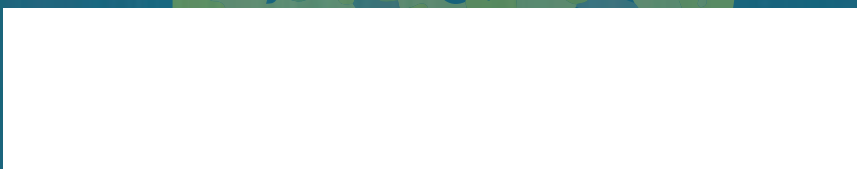
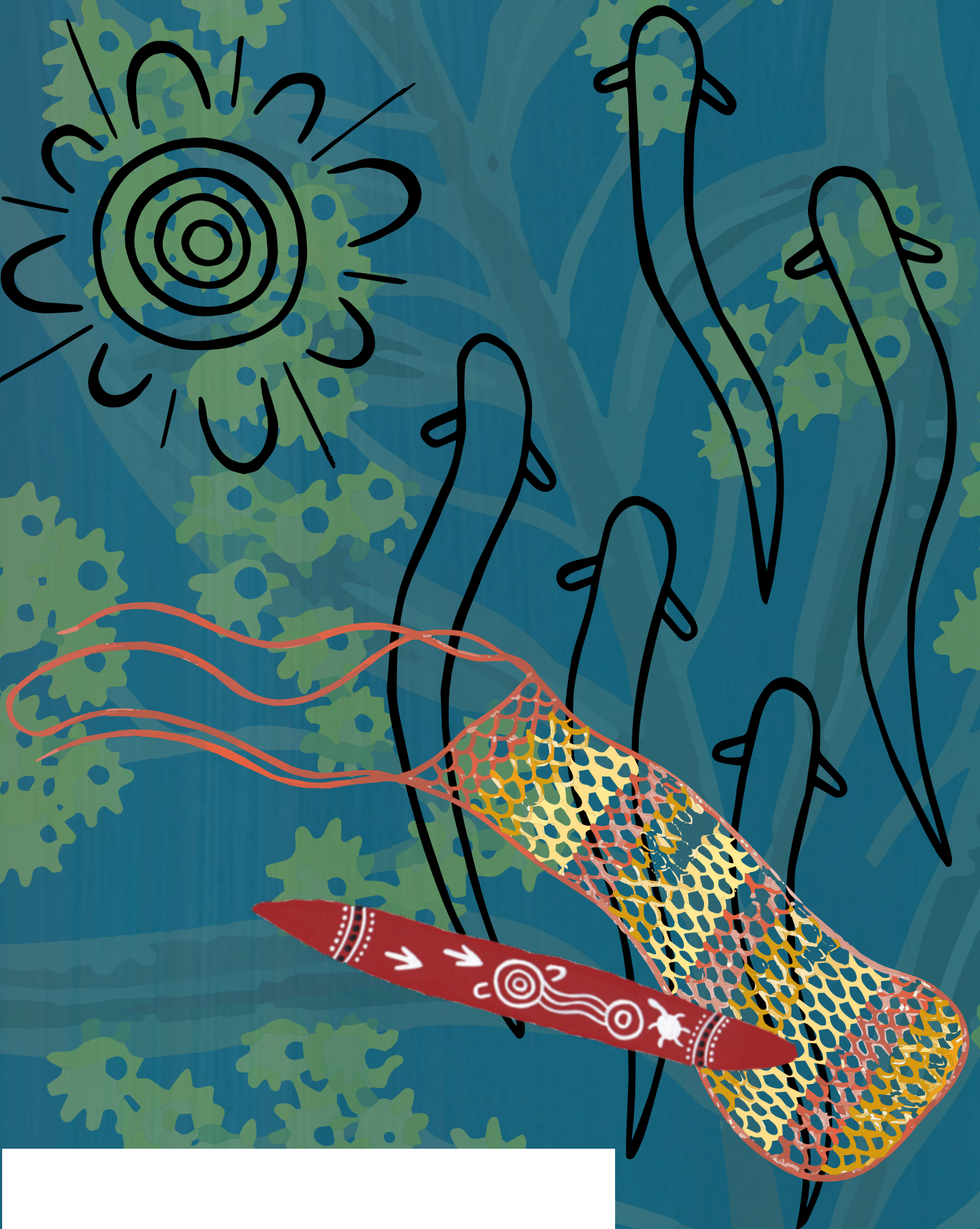


First Nations Peoples

of the Parramatta River and surrounding region



Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land and waterways in the Parramatta River catchment and pay our respects to their Elders, past and present.

We value and respect First Nations peoples continuing culture, beliefs, and relationship to Country and the important contribution they make to the life of this region.

This land is, was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

Cultural advice

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are respectfully advised that this document includes the names, stories, and images of people who have died. The historical data that has been used contains certain terms and opinions which reflect those of the period in which they were written or recorded and may not be considered appropriate today. These views have been included to provide historical context only and do not reflect current understandings of First Nations peoples history and culture or the position of the Parramatta River Catchment Group.

Forward

Baramadda dhurabang
(Parramatta River)

Ngaya Dharug dyin, Warmuli Buruburongal Ngunnawal yura.
(I am a Dharug woman from the Warmuli, Buruburongal and Ngunnawal people).

Baramadda dhurabang is located on Dharug Ngurra. Our Country is the whole of the Sydney basin, our people identify by our language and connections. Dharug is the language of Sydney.

Our culture is beautiful. We have a such a deep and ancient connection to this place. Our families are part of this Country.

It is important to tell our Dharug history of this place as it gives us a holistic understanding of who our Country is. They are us and we are them. There should be no disconnection when we talk of our people and Country.

Country includes the sky, waters, people, and all that is around us.

This Country holds our stories and our songs. The water holds our Ancient Dreaming and creation. The art that I have created shows my connection to the river. When the wattle blooms we move to the water with our digging sticks and net bags to gather our medicines and foods. We meet with our families and we celebrate our creator the bara (eel).

This research paper is a truth-telling document to start the healing of this place. The real healing will happen when we start to heal Country and Country hears our language. This will happen when people listen and start to care for these places. The Country is our mother and the waterways are people that are waiting for our healing to begin.

When Country heals, we all heal.

Leanne Watson Redpath

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Cover artwork and illustrations used throughout this document were created by Leanne Watson Redpath.



1. Introduction

As the main tributary of Sydney Harbour, the Parramatta River and land that surrounds it has been an important part of Australia's ancient and more recent past. The river has experienced considerable change, from its origins over 200 million years ago and the significant climatic events that shaped its shoreline, to the impact of British colonisation that changed, forever, its natural course and the lives of the First Nations people who have lived along its banks for millennia. The Parramatta River serves as a constant reminder of our country's rich, complex and, at times, dark past and the promise of a more enlightened and encouraging future.

While much is known about the region's colonial history, it is only in the last few decades that real efforts have been made to learn more about the lives of its first inhabitants. As the world's longest, continuing culture, First Nations peoples' profound knowledge of and respect for the land and waterways was formed and passed down over many generations. More importantly, the connection they feel to Country goes beyond physical elements and is fundamental to their identity. The land and water link all aspects of First Nations peoples spiritual, cultural, and social existence, and each person has a responsibility to care for the land with which they identify through complex kinship systems.

We are fortunate that the Parramatta River catchment still contains many sacred sites, middens, cave art, songlines, and stories that reflect the tenacity and resilience of First Nations peoples through significant environmental changes, invasion, trauma, and loss.

