He led the fight to save WA’s Ningaloo Reef. Now, as the future of Moreton Bay hangs in the balance, author Tim Winton says it’s time Queenslanders woke up to the jewel on their doorstep.

Out in Moreton Bay, the turtles are bedding down for the night. The loggerheads. The greens. The flatbacks, hawksbills and Pacific ridleys. After a busy day feeding, nosing about Fisherman’s Gutter or Peel Island, they’re dropping to their sleeping areas. And every hour or so, up they’ll bob to the surface for a deep breath, then back to bed.

They can’t know, these drowsy mariners, that on a recent Friday evening, beyond the estuary and up the winding Brisbane River, in the Poinciana Lounge of the State Library of Queensland at South Bank, a couple of hundred two-legged mammals gathered to celebrate them, to raise money for them, to secure their futures. These saviours came together in the crowded long room with views of the inky river, and they sipped champagne and wine and studied works of art prior to a turtle charity auction, and they laughed and sighed and deliberated over the fate of the species.

There were celebrities there, musicians, politicians and concerned citizens from the suburbs, opining in particular on the fate of the loggerhead, the dwindling Caretta caretta. They were waiting, too, for the evening’s star turn – the internationally acclaimed West Australian novelist Tim Winton, ocean laureate, author of Cloudstreet, Blueback, Dirt Music and An Open Swimmer and other bestsellers set in or beside the sea; Winton, 47, the Neptune of the national literary firmament. In his customary navy fisherman’s jumper, jeans and sneakers, he could have been mistaken for a trawler hand, there for a free feed, were it not for his famous mane of hair peppered with grey at the temples. As official patron of the Australian Marine Conservation Society – hosts of the function – the notoriously reclusive Winton had been lured from his home in Fremantle to stand up for the Moreton Bay loggerheads. It was more than notional philanthropy.
Right now, the Queensland Government is conducting its once-a-decade review of Moreton Bay Marine Park, and a gangle of scientists, ecologists, politicians, conservationists, boaties and professional fishermen is wading through the lengthy bureaucratic process leading towards the park’s potential, though not inevitable, rezoning.

Are the existing environmental protection zones enough? Or too much? Where should commercial and recreational fishermen be permitted to go without posing a threat to the bay’s animal and plant life? Where are anglers allowed to drop a line and take fish, and where should they be prevented from doing so if the protection zoning is to be increased? What is the state of health of the loggerheads? The dugongs, now considered “vulnerable”? The seagrasses?

The review, now in stage one – the “information-gathering and data analysis” stage – will move up a gear later this year when a new draft zoning plan is released. After public consultation, the final plan will be decided on in 2008.

The debate, to date, has remained convivial despite allegations of scaremongering, deliberate peddling of misinformation and the occasional cry from the “I fish and I vote” sector. In the coming months, though, it is likely to enter that dangerous zone where the perceived individual freedoms and rights of boaters, anglers and generational commercial fishermen will collide with the realities of science and conservationism. In the middle will be the arbiter, the Queensland Government.

At the turtle auction it was all warm and heartfelt. But as Winton knows, debates like this can get loud, frightening, even violent when the hard decisions have to be made. “We’re here in the name of turtles tonight,” he said to a crowd that continued to buzz for some minutes in the famous writer’s presence. Then he dropped them into cold, horrified silence.

“The first time I looked in a turtle’s face,” he said, “it had a hook in it. It was my hook.”

DURING HIS SURVEYING EXPEDITION OF MORETON Bay in July 1799, explorer Matthew Flinders came across a pod of strange creatures floundering about his sloop, the Norfolk. He wrote in his journal of “several animals that came to the surface to blow in the manner of a seal”. What he thought were sea lions happened to be a posse of the area’s plentiful dugongs. He immediately discharged three musket balls into one of them, and it sank into the bay.

So it was that the first real contact between Moreton Bay’s marine life and Europeans ended violently. That volley of shots might not have echoed through the centuries to today, but it is unarguable that Queensland’s history of marine and terrestrial conservation has been far from zealous, and out of step with world standards.

