

Bureaucrats, Boffins and Boofheads

The importance of community engagement in environmental problem solving



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Definitions

Boofhead: a fool or simpleton; a stupid person; an uncouth person. It was popularised by the use of **boofhead** as the name of a comic strip character invented by R.B. Clark and introduced in the Sydney *Daily Mail* in May 1941.

1943 *Australian Women's Weekly* (Sydney) 16 January: Many a time when his round head nodded wisely in accord with the sergeant's explanations, the sergeant was tempted to think: 'I don't believe the boof-head knows what I'm talking about.'

Boffin: was a common colloquial term used in Britain during WW2 for the technical experts, who were helping to win the war. An affectionate term, but with some practical fighting man's scorn for the academic brain worker

Bureaucrat: an official in a government department, in particular one perceived as being concerned with procedural correctness at the expense of people's needs.

Who the term applies to depends upon the role one has with respect to a problem – but generally each term fits each of us from the perspective of others.

Community environmental problem:

Although there's no official definition of a community problem, Berkowitz enumerated 6 criteria to help identify a community problem:

- The problem occurs too frequently (frequency)
- The problem has lasted for a while (duration)
- The problem affects many people (scope, or range)
- The problem is disrupting to personal or community life (severity)
- The problem deprives people of legal or moral rights (equity)
- The issue is perceived as a problem (perception)

This last criterion -- perception -- is an important one, and can also help indicate readiness for addressing the issue within the community.

This document highlights the importance of not treating a problem superficially and that symptoms, whether real or perceived, indicate a problem that needs to be addressed.

The fundamental solution is for boofheads, bureaucrats and boffins to work together in overcoming community problems.

Community Environmental Problem Diagnosis

Environmental community problems are much like taking a child, with “out of character symptoms,” to the doctor. You know something is wrong but not sure what. The community sees a problem but not sure what it is. Whether it is real and who should they see, a GP, psychiatrist, physician or surgeon?

In the community’s case, is it the council; local member; or shock horror, a government official?



Let me tell you a personal example;

My 4yo son constantly complained of headaches. Took him to the Drs. Dr said, “Nothing wrong, you are overreacting”.

One night when we were looking after our 14yo niece he came out complaining that he couldn’t sleep and he still had headaches. He then asked the question, “who is going to look after me when the big people go?” We asked him what he meant. He replied, “Both nanas are in hospital, both grandmas went to hospital and they died, so nanas are going to die and soon you will be in hospital and also die.”

I tried to explain but could not get through. My niece then piped up and said, “don’t worry Tim, I will.” Problem solved no more headaches.

I, the bureaucrat, couldn’t solve the problem, nor could the boffin, but the less educated one (boofhead) could.

Case Study - Myall River

History

The Myall River is an open semi-mature brackish freshwater barrier estuary of the Myall Lakes system. It originates in the southern slopes of Kyle Range within the Great Dividing Range, northeast of Stroud, and flows generally southeast then southwest, joined by tributaries, before reaching its mouth within Port Stephens at Hawks Nest. The river descends 355 metres over 92 kilometres.

After flowing past the town of Bulahdelah, east of the village of Nerong, the Myall River enters the most southern of the three Ramsar-protected Myall Lakes, and Bombah Broadwater, within the Myall Lakes National Park. The flow of the river runs adjacent to the coastline and through both Tea Gardens and Hawks Nest until it enters Port Stephens between Corrie Island (Ramsar listed) and Jimmys Beach (sand spit).

