

URBAN GEOLOGY OF THE NICKOL BAY - LEGENDRE SHEET

The aim of this Urban Geology survey is to provide information for those concerned with aspects of raw material and water supply, rural, urban, industrial or transport development. The intention is to point out geological factors which may affect planning on a broad, rather than specific basis. Detailed site investigations will still be required, but it is hoped that this information will provide a useful framework for such further work.

The area covered by the Nickol Bay and Legendre Sheets encompasses a variety of land-use stock grazing is carried out on two properties in the south. Karatha town covers some 3 km² and is currently being adapted to approximately twice that size; a temporary bitumen pond of 1 km² holds guest field from salt production to the west; minor amounts of sand, gravel (for roads), limestone, and clay (for bricks) have been excavated; an airport near Karatha and Damper, a railway marshalling yard and repair shed are sited in the southwest; and areas of unused or seldom-used land occur on the promontory northeast from King Bay and on the many islands of the Damper Archipelago. The total land surface is 237 km² of mainland (including the bitumen pond) and 16 km² of islands.

The geology of the Damper 1:250 000 sheet, which includes Nickol Bay and Legendre, was mapped previously by Kewell, Horvitz, Ryan and Back of the Geological Survey of Western Australia, the results being published in 1964. These two sheets were re-mapped in 1976 by Higgs of the Survey, using 1:50 000 topographic base-maps and 1971 and 1972 air photographs. The Precambrian rock sub-division of the earlier mappers was utilized with some modification.

PHYSIOGRAPHY

The Damper area is very broadly divided into physiographic units which are shown on the latest map. The Damper Archipelago division includes most of the islands and the promontory northeast of Damper and is typified by rugged, often precipitous terrain with some sandy bays and mangrove fringes. The limestone islands are low-lying and of lower elevation. Coastal flats include tidal mangrove swamps and saltflats as well as the extensive dune and dune flats which are submerged by sea, exceptionally high tides. The coastal plain is generally of low relief but includes dunes and broad river basins. The dune belt includes isolated hills comprising a variety of landforms, all fully to a greater or lesser degree and all separated from the main hill mass to the north by low-lying dunes. The Precambrian rock sub-division of the earlier mappers was utilized with some modification.

STRATIGRAPHY

Rocks of Archaean and Proterozoic age crop out throughout the mapped area, thickly mantled in places by Tertiary and Quaternary sediments. Sedimentation is occurring at present, especially where mangrove thickens are colonising the ocean margins. To a large extent, geologic controls physiography - folded granite and Quaternary sediments forming lowlands, the older rocks the uplands.

PRECAMBRIAN

The Archaean 'altered dolerite' is confined to a small area southeast of Nickol Bay. It is a fine- to medium-grained, monocrystic rock with scattered minerals and phenocrysts. Calcic, chlorite and pyrite are common secondary minerals as veins and aggregates. Most part of the 'altered' is metamorphosed dolerite, an intermediate intrusive. Close to this rock is a second dyke of metamorphosed dolerite which is not known to intrude Proterozoic rocks and is therefore either Proterozoic or Archaean in age. It is a fine- to medium-grained blue-grey rock with a distinctive dark red-brown weathering surface on the large subvolcanic boulders covering the outcrop. A few local developments of calcite occur on the dolerite close to the dyke.

The granite, gneiss and pegmatite unit probably underlies most of the coastal plain west of Karatha but is susceptible to erosion and therefore crops out rarely. To the north it has been protected by resistant overlying rocks and appears at the foot of cliffs along the promontory to Dolphin Island. The granite is coarse grained and incoherent, usually pink in colour. It is even grained to porphyritic, with pink feldspar phenocrysts set in a ground mass of grey quartz and dark brown biotite. The granite gneiss is deformed to greater or lesser degrees and is widely penetrated by quartz stringers.

