



Media Release

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WILD SHELLFISH IN THE TAMAR RIVER ESTUARY OFF LIMITS

People are being warned against eating wild shellfish from the Tamar River estuary after a new study found the oysters contained high levels of heavy metals.

Last year, the Tamar Estuary and Esk Rivers (TEER) Program investigated metal concentrations in Pacific oysters and four species of recreationally targeted fish - cod, flathead, flounder and mullet.

Around 300 oysters were analysed for metal contaminants and concentrations of cadmium exceeded limits in the upper estuary while in the whole estuary, zinc and copper were found to be up to four times the levels set by Food Standards Australia and New Zealand.

Metal levels in the fish species tested were found to be within the guidelines and not of concern to public health.

While it is acknowledged that many people enjoy consuming wild shellfish, this can be a high risk activity. The Director of Public Health, Dr Roscoe Taylor, warns against eating wild shellfish in Tasmanian waters.

"Harvesting and eating wild shellfish is never recommended because the quality of the water and shellfish is not always routinely monitored," he said.

"The quality of the water influences the quality of the shellfish. Poor water quality may be due to many factors, such as heavy rainfall or naturally occurring algal blooms."

TEER Project Officer, Monique Thompson, said the study confirmed the long standing recommendation from the Department of Health and Human Services against eating wild shellfish from the estuary.

"Despite this advice, locals and visitors are still harvesting shellfish from the Tamar River estuary," Ms Thompson said.

"We are now embarking on a public awareness campaign which includes erecting signage at boat ramps and other public areas to warn about the dangers of consuming wild oysters."

A brochure has also been produced and will be available at tourist information centres, local councils and most fishing outlets and a full technical report can be viewed on the TEER website <http://nrmnorth.org.au/teer>.

As part of the study, Pacific oysters were collected from eleven sites which were chosen according to public access areas and industrial bays.

Five of each fish species were collected from three zones in the Tamar estuary, which equated to a minimum of 60 fish of legal size.

"Metal levels in the fish species tested were found to be within the guidelines but it is recommended that people limit the consumption to two to three serves per week."

Metals in the estuary come from a variety of sources including run-off from urban areas such as roads, historic mining contamination from the upper catchments and are a legacy of industrial discharges into the Tamar estuary.

Ms Thompson said it had been several years since a similar study was carried out in the Tamar estuary.

“The last study of this kind was conducted in 2002 on behalf of the Department of Health and Human Services.

“It is important to have recent science supporting any health recommendations associated with Tamar seafood consumption.”

The TEER Program is a partnership between NRM North, the Tasmanian Government, Launceston City Council, Meander Valley Council, West Tamar Council, George Town Council, Northern Midlands Council, Ben Lomond Water and Hydro Tasmania.

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