

1880.

WESTERN AUSTRALIA.

REPORT

OF THE

COMMISSION

APPOINTED BY

HIS EXCELLENCY THE GOVERNOR

TO REPORT ON THE

PEARL SHELL FISHERIES

OF THE COLONY.

Ordered by the Council to be Printed, 9th August, 1880.

PERTH:

BY AUTHORITY: RICHARD PETHER, GOVERNMENT PRINTER.

1880.

EXTRACTED FROM THE MINUTES.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 6TH, 1880.

MESSAGES FROM HIS EXCELLENCY THE GOVERNOR.—A Messenger from His Excellency The Governor being announced, The Speaker took the Chair, and reported the receipt of the following Messages:—

Message No. 3.

WILLIAM C. F. ROBINSON.

The Governor forwards to the Honorable the Legislative Council the Report of the Commission appointed by his predecessor at the request of the Legislative Council to report on the Pearl Shell Fisheries of the Colony.

Government House, Perth, 6th August, 1880.

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MONDAY, AUGUST 9TH.

PEARL SHELL FISHERY COMMISSION.—The Honorable M. Fraser, with leave, without notice, moved, That the Report of the Pearl Shell Fishery Commission be printed.

Question—put and passed.

Report of the Commission appointed by His Excellency The Governor to report on the Pearl Shell Fisheries of the Colony.

SIR,

Perth, 29th July, 1880.

I have the honor to enclose herewith the Report of the Commissioners, whose names appear in the margin,* appointed by Commission, dated the 1st March, 1880, for the purpose of investigating "the subject of the Pearl Shell Fishing Grounds, &c., &c.;" also, following on this, respecting "the desirability of forming a Government Station at Beagle Bay, or elsewhere on the North-West Coast;" and also "the question of the terms and conditions on which the lands recently explored by Mr. Alexander Forrest should be granted to intending settlers."

Having sent in our Report on the last subject, we presume it is unnecessary to further deal with it; so in framing our Report on the two subjects first named, we have made no mention of the land question.

The minutes forwarded refer, however, to all three matters.

I have, &c.,

MALCOLM FRASER,

Chairman of the Commission.

His Excellency

Sir William Cleaver Francis Robinson, K.C.M.G., &c., &c., &c., Perth.

*The Honorable M. Fraser, M.L.C., Surveyor General, Sir T. C. Campbell, Bart., M.L.C., Sir L. S. Leake, Kt., M.L.C., J. G. Lee Steere, Esq., M.L.C., E. T. Hooley, Esq., C. Harper, Esq., J.P., W. Padbury, Esq., M. Grant, Esq., M.L.C.

REPORT.

To His Excellency Sir William Cleaver Francis Robinson, Knight Commander of the Most Distinguished Order of Saint Michael and Saint George, Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the Colony of Western Australia and its Dependencies, &c., &c., &c.

MAY IT PLEASE YOUR EXCELLENCY,—

1. We the members of the Commission appointed on the 1st day of March, 1880, to investigate the subject of the Pearl Shell Fishing Grounds, and to inquire whether some better protection may not be afforded to the beds, and arrangements carried out for conducting the Fisheries, which would be more advantageous both to Pearlers and to the Colony, have to report that during the course of the inquiry thus committed to us we have held thirteen meetings, and we have examined nine witnesses.

The direction in which we have worked in obtaining evidence may be thus summarised:—

Firstly.—As to the estimated first cost of boats engaged in the Pearl Fishery and their equipment at per ton, giving the tonnage of each.

Secondly.—The number of boats that have been lost, and the loss of lives from 1st January, 1873, to 31st December, 1879.

Thirdly.—The length of the period the boats are out during the season.

Fourthly.—The number of divers and crew employed in each separate boat, and by each Pearler—Europeans shown separately from Natives or Malays.

Fifthly.—The rate of wages and bonuses given to either natives or Europeans separately.

Sixthly.—The number of tons of pearl shells which were obtained, with that labor, at that cost, and during that time.

Seventhly.—The quantity of shells each party obtained, and the proportion of the live and dead ones.

Eighthly.—As to the value of the pearls obtained during the same period.

Ninthly.—The best system for working the Fisheries.

2. For the better conservation and protection of pearl shells, we have taken evidence upon, and carefully considered whether certain places such as Nicol Bay, Flying Foam Passage, and Port Headland, might be always kept closed, regarding them as spawning grounds and nurseries; and also if the shell is at maturity in five years whether it would be advantageous to only allow fishing every fifth year. This of course following on a division of the Pearling Grounds into five parts, four of which would be always closed.