First Nations peoples history and culture have been disrupted due to colonisation. Through the colonial process of repressing languages, beliefs and cultural practices, separating families, and displacing them from traditional lands, and then redeveloping that land without respecting its historical and spiritual significance, Elders were sometimes unable to pass down their ancient knowledge and wisdom in a culturally appropriate way.

Through research undertaken for this project, we hope to develop a deeper and more meaningful knowledge of First Nations history and culture in the Parramatta River catchment, both prior to and following British colonisation.

We also hope to explore the ongoing significance of the Parramatta River catchment to First Nations people today and celebrate a vibrant and resilient community who, while still healing from the devastating loss of culture and trauma over the last two centuries, generously share their stories and show by example how we should respect, conserve, and care for Country.

Parramatta River, Sydney.



Purpose and methodology

Purpose of this document

This document was written by the Parramatta River Catchment Group (PRCG) to provide background research on the First Nations historical and cultural significance of the Parramatta River catchment for the Designing with Country project. It is also intended as a standalone educational resource for local councils, libraries, schools, and the wider community.

The Designing with Country project was funded through a grant under the Metropolitan Greenspace Program, which supports councils to deliver projects that improve regional open space and community liveability as part of the NSW Government's vision for a 'Green Grid' across Greater Sydney and the Central Coast.

Working with First Nations landscape designer Yerrabingin, the project involved the development of a design framework to assist councils with creating public cultural works that connect community with Country in a more meaningful way.

The framework provides guidance on the use of landscaping, art, language, and other planning and design elements in a culturally sensitive and sustainable way to improve the health of Country. It also identifies locations for future projects that may include community and recreational spaces, tree plantings, gardens, and walking trails. To learn more about the Designing with Country Framework for the Parramatta River catchment, visit: ourlivingriver.com.au/firstnationspeoples.

The Designing with Country project supports the objectives of the PRCG's Masterplan for the Parramatta River, *Duba, Budu, Barra – Ten steps to a Living River*, which was launched in 2018 and outlines the steps needed to achieve a healthy, liveable, and sustainable river catchment.

The holistic approach of the Masterplan addresses:

- Duba (Land) – developments, water systems, regeneration of biodiversity and stabilisation of riverbanks;
- Budu (also Badu) (Water) – feeding creeks and catchments, surface water, flow speed, and the river body itself; and
- Barra (Sky) – the weather, calendar systems, climate, and day and night.

The Masterplan recognises the Traditional Custodians of the Parramatta River, its tributaries and surrounding lands, and their significant and enduring cultural ties to Country. It also aims to increase First Nations leadership in waterway

governance by strengthening relationships between local and state government agencies, First Nations groups and community members, to facilitate ongoing management and business opportunities.

Methodology and sources

This document was researched and written by Nadia Young on behalf of the PRCG, in consultation with First Nations organisations and individuals and the Designing with Country Project Working Group.

We are grateful to the following First Nations organisations and individuals for their assistance in providing advice on aspects of language, cultural practice, and history: Leanne Watson Redpath and Jasmine Seymour (Darug Custodian Aboriginal Corporation), Brad Moore (Local Land Services), Melle Smith-Haimona (community member), Reconciliation NSW, and Yerrabingin.

Our thanks also go to the Designing with Country Project Working Group, comprised of First Nations community members and representatives from PRCG member organisations, who provided input and feedback on the research paper:

Tahina Ahmed (Blacktown City Council), Craig Bush (Blacktown City Council), Vincent Conroy (City of Canada Bay), Camila Drieberg (Blacktown City Council), Adam Ford (Cumberland City Council), Catarina Fraga Matos (City of Canterbury Bankstown), Mark Gibson (Blacktown City Council), Nell Graham (Parramatta River Catchment Group), Barbara Grant (City of Canterbury Bankstown), Frances Hamilton (Cumberland City Council), Katie Helm (City of Ryde Council), Yvonne Kaiser-Glass (Sydney Water), Hugh Johnston (City of Parramatta), Deborah Lennis (Inner West Council), Stephanie Licciardo (Parramatta Park and Western Sydney Parklands), Luke Murtas (Inner West Council), Kylie McMahon (City of Ryde Council), Leanne Niblock (Sydney Water), Jasmine Payget (Parramatta River Catchment Group), Steven Ross (City of Parramatta), Melle Smith-Haimona (community member), Asad Suman (City of Canterbury Bankstown), Nerida Taylor (Sydney Water), Jacqui Vollmer (Hunter's Hill Council), and Luke Wolstencroft (City of Parramatta).

The document was reviewed by the PRCG Full Group Committee in February 2023 and endorsed at the March 2023 meeting.

Due to COVID-19, most of the research for this document was undertaken online using the digital resources of the Australian Museum, State Library of NSW, National Library of Australia, Parramatta Heritage & Visitor Information Centre, local council

websites, and other relevant sites. Additional research was conducted in person at the State Library of NSW and Parramatta Heritage & Visitor Information Centre, and through participation in cultural heritage tours of the Parramatta River.

Sources examined for this study included census data and other government records, colonial reports, journals and diaries, newspaper articles, images, maps, videos, academic papers, reports, and online lecture series, published books, and a range of other digital and print sources.

First Nations organisations and community groups were consulted to reflect the diverse range of views on First Nations history, languages, and cultural practices of the Parramatta River catchment, in an effort to encourage greater truth-telling, cultural sensitivity and healing. To support the research, writing, and community engagement for this project, the author completed an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Competence course provided by the Centre for Cultural Competence Australia (CCCA).

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About the Parramatta River Catchment Group

The Parramatta River Catchment Group (PRCG) is an alliance of local councils, state government agencies and community groups that are working together on the mission to make the Parramatta River swimmable again by 2025. The PRCG provides overarching strategic direction and coordination to address different aspects of ecological and waterway health, including riparian protection, biodiversity, litter prevention, and community engagement. It also works with local and state government agencies to improve stormwater and wastewater management, water sensitive urban design, and land-use planning.

Parramatta River

Parramatta River is one of Sydney's most iconic waterways. The river extends from Blacktown Creek in the west to where it meets Lane Cove River in the east and flows into Sydney Harbour. Approximately 21 km in length, the headwaters of the river are fresh water up until the Parramatta CBD at the Charles Street weir, where the river becomes estuarine (where fresh and saltwater mix).

The catchment area itself covers 266 km². A network of streams and creeks traverse the upper and lower parts of the catchment that all eventually flow into Parramatta River. The area includes several diverse ecological communities that support more than 370 species of wildlife such as the majestic Powerful Owl and threatened Southern Myotis.

The Parramatta River catchment encompasses 11 local government areas (Blacktown, Burwood, Canada Bay, Canterbury Bankstown, Cumberland, Hunter's Hill, Inner West, Parramatta, Ryde, Strathfield, and The Hill Shire). The region is home to more than 750,000 people from a wide range of cultures and backgrounds, and central to many significant and vibrant cultural, sporting and recreational events and activities.



2. The Living River

For First Nations peoples, Country is a concept that expresses the relationship between all things. It explains how all things are interconnected and animate. It is not equivalent to land or countryside as in the Western perspective.

‘Country is a place from which Ancestors originated and still exist within as life forces. Country cannot be owned or tamed, as Country is also a relationship that must be honoured and nurtured.’¹

Embracing the concept of Country as a way to understand and work with areas means learning to understand Country and building a relationship with Country. This, in turn, allows the understanding of the interconnected nature of all elements in Country and the animate nature of elements considered in the Western lens as inanimate and inert. Knowing Country creates an interdependent relationship of care with Country; if we care for Country, Country will care for us.

