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# Parramatta River Aboriginal Leadership: Community Engagement Report

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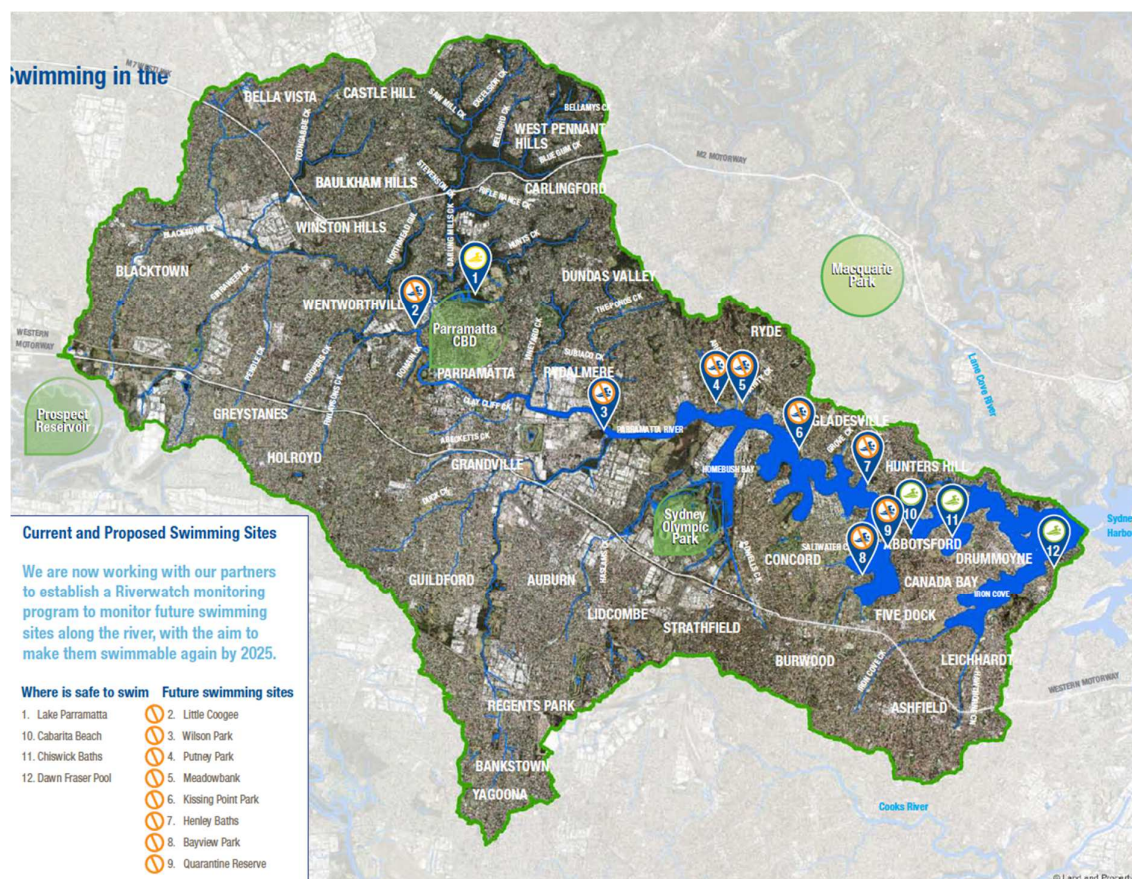


# Parramatta River Aboriginal Leadership: Community Engagement Report

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## Introduction

The *Our Living River Project* has a goal of establishing a swimmable Parramatta River by 2025. The Parramatta River Catchment Group has developed the Parramatta River Masterplan to map the pathways to achieving this goal. Broad community engagement was undertaken throughout development of the Masterplan. Aboriginal community engagement was also sought throughout the established project area with focus concentrated on the western region, moving eastward and with particular reference to the proposed swimming sites. The Parramatta River catchment area itself was identified, according to the *Our Living River* website and supported by Aboriginal organisations, to be on the traditional lands of an estimated 29 distinct Aboriginal custodian groups.