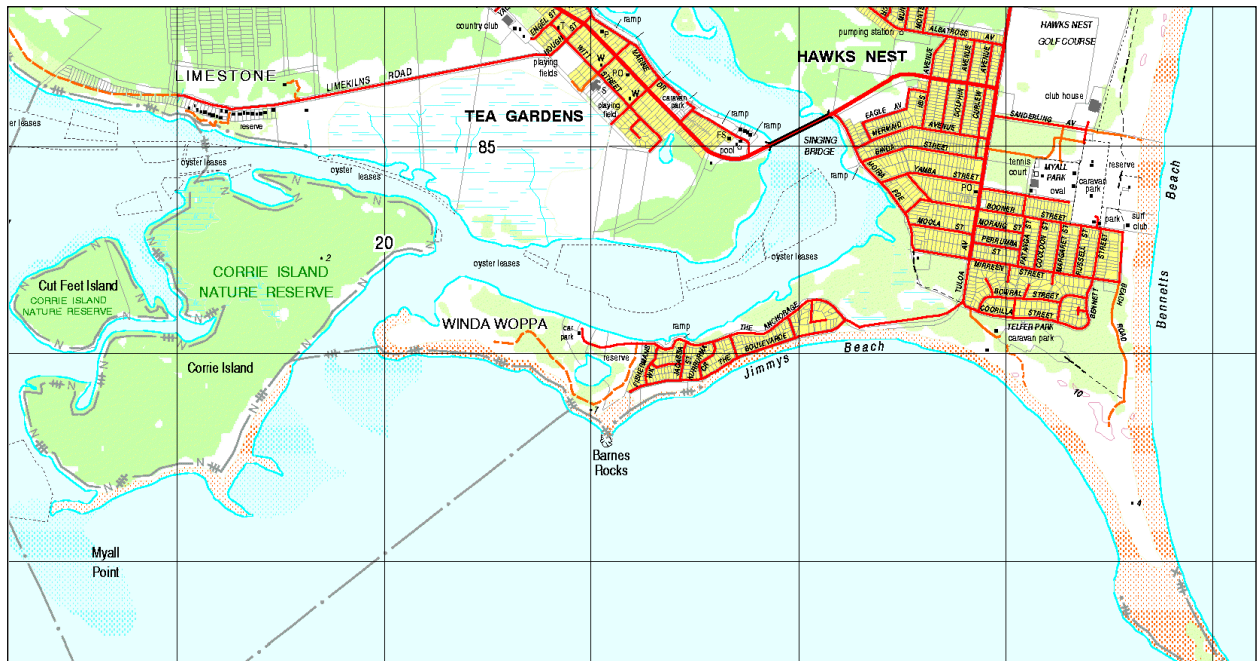
Steam powered droghers originally plied the Myall River to bring timber from the Myall Lakes area to Port Stephens to be loaded aboard coastal ships for further shipment nationally and abroad. In its early years, Tea Gardens was home to many vessels exporting its produce to major areas of Newcastle and Sydney.