The chert and clastic sediments comprise sedimentary rocks which have undergone some dynamic metamorphism. Cherts, being the most resistant to erosion, are visually more obvious but are subordinate to the clastic sediments and interbedded with them. Cherts are thickly laminated to massive, well-coloured (bands of several colours appearing even in single outcrops), and exhibit bedding structures from micritic, through micritic, to massive, to bedded, to columnar, and fractured by subsequent tectonics. Interbedded schistose quartzite has been described in places. The clastic rocks are said to be intermediate, fine-grained sand and coarse-grained till, readily weathering to grey, grey-green, cream or brown. Subsequent quartz veining was reported, generally parallel with bedding and introduced small gold deposits in two places. A tentative identification of granite and clastic material before consolidation. Minor horizons are pale and grey-green, brown and blue siliceous shale, and green-blue siliceous sandstone (Glenelg). Dark brown ironstone staining and coatings are common.

Within the basic and intermediate volcanic unit the rocks range from basalt, some rhyolite, through andesite to minor porphyritic rhyolite. One large area of dolerite occurs near Field Creek and hornblende schist is seen in one locality. The dolerite is a fine- to medium-grained, blue-grey rock of angular to tabular and foliaceous, with diamantoid pyrite, a common accessory. Hornblende and quartz occur in some occurrences of hornblende schist. The dolerite is generally fine-grained and massive, with some coarse-grained till, readily weathering to grey, grey-green, cream or brown. Subsequent quartz veining was reported, generally parallel with bedding and introduced small gold deposits in two places. A tentative identification of granite and clastic material before consolidation. Minor horizons are pale and grey-green, brown and blue siliceous shale, and green-blue siliceous sandstone (Glenelg). Dark brown ironstone staining and coatings are common.

At the extreme east of the sheet a marked unconformity cuts steeply-dipping basic volcanics which are iron- and manganese-stained, strongly weathered and partly laminated, indicating a considerable time-lapse before deposition of the overlying beds.

The ferruginous chert unit, also known as banded iron-formation, consists mainly of very fine-grained, coloured cherts and ironstone, often with some massive, coarse-grained cherts and ironstone. Leaching and silification of iron laminae are produced some massive quartz bottom. Micro- and macro-tectonic effects are common. Interbedded are some thin shales with rare azurite staining and some green pyrite. Calcite is developed locally and at storm-tide level. White quartz veining and manganese staining are common.

Overlying the unconformity mentioned above are shallow-dipping quartz-feldspathic sediments exhibiting fine bedding and channel sedimentation. Previously considered part of the Archaean sequence, regional evidence suggests these sediments may be Lower Proterozoic in age. The rocks are pale feldspathic quartz conglomerate, medium-grained sandstone and siltstone, and fine-grained sandstone and dark siltstone. Only the orthoquartzite shows evidence of metamorphism.

Resistant to erosion, gabbro form hills with heavy cover obscuring its contact with underlying rocks. Characterized by a dark brown weathering surface, the blue-grey rock consists of coarse-grained plagioclase feldspar and mafic minerals surrounding hornblende phenocrysts up to 10 cm long, often in radiating groups. Graptolite to foliaceous dolerite and quartz dolerite (tonalite) are common and saturation of lavard granite has caused some hybridization.

Similarly erosion-resistant, massive and layered granophyre forms the spine of the promontory and major islands west of Nickol Bay. It is a fine- to medium-grained, porphyritic blue-grey rock, typically with a reddish-brown weathering surface, composed of equal amounts of grey quartz, pink feldspar and dark ferromagnesian feldspar and subordinate white dolerite. The phenocrysts are quartz, feldspar and, less commonly, epidote. Southwest of King Bay is a grey siltstone, highly resistant to weathering, in aggregates up to 15 cm diameter. Admittance of granite (which also occurs as xenoliths up to 30 cm long, and basic rocks has produced several localized hybrid rocks. With the gabbro, this unit forms the Galley Group.

