

CoastSWaP Coastal Management Case Studies (3/10)

Preston Beach Volunteer Rangers

By Blair Darvill, January 2017

Background

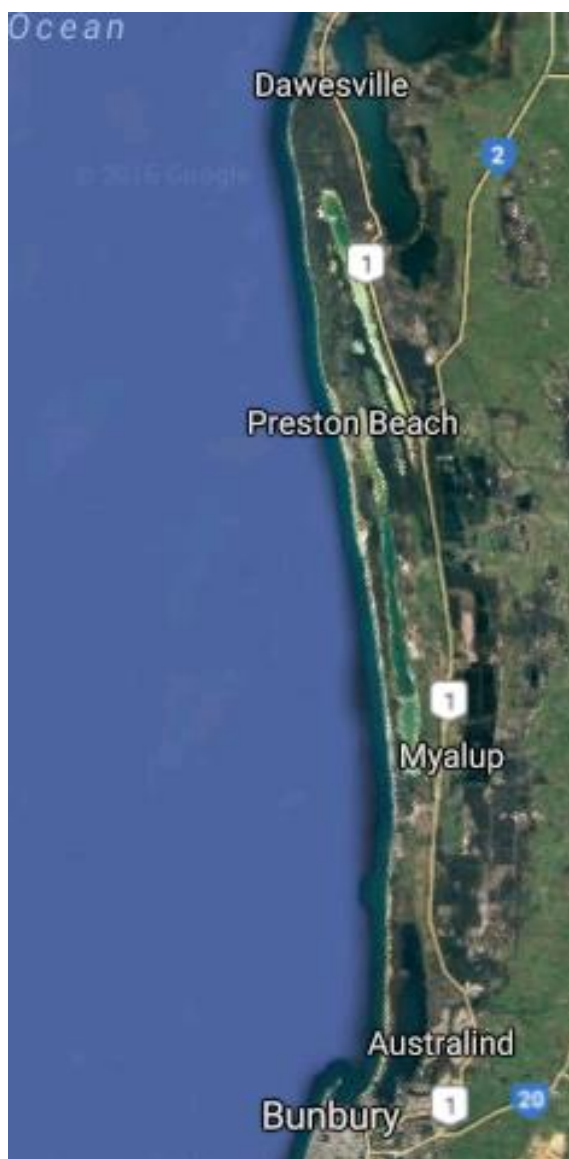


Figure 1: The 75 kilometre stretch between the Dawesville and Bunbury cuts.
(Image: Google Earth)

The small Preston Beach community is located in the Shire of Waroona and is nestled in between the City of Mandurah and the Shire of Harvey. It forms part of a continuous 75 kilometre stretch of coast from the Dawesville Cut to the Bunbury cut. Eighteen years ago residents of Preston Beach noticed an increase of off road vehicle (ORV) activity on their beach. Four wheel drives, quad bikes and motor bikes seemed to be growing in numbers and with it environmental and social impacts: damage to dunes and vegetation, disturbance of wildlife, swathes of tracks on the beach, campfires, littering and conflicts between pedestrians and vehicles.

Unbeknown to the Preston Beach residents, the City of Mandurah had begun to take actions to suppress this form of unacceptable behaviour. Restricted areas had been introduced and bans placed on motorbikes and quad bikes. Camping was prohibited and volunteer rangers introduced. These actions forced ORV users south into the Shire of Waroona where these rules had not been put in place. The main precinct, Waroona, is 35km from Preston Beach and enforcement resources were minimal. The issue wasn't being resolved, it was shifting.

City of Mandurah Volunteer Rangers

Ron Glasson from Bouvard Coastcare Group was a founding member of the Mandurah Coastal Volunteer Rangers program. The group formed in 1996 with support from the head rangers in both the Department of Conservation and Land Management and the City of Mandurah (CoM). While the role of the group was initially to inform and educate, senior volunteers were given formal recognition by the CoM, and the power to hand out 'contact notices' for illegal activities which were then referred onto the rangers. The

notice could then be used as proof for infringement. Ron states that within a few years the presence of the volunteers was paying off and inappropriate use and behaviour had reduced considerably.

Unfortunately, since 2013 the group has no longer been active, mostly due to key volunteers retiring or sadly passing away and what is believed to be a reduction in support of the program from the City of Mandurah. With limited patrols and presence coupled with an increasing population and ownership of ORV's, Ron and other coastcare volunteers are seeing illegal and inappropriate ORV use increase to unsurpassed levels in the Tims Thicket and Whitehills area. David Charles, Parks and Visitors Officer for the Department of Parks and Wildlife (DPaW), noted that over 200,000 vehicles visited Tims Thicket and White Hills annually between 2015/16.

Preston Beach Volunteer Rangers

In an attempt to combat the influx of ORV's, the residents of Preston Beach banded together in 1998 and produced a 'do's and don'ts' leaflet that was handed out to ORV's heading on to the beach (there are only two main access points onto the coast from Preston Beach so it's relatively easy to capture this audience). However, it was soon realised that more had to be done and the idea of forming a volunteer group was proposed.