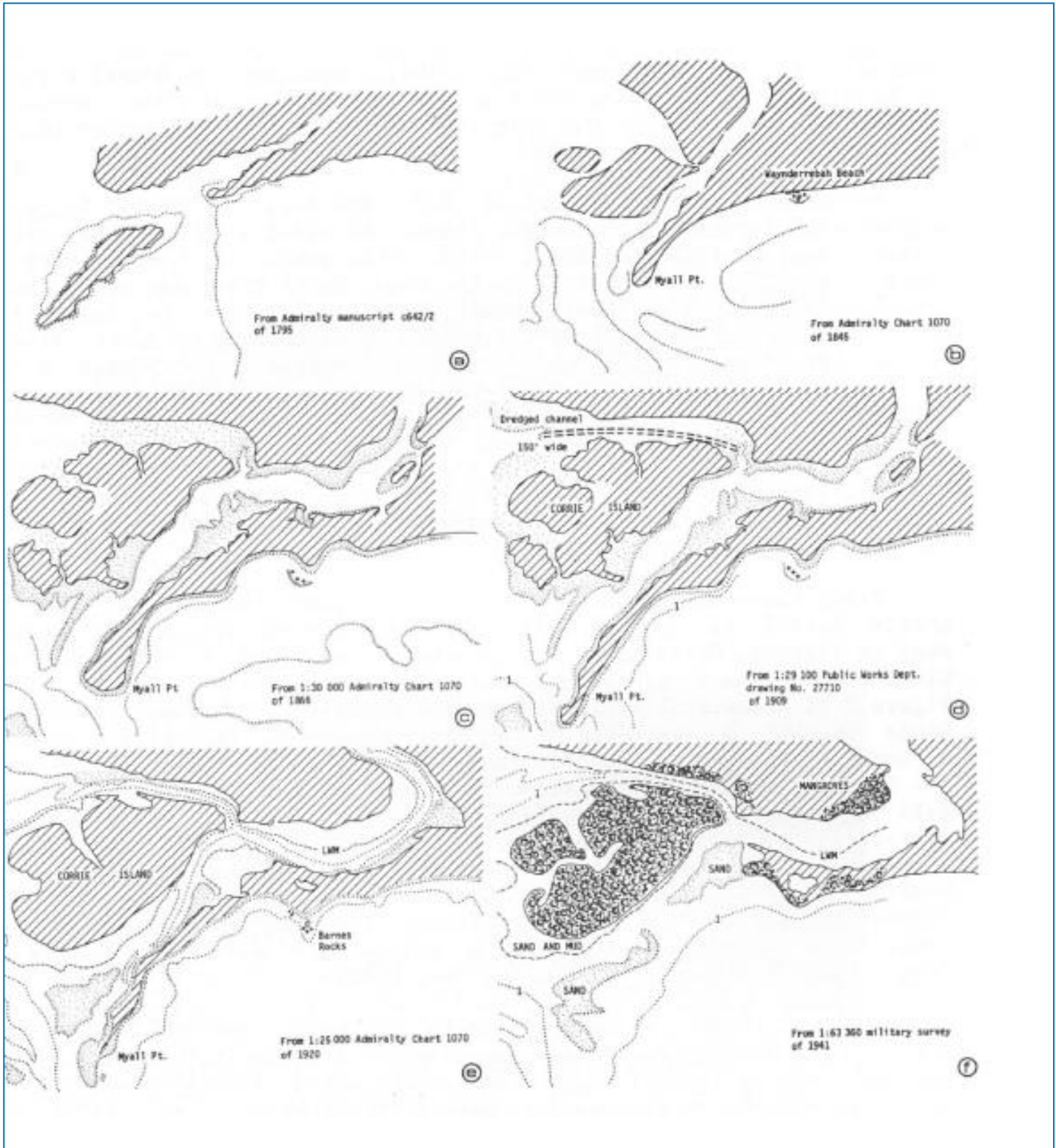
The area was occupied by several bands/clans of Kattung speaking, Aborigines prior to white settlement. The word Myall means stranger or wild and untamed.

The Australian Agricultural Company arrived in the area in 1826. The first Europeans to work in the area were timber-getters who took an interest in the forests (mostly red cedar) along the Myall River early in the 19th century. The timber was hauled by bullock train to mills and then carted by punt downriver. Ships bound for Newcastle and Sydney loaded the timber while unloading the stone they carried for ballast onto the banks of the river, much of it being used in the construction of the rock walls which can still be seen today. Access to Hawks Nest near the mouth of the Myall River was by punt until a ferry service was established in 1928; this service ultimately being replaced by the "Singing" bridge in 1974.

The Myall River has been the life line of the townships, initially logging, then fishing, sandmining and now recreational tourism. It was dredged on a regular basis for 102 years and ceased in 1998 due to withdrawal of funding by the then State Govt. The initial dredging in 1896 was to create a passage for the ships to take timber to Pindimar sawmills.

A channel (Corrie 150' w and 6' deep) was opened up along Corrie creek thus formalizing Corrie Island. The original channel was still used as a navigation passage into Port Stephens until the Corrie channel became the official navigation channel as it was safer (less affected by tidal change).