Dykes of dark, blue-grey, fine- to medium-grained dolerite intrude all Precambrian rocks. They are generally monocrystic, although monocrystic dykes occur. Accessory pyrite is disseminated or aggregated and rare to common in different dykes. Weathering surfaces are dark brown, the dykes forming negative weathering features within granophyre and generally positive features within older rocks.

CANZOZIC

Remnants of a massive laterite cap three small hills north of Lydie mine. A few pebbles of dolerite are seen but a massive brown and blue-black (iron- and manganese-stained) rock prevails. The red-brown alluvial sand which forms the widespread 'red soil' planter probably includes detrital and colluvial units in a flood plain environment. The quartz sand is unsorted to poorly sorted, fine- to coarse-grained, frosted, subangular to subrounded and includes small but significant proportions of limestone grains, pebbles, cobbles and boulders of dolerite or dolerite boulders are common. In places completely covering the land surface, following erosion of the finer matrix. Calcite nodules (spherulites) and discontinuous dolerite occur typically one to two metres below surface and small, platy gypsum crystals are seen in areas of poor, saline drainage. Patches of 'volcanic' dolerite are seen in areas of internal drainage, patches of 'volcanic' dolerite and the area is widely characterized by the minor hill-hole development known as 'cup-hole' country. Although dated as Proterozoic, some dolerite reworking may have occurred locally.

The dense limestone which occurs on Legendre and adjacent islands is a pink, lime-cemented dense sand, correlated with the Tanami Limestone further southeast.

Bollan sand has been mapped near Karatha airport and exhibits a characteristic subsoil self dune topography with dunes up to one metre high. The highly clayey and contains of fine- to medium-grained, subrounded to rounded quartz and limestone and has been derived from reworking of the Pleistocene or -bown silt sand.

Similarly derived from the silt sand, the outwash gravel veneer represents remnant pebbles after removal of sand and silt grade material by wind or water action. As mentioned above, such pebble pavements are common although of variable size. The pebbles are generally flattened, aligned parallel to the land surface and interlocked to form a continuous, vegetation-free, stone pavement. Usually only a few centimetres thick, the pebble unit grades vertically and laterally into its parent silt sand.

Colluvium is widespread on hill slopes in the area but has only been mapped where it forms a major topographic feature, typically in areas of chert ridges. The unsorted material ranges from clay pebbles to angular and subangular boulders of the parent rock-type. The coarsest material predominates close to bedrock outcrops.

One area of sand ridges is distinguished near Karatha airport and has almost certainly resulted from coastal reworking of the plain sand, probably during Holocene times. Grain characteristics are identical to the Quaternary sand with a slight decrease in finer material. Low parallel ridges aligned with the conjectured fossil coastline distinguish this unit.

Alluvium occurs in all present-day water courses in widths from a few centimetres to 200 metres. The sediments range from muds and fine silt through coarse sands to coarse of rounded boulders, the alluvium being higher in the reaches near sea level.

At and near present-day high tide levels, a lime-cemented beach conglomerate occurs at several places along the coast. Formerly considered with Pleistocene Tanami Limestone, the conglomerate is seen to include bottle-glass and iron sand and is therefore still being deposited. It consists of rounded pebbles of dolerite, gabbro, dolerite and boulders of many rock-types set in a hard, pale orange-brown, calcareous matrix which tends to deep orange and purple below high water marks. Sparse pebbles are seen and in situ infiltration of detrital drainage occurs in one place.

The Holocene alluvial sand is distinguished from its Pleistocene counterpart by the presence of abundant grains, often in profusion as fragmented or whole shells (see sketch at far right). Other mollusc shells and fragments may occur in smaller numbers. Red-brown loam, the quartz sand is very fine to coarse grained, subangular to subrounded, containing up to ten per cent shell fragments and whole shells. Occurring on the lower side of a rise to three metres topographic height, this horizon is probably derived from the Pleistocene unit with some material added during Holocene times.

