

# Get ready to go swimming in the Parramatta River

Dr Ian Wright, Senior lecturer in environmental science, Parramatta Advertiser

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THE other day I heard someone call Sydney Harbour the 'lower Parramatta River'.

This might have been a bit of a joke, but it is the major waterway feeding into Sydney Harbour. Why isn't the Parramatta River celebrated like Sydney Harbour is?

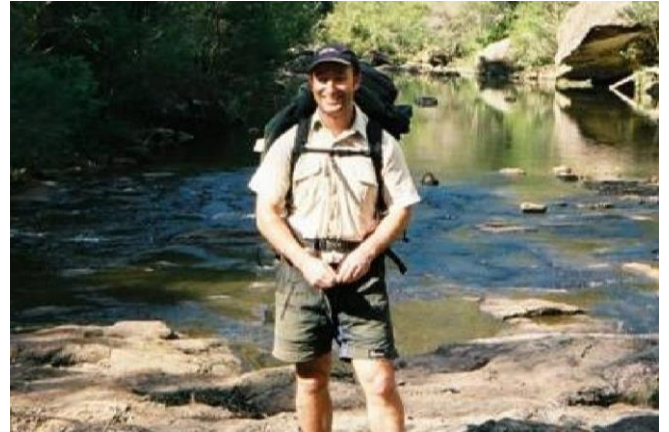
I can think of many reasons why this might be the case. Firstly, we have to acknowledge that the water quality of the Parramatta River has been historically poor. In particular, former industrial wastes around the Homebush Bay and Rhodes peninsula have left behind considerable contamination. This includes metals and a chemical called 'dioxin' which has accumulated in the river sediment. Today there is no commercial fishing in Parramatta River, because of dioxin contamination.



People swimming at "Little Coogee" in Parramatta Park in the 1920s. Picture: Parramatta Park and Western Sydney Parklands Trust

And recreational fishers are warned not to eat anything caught in the river.

There are lots of people working to change this and make the Parramatta River a celebrated waterway for the people of Sydney. The Parramatta River Catchment Group include all 11 of the local councils in the catchment of the Parramatta River. They are joined by key NSW Government agencies, such as Sydney Water, NSW Environment Protection Authority and NSW Health. And the other key people are members of the catchment community.



Western Sydney university senior lecturer Ian Wright wants to see more people swimming in the Parramatta River.

The Parramatta River Catchment Group have embarked on a program to improve water quality in the river. They are also encouraging the community to enjoy the many attractions and environmental values of the river and adjoining lands. A key part is an ambitious program to making the Parramatta River swimmable. Would you swim in the river?

Did you know that people are already swimming in the river? For example, Dawn Fraser Baths at Balmain. There is a beautiful photo of people swimming here.

People also swim at Cabarita Beach and also Chiswick Baths. Lake Parramatta is also open now for swimming.



Brooke Gebrael and John Chammas cool off at Lake Parramatta. Picture: Jonathan Ng

On this website [ourlivingriver.com.au](http://ourlivingriver.com.au) you can read about the 10 steps to making the river cleaner. Number one is 'Get swimming'. The community is encouraged to look at the Parramatta River Master Plan on this website.

Several more sites along the river are being investigated as future swimming locations. Go to the website to learn more and also to add your comment on the plans.

Swimming in a highly urbanised river is always going to be challenging. In wet weather urban pollution can make swimming unsafe.



*The Chiswick baths. Picture: Craig Wilson*

We were also reminded that sewer overflows can be a problem. A very large overflow of untreated sewage occurred from October 21 when sewage infrastructure failed. This was due to the collapse of a large pumping station at Northmead, releasing a large volume of effluent into the river. The spill has been cleaned up and the damage is being repaired. But luckily water testing has shown that all swimming spots along the river are unaffected and remain open for swimming.

To make sure that it is safe to swim, you can check harbour watch water quality before you jump in [here](#).

What will the river be like in the future? I hope it becomes more important in the lives of the surrounding communities. I think we will need more green space in our crowded lives. More parklands beside the river. Children playing games. Parents pushing strollers. Taking the dog for a walk. Sitting in the shade and watching nature, perhaps a fish jumping in the river. We should also think how it could look if we don't work together to take care of it.

● *Dr Ian Wright is a senior lecturer in environmental science at Western Sydney University.*