This created a unique challenge of facilitating meaningful, strategic engagement with multiple stakeholders. The importance of the multiple Aboriginal stakeholders overlaying their expert knowledge on the overlapping segments of the Parramatta River would give a more substantial understanding of critical sites and of course the interactions between segments.

As part of the initial phase *Shared Path Corporation* devised a case study to support the framework for the engagement project. The case study focussed on international and domestic models of protection and preservation of rivers based on Indigenous people's traditional custodial roles. The two key comparable projects due to their similarities in political circumstances and the expressions, adoption, and implementation of Traditional Custodial roles to the Parramatta River are the Whanganui River in New Zealand, and the Yarra River in Australia. These are only two of a number of rivers have been legally recognised and protected around the world, including the Atrato River in Colombia, and the Ganges and Yamuna Rivers in India.

Focussing on the legislative and political environments was an important guide in establishing the expectations of the Aboriginal community members and supporting the development of future opportunities. Expressing authentic information and opinions about the complimentary and competing priorities of a project like *Our Living River Project* was critical in building trust and foundations for continued involvement of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities throughout the lifespan of the project, towards the year 2025.

## **Scope**

The Aboriginal community engagement process was the foundation for the initial framework and implementation of Aboriginal values and knowledge into the Parramatta River Masterplan. As part of this project scope it was important to understand and build knowledge around the cultural importance of sites, including traditions and skills for preservation and protection.

The *Our Living River Project* has identified an enormous region centred on the river itself, as well as its tributaries and catchment areas. This created borders for the region with Blacktown in the west, north to Bella Vista and Castle Hill, along the northern side of the river Ryde and Gladesville to the eastern point of Balmain. The southern boundary is north of the Cook's river encompassing Yagoona and Bankstown, Holroyd and Greystanes. This area is known as the Parramatta River catchment and encompasses all lands and tributaries that flow into the Parramatta River.



In early discussions with the project team it was agreed that although community feedback would be sought for the entire region, there would be a specific focus on the Parramatta River and the proposed swim sites. This required sharing the location of the proposed swimming locations with additional information around the priority sites earmarked for the initial activation phase of the project. Creating key focal points to navigate the engagement phase will support the enhancement of expectations from community as well as build trust and support the ongoing relationship throughout the project.

## Methodology

- Meet with *Our Living River Project* team to establish the project timelines, scope and parameters of engagement. Develop a list of key contacts to engage with the project.
- Develop a case study to support the setting of expectations and a baseline for framing the engagement with community.
- Review historic, academic and Aboriginal information sources for the region to build a broad snapshot of the region and potential sites for focus.
- Reach out to key organisations and individuals within the Aboriginal community.
- Establish community spread over the identified river region.
- Begin discussions around parameters of the project and establish register of interest to be involved.
- Identify investigations past, present and proposed into the identified region to avoid overlaps and overburdening community members.
- Share key documents with community members (proposed swim locations, activation documents, key recommendations and developed case study).
- Establish a method of engagement (email feedback, face to face individually and group, phone discussions individual and group and walk through of locations).
- Synthesise community information and report back to community prior to publication.
- Submission of final report including findings and recommendations.

## Findings

Aboriginal organisations and individuals were contacted throughout the identified region and engaged to begin to build a more holistic view of the Parramatta River from an Aboriginal perspective. As seen in *Diagram 1*, discussions were held in overlapping zones which was a strategic plan to establish the interconnected relationships between the river segments and proposed swimming locations.