The shelly sand with complete fine to coarse grains and between 20 and 70 per cent shell fragments. Rounded pebbles and boulders frequently occur and the alluvium increases near mangroves. Small molluscs, especially *Anadara*, and marine corals are abundant on some storm-built beaches to the vertical or total extension of quartz. The units include deposits formed by beach ridges, dunes, dunes and distributary channels. The older unit is distinguished from the younger by the partial development of a well-defined weathered of fourth, lower, corals and a base level some two to three metres higher. On the mainland east of Walcott Island the younger dunes have been built to a greater height and have been reworked by the older. Elsewhere the younger deposits may occur as a thin (20 to 30 cm) veneer on foredunes rocks.

The mud and silt horizon is currently being deposited within the inter-tidal zone (especially between the mangroves) and mostly on the upper-tidal flats while samples and other halophytes are colonizing the landward side. The stratigraphy ranges from brown glauconitic muds through grey-brown dunes to brown silt muds, all heavily interpreted. Some shells are encountered, particularly in the sandier lenses.

STRUCTURE

The Archaean structural trend is northeasterly, the layered rocks forming the northeastern section of a locally complex anticline to the south of a granite mass. The Archaean rocks are a local unconformity. Proterozoic basaltic flows unconformably overlie Archaean granite on the Damper Archipelago and promontory. A differentiated granophyre has been introduced at this unconformity.

ECONOMIC GEOLOGY

CLAY

No good quality clay is known in the area. A pit in the south-western corner of the Nickol Bay Sheet area has provided silt material used in the construction of levees to the northwest.

CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS

Small quarries and pits have been developed along the main roads and the Timor-Pier-Damper railway line. Materials used include dolerite for road surfacing and granophyre and gabbro for ballast.

COPPER

No copper production is recorded from the area but minor malachite and azurite occur in banded iron-formation in the Chevre-ville area 3 km east of Walcott Island.

GOLD

Gold was first discovered at the Nickol Bay centre towards the end of the nineteenth century. Total production to the end of 1976 was approximately 12.45 kg gold from 697 tonnes of ore. The gold occurs in steeply inclined quartz veins which intrude Archaean diastemary rocks. Little mining has been carried out since 1910 and the workings are now flooded.

IRON

Banded iron-formation and ferruginous chert crop out in the Chevreville area, but iron content is far too low to warrant mining under present conditions.

LIMESAND

Shell sand is being extracted at Heaton Cove for use in the Damper iron ore pellet plant. Calcium carbonate content is about 80 per cent, the shell inquiry being silica. Other deposits occur as beaches and dunes on Conzinc and Angell Islands and the west coast of the promontory. Analysis of samples from these deposits indicate high grades between 85 and 95 per cent CaCO₃.

LIMESTONE

High-grade limestone suitable for cement manufacture, metallurgy, dimension stone and road construction occurs in the dense limestone of Legendre Island, Hay Island, Cohen Island and eastern Collier Rocks grades vary from 82 to 90 per cent CaCO₃.

SAND AND GRAVEL

Numerous small sand and gravel pits exist in the area. The gravel is of poor quality and much of the sand is either shelly or silty. Beach and dune sands east of Karatha have been used in house foundations.

WATER

The unreliable annual rainfall averages about 300 mm, mostly falling between December and April. Watercourses flow only briefly, after heavy rain.

Groundwater is generally brackish to saline and borohole and well yields are low, so that Karatha has to pipe its water supply from Maitland, about 100 km to the north.

The groundwater is contained in fractured and weathered Archaean and Proterozoic rocks, or in younger superficial deposits of alluvium and colluvium, generally of low permeability. Maximum yields from boroholes are, in consequence, unlikely to exceed 50 m³/day.

On the coastal plain the groundwater is generally 5 to 10m below ground level and is mostly brackish to saline, generally increasing in salinity towards the sea. Stock quality water is usually available and small supplies of domestic quality groundwater (<1 000 mg/l TDS) may be obtainable along larger creeks.

On the higher ground of the Damper Archipelago and isolated hill ranges, groundwater in fractured rock is fresh to brackish but supplies are small and unreliable.

