

THE IMPORTANCE OF LAKE ILLAWARRA TO THE ILLAWARRA REGION

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Lake Illawarra has been an important asset in the Illawarra region for a very long time, and has a rich and diverse history. Trying to fully understand the complex natural processes of the Lake from the standpoint of a mere 200 years of written history is a difficult task. This is, of course, further complicated by the fact Lake Illawarra has a physical and Aboriginal history far older than the little over 200 years of European impact to which it has, to date, been subject.

The European history of Lake Illawarra also reflects the early history of European settlement in the Illawarra region. In March 1796, Matthew Flinders had written in his journal, "About noon we came off the entrance ... it appeared to be a small stream which had made a passage through the beach; but we could not tell how it would be possible, even for our small boat, to enter it, as the surf was breaking nearly across, however, by following the native Dilba's directions, in going sometimes close to the surf, sometimes to the side and sometimes to the other, we got in with difficulty; and rowed about a mile up a little more water than the boat drew against a very strong tide."

The first land grants issued in the district surrounded the Lake. It is

also the birthplace of the region's first export industries – cedar from the very early days, tea tree by 1838 and cured animal hides in the 1840s. Despite such European firsts, the shallow, coastal, estuarine, drowned river valley named "Jubborsay" by the Aboriginals of the 1800s, had been providing sustenance, pleasure and grief for countless generations of Aboriginal Australians.

The rather diverse vegetation of the near and distant shores of Lake Illawarra appears to have been quite rapidly cleared after about 1810 – at first, by unauthorised cedar cutters, and later by stockmen and settler-families who established clearing leases on the land. Only very small pockets of the original vegetation remain today. The country to the west of the Lake proved to be ideal for growing crops, and vegetables as well as for dairying.

Development of the catchment also started quite early with building and improvements already in progress at Brownsville in the 1840s. The coming of the railway to the western shores of the Lake in the late 1880s also increased the population to areas around Dapto. Even tourism was a developing industry in the late 1800s when boats carrying 40-50 people each made excursions to the Lake Islands - Hooka and Gooseberry.

In 1888 a coke works had started on the western side of the lake and in 1895 a smelting works near Kanahooka was constructed. The smelting works lasted long enough to have a significant impact on the surrounding vegetation and lake system.

Attempts to create a permanent entrance commenced in the late 1890s when the Illawarra Harbour and Land Corporation started work to build a harbour within the Lake to permit ocean going vessels to approach Elizabeth Point (near Tallawarra) to ship coal, lead and other products. Even today, attempts to create a permanent entrance to the lake are at the forefront of discussions between state and local governments.

With the initial and continued clearing of the land surrounding the shores of the Lake for agriculture in the nineteenth century, little thought was given to protecting the environmental values of the riparian corridors. But despite these impacts, the Lake's ecosystem seemed, around 1900, to be quite healthy, with large fish stocks and clean sandy beaches. With such riches in its water it was possible for some families to fish the Lake professionally.

In 1880 a Fisheries Commission of Enquiry was conducted. At the time there were 4 fishermen working the Lake to supply the Sydney market. Even then the abundance of fish varied. Mr John Massey informed the Commission, "Sometimes there are and sometimes they are not." When asked is it a sandy or muddy bottom, Mr Massey replied, "Mud chiefly, weeds on the flats and sand in the channel with an average lake

depth of 6 to 8 feet." And the entrance, "It is closed up at times ... but the channel is only really deep when there is a fresh." All sounds familiar. Today the Lake supports quite a number of professional fishers and produces an annual professional fish catch of some 200 tonnes with an annual turn over of some \$750,000.

By the early 1900s the population and associated development had expanded to locations around the entrance to the Lake. Camping by the Lake entrance was popular as far back as the 1920s, and bookings at Windang House were always full during the holiday periods.

In 1921, the famous court case *Swan v Attorney General of NSW* was held. By Crown grant dated 30 March 1840, certain land containing 2000 acres, situated at Illawarra and described as being bounded partly by Illawarra Lake and partly by Mullet Creek, was granted to one Andrew Lang, subject to a reservation of "all land within 100 feet of high water mark on the sea coast and on every creek, harbour and inlet." Upon the evidence the Court found that, at the time of the grant, Illawarra Lake was only intermittently open to the sea, as the effect of the seas action was to close its entrance by heaping up sand in the form of a bank and when closed it remained closed until artificially opened or forced open by the pressure of water accumulated within the lake. Though more often open than closed, it was periodically closed for long periods.

The Court held that Illawarra Lake was not a harbour or inlet to the sea, nor was Mullet Creek a creek

or inlet of the sea within the meaning of the grant. Therefore the reservation in the grant was not applicable to the land within 100 feet of the waters of the lake or in Mullet Creek. As a result, any chance of a 100 feet (33 m) Crown Reserve surrounding the entire lake and its creeks was lost – apparently forever. At law, Lake Illawarra remains a non-tidal “inlet of the sea”.

In the 1930s the Port Kembla Steel Works were being established and the population around Warrawong was increasing. In 1938 the first bridge was constructed across the entrance channel of the Lake. The eastern shores of the Lake were now connected for the first time.

During World War 2 precautions were undertaken to halt the forward movement of enemy tanks and wheeled vehicles in the event of the Japanese forces deciding to attack the Port Kembla Steelworks. It was decided to construct 2 anti-tank ditches. One of these large ditches was constructed from Brownsville to the western shore of the Lake. This ditch now known as the Tank Trap carries a major portion of flow from Mullet Creek. The other ditch was constructed at Kemblawarra from the eastern edge of the lake between Old Shellharbour Road to the landward edge of the Perkins Beach sandhills. This ditch has commonly been referred to as the second entrance to the Lake, which it never was.

In 1949 Tallawarra Power Station was commissioned on the western shores of the Lake. The power station was decommissioned in 1989 but the fallout – “fly ash” has had an impact on the Lake.

As areas around the Lake became more accessible, the population began to expand rapidly from the 1950s. The population within the Lake catchment has increased from around 5,000 in 1950 to around 90,000 in 2003. This significant increase in population growth, combined with runoff from agricultural activities in the catchment, has placed extreme pressure on the environmental health of the Lake. It was not until the early 1980s that all areas around the lake shoreline were seweraged.

Problems with the Lake started to manifest themselves in the 1970s, when large algal blooms started to frequently occur. In 1988, Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke is reputed to have said of Lake Illawarra moments after setting off on a tour of its waters in the now defunct Merinda, “It might look alright, but it’s a bit on the nose, isn’t it?”

Fortunately, in the dying days of the Unsworth lead State Labor Government, it finally filtered through that the environmental problems of Lake Illawarra were so serious that addressing them was a major regional priority. The Lake Illawarra Authority was established in February 1988 with the task of repairing the damage that had occurred to the Lake and its foreshores over the past 150 years.

Many solutions to the human environmental impacts upon Lake Illawarra have been proposed in recent years. Some have been implemented, some are capable of implementation with the requisite funding, some appear very difficult (if not impossible) to achieve in the

foreseeable future. Nonetheless, it remains fairly evident that despite the fact that Lake Illawarra is one of the most studied natural resources in all the Illawarra, many of the complex interactions of its natural processes are not well understood.

It is hoped that this Symposium will answer some of those questions. The scientific research that has been carried out on the Lake so far and that proposed in the

future will have a major role in directing future management of the Lake. Lake Illawarra has been, and will continue to be, an important natural asset to the Illawarra Region. With continued financial and community support, I am sure the environment of the Lake can be improved to a level that will sustain the aquatic environment for future generations to enjoy. I now have great pleasure in formally opening the Lake Illawarra Symposium.