3. For a Revenue and for providing protection for those engaged in the Fisheries, we have well weighed the question as to which form is best.

(a).—Poll tax or head money on divers.

(b).—Dealing with each bank separately, and letting for one or more years to the highest tenderer.

(c).—Tonnage dues only on each boat.

(d).—A fixed export duty on shells shipped out of the Colony.

(e).—Duty on shells exported, calculating *ad valorem* duty at per cent.

4. We are of opinion that it is desirable that the waters and foreshores within the following limits should be protected from Pearl-ers and Divers for a period of four years.

(1).—All that portion of the coast lying between the meridian of Point Poissonier (mouth of DeGrey River) and the meridian of the East head of Banangara Bay (about two miles East of Mt. Blaze). [Native names:—Banks locally known as "Condon," "Ttcherlerdoun," "One Man Patch," "Pedoona," "Banangara."]

(2).—All that portion of the coast within a straight line drawn from the North point of Dolphin Island and Cape Lambert, including the passage between Dolphin Island and the main (Nicol Bay). [Local names:—"Broadhurst Bay," "Nicol Bay," "Antony Mia."]

(3).—Starting from Beadon Water Hole Northwards to Direction Island, then Eastward to Twin Island, thence South Easterly to mouth of Cane River. [Local name:—"Mary Ann Patch."]

The names above given are taken from the Admiralty Chart.

5. We are indisposed to recommend immediately any departure from the system of working the banks that is now in force, but deem it very desirable that the subtraction of immature pearl shells should be prevented by every means at the command of the Government, and if necessary by special legislation.

6. That the tax, duty, or royalty paid by pearl-ers should be on the quantity, or on the value, we consider at present preferable to any other course. The difficulty of deciding on and adjusting an export duty on the value is in our opinion the only objection to its adoption, for the reason that it is undoubtedly the most equitable tax. If this is found to be an insuperable difficulty, then the tonnage export duty must remain in force. We only deal with the principle, and leave the amount to be levied on one side, as being beyond our instructions.

7. With regard to the Pearl Fisheries of Sharks Bay, we consider that from the evidence placed before us the Fishery is being very seriously injured by the reckless and exhausting system of dredging continuously, as this destroys shells and spat of all ages. The result of this must necessarily be that before any length of time the beds will be entirely denuded and consequently unproductive. We therefore recommend, as part of a remedy, that the Pearl-ing Grounds in this Bay shall be closed for a time; but in order that the industry shall not be paralysed by the closure of all the banks at one time, we submit a division which there is good reason for believing will attain this object without the unnecessary disturbance of those now systematically engaged in the prosecution of the industry.

Firstly.—We propose leaving open, for three years, all that portion of the Bay lying East of Cape Peron, and bounded by the foreshore; this then to be closed.

Secondly.—We would close for that period, afterwards to be open for two years, all that portion of the Bay bounded by a line from Cape Heirisson to Cape Levillain, thence Eastward to Cape Peron.

Thirdly.—We would also close, for a period of five years, all that portion of the Bay between Cape Heirisson and Cape Levillain to the Westward.

Beyond this we do not suggest in the working of the beds any interference now, further than our recommendations provide.

8. In reply to the direction of His Excellency Sir Harry Saint George Ord, which is contained in the following minute to the Colonial Secretary:—

"I think it will be as well to invite an expression of opinion from the Pearl Shell Commission
"now sitting, respecting the desirability of forming a Government Station at Beagle Bay
"or elsewhere, on the North-West Coast, as suggested by the Legislative Council in
"Resolution No. 30, of the 30th September, 1879;"

As we are informed that Your Excellency has arranged for the Admiralty Surveyor to proceed almost at once in his schooner, for the purpose of discovering and reporting on a suitable harbor and port for the District, it is now unnecessary for us to make any suggestions on this point.

9. We forward copies of the Minutes of our Proceedings, and of the evidence which has been before us. We much regret that the further evidence expected from the Government Resident at Roebourne is not yet to hand. Those of us who are members of Your Legislative Council would respectfully ask, that when received, this evidence may be laid on the Table for the information of the Council.

MALCOLM FRASER,
T. COCKBURN-CAMPBELL,
L. S. LEAKE,
JAS. G. LEE STEERE,

EDWARD T. HOOLEY,
CHARLES HARPER,
McKENZIE GRANT.

Mr. Padbury absent on his station, therefore signature is wanting.—M. F.

Perth, 29th July, 1880.