Historical development of Myall River cited in WBM BMT 2011

Problem Timeline

1991 State Government grants Jimmys Beach restoration Society funds towards protection of beach. Great Lakes (now Midcoast) Council obligated to protect road asset. Commencement of partnership between council and state government in protecting Jimmys beach from ongoing erosion problem.

20 years ago Great Lakes Council began experiencing various water quality issues within its lakes and rivers.

1997 Hepatitis A outbreak traced to consumption of Wallis Lake oysters

More than 400 people contracted hepatitis A after eating oysters from Wallis Lake on the Mid-North Coast, and one person died. Heavy rain had caused faecal pollution of the picture-postcard waters.

Council embarks upon strategic, innovative water quality program – with community support.

1999 Blue-green algal blooms in the Myall Lakes

A widely documented and studied blue-green algal bloom occurred in the Myall Lakes system. That bloom was one of the first significant blue-green algal outbreaks to occur in a coastal brackish lake system in NSW, which had significant impacts for the commercial fishing industry, local tourism operators, businesses and recreational users.

Council seeks answers on community's behalf but restricted as in National Park. NPWS fails to recognize problem.

2000 Local member asks questions of minister

BLUE-GREEN ALGAE—MYALL LAKES REGION—Mr J. H. Turner to the Minister for the Environment, Minister for Emergency Services, Minister for Corrective Services, and Minister Assisting the Premier on the Arts— April 13 (559)

NPWS caught out and forced to address problem. Partnership with council and community begins.

2002 Council and community adopt water quality as key component of environmental outcomes. Environmental levy adopted. Over the years council recognized as leader in water quality outcomes and wins various awards. Community becomes water quality watchdogs. Water quality report card implemented.

2004: Myall River characteristics began to change and we began to experience fish diseases, the loss of our local oyster industry due decreasing salinity and increased turbidity. The condition worsened.

2008: the community submitted a petition containing 3500 signatures asking for urgent action to dredge the natural channel which was blocked due sand migration and the obvious cause for the loss of fresh oceanic water entering the system. The Myall River Action Group was formed and adopted the role of spearheading the community wishes. Council recognised MRAG as a reference group. Community undertook community dig.

Problem Perspective

Boofheads:

- Our river is different: it is polluted, the colour has changed and it smells
- fish are dying
- fish are diseased and it is not red spot
- Dolphins are no longer present
- Navigation is poor
- Economy of town is suffering
- Corrie Island is eroding
- Corrie Island wildlife is being threatened

Residents hold river dredge protest

Posted 10 Nov 2008, 8:33am Mon 10 Nov 2008, 8:33am (Newcastle Herald)

About 100 people armed with shovels turned out to start digging up the mouth of the Myall River yesterday, in protest against what they say is New South Wales Government inaction.

Salinity levels in the waterway have dropped significantly in recent months, causing fish kills and the closure of several oyster leases.

Yesterday, residents gathered at Tea Gardens to again call on the Government to dredge the river to allow natural flushing of the waterway.

Tea Gardens residents dig Myall River



Bureaucrats

- There is no problem.
- It is not our problem.
- Need to consult other agencies: Council / NP&WL / Marine Parks / Maritime Services / Fisheries / OEH / Lands / EPA / Aboriginal Land Council.
- The community doesn't understand.
- Need assessments: noise, plume, bird, seagrass, fish habitat, and so on.

“Around the same time (early September 2008) attention focused on shoaling at the mouth of the Myall River in an area known as the “short cut” which was seen by some community members to be a contributing factor to the water quality issue.” “Headlines such as, sick river, toxic blend of pollution, low salinity and toxic cocktail of salinity and pollution were splashed across newspapers and local residents formed the Myall River Action Group (MRAG). Regardless of scientific evidence that showed events in the Myall River as natural phenomenon and normal conditions would return, MRAG continued with a campaign calling on government to undertake remedial dredging. - *Ling 2009 Coastal Conference*