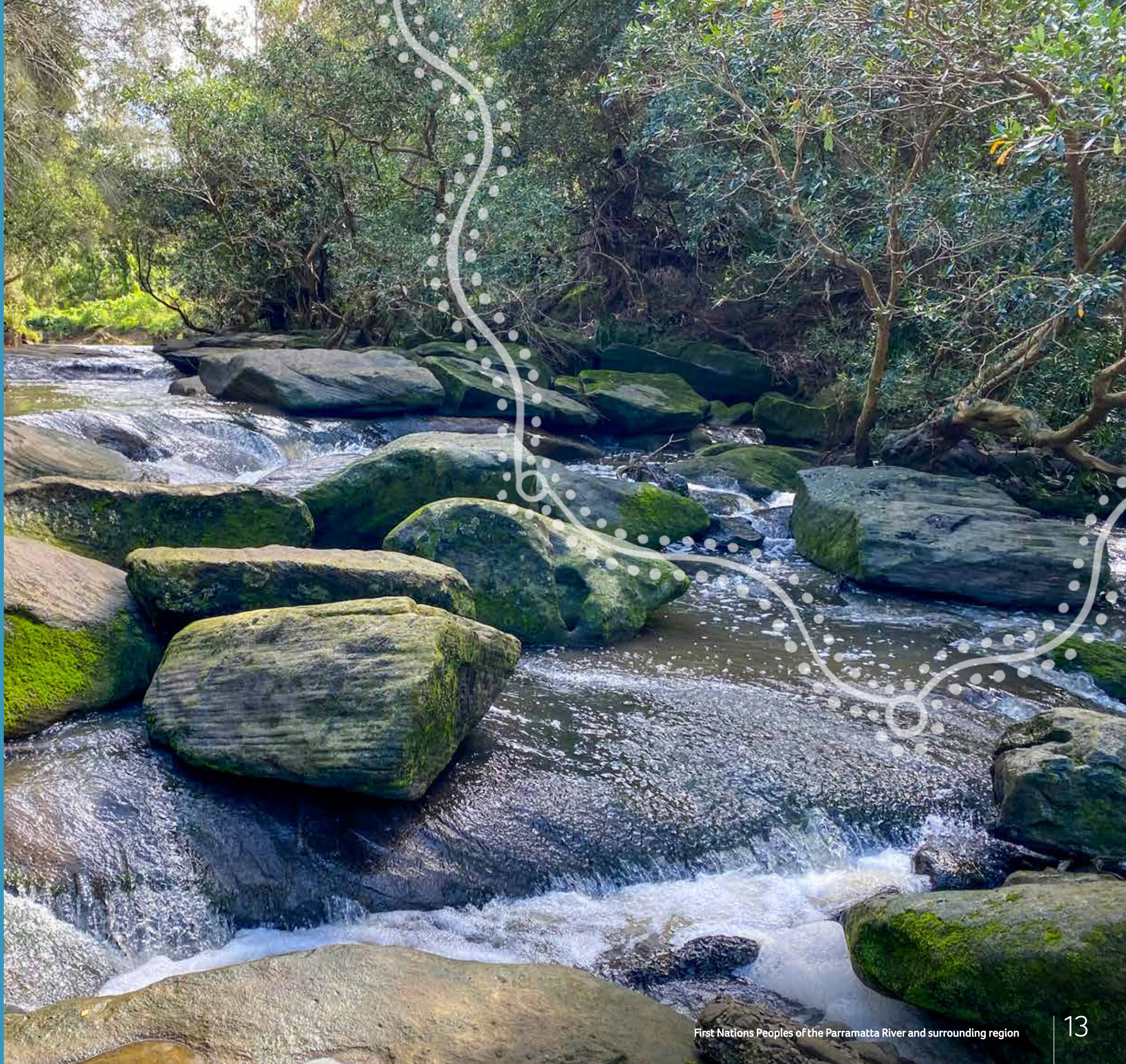
Recent research and community engagement by the PRCG has included research into the significance of the river for First Nations people. The *Parramatta River Aboriginal Leadership: Case Study* report by Shared Path consultancy, commissioned by the PRCG in 2017, discusses the importance from a First Nations perspective of not simply focusing on the identification and protection of individual sites of prior use or occupation, but considering the ongoing connection, both physical and spiritual, and the custodial relationship First Nations people have to the Parramatta River catchment.

Specifically, the study notes, 'Of greater importance over recognition of Indigenous peoples' histories is a growing understanding and value of the critical, proactive action and influence Indigenous people had in creating environmental sustainability. Their knowledge of the interconnectivity of ecosystems and biodiversity is yet to be fully understood. Work to revitalise this information under the guidance of Indigenous populations will aid the creation of stronger policy, management systems and implementation of protections and sustainability.'²

The case study explored the First Nations perspective and relationship to rivers. Unlike Western rationalist thought which considers the material nature of physical entities as the sole or primary agent, First Nations thought also considers the spiritual nature and agency of entities and observes the interconnectedness of physical and spiritual entities. Physical components of Country such as rivers are living entities, 'an entity meaning a being that is alive, capable of decisions, interacting with those around, distinct and independent'.³

In New Zealand, the Te Awa Tupua Act is the first legislation in the world that recognises a landmark (a river) as a living entity, granting it personhood with legal protections for its health and wellbeing. The Whanganui River has 'all the rights, powers, duties, and liabilities of a legal person', which are enacted by Te Pou Tupua people, the human face of the Whanganui River.⁴

Toongabbie Creek, Westmead.



In Victoria, the Yarra River Protection Act 2017 includes the Wurundjeri perspective of the river, Birrarung, as a living and integrated natural entity, noting that the river is alive, has a heart and a spirit, and is part of the Dreaming, and these factors are to be considered in future development and use of the river.⁵ In practice, the First Nations custodianship of Birrarung is enacted by Wurundjeri representation on a Council that has a mandatory voice on matters related to the river.

The Parramatta River Masterplan recognises the Parramatta River as a living entity and acknowledges the importance of the river's Traditional Custodians in taking a greater role in the future planning for the river. The Masterplan notes the complexity of engaging with multiple stakeholders to achieve a more holistic and integrated approach to waterway management, and recommends the following ways that the First Nations perspective could be included:

- The use of language in establishing the priority of values and inclusion.
- Recognising First Nations peoples as a priority stakeholder in the protection, preservation, and planning around the future use of the river and surrounding land.
- The number of First Nations communities across the catchment and how representation is then balanced across the areas of governance, policy, advisory, and advocacy.
- Having First Nations customs and culture at the core to ensure the continued connection and practice of culture that will build on modern techniques of water access, management, pollution, and environment.
- Supporting First Nations communities to continue their role as custodians and develop economic opportunities to support the protection of a healthy swimmable river, for example, festivals, net-making for swimming areas, information signposting, and tourism operations.⁶

Understanding and embracing the First Nations concept of Country means giving a voice back to Country. First Nations spatial designer Daniele Hromek explains that the colonial, anthropocentric management systems that view aspects of the environment as separate and able to be managed individually are not efficient for managing interconnected and interdependent Country. Design that starts with Country at the centre will instead give a voice to Country and allow the long-silenced voice of Country to be heard, which will importantly create a place for healing and regeneration.