Moreton Bay is a unique case study. Prior to settlement it was a seemingly inexhaustible tood bowl for local indigenous people. So, too, for inhabitants since settlement. Fish has always been on the menu for Brisbanites. There were turtle soup factories in the city until 1950. Moreton Bay also happens to be a complex and diverse ecosystem in the back yard of a major and expanding 21st century city. Nowhere else in the world do six of the planet’s seven turtle species make their home at the doorstep of a modern metropolis. They do in Brisbane.

The Moreton Bay Marine Park, stretching 125km from Caloundra to the Gold Coast Seaway and encompassing 3400 square kilometres, was established in 1993 and expanded in 1997. The current review is the first major overview of the state-controlled marine park under its existing boundaries.

The park contains six green or protection zones, known as “no take” areas. Under legislation, nothing can be extracted from these zones. They vary in size. The one at Tripos Bight near the northern tip of Pumicestone Passage is 5.7 sq km. Another at Willes Island near Russell Island in southern Moreton Bay is 1.9 sq km. The zones collectively amount to just 0.5 per cent of the total marine park.

The dilemma for the state government is that the bay is a crucible of competing interests. There might be 750 species of fish, turtles, dugong, sharks, coral and seagrasses below the surface but up top there’s an equally vibrant culture of recreational and professional fishermen, tourist boats, speedboat enthusiasts and container ships.

Amid this frenzy, the Australian Marine Conservation Society, based at Manly in Brisbane, has focused on the loggerhead as its buttress in the debate. Craig Bohm, the society’s National Fisheries Campaigner, says the bay is reaching a human saturation point. “Fishing in the bay is no longer about putting on your beanie and throwing in a line,” he says. “The affordability of boats has put so many more people on the water. There’s hi-tech fishing equipment. It’s become a very sophisticated game. There’s no place left for fish to hide.”

Dr Col Limpus, a world-renowned turtle researcher with Queensland’s Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), says turtles have battled to survive in Moreton Bay. “Around 1880, turtle soup was the fashion in Brisbane,” he says. “They were commercially hunted for soup and frozen carcasses were also exported overseas. Because of concerns for the fate of the green turtle, Queensland Fisheries introduced a closed season as of August 1950. After that, all the turtle soup factories closed down.”

The problem with turtle regeneration is their life cycle: green turtles don’t reach maturity until they’re 35 or 40 years old. Loggerheads mature around 30. Only now, more than 50 years later, are decent numbers of mature green turtles being seen in the bay.

numbers of mature green turtles being seen in the bay.
It’s a different story for loggerheads, unpalatable and never really hunted for food. Their numbers remained fairly stable until a boom in trawler fishing in the 1970s quickly reduced their population from about 3500 along the eastern coast of Australia to 500. Turtle exclusion devices were introduced to trawlers in 2001, but then there was a dramatic increase in boat traffic on the bay. Loggerheads are now officially rezoned and granted 34 per cent marine protection.

Dr Sue Pillans, a senior marine and coastal planner with the EPA, last year completed a doctorate on the effectiveness of the “no take” reserves in Moreton Bay. Her findings go to the heart of the debate surrounding the marine park review. Over several years, Pillans caught and released more than 65,000 fish and invertebrates in two green zones within the park to study species movement, growth and viability.

She found, for one example, that mud crabs within a protected zone were three times more plentiful than outside it, and on average were ten per cent larger. She had similar results with dusky fathead and yellowfin bream. Her research also proved the “spill out” effect, disputed by professional and amateur fishermen and some leading scientists, that says green zones contribute to the replenishment of fish stocks that ultimately will move beyond the zones and be available for capture by anglers.

“One of the yellowfins I tagged was caught 713 days later, 10km south at Jumpinpin Bar,” Pillans says. “I don’t know how fish think, but if they have a protected area, they flourish. In time they’ll be bigger and available to be captured. It makes sense.”

She is supported by Dr Hugh Possingham, an ecology expert at the University of Queensland who says marine parks need a minimum of ten per cent protection – standard practice around the world.

