

Aquaculture debris ;still polluting and hazardous despite Governments zero tolerance

There has been a lot of talk about the salmon industry. One area not being discussed, silent and hidden, lurking in our waterways, is aquaculture debris. The continuing issues around debris are worth talking about. We are, after all, a community of water lovers: sailing, swimming, canoeing, rowing, fishing, cruising etc.

In 2017, as vice commodore of a local cruising yacht club, I organised a cruise to Great Bay, Bruny Island, to clean up the shoreline as a Clean Up Australia Day activity. Each boat's crew selected a section of the shoreline and picked up what rubbish they could. At our post-clean up get-together we had filled all supplied sizeable bags with rubbish. There were minimal objects that might have come from recreational boating activities. These were things such as a few drink containers, food wrappers and lost hats. More than 90% of the bulk was clearly identified as coming from fish farms. This included salmon company ropes (black and grey or blue and white), black pipes, cut off pieces of black plastic and salmon feed bags. Unfortunately, some of the fish farm debris had to be left behind on the shore. Some was simply too large to carry, some was old and deteriorating and too small to pick up effectively and some was tangled and partly buried and could not be removed. We speculated on what volume of fish farm debris may be hidden underwater and what effect all that deteriorating plastic might have on birdlife and other marine animals let alone the risk to the boating community of Tasmania.



The ball of debris collected on a half hour walk on the rocky shore in the channel opposite Gordon Photo taken S Neill 2017

That clean-up was the start of a journey for me. I took a huge tangled ball of aquaculture rope into Hobart, and spoke to the media and my yacht club, expressing my concerns about the salmon industry debris in the marine environment.

I met with 3 other women who shared my concerns. We took a boat out to Frog Point, near Nubeena, and landed ashore. The amount of fish farm debris washed up there was simply staggering. I was enraged. We posted a video on FaceBook and it had many views. People started to send me photos of debris that they found washed up on their local shores. There were lengths of large diameter poly pipe over 50 m long, sections of plastic walkway from fish pen installations, large cardinal marker buoys, and vast amounts of rope. Clearly there was a problem with fish farms containing their infrastructure within their lease boundaries and managing day-to-day activities of their workers.

In 2016, Peter Hopkins of Marine and Safety Tasmania, stated that there is a real risk of death associated with a boating incident involving fish farm debris. A group of concerned citizens met the then Premier, Will Hodgman, to discuss issues around the aquaculture industry. I raised the debris issue. I spoke of the boat incidents I was aware of and the growing risk and possibility of death from debris floating just near the surface. I showed the premier photos of debris and he was genuinely shocked.



A member of the community was stopped in his tracks by this pipe off Betsey, reported 2019

As a result of representations to government, Will Hodgman implemented the zero-tolerance of fish farm debris policy following the 2018 state election. This policy was implemented not just because of the unacceptable pollution of our waterways with plastic fish farm rubbish, but because this debris poses a significant threat to Tasmanian boaters who use these public waterways.

A number of community professional and recreational organisations started talking and sharing their frustrations with the industry and their failure to listen. We all came together to form the Tasmanian Alliance for Marine Protection (TAMP) in 2018. TAMP includes surfers, fishermen, scientists, business people, many community groups and caring individuals: all interested in protecting the marine environment that they love. We are growing in numbers as the word gets out. I am the marine debris contact person within TAMP. I have been informed of many boating incidents due to fish farm debris. These have included a well-known yacht being damaged in Storm Bay on its way to the start of the Sydney-Hobart race, a runabout colliding with a large section of black pipe near Nubeena and almost coming to grief, a well-known fishing identity having engines fouled by rope in Mercury passage, a moored yacht at Bruny Island being hit by a loose fish pen at night, and many other incidents and near misses. They keep happening despite the Government's zero-tolerance policy.



Lease maker found on Chucklehead Bruny Island

Over the past three years TAMP representatives, including myself, have met with the heads of DPIPW, Marine Farming Branch and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the previous Premier Will Hodgman, respective responsible ministers and fish farm industry

representatives. We have worked with members of the Marine Farming Branch and MAST on ways to better implement the zero-tolerance policy, particularly for improving the reporting of marine debris. Many suggestions have been implemented. We are pleased with the positive outcomes of these constructive meetings.

Since the introduction of zero-tolerance for marine debris, there are two systems working. Either the industry will find and collect their debris without fines or consequences, or the community reports debris and DPIPWE investigates and potentially instigates fines and, where possible, demerit points. Over the past three years the salmon industry has received 40 fines, mostly for equipment found outside of their lease areas. Each fine usually is associated with the loss of 1 to 4 demerit points, valued at \$173 per point. Debris reports have increased dramatically since TAMP has worked with DPIPWE and encouraged the public to report directly to the marine farming branch (mfops@dpiuwe.tas.gov.au) or MAST (0418 145 439 or VHF Ch 16).

In financial year (FY) 2021, Tassal employees, with pakana workers, according to the Tassal dashboard, spent 2635 hours cleaning up shorelines. In FY 2021, Huon employees spent 336 hours cleaning up shorelines. The Huon clean ups resulted in the removal of 12.6 cubic metres of fish farm debris that accounted for about 61% of the volume of rubbish collected. DPIPWE reported that 90 cubic metres of fish farm debris were collected from shorelines in 2020 (DPIPWE Salmon Portal). This amount of debris would fill a semitrailer.

Aggregated Aquaculture Marine Debris State Wide 2020

| Area and Company | Aquaculture Debris Volume m3 | Total Volume m3 | Percent of marine debris attributed to fish farms | Infringements |
|---|------------------------------|-----------------|---|---------------|
| Huon and Channel region Huon and TASSAL | 19.49 | 51.66 | 37.73 | 9 |
| Storm Bay Huon only | 0.78 | 1.40 | 55.71 | 9 |
| Tasman Peninsula and Norfolk Bay TASSAL only | 7.98 | 19.93 | 40.05 | 0 |
| Macquarie Harbour Huon TASSAL and Petuna | 58.15 | 66.97 | 86.83 | 0 |
| Okehampton TASSAL | 2.96 | 16.20 | 18.28 | |
| Tamar Estuary Petuna | 0.19 | 0.53 | 35.98 | 0 |
| Totals | 89.55 | 156.69 | 57.15 | 19 |

taken from Salmon Portal DPIPWE, July 2021

So, whilst the Government's zero-tolerance policy has resulted in fish farms taking their debris seriously, they are still losing far too much infrastructure outside of their lease areas for the community to be at ease. No matter what your view on this industry, it is not acceptable for it to pollute and create hazards. The industry has a responsibility to the environment and the community to do a better job.

TAMP will continue to lobby for more accountability from industry, will work with Government, and suggest improvements around aquaculture debris.