

Rough ride for bay's fragile beauty

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Environment Reporter

IF YOU peer over the boardwalk that snakes its way through the mangrove forest behind the Cronulla Sutherland Leagues Club you can just make out the shape of an oyster colony. On a winter's afternoon, with the sunshine caught between the crooked curves of mangrove boughs, you can also see new mangrove shoots poking up through potholes of mud and the tiny marks left behind by crabs. Lift your eyes and across the bay you can see Sydney's skyline and a container ship moving sluggishly towards the heads. What you cannot see is what

lies beneath: deep channels carved out of the bed of the bay to ease the passage of ships, submarine cables for electricity, and decades of industrial and residential pollution that has sunk deep into the sediment. This is NSW's biggest container port, and the site for a big oil terminal. It is also home for hundreds of native birds and

marine species. It has always been an uneasy cohabitation, but the battle between industrial and environmental interests is set to intensify. Residents and environmentalists are angry about State Government plans for the expansion of Port Botany, construction of a desalination plant at Kurnell and its eight kilometre pipeline across the bay, and, in a separate project, a two kilometre pipeline housing an electricity cable that will run between the heads. All three excavations of the bay's bed will be going on simultaneously in 2008," said Bob Walshe, a long-time environmental campaigner for the bay. "It will be, without any doubt, the death of what is left of

the ecology of Botany Bay." Mr Walshe and others are worried dredging operations for the three projects - 7.5 million tonnes of material will be dredged for the expansion of the port alone - will stir up toxic chemicals in bay sediment, create turbidity thick enough to disturb fish life and block out sunlight for sea grasses, and possibly change wave pattern across the bay, causing erosion in some areas and sediment buildup in others. Life in the bay is a tightly woven web of interconnections, says Dr Melanie Bishop, a research fellow at the University of Technology, Sydney. Damage to one kind of plant or animal species can allow another to take over. Deterioration in water quality can damage the plant life that fish and birds rely on. One of the concerns about

dredging, Dr Bishop said, was that it disturbed the ecosystem, pushing out native species, and providing a window of opportunity for invasive molluscs, worms and algae to grab some prime real estate. Arriving on the bottom of cargo ships, these invaders make it difficult for native species to return. "And it is only a matter of

time before they move across the bay to Towra [on the southern edges of the bay]," Dr Bishop said. Towra is Sydney's most significant wetland. Dredging in the 1970s to allow ships to enter the port safely changed wave patterns, deflecting them from the port and to the reserve. Little terns that once nested where the third runway now is moved to Spit Island at Towra Point. Under threat from cats and dogs, the spit was raised and moved north. But in the process seagrass beds were damaged. Seagrass meadows may be damaged again when dredging starts next year. Because these plants must photosynthesise, sea grasses thrive only at certain depths, said Associate Professor Peter Ralph, a UTS marine botanist. "If the sunlight is limited by turbidity or dredging spoil they become stressed," he said. "If you lose your sea grasses you lose your entire ecosystem. There will be

no fish, no prawns, no molluscs." Jim Colman, a town planner, concluded in a report on the bay in 2000, *Turning the Tide*, that the management of Botany Bay by several layers of government was unco-ordinated and ad hoc.

Speaking to the Herald this week, Mr Colman said it seemed little had changed. "I despair at the inability of government generally to recognise [the bay's] history and social importance, its environmental values for species

of all kinds ... it is part of Australia's heritage that has had a pretty rough time."

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