“We know from hundreds of scientific studies that the number and size of fish got bigger in the long run with more green zones,” he says. “It’s not negotiable. Saying fishing has no impact is like saying logging has no impact. I don’t know how the government is thinking on this … But scientists have reached rock-bottom consensus on these issues.”

Daniel Gschwind, CEO of the Queensland Tourism Industry Council, points out that the toughening of protection zones in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park in recent years has had no negative impact on boating or fishing, and both fishing and recreational use of the park have increased. “I don’t believe the government has any intention of locking off the bay – that is scaremongering on an alarming scale,” he says. “Moreton Bay has to be managed sensibly for the future, and part of that management has to look at zoning and non-fishing zones as one of many management tools. It’s an incredible asset for all of us. We’re all on the same side.”

TIM WINTON CAN’T REMEMBER LIFE WITHOUT THE OCEAN. Born and raised on the West Australian coast, his earliest recollections involved exploration of the sea and its creatures. They remain a touchstone for him and his work. There’s his fictional whaling town of Angelus. Abel Johnson, the ten-year-old boy at the heart of his fable Blueback. (“His mother said he was a diver before he was born.”) The fishermen, from his first novel to his most recent, Dirt Music, who lumber through the dawn to get to their boats and out to sea. Winton and the ocean are inextricably linked.

Only recently, though, has he publicly fought on its behalf. He was the face of the campaign to save Ningaloo Reef, 1200km north-west of Perth, from developers. After a two-year fight the WA Government capitulated and in 2003 blocked a proposed hotel and marina development. In addition, Ningaloo was rezoned and granted 34 per cent marine protection.

You’d think Winton would have happy memories of the victory. “For a lot of people it was pretty scary,” he says. “They could still have 70 per cent of a 200km-long coral reef at their disposal to extract fish from … [but] the prospect of giving up any small amount of that for people who didn’t fish or weren’t born yet was beyond their ability to either imagine or to contemplate.

“There were recreational fishermen waving hangmen’s nooses in front of government offices. I understand this. This is the culture I come from. There are people for whom fishing is not a hobby, it’s not even a lifestyle, it’s not even a way of life, it is life itself. So you’re up against a perceived religious conviction. Dare to challenge that or offer an alternative or even set some conditions on it, then you are a dirty infidel.”

Winton laughs at the mantle of “greenie” placed on him post-Ningaloo. He prefers to label himself a “witness” to the times. “I guess everything I learned about the marine environment I learned at the point of a spear. Or a hook, or a gaffe. I learnt what marine creatures were by killing them and eating them, or tracking them and collecting them for aquariums.

“As a keen spearfisherman I could see the impact I was having over time on ecosystems. When interest rates were 17 per cent and my books were just staggering along, I was out there supplementing the table with what I could spear in my own bay. I’d spend two, three, four hours every day taking abalone or spearing half-a-dozen species of fish and octopus and squid and whatever else … I knew I was having an impact, and reconciling myself with having killed those creatures is something I think about probably twice a day.”
want to look at ways of protecting the biodiversity without putting big green blocks over the park. We causing the problem, and finding a way to solve it appraisal that looks at threat analysis, at what's of looking at protection. “We want a scientific says Alliance members want a more "creative way" own independent scientific Expert Advisory Panel. at boat shows, online surveys and regular meetings parallel raft of public hearings, information booths The government and EPA have countered with a campaign, disseminating information with prudence. The government with its findings later this year. Development Corporation and various industry and grant jointly funded by the Fisheries Research and into the park and its habitats, courtesy of a $226,000 of people's livelihoods and recreational interests. in the bay will have a negative impact on thousands dramatic increase in green zones and other restrictions inform bay users and the general public that any rezoning plans - a claim flatly denied by the government. And an email from Lindy Nelson-Carr that, at a recent meeting between Bruce Alvey, manager director of Alvey Reels Australia and a member of the stakeholder group, says Alliance members want a more “creative way” of looking at protection. “We want a scientific appraisal that looks at threat analysis, at what's causing the problem, and finding a way to solve it without putting big green blocks over the park. We want to look at ways of protecting the biodiversity where you don't need to stop fishing.