There was some concern among councillors, staff and residents with starting a volunteer ranger program. To some, 'volunteer rangers' were envisaged as a bunch of vigilantes running around handing out fines and taking the law into their own hands. Others were worried that volunteers could be put in danger if members of the public became aggressive. The Shire was obviously concerned about a wide range of liability and occupational health and safety issues also. However by ensuring that the primary role of the group was to *educate* rather than enforce, a 12 month trial was approved by council. The trial was a success and the group was formalised with further Shire support including the development of a Volunteer Ranger Policy and training program, purchase of a second hand 4wd vehicle for patrols and a volunteer's uniform. The initial setup of this program cost less than \$5000.



*Figure 2: Injured wildlife discovered by PBVR and reported to DPAW.
(Photo: Noel Dew)*

Seventeen years on and the group has gone from strength to strength. The main activities the volunteers carry out include providing information directly to the public via leaflets, and conducting regular patrols. The group is now equipped with DFES radios, lifting equipment (to assist in picking up sick /injured or dead animals), mobile phones, an in-car- camera, an All-Terrain Vehicle (ATV) that can be used to get into more difficult areas and a 'fairly powerful' loud hailer.

The PBV receive strong ongoing support from the Waroona Shire and work closely with the Shire Rangers. OH&S is very important, for example, anyone wishing to drive the ATV must have the appropriate professional training and volunteers are also supplied with basic requirements such as a uniform, sun screen and insect repellent. Extra funding to the value of \$10 000 per year is kindly donated by the locally based Footprints Resort and used to maintain vehicles and pay for running costs.

While the volunteers' primary role is still education, they now assist rangers to issue infringements where required by reporting illegal activity and providing video footage and photos as evidence.

The Preston Beach Volunteer Rangers also carry out a broad range of other activities which include supporting and assisting emergency services, wildlife rescues and coastal rehabilitation projects. The group hosts an annual meeting before the peak Christmas holiday period with Shire, Parks and Wildlife, Police, Fisheries and Fire departments to assist in coordinating management actions which minimise and prevent emergencies and illegal activities occurring in the coastal area.



Figure 3: Attendees and vehicles during the annual coastal managers meeting. (Photo: Noel Dew)

“Without a doubt, the Volunteer Rangers’ actions over the years have significantly reduced inappropriate behaviour and environmental impacts in the local dunes”, said Noel Dew, founding member of the PBVR and current Waroona Shire President. Residents and tourists alike have mentioned to Noel they feel safer and more comfortable with the volunteer’s presence. “The initial suspicion and concern has been replaced by admiration and support.”



Figure 4: Preston Beach Volunteers founder Noel Dew (left). (Photo: Hannelore Hepburn)

Noel believes the main reasons for the group's success is due to:

- a small group (there is a maximum of five volunteer rangers allowed) of long term dedicated members that are provided with specialist training and equipment
- the ongoing support and assistance from the Waroona Shire and other government departments including Police and emergency services
- the focus on positive engagement through education and awareness raising actions
- maintaining a regular presence on the beach
- external funding from community businesses

Unfortunately, this doesn't mean that the problem has gone away and once again it is shifting. "With the word out that you can't take your ORV and 'cut up' around Preston Beach without getting busted, the northern and southern adjoining local government areas are seeing increasing damage to the dunes from off road vehicles" said Noel. The number of 4WD users is also rising, Noel and other volunteers counted 180 vehicles on the beach over four hours during a recent summer holiday period and estimate up to an eighty percent increase in numbers overall.



Figure 5: Vehicle numbers in the coastal zone are increasing rapidly (Photo: Domain)

Conclusion

While a group like the Preston Beach Volunteer Rangers has proven to help make beaches safer and reduce the environmental impacts from off road vehicles, a stronger, more strategic and coordinated approach is required from local, state and federal levels. Unfortunately, it becomes a political issue as a great deal of the public would vote 'no' if elected members wanted to strengthen rules and regulations on vehicles in the coastal zone.

CoastSWaP has been involved in promoting the Preston Beach Volunteer Ranger model and exploring solutions at forums and conferences from a sub-regional to state level. The City of Busselton and Capel Shire were interested in trialling a similar Volunteer Ranger program, unfortunately a 2016 State NRM grant application between the City of Busselton, South West Catchments Council and CoastSWaP was unsuccessful.

Other local governments and stakeholders are concerned about liability and OHS issues with a volunteer ranger program. However, with tried and proven examples such as the PBV and previous Mandurah group, CoastSWaP still sees this model as an effective method of reducing impacts from inappropriate ORV activities.

Noel believes the changes that need to be made require courage and determination from coastal managers and the community. "If we are not prepared to take the hard yards and make the tough decisions for the future someone will make them for us, input may then be minimal and the outcome unsavoury." This may ultimately mean vehicles are completely restricted from gaining access to the beach, something which seems unheard of in Western Australia but not uncommon in eastern states or other countries.

For more information

Preston Beach Volunteer Rangers – Noel Dew dews27@bigpond.com

South Coast Management Group documents

<http://southcoastmanagementgroup.org.au/content/view/13/28/>

Discussion Paper Off-road Vehicles on Beaches - the impacts, implications and options for coastal managers in Australia http://mybribieisland.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Discussion-Paper_ORVForeshores_2012+1.pdf

Please also see our other coastal management case studies in this series <http://coastswap.org.au/case-studies/>

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