



## Butts in the Burdekin Dry Tropics

Deborah Cavanagh, BDTNRM Communications

Tel: (07) 4724 3544 Mob: 0427 243 001

[deb.cavanagh@bdtprm.org.au](mailto:deb.cavanagh@bdtprm.org.au) [www.bdtprm.org.au](http://www.bdtprm.org.au)

**August 2007**

### Fixing the Broken River

*By Terry Butts*

The Burdekin Dry Tropics Natural Resource Management (BDTNRM) and sister organization the Mackay Whitsunday NRM are working closely on a project to clean up one of Queensland's best-known habitats for our platypus- the aptly named Broken River at Eungella in the Mackay Highlands. The river has been so polluted in recent years that all human contact has been outlawed. Yet, this bizarre looking duck billed, egg laying iconic mammal, endemic to the east coast of Australia, and sometimes used as a mascot for Australia, has survived the murky mess in which it lives, plays, eats and breeds. Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century the platypus was hunted for its fur, but is now jealously protected. Surprisingly it is also Australia's only venomous mammal. Though powerful enough to kill smaller animals, its venom is not lethal to humans though it can produce severe pain. The platypus, an excellent swimmer spends most of its time in the water foraging, is extremely private and rests on the river bank, not far above water level and well hidden. In Eungella the platypus is a VIP and currently plays an integral part in this very delicate project to "fix" the Broken River.

Twenty years ago the elusive yet lovable platypus of Eungella National Park was fast gaining worldwide status. Attracting thousands of domestic and overseas visitors to the banks of the then-beautiful Broken River, near Mackay.

A special viewing platform was built to give tourists a better chance of snatching a glimpse of what is arguably Australia's most famous animal, in its natural and extremely peaceful environment. And 20 years ago the Broken River was crystal clear. Visitors and locals not only swam in its often-chilly waters but happily drank it.

Things changed dramatically.

About six years ago a forbidding, NO SWIMMING sign went up at the entrance to the park. The once free flowing waters of Broken River, at least in the area where the platypus play, had turned a very milky grey. Polluted, and according to the Environment Protection Agency (EPA) a water sample taken at that time revealed dangerously high levels of bacteria, algae and faecal coliform. So outrageously high, in fact, that the Queensland Parks and Wild Life had no option but to slap up the sign warning people not to swim in or have human contact with the river. It is a sign that according to the locals, many of whom rely on tourism, is costing thousands of potential customers.

"Tourists would come up for the day, swim, view the platypus, picnic, go away and tell the world."

"It was a unique part of their holiday," says one such business person, a long time resident, but like most in this small community, insists on anonymity.

For the issue of the platypus and Broken River is somewhat emotive, to say the least. And has been for a long, long time.

The big anomaly is that, years ago when the river was crystal clear, it was often difficult to catch sight of a platypus. In fact they were seldom sighted according to the those who have grown up in the area, which is an hour drive from

Mackay, high into the mountains with commanding views across the rich Pioneer Valley and, on a clear day, the waters of the Great Barrier Reef.

“As kids we used to swim in the river and sometimes tourists would stand all day, often until dark, just waiting for a glimpse.”

“And they’d come back the next day and do the same thing.”

“But now you can see platypus almost anytime,” said Eungella born and bred Carmel, a receptionist at the local chalet.

Some claim its because the platypus have multiplied, having thrived on the bugs produced by nutrients, algal blooms and other high faecal coli forms that have impacted on the river, that, also just happens to be the main water supply for three of the five remaining dairy farms in the area.

Before regulation of the dairy industry in 2000 there were 30 such farms and argument continues as to why the river can be so polluted now, with only a handful of farms operating.

There is no clearly defined reason for the pollution either. A lot of government departments and locals have their ideas. But the one fact generally accepted is that the pollution has not harmed the life cycle of the platypus. Some environmentalists are quite adamant the platypus has thrived. Others are more sceptical, claiming the once fiercely private platypus has become more visible because it has become accustomed to the tourist attention. There are seasonal factors as well.

Unfortunately however there has never been an official count of the animal or, at least one that is generally accepted as accurate.

Less than a kilometre down stream from the NO SWIMMING sign local businessman (and former dairy farmer) Rob Burns pumps water from the Broken River into a tank for all of his household use, and has done for years.

“My kids have drunk it every day,” he says “And we still do without any problems and without treatment.”

Rob, like almost everyone, is hopeful of a return to the days tourists could swim freely again in the river. And he believes, with the practices being put into place by community groups such as the Burdekin Dry Tropics (BDTNRM) and Mackay Whitsunday Natural Resource Management (MWNRM) that the No Swimming sign will soon go the way of the Berlin Wall and everyone can swim and enjoy the facility without any inhibitions or fear.

More than hopeful of that outcome is Jon Graftdyk, a project manager for the state and federal government funded MWNRM, and colleague Peter Alden, a former LandCare operative who has recently joined MWNRM. Their job is to ‘fix’ the Broken River.

Alden talks to the farmers, (there are other land users besides dairy farmers in the area) and offers cash as well as professional and technical ways to increase their productivity and sustainability while at the same time reducing their environmental footprint.

Everything is changing in this field and farmers are becoming more aware of the sensitivities of the land and its management.

The goal is to create a riparian hedge along the river bank, keep stock away from the banks by fencing, and encourage land care initiatives that include recycling of the farm waste into fertiliser and settling ponds to catch the run off.

Alden is not sure of the future of the platypus however, once the broken river is fixed.

He admits some of the food supply might diminish but how much an impact the cleaning of the river will have on platypus numbers he isn't sure.

"Our job is to fix the river. Not to promote tourism, as such."

"But I realise it will be good for tourism when we clear all those high nutrients currently sitting in mud at the bottom."

The river has been subject to considerable stress over the years but apparently it was a lot worse before the drought breaking rains earlier this year.

The rains flushed out a lot of nasties.

The Burdekin and Mackay NRMs continue to work with the National Parks and Wildlife, and the EPA, and believe they are winning but it's not a quick fix.

No one is certain really what caused the ultra high reading last time, that showed an unacceptable level of faeces from a warm blooded mammal.

It might have been a dead wallaby in the water, or even a leaking septic tank, not necessarily run-off from a dairy farm.

No one really knows.

But the next time a water sample is taken, there is an air of confidence among the project that it will be OK, or safe for everyone and every little swimming thing.

And then the platypus and cows, tourists and townsfolk, and of course the farmers might all live happily ever-after in their little wonder world way up in the clouds of Eungella.