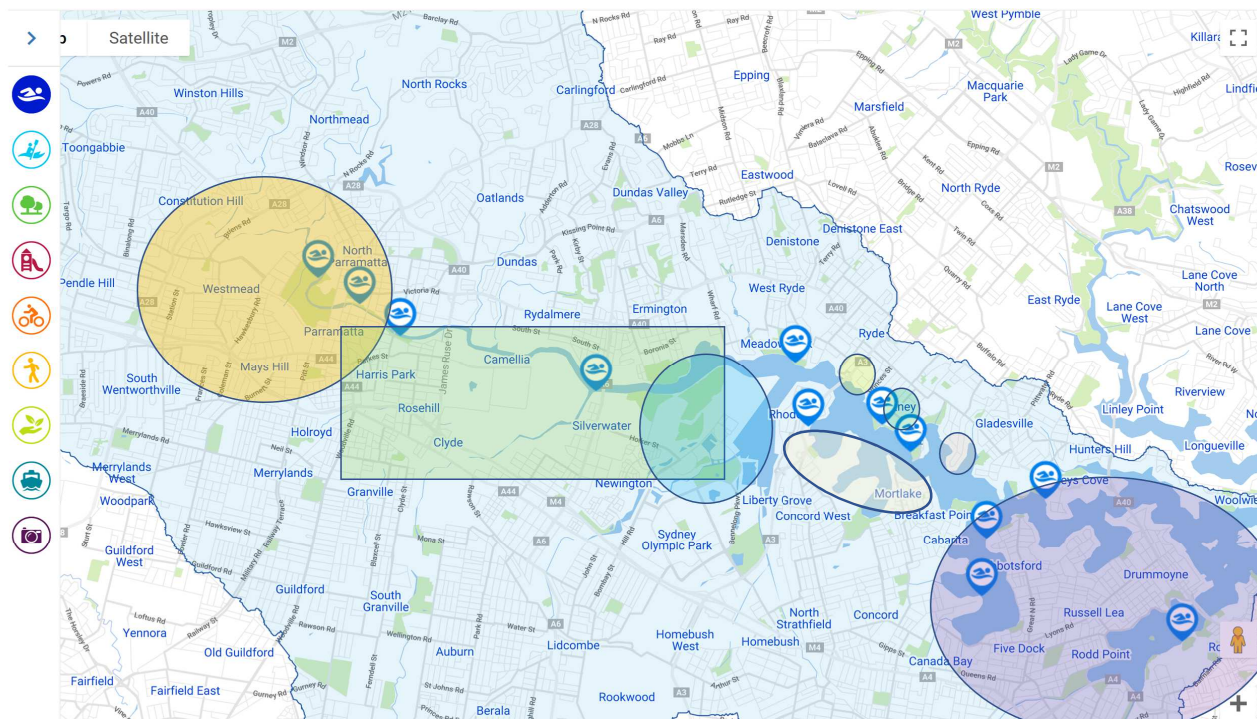
It was identified early in the critical investigation and supported in the community engagement that there were a number of the proposed sites which would raise concerns with





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the Aboriginal stakeholders. Some sites raised concerns over the cultural heritage located close by both on land and under the water. Others were based on historical events that took place at or near locations.



*Diagram1- Aboriginal Community Coverage*

### Aboriginal Community Commentary by Proposed Swimming Location

- **Little Coogee-** Dharug Custodians held major concerns over the activation of this site for a variety of reasons. Currently the community are using the riverfront site to conduct cultural programs as well as ceremony including “singing to eels”. Activation of a swimming location here will have a negative impact on their access and ability to practice culture.

A growing number of high residential developments in the Parramatta CBD area will bring larger numbers of people to the site further impacting on access to the sites for cultural activity.

There have been a number of cultural sites ignored for other proposed developments, and there are strong concerns around the activation of the site and that development will ignore cultural heritage and the cultural importance of the site to the eel breeding and songline.

Greater consultation of the site is required with the community.

- **Parramatta CBD & MacArthur St Bridge Locations-** The stretch of the river between these two sites has a history of drownings within the Aboriginal community, mainly



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children with the last known in the 1950's. The community members are aware of changes made to the water flow of the river due to changed structures that have caused undertows, but do not see this stretch of river as a culturally safe place to swim.

There have been a large number of investigations of Aboriginal heritage in and around the Parramatta CBD and there continues to be investigations in the local area around Vineyard Creek and surrounding areas.

- **Silverwater Park-** The location identified is close to the mouth of Duck River and on the mud flat. The mud flats along this stretch of the river (Ryde up to Parramatta) are critical to the eel journey up to the breeding grounds towards Parramatta.

There are concerns over the impact on the Duck River and Parramatta River junction and what impact any swimming structure would have on this area.

Community members from Murama Cultural Council were quite impressed with the opportunity of having a swim location based at Silverwater Park, and the opportunities it may present to celebrate their cultural presence. In discussions with community members of Murama Cultural Council it was noted that a further critical investigation was to be carried out along Duck River as well as Sydney Olympic Park/Newington site. It is only proposed critical investigation at this stage so full details are not clear.

