with storms, floods and no beach for almost eight months. The effect on tourism was "horrible, just horrible!" – but this was during the period when supplies of inactive sand within the estuary had dwindled, and a new "fix" had yet to be devised. Nonetheless, the council was deemed too slow in putting things right, so the traders (who contribute \$500,000 a year to what's called beach maintenance) forced the issue. "We all said, 'Enough is



Noosa Spit is now so badly eroded there are fears the river may break through and return to its original course, endangering Hastings Street itself.

Elements of change: (above, from top) an aerial view of Noosa Heads showing the changes over 30 years; conservationist Darryl Fry at Noosa's sand-pumping hole; Hastings Street Traders Association president Jim Berado.

enough! We gotta get sand back on this beach!"

Under pressure, the council restored Main Beach with active sand dredged from within the river mouth. "We thought it would be a good thing for the river mouth," explains Berado, "because it was just clogging up anyway ... After we got the beach fixed in the short term, council looked at getting a more permanent fix. Because we knew that dredging wasn't necessarily the best for the environment, for the fish colonies and so on."

Berado sees the present pumping system as a permanent solution, except in extreme weather. Yet late last year, with the beach again depleted, the forceful American issued an ultimatum via the media: if the council didn't fix the beach in time for summer crowds, traders would truck in their own sand and do it themselves. Again the council came to heel, using a front-end loader to fill trucks near the sinkhole (which wasn't replenishing quickly enough for normal pumping), then carting it to Main Beach.

"That did the job beautifully," says Berado.

He is upbeat about the soon-to-be-doubled capacity of the sand-pumping system, and a series of valves running off the pipeline that open independently to bolster sand stocks in front of each beachfront property. He becomes a lot more circumspect about the effect all this is having on the river system.

"Could it be [linked to the collapse of the Noosa Spit shoreline]?" he ponders. "Maybe yes, I really don't know. But the sands in that place shift so much! ... Part of it goes back to when we redirected the river and that sort of thing. It's unnatural, still, so how you could make any sort of deduction out of what happens when you redirect the river ... I don't know."

Would he have opposed the moving of the river mouth if he'd been around at the time?

"Probably so, yeah. But you can't go backwards. You can only try not to make the same mistakes, or compound those mistakes further."

Berado doesn't seem to see the traders' endless demands for sand as falling within this category. "When it comes to our investment, and people's jobs, our association is going to do whatever it has to do to get [the beach] right," he says. "We pay for it, it's our frigg'n money, it's 500 grand from us!" (Broken down among the many traders involved, Berado's share of the levy is a less imposing \$450 a year. Taxpayers also subsidise the artificial beach via funding from the council and the federal government.)



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In parting, Berado ventures a measured nod to the days when pro-development forces ruled Noosa. "The Joh people have all died off," he says. "And love them or hate them – and I'm not necessarily sure I love them – but he [Bjelke-Petersen] transformed Queensland ... That kind of thing is the spirit of what Queensland was about, and it's not here now."

NOT OVERTLY, ANYWAY. BUT BEHIND WHAT MIGHT be called Noosa's green facade, nostalgia for that era of rip-roaring opportunism seems as persistent as the damage it inflicted on the landscape. Not that I can claim to have been overly troubled by such things at the time. During the worst excesses of the Joh period, when Nancy Cato, Dennis Massoud and other locals were fighting to save Noosa's remaining attractions, friends and I went there from Brisbane to have fun.

While they blocked bulldozers and got death threats, we sailed surf cats and interviewed charming crooks in restaurants where patrons snorted coke off tables and copulated in fragrant courtyards. It wasn't that we opposed the earnest green warriors. But their causes, taken individually, seemed petty or hopeless, or both, especially alongside the official arrogance and corruption we wrote about in Brisbane.

It was years later before I realised the magnitude of what the Noosa greens had achieved. Guided by Arthur and Marjorie Harrold (who led earlier battles to save the Noosa and Coolool National Parks from roads, development and sand mining), and a clever lobbyist/town planner called Michael Gloster, their campaigns through the Noosa Parks Association (NPA) shaped the future of a community.

