

Iconic sea jetty still plays important role

We can go beyond the maintenance debate, writes **Chris Tola**.

DURING the current period where the tightening of financial purse strings is the norm, maintenance of costly heritage items can be a hot potato when it comes to deciding who foots the bill.

In the case of the Catho jetty – putting a price on a structure for its iconic and heritage elements can be quite a challenging endeavour.

The estimates of the recurrent maintenance costs of the Catherine Hill Bay jetty in its present form could be a burden on public authorities and may be a deal-breaker for any prospective investors interested in capitalising on potential entrepreneurial ventures.

As with many heritage structures, calls for relevant and useful reuse have never been more appropriate. For local examples we need only to look at the reuse of the Newcastle wool stores, rail sheds, or old rail trails converted into cycleways.

The popularity of the Catho jetty as an iconic structure, a symbol of Hunter mining heritage, popular dive site and its value as a landmark unique to Catho, is unquestionable.

To simplify the issue and say that the structure is dormant and requires reinvention as a relevant and useful structure to allow its continued presence in the Catherine Hill Bay coastal landscape is not quite accurate, and tells only half the story.

The role the jetty plays in the aquatic landscape is real and present and has continued to be functional long after the coal ships ceased their regular loading visits.

The aquatic landscape functions are a little less publicised and understood. As an established underwater ecosystem the role of artificial reef structures are well documented in terms of their value to both the recreational fishing and diving communities and industry.

The popularity of the site for divers near and far due to the unique sea life that inhabits the structure and nearby sea caves are known, but perhaps not well documented.

The second major role that the structure plays, which is possibly



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even less understood, is in terms of its influence on the near shore hydrology and beach profile. Any calls to remove the structure in its entirety require robust investigations and modelling.

The surfing culture entrenched in the local community is second to none. Every surfer worth their salt knows where Catho is, and upon mention of the name can recall epic sessions there.

Even international visitors have either direct experience or have heard of such. Some of these stories usually include a comment about the legendary "Old Tom", the one-eyed great white shark calloused from using the jetty as a scratching post.

Surfing Catho is certainly an experience of the senses, and the jetty forms part of the fabric in providing a unique identifying profile for this beach and the village.

The question is how we minimise the costs of recurrent maintenance to the structure while maintaining

heritage interpretative values, ecosystem and aquatic recreation functions and its iconic landscape feature.

The answer may lie in removing the top half of the structure while retaining the pylons. Removal of the top half of the structure should not change any hydrological aspect, ecosystems or alter the surfing amenity, and would allow for the marine/diving environment to remain as is and deteriorate naturally over time.

Currently the jetty is not accessible to the public and is limited in providing any benefit in terms of an elevated platform when compared to the maintenance costs. The remnant piles could provide the physical reminder of the heritage and physical iconic reminders for interpretation purposes of the past (good or bad).

The community benefit of maintaining the structure as is cannot be justified in terms of just coalmining heritage value. I agree

with calls for those funds to be spent providing more functional community facilities. Half removal though maybe a workable compromise for all.

If it were to be completely removed the role the structure plays in aquatic ecosystems (not just as a scratching post for Old Tom) and the foreshore profiles affecting the surfing amenity, would require significant investigation.

It is these current roles and the iconic nature of the structure as a constant reminder of why Catho is Catho that call for an effective (and financially viable) reuse.

Catherine Hill Bay, the Hunter and our national coastline deserve better than an ill-planned proposal. Let's work together to see a positive and sustainable compromise achieved.

Chris Tola is president of the Hunter Chapter of Surfrider Foundation Australia.