The Ningaloo campaign took him away from his desk and rendered him, for the first time in his career, a “part-time writer”. He has since returned to his vocation and will release a new novel, *Breath*, in April next year. It, too, features the sea. As for the Moreton Bay loggerhead, he couldn’t turn his back on its fate and believed it needed a bit of a “leg up”.

Winton has no intention of flitting in and out of Brisbane as some pontificating expert on the turtle and the Moreton Bay Marine Park. “Obviously I’ve got to be careful not to presume that I know anything that the locals don’t … But I’m not sure the people of Queensland fully realise how lucky they are to have this jewel on their doorstep. You have 0.5 percent protection. Some things are just so small they get impressive. A half of one percent. Bloody hell, what’s the story? I was gobsmacked when I read that figure.”

Winton knows that the decision Queenslanders must make now will have an impact on future generations. “You don’t get many opportunities for a rezoning like this one,” he says. “I would say to Queenslanders: don’t be afraid to claim some affinity with your own place, on behalf of your children.”

THE MORETON BAY ACCESS ALLIANCE, A LOBBY group representing professional and amateur fishing bodies and myriad other interests like the seafood industry and tourism operators, was formed in August 2006 in preparation for the marine park review. Over the past year it has held rallies and meetings to inform bay users and the general public that any dramatic increase in green zones and other restrictions in the bay will have a negative impact on thousands of people's livelihoods and recreational interests. The Alliance is conducting its own scientific study into the park and its habitats, courtesy of a $226,000 grant jointly funded by the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation and various industry and recreational fishing groups. It will present the state government with its findings later this year.

To date it has conducted a sensible, well-organised campaign, disseminating information with prudence. The government and EPA have countered with a parallel raft of public hearings, information booths at boat shows, online surveys and regular meetings of its Stakeholder Reference Group, bringing together both sides of the debate. The government has its own independent scientific Expert Advisory Panel.

Bruce Alvey, manager director of Alvey Reels Australia and a member of the stakeholder group, says Alliance members want a more “creative way” of looking at protection. “We want a scientific appraisal that looks at threat analysis, at what's causing the problem, and finding a way to solve it without putting big green blocks over the park. We want to look at ways of protecting the biodiversity where you don't need to stop fishing.

If you talk to some professionals they tell you some turtles in the bay now are almost in plague proportions, which is good to see. If there are areas of seagrass that need protecting, then we'll look at that. But if you stop commercial fishing, you would expect people to be compensated. The fishing-tackle industry alone in Queensland employs 3000 people. There are 210,000 boats registered in Queensland, and in the next two or three years we'll have the biggest boat registration in Australia. The biggest threat to recreational anglers these days is access. We just want to see everyone get a fair go.”

 Says local fisherman and stakeholder member Grant Bennett: “There have been 'no take' zones for ten years and the EPA has made no evaluation in terms of the benefits. They've got to prove how it's added value to the bay. The whole bay is covered in some sort of zone, from 'no take' to 'go slow' zones. According to the Department of Primary Industries there are 300,000 people who fish in Queensland, and half of those are in Moreton Bay. Increased green zones in the wrong places will not only shut down recreational fishing but commercial fishing as well, and you won't see fresh seafood on people's tables.”

Kellie Williams, CEO of the Moreton Bay Seafood Industry Association, affirms the Alliance's scientists are examining ways to continue fishing on the bay without affecting stocks of individual species. The industry has reached a delicate balance between levels of commercial fishing and available seafood stocks, she says, and thousands of lives depend on it: at any time of the year, about 50 prawn trawlers work in the marine park, 20 to 25 inside. Also inside are about 40 full-time “fin fish” crews. (According to the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries, 160 trawlers operate in the marine park.)

“Depending on the location of these [new green] zones, it would probably devastate our industry,” Williams says. “Commercial fishermen are terrified about what might happen. They’re worried about feeding their families next year.”

There’s no doubt the debate over the review will become more fractious as it inches towards its finale. Fishing groups have already labelled the EPA “bullies” and complained to former environment minister.

