

“Diving in to help – the Northern Pacific Seastar at Inverloch”

Australians have a generous spirit and a desire to remain the “lucky country” and protect the environment they love. And most of us will lend a hand at least once.

When the Northern Pacific Seastar, a serious marine pest, was first found at Inverloch on Victoria’s South East coast, the community were determined to act.

From the moment locals had confirmation from the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) that the pest was on their doorstep, and of the damage it could cause, they wanted to help get rid of it. Despite the elusive nature of this pest, its awful reputation and other hurdles such as the difficulty in locating the ‘source’ population, no one wanted to look back and feel as though they hadn’t “given it a go”, even when success could not be guaranteed.

Locals knew that they were custodians of one of the world’s most precious pieces of coastline, home to species not found anywhere else. And they weren’t about to lose it.

And far from lending a hand once, volunteer divers, with the support of other locals, have spent endless weekends locating and removing the Northern Pacific Seastar.

Several hundred volunteers have been involved. They have combed the beaches and spent hours underwater in their relentless search. And boats, safety equipment, search gear and food were marshalled in for support.

That this represents one of the most sustained volunteer eradication efforts in Australia’s marine environment, and possibly in the world, is testimony to determination and understanding by locals of the seriousness of this marine pest on a global scale.

Marine pest incidents like the Inverloch one need to be dealt with according to agreed national guidelines, which in turn, link to a range of international endeavours to deal with the marine pest ‘problem’.

The Department of Sustainability and Environment has been acting as a co-ordinator at the local level and is responsible for meeting local and national requirements and expectations on how this incident is dealt with. The ease with which marine pests are spread, makes this coordination role vital.

But it is the volunteers who have been central to the impetus and direction of eradication efforts.

And it is the optimism and determination of volunteers that has fostered a sense of pride in and around Inverloch and a togetherness among the recreational dive community across Victoria.

It is the volunteer divers who, in looking after their own patch, are looking after their neighbours patch, and their neighbours neighbours patch and so on. A classic ‘Think Global, Act Local’ response.

Local media have followed progress of volunteer diving with interest and given profile to a sometimes under rated environmental problem. Local volunteers are helping to drive a bigger agenda that will reduce the chance of more pests being found at more locations and have asked for nothing in return.