The voice of Country has been unheard by Western systems since colonial processes arrived, and the agency of First Peoples to translate that voice. A tangible aspect of healing is the capacity for Aboriginal people to be able to access Country. Much Country is locked off behind fences and under concrete. Aboriginal people are unable to access this Country, unable to undertake the necessary reciprocal actions of care creating a deep sense of mourning for that Country. Those working in and making decisions for the built environment are in a unique position to be able to create opportunities for mutual actions of care to occur, and through those actions, healing.⁷

It is a goal of the PRCG to design with Country, to recognise the living landscape of the river catchment, to build connections with First Nations peoples and groups to collaborate on healing and regenerative cultural and environmental projects in the river catchment area that supports healthy Country, which will support a healthy community.

Elements of Country

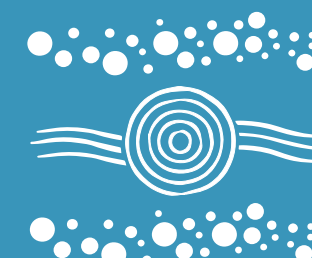
First Nations landscape designer Yerrabingin has developed an 'Elements of Country' framework for use in designing with Country for development of masterplans and regenerative urban design projects. Below is an overview of the framework. A detailed explanation of how the framework will be applied to proposed sites identified for cultural interpretation within the Parramatta River catchment is provided in the *Designing with Country Framework* report, which can be viewed at: ourlivingriver.com.au/firstnationspeoples.

A way to think and learn about Country is to consider Country as made up of a series of interconnected elements: Move with Country, Water Country, Sky Country, Non-Human Kin, Deep Country and Wind Country. This allows us to look at different parts of Country and the role they play in an overall system.



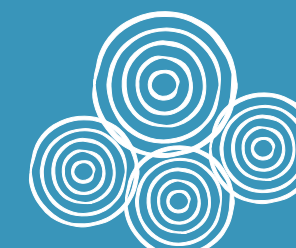
Move with Country

At the heart of Country is people and community, where our spirituality is embedded in environmental consciousness. To Move with Country is to be a Custodian of Country. It is where we record and share our knowledge through story, song, dance, and art.



Water Country

Water Country is the connective tissue, the circulatory system, the confluences and paths within and between Country. It is the meeting of salt and fresh water, where one drop forms setting a path through Country, connecting with story and landscape.



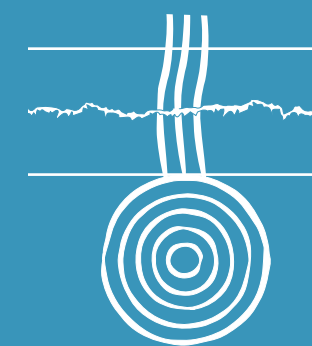
Sky Country

Sky Country is a place of spirits and the ancestors and includes knowledge about navigation, the seasons, time and Songlines. It is also an important component of ceremony as it allows engagement with our Ancestors and spiritual beings.



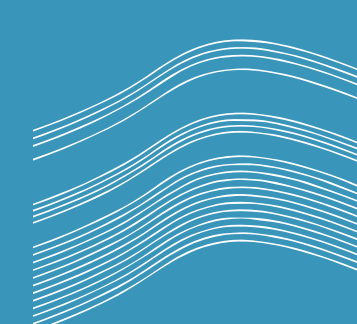
Non-Human Kin Country

Non-Human Kin Country fills the senses with colour, smells and sounds. On Country we are surrounded by our kin, the animals and plants. This is where we learn about the connection of all living things and our responsibilities and roles within this web of connections.



Deep Country

Deep Country is the most Ancient of connections and one that we honour for the many gifts it shares, such as the stone axe and the ochres that we paint with. When we dance, we are celebrating and honouring the spiritual beings below our feet and their kin in Sky Country, representing the extent and connection of Country.



Wind Country

Wind Country carries the messages of seasonal change, the songs and words of our ancestors across Country. It is where the landscape and light vibrates to a rhythm, be it the trees and the grass, or the clouds racing across the sky.



Coastal Saltmarsh, Sydney Olympic Park.

Caring for Country

For First Nations peoples, caring for Country is fundamental to their identity. Country embodies not only physical elements such as the land, sky, water, and all living things contained within it, but also intangible aspects such as story, language, and lore. First Nations peoples see the land as their mother and natural entities such as plants and animals as their kin. Their deep personal, spiritual, and cultural connection to Country means they have a responsibility to care for and protect it.

For many First Nations communities, caring for Country is also strongly linked to economic, social, and cultural prosperity. This not only enables the intergenerational transfer of traditional knowledge, but also provides education and work opportunities, and assists with improved physical and mental health outcomes.⁸

Traditional land management practices such as cultural burns have been used by First Nations peoples for tens of thousands of years; working with the seasons and other climatic changes to sustainably manage the environment in a way that keeps it thriving and healthy.

European colonisation irrevocably changed the landscape to what it is today, through the introduction of foreign plant and animal species, extensive land clearing and filling, use of Western agricultural practices, and urban development. This resulted in damage to ecosystems, loss of biodiversity, soil erosion, and waterway degradation.⁹

Key findings from the *State of the Environment Report 2021* released in July 2022 indicate that the 'overall state of Australia's environment is poor and continues to deteriorate'.¹⁰ This deterioration is due to several increasing pressures and changing environmental conditions, including climate change, habitat loss, invasive species, pollution and resource extraction. While these pressures are not new, their impacts are becoming more intense, amplifying the threats faced by the Australian environment.

First Nations peoples have known for millennia that 'if you take care of Country, it will take care of you'. While the land will never be the same as it was prior to colonisation, by working together to combine traditional knowledge and practices with improved modern land management techniques, we can start to heal Country and preserve its future.

How you can care for Country

Many people are deeply interested in learning more about the concept of Country. Caring for Country is central to First Nations peoples spiritual identity and the knowledge and skills are passed down by traditional Elders over many years.

While it is not the same as the deep connections and responsibilities for Country that are held by First Nations peoples, most of us can identify when we feel a strong connection to a particular place. It may be our home or neighbourhood, favourite park, bushland area, or beach.

For many people, there is also a strong desire to care for that place by keeping it clean and protecting the local wildlife. To work and live holistically and respectfully is vital to Caring for Country.

Regardless of your cultural background, we all have a responsibility to care for Country. By taking care of the land and waterways where you live, not only are you protecting the natural environment, you are also acknowledging and respecting a culture that has survived for thousands of generations and continues to be inextricably linked with the land we share.

While the idea of caring for River Country may seem like an overwhelming task, there are many simple things we can all do in our daily lives to improve the health of our land and waterways and recognise their enduring significance to First Nations peoples. For more detailed information on ways to care for Country, visit: ourlivingriver.com.au/firstnationspeoples.

Cultural awareness and support

Learn about First Nations history

You can understand more about First Nations perspective on news by reading and subscribing to Aboriginal-owned publications such as the *Koori Mail* or watching NITV. First Nations music and theatrical performances, art galleries, films, books, and other cultural events and activities also provide opportunities to learn more about and experience Indigenous history and culture.

Your council library is also a good place to learn about the First Nations peoples history and culture in your local area, including who is the traditional owner of the land and what language was or still is spoken. Also see <https://aiatsis.gov.au/whose-country>.

Take action to support respectful relationships

Caring for Country is based on respect. One way of showing that respect is by acknowledging the traditional land on which meetings or events are held. Encourage your work or community organisations to hold an Acknowledgement of Country (or Welcome to Country when appropriate) at the start of meetings and other events.