The dense limestone on Legendre Island might give limited supplies of fresh to brackish water.

ENGINEERING GEOLOGY

The engineering properties of rocks, which include such factors as strength, suitability for foundations, stability on slopes and in excavations, and suitability as construction materials, depend on geological factors such as mode of origin, composition, and susceptibility to metamorphism, weathering and erosion. The generalised engineering properties of the rocks that occur in the area are described with this in mind.

ARCHAICAN

The Archaean rocks comprise a variable group with a wide range of engineering properties. Where the clastic sediments are exposed in shallow excavations beneath superficial material they are often soft and weathered. They would not stand well in excavations but would be satisfactory as foundations for structures of moderate loading. Their properties differ widely from those of the interbedded chert which more commonly crops out and is hard and resistant to weathering. Engineering problems could arise with the rock unit as a whole because of the different properties of the two closely associated rock types. For example slopes and excavations could be unstable and differential settlement could occur beneath foundations. They are unsuitable as a source of aggregate.

The ferruginous chert unit which is generally durable forms ridges but contains well-developed bedding and joint surfaces which aid the production of abundant rock fragments in the colluvium that forms on the slopes. This contributes to the suitability of adjacent superficial deposits of alluvium as a construction material. Because of the interbedded shales the rock unit as a whole has some of the engineering characteristics of the previous group, such as instability on slopes and in excavations, but the predominantly chert sections would make satisfactory foundations in flat areas even for high load structures.

The quartz-feldspathic sediments are moderately strong to weak, are more uniform, and have superior engineering properties to the clastic sedimentary phases of the two units described above.

All the Archaean igneous rocks are strong and stable when fresh, but near surface are generally weathered and less stable due to weathering of either the rock mass or joints.

The altered dolerite and the metamorphosed dolerite have similar engineering properties. They are both probably more susceptible to weathering than the basic and intermediate volcanic units, but would have equally good engineering properties unless weathered to such an extent that they are unsuitable for use.

Although the igneous rocks of the basic and intermediate volcanic units are resistant to erosion and crop out to form ridges, detailed examination shows many defects and complex variations in composition and structure. In addition to jointing, the rocks are foliated in part, contain lenses of silt and other weak material and are cut by quartz veins and minor dykes of varied composition. These features may, but do not necessarily, make them unstable on slopes or in excavations or reduce their suitability as foundations. However, these features detract from the value of the rock as a source of aggregate. The dolerite included in this unit has the defects of sedimentary rocks but it has superior engineering properties to the clastic sediments already described.

The granite, gneiss and pegmatite unit is weathered in part and forms low rounded outcrops cut by joints. This is not necessarily representative of the unit where it occurs beneath superficial material on the coastal plain. However, no major engineering problems are foreseen with rocks from this unit unless weathering is advanced and the rock mass has become profoundly altered.

PROTEROZOIC

Proterozoic granite, granophyre and dolerite are generally stronger and more uniform than the more deformed and variable Archaean rocks and consequently present fewer engineering problems. Problems with stability could arise from the development of some of the gabbro. The use of the granophyre as a source of aggregate has been satisfactory.

TERTIARY

Lenticles in a rock with varying engineering properties depending on its state of erosion, but is of minor engineering significance in this area.

QUATERNARY

The Quaternary group includes a wide variety of superficial units with complex field relationships and differing engineering properties.

For example, the behaviour of a unit is modified by the properties of an underlying unit, and the stability of the local groundwater, and the alluvium of the unit. Because this material occurs in the flatter parts of the area where future development is expected, its varying properties and their complex distribution are significant. It is assumed that detailed investigation at the actual site of proposed development is necessary and the information given here can only serve as a guide.

One of the major engineering problems with the superficial materials is the presence of expansive clays in some parts of the silt sand. These areas are characterized by 'cup-hole' country. The clay contains a high percentage of montmorillonite thought to be derived from the weathering of ferromagnesian minerals in the mafic and ultramafic volcanic and intrusive rocks of the region.