- **Brays Bay-** Dharug Custodian representatives raised concerns over the inclusion of Brays Bay with the number of shelters and midden sites located in the area. They felt like more information regarding the specific location of the swim site and infrastructure (parking and access) was required. Sketch plans for the site were provided to community members for consideration and it was noted that the proposal shows the swim area towards the beach and mangrove area. This area does contain midden sites and fish trap infrastructure and would require access infrastructure to be built to move the swim area further out from the shore line. The use of the site could also provide an opportunity to build protective infrastructure around middens and shelters to prevent further damage from pedestrian traffic, boat traffic, surface and grey water flows.

Greater consultation is required with the community.

- **Kissing Point Park-** Community representatives raised concerns that there are a number of cultural sites located in the area. They felt like more information regarding the specific location of the swim site and infrastructure (parking and access) was required. Proposed sketch of swim area raised some concerns over the impact of construction. The use of the site could also provide an opportunity to build protective infrastructure around cultural sites to prevent further damage.

Along this stretch of the river is also a deep point or “well” that is where bull sharks gather during the daylight hours when in rest. Cultural stories tell of the well and the local feeding areas for crab, ray and mullet.

Greater consultation is required with the community.

- **Putney Park-** With a number of cultural sites located both on land and in the river, Custodian representatives raised concerns over the location. Concerns are held regarding the specific location of the swim site and how far of the current shoreline it will be. The construction of the swim swimming area has the potential of damaging some of the



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cultural sites that are on the river floor. Currently the parking area allows free pedestrian access throughout Putney Park and with an increase in the public access due to the swim site it was noted a fear of further damage to the sites in and around the tree lines and rocks without better implementation of infrastructure (parking and access) was required.

Greater consultation is required with the community.

- **Bayview Park-** Is the site of a Wangal Dreaming story and a site of high cultural importance. The inclusion of this site needs to be treated carefully but has a potentially beneficial outcome for the Custodians in protection and preservation of the area. With the large development proposed near the site it is important that there are appropriate conservation and water quality measures to protect the site from further damage and negative impacts on biodiversity in the river.

Greater consultation is required with the community.

- **Henley Baths-** Henley baths or the Parramatta Regional Park location are both suitable locations from the Aboriginal perspective and closely link to key sites close by Glades Bay carvings and middens sites and Looking Glass Bay historic interaction between Aboriginal and Colonial groups.
- **Callan Park-** This location is of concern to the community representatives. The beach site originally identified is a significant location at high risk of damage to the midden and carving sites. The midden is exposed over the headland and on the beach and any increase in foot traffic would lead to major damage. The beachfront itself contains a number of cultural fish traps, and dreaming stories show the location of electric ray breeding grounds as well as a deep point or “well” that is where bull sharks gather during the daylight hours.

Community suggestions are to move the location further around the point into the reclaimed land zone closer to waterfront drive and erect protective infrastructure for Aboriginal sites within the area.

### Critical Investigation

Historic records of Australia and Sydney have many discrepancies and contain “questionable accuracies”. As part of the critical investigation *Shared Path Corporation* reviewed multiple sources holding community accounts at the heart of the issue and allowing deeper insights and understanding. Through this method *Shared Path Corporation* has found the Aboriginal accounts accurate.

The Aboriginal community members engaged spoke of the Parramatta River as a key songline for both the Aboriginal people as well as the totem animals of the region. Fundamentally the Traditional Custodians speak of a biodiverse, slow flowing river with



great visibility in the deeper channels as well as in the undisturbed mud flats. Gammage (2012) records that the harbour and Parramatta River are intricately linked with resources and through the Aboriginal Clan Groups' management of resources. Clans cared for resources and within their traditional boundaries but not in isolation from neighbouring Clans, with an understanding of the management and balance required in the entire river system. Gammage (2012) also reports that early Colonial accounts show that from Balmain west to Homebush and Parramatta, the tidal mudflats gave way to clear spear fishing water. The slow-moving nature of the Parramatta River under the Traditional Custodians meant that surface water flow and tributary water flow was slowed. The river into the harbour, even in the deepest sections, provided great water clarity to allow surface spearing and diving spearfishing activities.