Boffins

- It's a Jimmys Beach problem, sand migration is a natural phenomenon,
- The river is changing form oceanic to estuarine but is of no consequence.
- Health of the river is no worse than other rivers.
- Dredging won't benefit nor harm.
- Can't use dredged sand elsewhere as grain size is too small.
- Studies are inconclusive, need more studies.
- Need to continually dredge around Corrie Island (Umwelt 1998)

BMT WBM (2011) concludes that “The ongoing growth of the Winda Woppa spit is causing the eastern channel to infill and contract between Winda Woppa and Corrie Island, and this is contributing to the ongoing erosion of Corrie Island by pinching tidal flows against the edge of the Island.

Report titled “Ecological Condition of the lower Myall River Estuary” (prepared by Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water for Great Lakes Council, December 2010) stated:

- The water level in Bombah Broadwater is the primary driver of lower estuary salinity and colour.
- Relative influence of the two channels has changed to an equal contribution.
- Myall River ecological health is not poorer than comparable estuaries.
- Estuary health is well within an acceptable range and was not affected by periods of low salinity
- Dredging will not improve estuary health nor will it harm it.

Community deals with the Problem

The community realised there was a problem but no one appeared to be interested in helping. They knew there was a problem because 4 of the community problem criteria were met, namely;

- The problem has lasted for a while (**duration**)
- The problem affects many people (**scope, or range**)
- The problem is disrupting to personal or community life, (**severity**)
- The problem deprives people of legal or moral rights (**equity**)

There was not just the environmental problem but a system problem. There was something like 11 different agencies to deal with and departments within agencies.

It was not realised at the time, but the group worked through 7 steps in seeking a solution. The group had a plan but it was not formalised. Having a plan of action is always better than taking a few random shots at the problem. If you know where you are going, you are more likely to get there.

Step 1 Form a reference group

Community formed an action group of stakeholders and community representatives.

Step 2 Find an advocate

The Action group found an advocate/s to champion the cause. In this case the council and the local members. Determine whom you should focus your efforts on and who has the power to improve the situation? The best route to that may be to mount an advocacy effort aimed at officials who can make it happen. Do not waste time with talkfests.

Step 3 Highlight the problem.

The media loves a concerted community uprising and it needs to have community consensus. Identify the results of the problem. In this case, aesthetic, economic and community safety.

Step 4 Find the root of the problem

Concentrate on finding the cause and not on the symptoms. The real cause of a problem may not be immediately apparent. Once you understand the root causes of a community problem, you may be able not only to solve it, but to establish systems or policies that prevent its return.

In this case, it was agreed to rely on the science – a reputable and trusted scientist had to conduct the investigation, independent of the bureaucrats. The Minister

suggested Dr Peter Scanes, the action group, readily accepted because he had runs on the board with the algae outbreak.

Step 5 Work with the investigator.

It is important that the reference group and community work with the investigator or boffins in determining the problem. After all, it is a community problem and the community wants a solution. They are not there just whining and complaining but actively seeking a solution. The community is showing good faith and building up relationship capital. Governments are more likely to commit to a project where there is in kind or cash contributions.

In this case the boffins acknowledged the contributory works in the opening comments of the authors of the OEH report on the *“Ecological Condition of the lower Myall River Estuary commissioned by GLC in 2010”*

“The authors wish to thank the Myall River Action Group and other members of the Tea Gardens and Hawks Nest community for raising the profile of the changes to the river entrance and thus providing the opportunity for this study. We are particularly grateful to Gordon Grainger for many interesting and fruitful discussions on the topic of the lower Myall River; and for his tireless efforts in collecting an outstanding set of data on the clarity of the Myall River and on the relative abundances of rays under the bridge.

This showed the government (the ones with the purse strings) and the bureaucrats, that the community was serious about the issue.

Step 6 Accept the result and work on the outcomes

There will always be an outcome. It does not matter if it is not what you hoped. By accepting and working on the recommendations a plan has commenced and someone has taken ownership. Once that happens it's at least a start. Real community problems are likely to be complex. Economic development may depend on the global economy, a force you can't have much effect on. The solution may be more difficult still to implement.