First Nations peoples invite you to take part in events such as NAIDOC Week and Reconciliation Week. Participation can include learning a language, attending a talk or performance, and supporting organisations, businesses and groups run by First Nations peoples in your community.

Challenge myths and untruths about First Nations peoples and call out racism when you see or hear it.

Around your home

What we do in our homes to live sustainably helps our community and our River Country. Your local council runs sustainable living programs for homes and gardens and provides details on ways to reduce your impact on the environment.

In the garden

Planting native plants in your garden not only provides vital habitat, food, and vegetation links for birds and other wildlife, they also increase soil stabilisation, reduce water runoff, and help regulate local climate conditions.

Respectful interaction with wildlife in our urban neighbourhoods and parks

It is useful to know that even the smell of a dog can disturb wildlife. Ensure your dog is on a leash in areas with wildlife habitats. We can also nurture the environment by 'leaving only footprints' and disposing of litter in bins or taking it home.

Volunteering, conservation, and citizen science

Council and Aboriginal community programs run sessions to share First Nations knowledge and perspectives. Bushcare and Landcare groups are volunteer programs managed by councils that help with weed removal, native tree planting, and habitat restoration.

You could also volunteer with or support community groups and citizen science programs that rescue, care for, or monitor wildlife and environmental health in your local area such as Sydney Wildlife Rescue, TurtleSAT, Streamwatch and the Backyard Bird Count.



3. First Nations peoples beliefs and cultural practices

While this document focuses specifically on the Aboriginal people of the Parramatta River catchment, it is important to understand the beliefs, knowledge systems, and cultural practices shared by many First Nations peoples.

The Dreaming

The Dreaming' is the First Nations peoples understanding of the universe and its creation. Country, as discussed earlier, is an interface for the Dreaming – it is where we see the Dreaming expressed. Shared from generation to generation over thousands of years through storytelling, music, art and dance, the Dreaming conveys beliefs that govern all spiritual and physical aspects of First Nations life. These stories provide structure and guidance on the social regulation and understanding of family life, the relations between the sexes and obligations to people, land, and spirits.

The word 'Dreaming' is an English translation that does not adequately convey the complex nature of this important belief system. It is called different names in different language groups. Australian anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner (1905-1981) first used the term in his 1956 essay, *The Dreaming*:

The Australian Aborigines' outlook on the universe and man is shaped by a remarkable conception, which Spencer and Gillen [1899] immortalised as 'the dreamtime' or Alcheringa of the Arunta or Aranda tribe...Some anthropologists have called it the Eternal Dream Time. I prefer to call it what many Aborigines call it in English: The Dreaming or just, Dreaming.

A central meaning of The Dreaming is that of a sacred, heroic time long ago when man and nature came to be as they are; but neither 'time' nor 'history' as we understand them is involved in this meaning... One cannot 'fix' the Dreaming in time: it was, and is, everywhen. The translation of the meaning of 'Alcheringa' into English does not do justice to its real and inner meaning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.¹¹

The Dreaming represents the time when Ancestral Beings moved over the land and created life and important physical geographic formations and sites. Once the Ancestral Beings created the world, they changed into natural forms such as stars, trees, rocks and watering holes. The spirits remained in these forms, which have special meaning and are considered a sacred part of First Nations culture. The Ancestral Beings serve to act as models for human and non-human behaviour and activity, ethics and morals.¹²

Contrary to popular belief, The Dreaming did not take place at the beginning of time and is non-linear in nature, but rather an all-encapsulating, continuous and eternal process. Dreaming stories can differ between Nations, however they share common beliefs and features. They continue to be shared within First Nations communities, passing on knowledge, cultural values, traditions, and lore to future generations.

Milky Way Galaxy.

Songlines

Songlines or Dreaming Tracks are ancient knowledge pathways that criss-cross the continent linking people, places, and cultural practice. An integral part of First Nations spirituality, Songlines trace the sacred journeys and activities of Ancestral Beings during the Dreaming. They also contain practical knowledge, cultural values, and wisdom that embody the obligations they have to each other and Country.³

Detailed information about the climate, seasons, sky, landscape, plants, and animals was embedded in stories that were shared through songs. These songs were learned and memorised in sections or chapters and passed down by initiated people from generation to generation through ceremony.

Specific stars and constellations were also used by some language groups to assist them in teaching travel routes based on Songlines. 'Star maps' helped to identify key waypoints along a route and predict when particular resources were available.¹³ This encyclopaedic knowledge of the environment not only enabled First Nation peoples to successfully navigate

the landscape and interact with each other but also survive significant climatic changes over millennia.

Each language group knew the story of the Songlines of their Country, which defined the responsibilities, laws and ceremonies they held in relation to their land. Many Songlines continued into the Country of neighbouring language groups and the next stage of the story would be known by that group. The shared custodianship of Songlines was an important part of communication between nations, facilitating safe passage through neighbouring lands for hunting, trade, and ceremony, and creating a cultural network that linked all First Nations peoples together.

Many of the routes embedded in Songlines that traverse the continent are now the roads and highways we use today. Songlines reflect the extraordinary ability of First Nations peoples to accurately record and share complex, detailed knowledge systems over more than 60,000, enabling a profound and continuous connection to Country.



Lake Parramatta, North Parramatta

First Nations kinship system

Kinship is an integral part of the Dreaming and central to First Nations peoples culture. It is a complex and dynamic system that defines a person's relationship, obligations, and behaviour towards each other and Country.

For First Nations peoples, the land links all aspects of existence – spiritual, physical, cultural, and social. All natural elements, including the sky, water, landforms, plants, and animals, are recognised as living and equal entities, inhabited by the Ancestral Beings that created them.

Each person is connected to their land through the kinship system. Based on respect and reciprocity, they have a lifelong responsibility to learn about and care for their land. Kin can be human or non-human, such as animals or plants. Non-human kin takes the form of totems that the person is responsible for protecting (see next page for more information). This binding relationship between people and the land is fundamental to the identity of First Nations peoples and fosters a deep sense of purpose and belonging.

The family system is an extended relationship structure that differs from the nuclear or immediate family unit which is common in Western society. This system can influence the way certain life events or situations are managed, such as raising a child if a parent dies, who is allowed to marry, taking responsibility for another person's debts or misdeeds, or caring for the sick and elderly.

Under First Nations kinship laws, children often refer to their aunty and uncle as their 'mother' or 'father' and their cousins as 'brothers' or 'sisters'. Although they know who their biological mother and father are, other family members have equal importance.

Similarly, Elders are usually addressed as 'aunty' or 'uncle', which in this context are terms of respect. They are used for people who are held in esteem by their communities for their wisdom, cultural knowledge, and community service. Age is not the only factor in determining whether someone is recognised as an Elder in the community.