If the material containing expansive clays is not allowed for in the design of foundations, settlement can be made by playing down the surface soils of fluctuating moisture content. Both methods have been used in the area.

Low permeability in the superficial material inhibits drainage and allows the water table to rise in areas of housing development. Low permeability occurs in the clayey parts of the silt sand, and in the colluvium and outwash soils with high pH values. In these latter soils the clayey dispense when wet, further reducing permeability. These types of soils should be avoided for housing development, or precautions taken, such as provision of adequate drainage. In these areas, the construction of foundation pads with the solution of both drainage and foundation problems.

The mud and silt of tidal areas are weak materials and poor foundation properties for roads, railways and levees. The problems can be solved by the provision of stable embankments and suitable, properly compacted material. Suitable materials for embankments include Quaternary outwash gravel, colluvium, and alluvium, as well as rock fill obtained from the stronger parts of the older rock units. For levees, silt sand containing clay has been used, but requires thorough compaction. Weak, uncompacted mud and silt is displaced from beneath the fill when it is placed.

As well as providing suitable fill for the construction of foundations, the less clayey parts of the superficial units, such as outwash gravel, colluvium, alluvium and parts of the silt sand free of expansive clays, make suitable foundations for structures of moderate loading provided the normal precautions are taken.

The various beach and dune deposits are generally friable and when loose may be unstable in excavations and on slopes. They are able to erode if cleared of vegetation. Except for other leached deposits they are of limited use in construction because of their silt content. Shell banks from Heaton Cove are used for lime sand. In many cases the superficial deposits are thin or of too limited extent to have any engineering significance.

ENVIRONMENTAL GEOLOGY

The finer silt fraction of the coastal plain sediments includes free floating of groundwater and this has probably contributed greatly to the retention of salts in the soil profile. Indiscriminate irrigation may mobilize these salts and cause salt-rolling down-slope from the irrigated area. Warning to establish vegetation in Karatha has already drawn attention to this problem which was alleviated in that case by changing from sprinkler irrigation to a trickle system. In other areas irrigation should be restricted on fine-grained soils, especially those where localized, graptolite occur close to surface, unless adequate drainage has been provided.

Water disposal may present problems especially when the planned expansion of Karatha takes place. Above-ground disposal of waste is often unacceptable aesthetically and because of the cost of preventing dispersal by wind. The shallow beach and beach of the mapped area limit suitable disposal sites and to date two abandoned gravel pits have been utilized. Further sites may be available when coastal dune sand-pits have been worked out. Longer-term possibilities are quarries on Legendre Island following limestone extraction. Sites should not be considered on flood-prone flats south of Nickol Bay. No suitable sites for toxic waste disposal occur within the mapped area.

Several small gravel pits have been opened alongside roads and tracks, many without planning permission. These cases of sand pollution and had led to a waste of resources by piecemeal excavation. Extraction licenses should be obtained from the Shire Council which will in general favour incoercible sites, grouped for maximum resource utilization and for possible waste disposal areas when abandoned.

The salt bitumen pond is a temporary solution to disposal of the liquor because of the retention of salt and precipitation of oil on the surface. The pond is a long-term study is under way to assess the effects on marine life, especially breeding crustaceans, in Nickol Bay, if the liquor is discharged from an underwater pipeline.

Soil erosion is a minor problem on the coastal plain, local remedial action being sufficient to repair gullying. The vertical soil erosion has been stable and is present in a little affected by sea. Sand dunes near Karatha suffer minor damage from human activities but the gain size is relatively coarse and the danger of a major blow-out seems low. No information is available about soil or dune stability on the islands.

Further information may be obtained from the Geological Survey of Western Australia, Mineral House, Perth.

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Copies of this map may be obtained from the Geological Survey of Western Australia, at Perth.

Diagrammatic Section A-B

SCALE: 1:50 000

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