

Parramatta River: so clean you can swim in it

By Helen Pitt
October 20, 2019

Sue Wiles grew up in Drummoyne, swimming in the Parramatta River at Iron Cove Bay in Sydney's inner west.



Swimmers prepare to enter the water for the two-kilometre open swim at Lake Parramatta, in the upper reaches of Parramatta River. NADIA YOUNG

“We just popped down the road with cossies and a towel and jump into the river and instantly, the water made you feel like that’s where you belonged,” said Ms Wiles, a 79-year-old swimmer who now lives in Wentworth Falls.

This weekend she dived back into the fresh water of the upper catchment of the Parramatta River, as one of the 35 swimmers in the Masters Swimming NSW (MSNSW) trial open water swim, to launch this year's Parramatta River Riverfest.

Now in its fourth year, the festival celebrates the waterway that starts at the head of the river at Parramatta, which the local Indigenous Burrumatta people said was “where the eels lie down” and snakes its way through Sydney's western suburbs to Sydney Harbour.

It is the brainchild of the Parramatta River Catchment Group, an alliance of councils, state government agencies and community groups, with the mission to make the Parramatta River swimmable again by 2025. For decades it was a dumping ground of industrial waste and so unsafe for swimming that even dog owners were cautioned not to let their pooches paddle there and in its tributaries.



Ms Wiles, who has swum in the Cole classic for the past 14 years, would welcome the chance to swim long distances in the revitalised fresh waterways of Sydney's west. She's been swimming with the masters for 15 years, training three times a week in the Blue Mountains at Katoomba, Springwood and Glenbrook pools, where she swims 2.5 kilometres.

Sue Wiles (left) prepares to dive into the depths of Lake Parramatta to take part in Parramatta River Riverfest. NADIA YOUNG

“Cleaning out the Parramatta River is such a fabulous idea, there are old nettings from the 1940s all along it that could be made into wonderful spots to swim like I did as a kid,” said the former book editor and translator, who swam the two-kilometre race on Saturday.

“I'm turning 80 next year ... I would love to see swimming in the Parramatta River again in my lifetime – swimming is a lovely way to connect in a community – in our Blue Mountains club I am the oldest, but all the swimmers are so supportive,” she said.



Swimmers marking the start of the 2019 Parramatta Riverfest. NADIA YOUNG

Riverfest was launched in 2016 as a single event hosted by the City of Ryde at Putney Park. It has since expanded to a 10-day festival taking in activities across the Parramatta River catchment including City of Canada Bay's 'Spring Clean' at Rodd Point, City of Ryde's Granny Smith Festival, a "bat spotting" night walk at Darling Mills Creek, a kayaking bush care volunteer work day, a Parramatta heritage tour, and a river foreshore clean-up at Rydalmere Wharf and Eric Primrose Reserve. Parramatta River Catchment Group chair and Inner West councillor Mark Drury said that Lake Parramatta, connected to Parramatta River via Hunts Creek, was a fitting location to launch this year's Riverfest.

"In 2014 we worked with the City of Parramatta to re-open Lake Parramatta for public swimming after being closed for 72 years. It has grown in popularity over the last few years to attract more than 80,000 in 2018, highlighting the community demand for natural swimming spots closer to where people live," Councillor Drury said.

"As we open more swimming sites along the Parramatta River, Lake Parramatta stands as a clear example of what can be achieved when councils and the community collaborate to deliver improvements for the health of our local waterways and quality of life for our residents," he said.