There are more than 500 different nations across Australia that are connected through kinship systems. These nations cover wide geographical areas with distinct borders created by mountains, rivers, and other natural land formations. Within each nation are clan groups that have more specific borders and often share common kinship and language. Clans are also made up of smaller family groups where kinship is based on either patrilineal (father's) or matrilineal (mother's) lines of descent. Today, these groups are often referred to as 'extended family' or 'mobs' by First Nations peoples.¹⁴

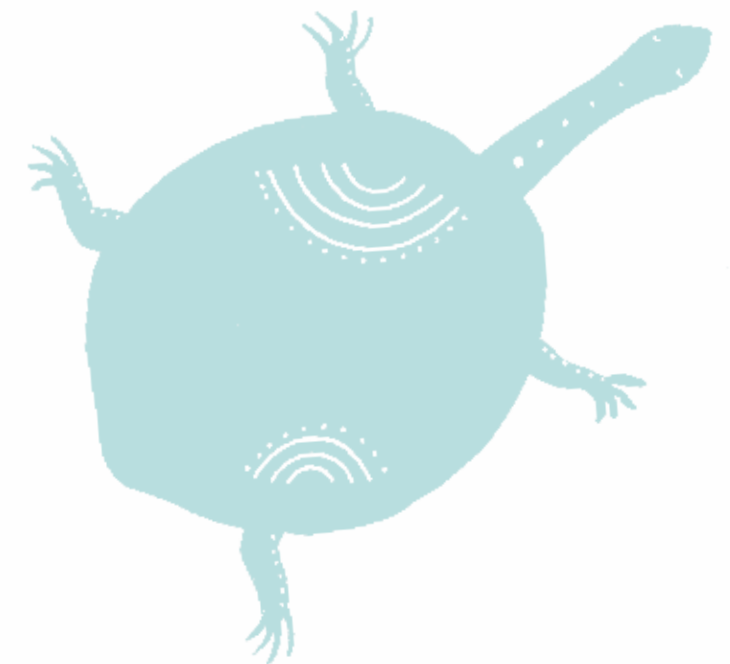
First Nations kinship is underpinned by three important foundations:

How the universe works and First Nations peoples connection to it

First Nations peoples consider everything in the universe to be half of a whole and, as such, the mirror of the other. In order to understand the whole universe these two mirror images must come together to form a whole. This system is also sometimes referred to as 'moiety', a Latin word that means 'half', which is used by anthropologists to convey certain characteristics of cultural groupings. Each nation or language group has its own words to describe this understanding of how the universe works and their relationship to it and with each other.

This system impacts all aspects of life from marriage and relating to others to caring for the land and resources. For example, if two people share the same patrilineal or matrilineal ancestry, they are considered siblings and are not allowed to marry. Having the same ancestry also means a mutual responsibility to support one another.

British colonisation had a devastating impact on First Nations peoples and their kinship system, through mass killings, disease, forced separation of families and removal of children, loss of language, and denial of cultural practices. While First Nations peoples continue to heal from the ongoing impact of colonisation, kinship, and family structures are still an integral and cohesive force that binds communities together across all parts of Australia.





Wagana Aboriginal dancers perform at the official opening of the Aboriginal Heritage Garden at Nurragingy Reserve, Doonside in 2019. (Blacktown City Libraries).

Totems

Totems are non-human kin that link a person to the universe, including the land, air, water, and other geographical features. People don't 'own' their totems but rather are accountable for them. Each person has a responsibility to ensure that their totems are protected and passed on to the next generation.

The number of totems that a person has can vary and may include different ones for their nation, clan, and family group, as well as a personal totem. While the totems for nation, clan, and family are predetermined, personal totems recognise an individual's strengths and weaknesses.

Totems define people's relationships with each other and give them particular rights and roles within the language group. They are split between bloodlines to create a balance of use and protection. For example, while members of one bloodline protect and conserve the animal, members of the other bloodline may eat and use the animal.¹⁵

Skin Names

Similar to a last name, a skin name indicates a person's bloodline. It also conveys information about how generations are linked and how they should interact. Unlike last names, husbands and wives don't share the same skin name, and children don't share their parents' name. Rather, it is a sequential system, so skin names are given based on the preceding name (the mother's name in a matrilineal system or the father's name in a patrilineal system) and its level in the naming cycle.

Each nation has its own skin names and each name has a prefix or suffix to indicate gender. There are 16-32 sets of names in each cycle. For example, in a matrilineal nation, if a woman with the first name in the cycle (One) has a baby, the child's skin name will be the second name in the cycle (Two). All other 'Twos' in that community are now considered the sibling of that child, and all 'Ones' are considered their parents. When that child grows up and has children of their own, those children will be Threes. This sequential naming continues until the end of the number cycle is reached, then it begins again at One.¹⁶

Ceremonial life



Ceremonies hold a sacred place in the lives of First Nations peoples, connecting them spiritually to the land and each other. Passed down over thousands of years, Elders conduct ceremonies that are designed to share Dreaming and other important stories and cultural knowledge and commemorate significant life events, such as adulthood, marriage, and death.

Most ceremonies combine dance, song, rituals and the use of body paint, or other decoration. Fire is also a significant and symbolic part of ceremonial traditions. Some ceremonies are open to men, women and children while those used for initiation, childbirth, and other sacred men's and women's business, are gender specific and held separately.

Smoking ceremonies

Smoking ceremonies are a highly spiritual and integral part of First Nations culture. The ancient practice is used to cleanse and protect people and places from harmful spirits and encourage good health and wellbeing. It also helps bring people together and promote good will and healing.

Native plants with special medicinal or therapeutic properties are burned to produce a thick, wet smoke. Plants used in ceremonies vary depending on the region and purpose and can include peppermint,

cauliflower bush, eucalyptus, and sandalwood. The ceremonies are performed for a wide range of events, such as initiations, burials, and as part of a Welcome to Country. They are also used during childbirth and to prevent the spread of infection and other sickness.¹⁷

Death and Sorry Business

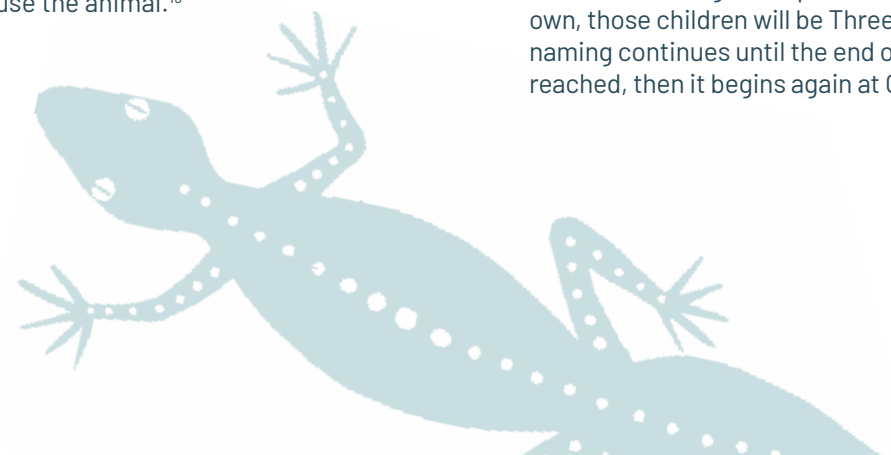
Ceremonies surrounding death are very important to First Nations peoples and take priority over all other activities. Due to the kinship system, the whole community usually comes together to mourn and acknowledge the deceased person through a process called 'Sorry Business'.

Funerals often involve several ceremonies and rituals that can take from a few days to weeks or even months to perform. This is determined by the beliefs of the language group and status of the deceased person.

The bereavement process is a complex one that can include not using the name or image of the deceased person. Family members may also remain in their homes for a period of time and are not allowed to participate in non-bereavement related activities and events. Sorry Business can also be conducted to mark the experience of grief or loss in other circumstances, such as mourning the loss of land or land degradation.¹⁸



Smoking ceremony, Greater Sydney Local Land Services 'Yarning on Country' event, 2022.





4. Archival history of the Parramatta River catchment

Learning about European colonisation and its continuing impact on First Nations peoples is a vital part of acknowledging Australia's full history and furthering reconciliation and healing. This section uses archival information that was primarily written by non-Indigenous people. As work continues by First Nations communities to reclaim and preserve their languages, knowledge, and culture, we hope to gain a deeper understanding of, and respect for, First Nations peoples and their land.