Lindy Nelson-Carr that, at a recent meeting between the agency and representatives of the game fishing lobby, government-drafted maps showing 35 possible “areas of interest” were not permitted to be copied and disseminated, and that the size of these areas in relation to the entire marine park was not revealed. (The government has denied this, saying all map co-ordinates have been revealed.)

Newspaper stories have appeared suggesting families may never again throw a lazy line off the Redcliffe jetty under the rezoning plans – a claim flatly denied by the government. And an email from Kellie Williams, sent to another Alliance member
and inadvertently received by *Qweekend*, perhaps shows signs of things to come. “We probably still don’t want the Alliance to be seen as EPA-bashing at this stage,” the email says. “Others can do that.”

Williams says later of the intensification of the debate: “There are a lot of livelihoods on the line. We can’t control what people do.” As for that sandgroper Tim Winton turning up to protect the loggerhead, Bruce Alvey says: “I would think most locals would say he’d be best to keep his comments to himself.”

**ACCORDING TO NELSON-CARR, WHO UNTIL earlier this month had been the ultimate referee in this contentious issue, the review process to this point has been amicable and measured.** “There’s no point in warring when all of us – and I think you’ll find this with everybody – want the best outcome for the bay, but also the users of the bay,” the former minister told *Qweekend*. “That’s not to say there’s not going to be unhappy people when the final die is cast, but we’re trying very hard to accommodate everybody.”

Fishing on Moreton Bay, she says, is about “mums and dads taking their kids and their grandchildren” and throwing in a line when they wish, but that with south-east Queensland’s phenomenal growth in population and commensurate infrastructure, the community must be mindful of the health of the bay. “We’re still able to harvest from the bay, enjoy the bay and still maintain a lifestyle that’s been around for a long time. But it is putting a strain on the bay in a number of areas and we have to address all of them.

“I think the scientific facts are indisputable, so those who maintain that rigid, inflexible view of the past I believe are in the minority. The fishing Alliance will agree with me that we need to do something about Moreton Bay and we need to do it now. If we can use their science and our science and come up with a solution that we’re all happy with, I think that’s the name of the game.”

Does she agree that 0.5 per cent protection is farcical by Australian, let alone world, standards?

“That’s right. Time [for review] is well overdue. The scientific panel at this stage is recommending a minimum of ten per cent, which is hardly ... it’s not huge. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park stands at 33.5 per cent. Revisiting [Moreton Bay] in five years’ time would probably be a good way forward. That’s not to say that every area will be ten per cent. Some may be as high as 18 per cent, depending on what the bio-region is. To suggest there won’t be any fish on our plates in years to come is just nonsense. There may be a period of time when fish numbers will be low, and we may have to use farmed fish, but those stocks will increase. We’ve just got to be patient.”

Andrew McNamara, the new Minister for Sustainability, Climate Change and Innovation (which now takes in Nelson-Carr’s former Environment portfolio) says he supports his predecessor’s assessments of the review. “I think commercial fishermen are entitled to a living and I have no interest in shutting them down. It’s about sharing resources. I also think a review every five years is a good thing. It is simply good governance. “Some pain will have to be shared by all users, but there has been a lot of maturity shown in this debate. We have to move to protect this resource. The review will be the first thing in my in-tray.”

**TIM WINTON FLEW OUT OF BRISBANE IN THE EARLY afternoon of the next day after his mission to speak up on behalf of the Moreton Bay loggerheads.** We had been discussing the almost religious fervour of recreational anglers. He sent me a note in which he countered with his own beliefs. It was a quote from the “Sermons” of Jacobean metaphysical poet and preacher John Donne: “Every man hath a Politick life, as well as a natural life; and he may no more take himself away from the world, then he may make himself away out of the world. For he that dies so, by drawing himself away from his calling, from the ways of mutual society in this life, that man kills himself, and God calls him not.”

At the bottom of the note Winton wrote: “I grew up on a literary diet of cool outsider modernism. But ... jolly Jack Donne had the larger view, and perhaps for some of us the wheel has turned a little.”
Delicate balance ... Reconciling the interests of fishermen and the marine conservation lobby is at the heart of the Bay debate.

Fishing in the bay is no longer about putting on your beanie and throwing in a line. There's no place left for fish to hide.