Gammage (2012) and Pascoe (2014) sourcing original colonial diaries and accounts provide a snapshot of the Harbour and Parramatta River as containing woodlands on the southern shorelines and rocky outcrops on the northern sides. The rocky shoreline and woodlands on the southern side of the harbour and river begin to ease into more 'open country' from the Balmain area. From Drummoyne and westward up the Parramatta River the open grasslands become increasingly vast. Gammage (2012) states in 1790 John Parks travelling south of Parramatta 'walked through very pleasant tract of country' with 'rising slopes covered with grass, appeared like a vast park'. Attenbrow (2010) reports Surgeon White recalls first trips up the Parramatta River to the Parramatta area, where he passed through a number of clear 'park like' lands bordering the river and on arrival in what is now Parramatta 'as flat covered tolerably rich and succulent grass height to one's middle, trees immensely large and at a considerable distance'. These accounts speak to the large passages of land managed as agricultural land bordering the main body of the Parramatta River. The agricultural passages of land separated by woodland forest created a unique, biodiverse environment that created balance throughout districts.



Diagram 2- Wallaby Carving



Diagram 3- Hand Stencil





Diagram 4- Cultural Landmark Carving



Diagram 5- Shelter

The expansive Aboriginal management of land in and around the Parramatta River region is also reflected in the large number of conflict sites set around the Parramatta River. The overlay of maps of conflict sites with site descriptions and Aboriginal community recall shows that these areas are based mainly within the Aboriginal crop grounds (Gapps, 2018). Events are mainly recorded as skirmishes with deaths recorded on both sides, and no massacres, with one battle fought around the Parramatta area (Gapps, 2018; Renoylds, 2018). Records of Mathew Everingham, an ex-convict, report that he could see fires spotted across country from Bowen Mountain to the ocean and down to the Illawarra escarpments (Gapps, 2018). Everingham states that it was clear country, with a well-managed healthy landscape ready for farm animals, pastoralists and farmers. This supports Aboriginal community knowledge around the key agriculture, land and waterway care systems established within the region prior to colonial arrivals.

Irish (2012) on Pemulwuy's guerrilla warfare adds weight to the discussions around the Aboriginal infrastructure established in and around the Parramatta River. Irish (2012) reports that an endlessly expanding colony fed by new arrivals of convicts continued to access and acquire key agriculture lands, removing critical resources from the Aboriginal communities and placing enormous pressure preventing the re-establishment of an Aboriginal presence and systems within the Sydney region and in particular along the Parramatta River.

Gammage (2012) also shows evidence of the changing environment after Aboriginal land management systems had been overrun by colonial systems. Gammage (2012) reports that in 1802 Peron writes that insects in the Parramatta region occur in large numbers in land managed by English but in low to no numbers in country manage by Aboriginal inhabitants. Gammage (2012) also reports that Sydney caterpillar plagues started in 1810 and devastated crops and pastures for decades once Aboriginal land management had been ceased by colonial management. This was a concern never present on the land when previously managed by Aboriginal inhabitants.



With the large amount of evidence supporting the long existence of Aboriginal land and waterway management of the area it is surprising that Attenbrow (2012) reports of a low number of archaeological midden sites in the areas of Vineyards Creek (36), Duck Creek (0), the upper Parramatta River (0), Homebush (0), and from Concord to the Harbour Bridge (20). Aboriginal community have referenced a far larger number including key sites around Duck River, Parramatta, Brays Bay and Callan Park, which can be somewhat explained in Attenbrow's reference to bad records keeping, amateur explorations, site relocations and shallow depths of explorations. The consideration of confusion of landmarks and changing pathway of the river can also account for much of the missing written records of culture that remain part of the oral recollections of the Aboriginal communities. Attenbrow (2012) does reference that the changing environmental climate has affected the Parramatta River's physical presence, that 20,000 years ago it was a mere creek, and that the coastline was 100km further east of the current harbour headlands. At 5,000 years ago, the water level was 3-5 meters higher than present day. This does account for many of the Aboriginal community reference to key cultural sites and dreaming locations that exist under the present body of the river and require preservation and protection without written verification.