By the end of the 1980s, the NPA had prevented Club Med and other would-be developers taking over Noosa Spit (now permanently protected public parkland); fought off large-scale development of Noosa's north shore (on the northern side of the river); stopped high-rise buildings in Hastings Street; helped bring about the election of Noosa's first green mayor, Noel Playford, and, through his council's strategic town plan, achieved a population cap for the shire based on environmental sustainability.

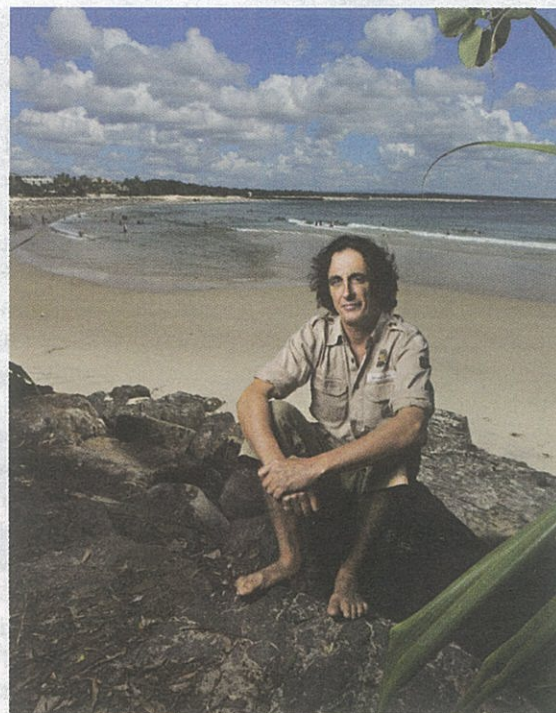
Infuriated by these triumphs, pro-development forces waged a sustained smear campaign against leading greens, falsely accusing them of everything from corruption to paedophilia. A key target was the environmental reformist Michael Gloster, whose hard-nosed dealings with developers and politicians on behalf of the NPA made him especially reviled. Back then, when Gloster (like Nancy Cato and the Harrolds) lived on the hill above Laguna Bay, civil war broke out between the "hillies" and development-friendly "flaties" who'd settled on the problematic Noosa Sound.

"We used to sneer that they were going to f...ing drown," Gloster says, "and they would sneer that we were going to get burnt [in a bushfire]. Half the town wanted bloody Noosa Sound to go under, because they just weren't liked ... and, of course, that's where a lot of pressure came from for moving the river mouth."

Now a "flatie" himself, Gloster lives at Munna Point, only a few hundred metres from Noosa Sound. In 1995 he was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for services to conservation and the environment, and now, at 62, has largely withdrawn from the fray.

He tells me the NPA's now-ailing founder, Arthur Harrold, still regards the development of Noosa Sound, and the ensuing "destruction" of the lower river's wetland ecosystem and Main Beach, as their greatest failure. At the time, before Gloster came to Noosa, the NPA was too busy fighting other causes to make an effective stand over Hays Island.

In her book *The Noosa Story*, first published in 1979, Nancy "The Knocker" Cato (as detractors called her), describes how abruptly the island's natural regime ended. The morning after heavy machinery moved in, "... residents on Laguna Hill woke to find a smoking ruin spread out in the estuary. It was as if a selective atom bomb had struck. Not one living thing was left ... The amount of



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Eco worrier: (above, from top) green activist and Noosa local Dennis Massoud believes Noosa River and its estuary have been "raped"; the Noosa River mouth with Hays Island, circa 1967; Hays Island is developed into Noosa Sound, around 1977.

wildlife destroyed ... was inestimable ... The whole life-support system of a complex, interweaving mass of bio-energy was swept away."

Cato died in 2000, aged 83. Before I met with Gloster, a real-estate agent took me on a tour of Noosa Sound's multimillion-dollar properties. He stopped in Dolphin Crescent and pointed to a comparatively modest waterfront home, worth perhaps \$2 million, that he insisted had been owned by Cato. Given the feisty author's loathing for the development, it seemed hard to believe.

So I check with the all-knowing Gloster, half-expecting to learn it was part of some long-ago smear. But it wasn't. Cato bought the home in 1990 and lived there until she moved to a retirement village in 1997. "Nancy was a great publicist for the conservation cause," says Gloster, "but she was a very poor team member."