First Nations peoples believe that they have always inhabited Australia since it was first created. Dreaming stories describe how Ancestral Beings created all life and land formations and connected people to the land and each other. Prior to the Dreaming there was a 'land before time' when the earth was flat, silent, and dead.

Unlike the creation stories from other faiths or cultures, the Dreaming is a non-linear and constantly evolving process. First Nations peoples experience the land as a deeply symbolic and spiritual landscape rather than merely a physical environment. Beliefs and practices are deeply imbedded in the philosophy of oneness with the natural environment. First Nations peoples believe the land is their mother; the land teaches, nurtures, heals, and sustains them and they, in turn, must care for the land and each other.

How the Parramatta River catchment changed over time

It is estimated that the Parramatta River was formed between 15 and 29 million years ago during the Paleogene and Neogene geological periods. Over time, freshwater forged a valley in the bedrock base composed of Hawkesbury sandstone and Ashfield shale, which had been laid down more than 200 million years earlier.¹⁹

The climate changed many times over the millennia. In Sydney, around 60,000 years ago, sea levels were estimated to be 20-70 metres below their present level, the coastline was 2-3 kilometres east of its current position and temperatures were 6-10°C cooler than today.

It wasn't until the end of the Last Glacial Period, 18,000 to 11,700 years ago, that the climate gradually became warmer and melting glaciers in the northern and southern polar regions saw sea levels rise and stabilise around their present position.²⁰

Approximately 7,000 years ago, coastal and river valleys across south-eastern Australia were flooded with seawater, the largest of which were turned into drowned river estuaries. The Parramatta River valley is a prime example, which eventually became the estuary we now know as Sydney Harbour.²¹

With the formation of estuarine environments, much of the sediment that had once been flushed into the sea remained within the estuary. This created various tidal zones from which several diverse ecosystems evolved, including saltmarsh, mudflats, mangroves, woodland, forest and rainforest communities. Over time these ecosystems supported an abundance of wildlife and food for First Nations peoples, providing new species of fish, crustaceans, and plant life.²²

Engraving showing the Parramatta River with a distant view of the 'western mountains'. (State Library of NSW).





The landing place at Parramatta. (State Library of NSW).

European colonisation had a dramatic impact on the Parramatta River and surrounding catchment. As settlement spread from Parramatta along the river foreshore, changes in water quality occurred through increased sedimentation and turbidity, and pollution from the effects of land clearing, agriculture, domestic animals, and urbanisation.

Modifications to the river began as early as the 1790s to support the planting of vineyards, fruit trees, vegetables, and other crops in areas such as Eastern Farms, which is now known as Ryde. By the 1830s wetlands along the river were drained and filled to create firm and arable land. As a result, mudflat areas continued to expand until they became, along with saltmarsh, a dominant feature of the river's foreshore areas.

The rapid growth of urbanisation and industrialisation throughout the catchment over much of the last two centuries saw an increasing degradation of the river system. Saltmarsh areas were further depleted due to the filling and reclamation of tidal lands for development. Considerable native vegetation was lost through land clearing and the planting of European plant species, and many freshwater streams and creeks became polluted from stormwater runoff and human activity. Several species of wildlife were also endangered or lost altogether due to habitat loss.²³

By the 1900s illegal dumping of soil and rubbish in the river was commonplace. Despite the river's popularity as a swimming and recreational location from the 1880s to the 1930s, by the middle of the

20th century water quality in the river had become a health risk and most swimming baths were closed. In 2006 commercial fishing was banned from the river, which had provided an abundance of food for the First Nations people who had lived along its banks for thousands of years, due to the accumulation of heavy metals in fish and other marine life.²⁴

With the introduction of the Clean Waters Act and relocation of foreshore industries in the 1970s, interest in improving the water quality and ecological health of the Parramatta River began to grow. Over the last 30 years, we have seen significant improvements in the management of the river with advancements in regulation, technology, and community awareness.²⁵



The Glades Bay Baths, 1951. (City of Ryde).

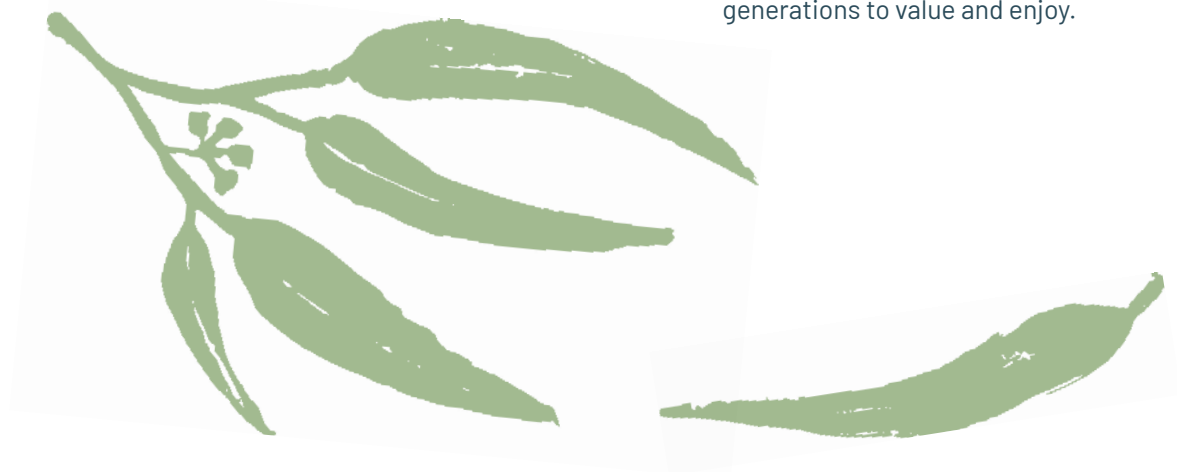
The Parramatta River Catchment Group (PRCG) was established in 2008 with the purpose of restoring and protecting the Parramatta River. In 2014, the PRCG launched a new vision, purpose and mission to make the Parramatta River swimmable again by 2025. A Masterplan for the Parramatta River, *Duba, Budu, Barra – Ten Steps to a Living River* was released in 2018, outlining the steps needed to improve the health of the catchment, such as better management of stormwater and wastewater, protecting and restoring wildlife habitat, and educating and empowering the community to help care for the river.²⁶

The Parramatta River that existed prior to colonisation has been changed irrevocably due to urbanisation and development. Through these initiatives, in consultation with First Nations



Rockend Cottage and Harold Meggitts linseed oil mill, Gladesville around 1924. (City of Ryde).

communities, the goal is to develop a more holistic and sustainable approach to catchment management and work towards conserving the river's natural and cultural significance for future generations to value and enjoy.



Archaeological evidence of First Nations peoples occupation

Considered to be the oldest, continuous civilisation on Earth, evidence of the first human occupation of Australia, found at sites in the Northern Territory and more locally along the Hawkesbury-Nepean River near Penrith, suggests a widely accepted date of about 50,000 years old.²⁷

Studies over recent years indicate that Australia's First Nations peoples were amongst the first modern humans to move out of Africa, predating human settlement of Europe and the Americas. They are thought to have arrived in Australia when Papua New Guinea and Tasmania were both connected to what we now know as modern Australia, forming the mega-continent of 'Sahul'.²⁸

New research conducted by the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Australian

Biodiversity and Heritage proposes that the early First Nations peoples migrated across the continent relatively quickly within a few thousand years. Archaeological data and demographic modelling was used to map the likely paths or 'superhighways' that Australia's original inhabitants took, navigating a diverse range of environments and climatic conditions. Several of the major routes identified are very similar to today's highways and stock routes.