The international rights of Indigenous people, and their traditional and ongoing responsibilities to land and waterway care is based on the underlying point of difference between Indigenous people and western populations preservation and protection (Marshall, 2018; O'Donnell, 2018; O'Bryan, 2018). Based on the compelling evidence around the continuation of traditional practices in the management of land and water resources, there is an international movement of entrusting the next generation of rights and caretakers of land and rivers to Indigenous Traditional Owners. In overturning *aqua nullius* (Marshall, 2018) it is important to understand the comprehensive integrated management system that treats all the ecosystems as one single system. In combining the legal Indigenous rights findings (Marshall, 2018; O'Donnell, 2018; O'Bryan, 2018) with the historical evidence of custodial roles, it is necessary to ensure Aboriginal Traditional Owners unprecedented record of preservation and protection strategies are prioritised.

## **Analysis**

It is clear from the consultation that there is a wealth of knowledge and understanding not supported in academic and historical resources. This is not overly surprising given the growing understanding of the accuracy of recall of Indigenous oral history (Robertson, 2015). As science and western systems catch up with Indigenous knowledge it becomes apparent that a greater level of trust should be placed in the knowledge provided by Aboriginal people through their cultural teachings.



As historic academics records demonstrate the depth and intricacies of Aboriginal traditional practices, culture and customs, priorities need to be focussed through Aboriginal perspectives. These include:

- A more integrated approach to creating a healthy river through land and water biodiversity, slowing the flow of surface water, grey water and the river itself, protection of the key mud flats, cultural sites and both the cultural and natural infrastructure.
- The creation of preservation sites for mud flats, ochre and clay sources, ceremony and breeding grounds. This will require further consultation and inclusion of Aboriginal organisations and individuals around the development of policy, infrastructure and legislation.
- Avoiding culturally sensitive locations and providing protective infrastructure around cultural sites to protect and preserve them whilst ensuring continued access to the community.
- The activation of *citizen scientists* (ACSA, 2018) to create large scale, low cost, real-time data yields that empower community-based action backed by data sources around soil and air, water quality, temperatures and flow speeds, marking and tracking of chemicals in the river back to their source.
- Creation of risk/reward matrix in the development of infrastructure plans routes to keep public away from sensitive sites to appropriate areas, creation of fencing and boardwalks to protect sites, process of accessing water and the type of water activity. This matrix is a decision support tool to better understand the potential irreversible effect of damage on culture verse the potential highlight and celebration of cultural sites and protections. Currently many sites remain hidden from public view and not openly discussed in a attempt to protect which is problematic when construction approval goes ahead without knowledge of a site.

Creation of culturally inclusive swimming locations through the inclusion of Aboriginal history, perspectives and priorities must be done on a greater scale beyond individual locations and treat the entire Parramatta River as a single entity weaving the stories, sites and exposing the interdependence of the local impacts on the entire river. The engagement of Aboriginal people and business in the structural investigations of locations to embed their expertise in solutions and designs in stormwater overflows, swim structure designs, creation of environmental controls and biodiversity plans, landscaping and land care will create holistic coordinated implementation. Supporting Aboriginal enterprise inclusion at local swimming locations as net makers, holders and practitioners of ceremony, will ensure continued access for cultural practice, support continued preservation practice such as removal of nets for breeding times or safe passage of animals and regeneration of biodiverse land and water environments.

A living policy document should be created that can evolve to include proposed future critical investigations and reports into the Aboriginal cultural heritage located in and around the



Inner West Council, Duck River, Parramatta CBD, Vineyard Creek and Homebush. This will require open sharing of this report and recommendations to future projects to ensure coordination of outcomes and inclusion of key representatives of the Aboriginal community to ensure proper representation and sharing of information to ensure the continued building of trust.

This report should be understood and implemented as a starting point to continue engagement with the Aboriginal community. As the *Parramatta River Masterplan* is implemented between now and 2025 it will be critical to continue the conversations, designs and integration of policy and practice. The implementation of programs like *citizen scientists* and *INaturalist Apps* within the Aboriginal community opens unique opportunities to develop greater data to support the successful implementation, measure and reporting of Aboriginal practices, priorities and perspectives.

