

## Democracy fails in East Gippsland Shire

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By [Jackie McNamee](#)

Mallacoota — love it. If you've been there, you do. It's remote, in the heart of the Croajingolong National Park in East Gippsland. People come and they return, to enjoy unspoilt wilderness and peace, to walk, swim, surf, fish, paddle a canoe.

It's a place to breathe and see how it used to be. This haven of forest, lakes, birds and native animals, ocean and miles of pure unsullied beaches, dolphins and whales passing by, hasn't been privatised or resortised. It does have the biggest, publicly owned, affordable camping park, which is adjacent to the UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve.

Presiding over this jewel is East Gippsland Shire Council (EGSC) — seated 230 kilometres away in Bairnsdale and reigning over a region the size of Wales. This council, which praises Mallacoota's "natural beauty, its landscape diversity, its low-key development", has a plan for the area's Bastion Point — a huge, industrial scale boat ramp with a vast breakwater, right on the beach.

There is a small concrete boat ramp there, which services the local abalone divers, recreational fishers and trips to nearby Gabo Island, and many agreed it could do with an upgrade.

The Option 3b Boat Ramp Development at Bastion Point received final Coastal Management Act consent from Victoria's environment minister, Ryan Smith, in January.

The proposed ramp would need a 130 metre-long, 2.8 metre-high breakwater, built on the reef and a famous surf break. It would have a 150 metre causeway road on the beach leading to a multi-lane boat ramp, and a large car park along the cliff top.

A boating channel would require the destruction and removal of 3500 cubic metres of rocky reef, and noisy, expensive, perpetual dredging to remove the sand that would accumulate.

It would ruin the town's main beach forever.

But despite the council, in effect, steamrolling over community outrage, it has not broken any law. It commissioned an Environment Effects Statement (EES). However, the Independent Panel examining this EES found the proposal "unacceptable" and "of no societal benefit" and recommended a minor upgrade of the existing ramp — just what everyone wanted.

Although commissioning the EES was a legal requirement, it was also equally legal for the planning minister, Justin Madden, to completely ignore the Panel's findings and support 3b.

The fact that East Gippsland's independent MP at the time, Craig Ingram — with interests in the abalone industry and whose support would have been vital to Labor in the event of a hung parliament — was demanding a big boat ramp at Mallacoota would of course have had no influence over Madden's judgement. That would have been wrong.

The proposal has met with other hurdles, which the council has blithely pressed through. This includes financial projections from Buchan Consulting being wildly inaccurate and the "benefit cost ratio" being reduced from 6.4 to 1.6.

Marine Safety Victoria's Boating Safety and Facilities Program rejected EGSC's funding application on the grounds that demand for the facility hadn't been demonstrated, that the cost estimates had been prepared by consultants "with no evidence they have any experience in this type of development", and that safety issues hadn't been addressed.

But in the dying days of the previous Labor administration the state government promised Ingram - and incidentally EGSC - \$6.2 million.

Madden and Ingram are gone, but 3b lives on.

The council persists with the Bastion Point boat ramp development despite the clear opposition of the Mallacoota community. A recent Department of Transport survey of public opinion found 87% of respondents were opposed to the council's planned development.

The Option 3b boat ramp saga is another shameful tale of a community let down by so-called due process, unaccountable councillors and council officers, and hidden vested interests.

If this development goes ahead, millions of dollars of public money will be wasted because of a shady deal that has gained its own seemingly unstoppable momentum, the ratepayers of East Gippsland will be burdened with an expensive and unwanted white elephant, the visitors will stop coming, and this beautiful coastal wilderness will be despoiled forever.

[For more information about the council's option 3b development, visit [Save Bastion Point](#).]



An artist's impression of the proposed boat ramp.

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