Did he ask her why she bought there?

He shrugs. "Nah. In a small town, everybody's a mass of contradictions ... Nancy lived in that house; Arthur Harrold, who I regard as Noosa's greatest citizen, walked his bloody dog in the national park. People would snigger about him being a hypocrite. And I'd say, 'Of course he is! So am I! We all are. But let's get to the real issue.'"

Gloster has all but given up on the lower river because it's in the throes of becoming yet another rock-wall environment. As he sees it, Noosa, like so many other now-sullied river towns along the east coast, developed too close to the water and eclipsed the "sacrificial zone" demanded by nature. Yet Gloster's pleasant riverside apartment (with a Porsche in the garage and a yacht docked out front) is in a block sheltered behind the first rock wall built in the shire.

He also admits to working as a consultant for the developer of a second, less mentioned waterfront estate, Noosa Waters, in the paperbark swamps behind Noosaville, but only because his influence changed the already approved project from being a canal estate to a "lake" estate, connected to the river via a weir system. Gloster says this minimises ecologically damaging interaction between the lake and the river.

Others, like Dennis Massoud, reckon this is self-serving nonsense, and that the estate ruined an ecologically sensitive site rich in Aboriginal history. Asked if it's true that his knockabout uncles tried to sand-mine Noosa's Main Beach in the 1950s, Massoud goes off to check with family members. "My uncle Bill did get a lease to mine at Main Beach," he reports back. "But only to protect the beach by stopping [another would-be miner] getting the lease and mining there. My uncle never used it."

At her home in nearby Tewantin, Cato's middle-aged daughter, Bronnie Norman, tells me her mother "compromised her beliefs" by buying into what is technically Noosa Sound. "But there were two reasons: she loved to be by the water, and by then she was pretty crippled [with arthritis] and needed to live somewhere flat ... But she would never, ever admit she was living at Noosa Sound. She said she lived at Munna Point."

AMONG THE FEW PERFECT THINGS TO BE FOUND IN THIS WORLD IS THE WAY the Noosa River looks as it fans out for the last leg to the sea. From the low riverbank at Noosaville, the turquoise expanse dances before the eye like an immense version of those wet-edge pools popular in corporate foyers. Its surface and everything upon it appear strangely suspended against the sky, as though exempt from the known conventions of physics.

In fact, it has the shallowest hydraulic grading of all Queensland rivers. Like a series of baffles, its sandbars and the shallow lakes further upstream slow tidal movement to the extent that, at times, the river is almost a metre higher than the sea itself.

It begins its seaward journey in the valleys of the Como Escarpment, 60 kilometres to the north-west, then twists southward through the eerily beautiful Noosa Everglades and the broad tidal lakes of the Cooloolo National Park. To the passing eye, these fauna-rich upper reaches look almost pristine. Yet even here the river is threatened by nutrient pollution and siltation from farming and land clearing, and by pressure for channels to be dredged for boating.

"It's really a re-run of what happened at this end of the river 20 to 30 years ago," says Gloster. "Everybody dines off the fact that the river has one of the best water qualities in the state for a settled area. But that's only because most of it is protected within the Cooloolo National Park. Once you get below the national park, we're doing as good a job of rooting it as anybody."

Except, of course, for the lower reaches and the river mouth, where they've done an even better job. Even the Main Beach rock wall, which descends 10 metres below beach level, was botched during construction by the council in 1968. (More recent councils have said it was built out of alignment with incoming waves, contributing to erosion.)

And then, for all the Noosas of the world, there's the spectre of climate change. "A sea level rise of half a metre would be enough to inundate Noosa Spit and Hastings Street," says conservationist Darryl Fry.

None of this seems to trouble those behind a new, \$400-million "super-luxury" development due to get under way on Hastings Street later this year. Firstlight Noosa will span 120 metres across the Main Beach foreshore on the site of a soon-to-be-demolished existing resort, and offer 20 apartments with price tags of up to \$16 million. According to its backers, the wonderfully named Blue Sky Capital, the project will attract Australia's wealthiest people and international visitors who often complain that Hastings Street offers "nowhere to stay".

Fire up the pumps! Like sand through a pipeline, these are the days of our endless environmental soap opera. **GW**

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