But that's why problems are problems. Community problems exist precisely because they often resist clear analysis and solution. They persist despite our efforts. They can be real challenges.

Yet this doesn't mean we are helpless. Knowing the real problem allows for lasting solutions and leads to change.

In this case, 2 problems were able to be solved; the dredging of the river and; the renourishment of Jimmys Beach.

Step 7 Watch out for flowback

It means looking at the restraining forces that act to keep the problem from changing social structures, cultural traditions, ideology, politics, lack of knowledge, etc. There will be new barriers; that is the nature of Bureaucracy, but you are now armed with a process for change.

What Now?

The dredging was conducted last year. The innovative solution has not only given the community what they expected but also created a sustainable solution for the stability of Jimmys Beach.



It has resulted in:

- the return of the river to its' former oceanic appearance.
- the return of the oyster farmers
- Increased use of the river
- Improved economic uptake for the towns
- Aesthetics
- Dolphins again playing in the river
- Corrie Island being restored

and it has proved the boofheads were on the right track. It proved that bureaucrats and boffins should listen to local communities who have local knowledge and maybe Boofheads, Boffins and Bureaucrats can work together into the future.

Conclusion

These steps were subsequently used by council in addressing a problem centred on angst over the required removal of coral trees (environmental weed). A reference group was established and despite the opposition and divided community the reference group was able to manage the change and achieve for the community.

It is important to realise that a community environmental problem needs to be addressed through bureaucrats, boffins and boofheads working together. Councils and agencies should not resist the cries from the community but follow the process for recognizing and dealing with community problems.

That is, if the problem has:

- (frequency)
- (duration)
- (scope, or range)
- (severity)
- (equity)
- (perception)

Then trigger the 7 steps

Step 1 Form a reference group

Step 2 Find an advocate

Step 3 Highlight the problem.