## Recommendations

- **Swimming site investigation and engagement:** Further investigation and engagement with the Aboriginal communities around the current proposed swimming areas is recommended, including a walk-through of sites with proposed infrastructure (parking, access, toilets and showers and swimming structures) and accessing critical feedback into the designs and protective infrastructure.
- **Use of Aboriginal language:** Language was a key element raised by the community and currently not represented in the draft Parramatta River Masterplan. Utilising Aboriginal names for locations, projects and policies would be a strong strategy in promoting the Aboriginal representation and priorities. Community felt strongly about using Aboriginal language with English language in brackets if necessary. Further engagement with the community will be needed to identify places, language and coordinating sites along the Parramatta River.
- **Local business opportunities:** Investigate Indigenous procurement and business opportunities based along the Parramatta River and at proposed site locations to develop greater depth in the Aboriginal representation in the *Our Living River Project*. This would consider all opportunities from Aboriginal businesses that perform archaeological and infrastructure surveying, net makers, designers, artists, tourism, food stalls, land care and river rangers and cultural educators.
- **Aboriginal citizen science:** Activate *citizen scientist* programs and *INaturalist App* within the Aboriginal community to gather data to implement, measure and report on Aboriginal practices, priorities and perspectives. Such programs could use low cost technologies such as Micro:Bits to create large scale, low cost, real-time data sets that empower community-based action backed by data sources. This could include data





collection around soil and air pollutants, water quality, temperatures and flow speeds and the marking and tracking of chemicals in the river back to their source.

- **Links Aboriginal culture with overall river and catchment outcomes:** Develop a comprehensive, coordinated and collaborative strategy along the entire Parramatta River that links key swimming sites, Aboriginal cultural sites and wider community spaces through Aboriginal Procurement Policy (NSW Government, 2018) . This includes using storylines, art and signage to tell the story on the place and its role within the wider scheme of the river; developing pathways, cycleways and other infrastructure to share, protect and preserve Aboriginal cultural sites; and developing land care and water management policies that support the entire health of the river without passing issues up or down stream.

## Conclusion

This *Parramatta River Aboriginal Leadership community engagement report* has established a baseline for the ongoing implementation of an engagement strategy with the Aboriginal community. As established in the report, the critical investigation and engagement piece has identified a number of areas requiring further work to establish the proposed swimming areas in the Parramatta River.

It is critical to establish a holistic approach to the Parramatta River engaging the Aboriginal community to develop a single strategy to complement each bay, region and local government area. Using a capability and capacity building approach will support the ongoing commitment and building of trust with the Aboriginal community and organisations. Strategies like Aboriginal *Citizen Scientist* programs will be important to help build the skills, knowledge and real time impact for the communities to build a collaborative understanding of the state of health in the entire river and how individual programs contribute to the common goal.

A key recommendation is to develop common universal language and policy around water management, pollutants and development proposals in the entire region. This would involve establishing a universal baseline of development approvals, local government stormwater projects and programs focussed on the health of the Parramatta River. A key stage in the establishment of this universal baseline is building the body that can work across local governments and state governments to ensure the alignment of the entire region. The Parramatta River Catchment Group, as an alliance of local and State Government agencies, provides a good foundation for this body, but needs to evolve to include appropriate representation of Aboriginal communities.



Proper representation of Aboriginal people and priorities needs to be implemented into the developing framework. This initial engagement report is a start but the feedback and recommendations received need to be actioned to demonstrate to the Aboriginal community the importance held for their involvement and vision for the future. The NSW Aboriginal Procurement Policy (NSW Government, 2018) will be a key element of this ongoing engagement strategy to engage Aboriginal people in the project in a variety of platforms beyond the atypical advisory board and into business chambers and community stakeholders.

It is critical that a transparent and coherent representative group is formed that understands the complementary and competing priorities of the *Our Living River Project*. The representative group needs to be reflective of the entire community but requires a focus on the Aboriginal community, highlighting their priorities on preservation and protection through cultural traditions, practice and customs. Further work on the Parramatta River Masterplan governance structure, in discussion with Aboriginal communities, is needed to develop the preferred structure.



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