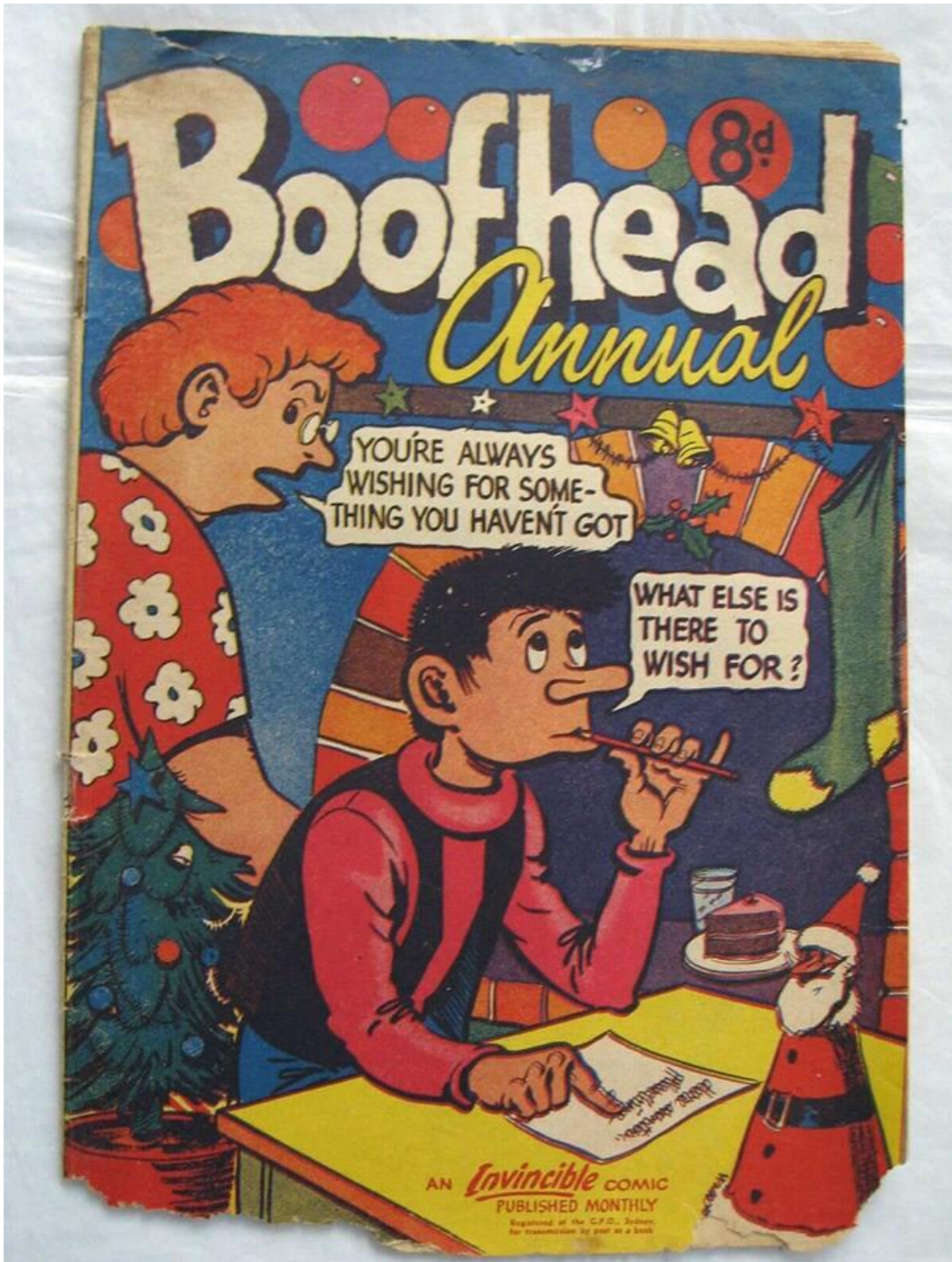
Step 4 Find the root of the problem

Step 5 Work with the investigator.

Step 6 Accept the result and work on the outcomes

Step 7 Watch out for flowback

In closing when it comes to community problems, I'll let Boofhead have the final word.



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References:

- MYALL RIVER INTER-AGENCY TASK GROUP Final Report – December 2012
- The Jimmy’s Beach Sand Nourishment Assessment (BMT WBM, 2012)
- Ling, A 2009 Benefits of integrated management in the coastal zone: Department of Lands and local government
- Ports Stephens - Great lakes Estuary Management Plan 1998 (Umwelt)
- Bill Berkowitz, Ph.D. Associate Professor of Psychology University of Massachusetts Lowell – “Analyzing Community Problems” article in Community Toolbox <http://ctb.ku.edu/en> The Community Tool Box is a public service of the University of Kansas, a designated World Health Organization Collaborating Centre for Community Health and Development

Synopsis

This treatise takes a thought provoking but tongue-in-cheek look at the importance of community engagement in searching for acceptable answers to environmental problems.

The history of sand erosion/deposition of the Myall River and Winda Woppa, on the NSW Mid-Coast, as a perceived community and environmental problem, is used as a case study in bringing stakeholders together to achieve a welcome and innovative solution.

A timeline of events outlining the history and anthropogenic developmental milestones is used to place the problem in context.

The author outlines the problem from the distinct perspectives of the Boofheads (community); Bureaucrats (council and government agencies); Boffins (scientists and experts). Various media articles, agency and expert reports and correspondence are referenced.

The role of the various stakeholders; government, council, community, politicians, Aboriginal Land Councils and experts is examined in the light of hindering/achieving an outcome.

Whilst, the case study highlights the lessons learnt; the significance of breaking down silos; and Boofheads, Bureaucrats and Boffins working together to achieve an outcome; it also patterns a replicable and transferable process of engagement.