The researchers hypothesise that one reason why First Nations peoples were able to settle the entire continent in such a relatively short amount of time was due to a deep understanding of the land recorded through the Songlines that were passed down for tens of millennia and contained an encyclopaedic knowledge of the landscape, natural resources, climate, and seasons.²⁹

First Nations people of the Sydney region

While much of the evidence showing when First Nations people first lived in the Sydney region was lost when sea levels rose around 7,000 years ago, we are fortunate that thousands of First Nations sites, including rock art, shell middens, axe grinding grooves, ceremonial grounds, burial sites, stone quarries, fish traps, and water holes still exist. Sadly, many of these are under threat from development, public usage, vandalism and natural erosion. As we continue to learn more about the ongoing significance of these sites to First Nations people, and their importance to our shared historical and cultural identity, it is hoped that more will be done to ensure their conservation in the future.

Archaeological research undertaken in recent decades now dates the First Nations occupation of the Sydney area from at least 30,000 years ago. In an archaeological excavation undertaken at three sites in Parramatta in 2002, more than 20,000 artefacts were found, including spear points, axes, anvils, and grinding stones. However, the most extraordinary discovery was the presence of charcoal that was unearthed about a metre beneath the surface.

Radiocarbon dating showed that the tiny fragments were at least 30,000 years old. Four other charcoal samples recovered from shallower depths were also found, indicating increasingly younger ages, with the uppermost sample dated around 3000 years. This age pattern suggests that First Nations peoples had been routinely camping on the site for at least 300 centuries.

Another significant finding was a stone artefact made from a metamorphic rock called andalusite-cordierite hornfels. This rock was sourced mainly in the Megalong Valley, 70km west of Parramatta in the Blue



An andalusite hornfels stone tool found on the north side of Parramatta River, dated to 14,000 years ago. (Photo: Laressa Barry, University of NSW).

Mountains. Its presence suggests that First Nations peoples were highly mobile in that region as sea levels began to rise around 14,000 years ago.³⁰

Elsewhere in the Parramatta River catchment, artefacts such as flaked stone tools made from silcrete, a hard, yellow-red rock, as well as quartz, quartzite, and chert have been found along the banks of Domain Creek and in Blacktown and surrounding areas across the Cumberland Plain.³¹

Along the Parramatta River foreshore and its connecting tributaries such as Toongabbie Creek, there are several rock shelters and shell midden sites, most of which have been severely impacted by European occupation and land use. Examples of rock engravings, hand stencils, and scarred trees also exist at Lake Parramatta, Parramatta Park, and the Millenium Parklands.³²



Shell midden, Cabarita Park, NSW.

First Nations languages of Sydney

The first British naval officers and colonists who attempted to record the languages of the First Nations people of Sydney did not include specific names for language groups, although they did identify variations in the languages or dialects spoken by neighbouring groups across the region. It wasn't until the late 1800s, when more comprehensive attempts were made to record the languages, that historians and linguists began to use names such as Dharug, Darginung, Dharawal, and Eora.³³

It is also uncertain exactly how many clan groups existed in Sydney. Introduced diseases had a devastating impact, killing all the members of several clans before their existence could be recorded by the colonists. Variations in the spelling and other discrepancies in colonial records also suggest that the names of some clan groups may have been confused with those of individual clan members or other commonly used words.³⁴

Understanding precise clan boundaries posed an even bigger challenge for the colonists, who were unaware

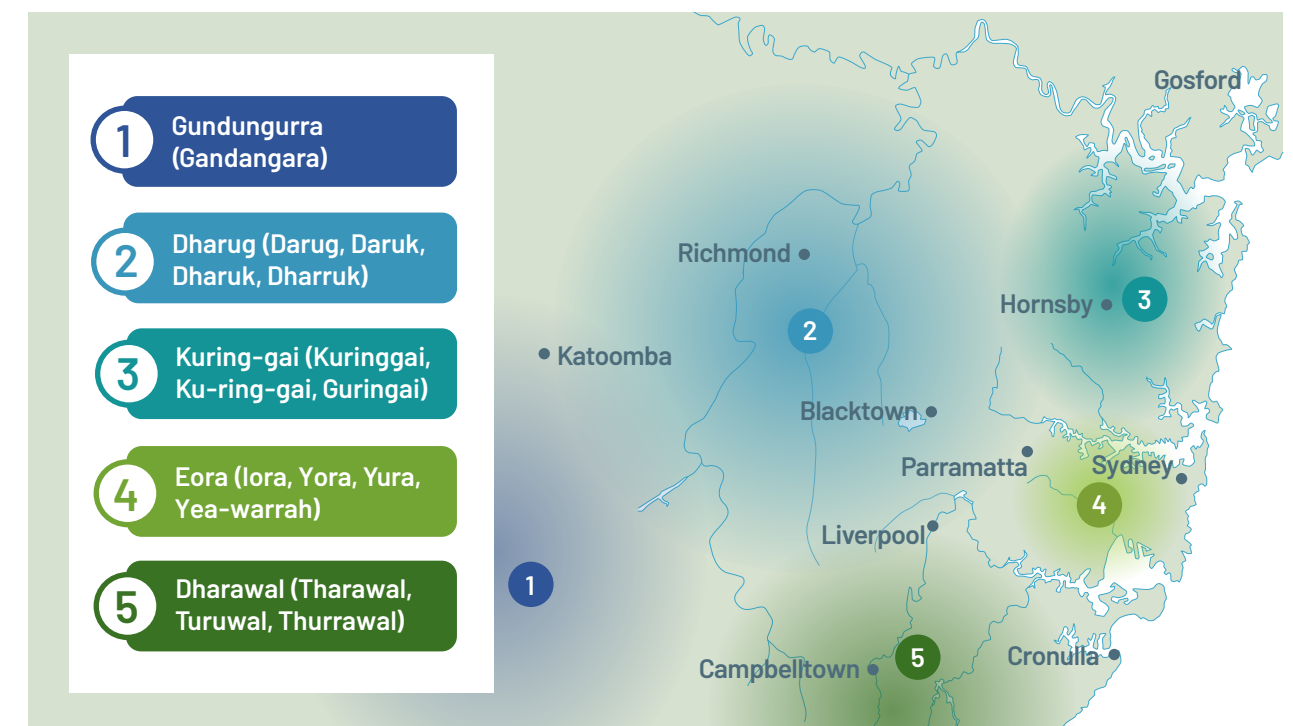
of the importance of natural features in determining boundaries and the complex, cultural responsibility of shared land use and management between neighbouring First Nations clans, which could affect boundaries over time.³⁵

The displacement of First Nations peoples and denial of cultural practices, and continuing development and urbanisation of the Sydney region, changed forever the traditional boundaries of some of Sydney's language groups and caused the significant loss of cultural knowledge for many of their descendants.³⁶

The interpretation of colonial records and other sources by researchers in the late 19th and 20th centuries led to a range of perspectives on the existence, location, and relationship of the different language groups in the Sydney region that are still recognised today.

We acknowledge and respect all First Nations peoples and the languages and nations with which they identify today. To this end, all recognised First Nations languages and nations in the Greater Sydney area and surrounding regions are represented in the map below.³⁷

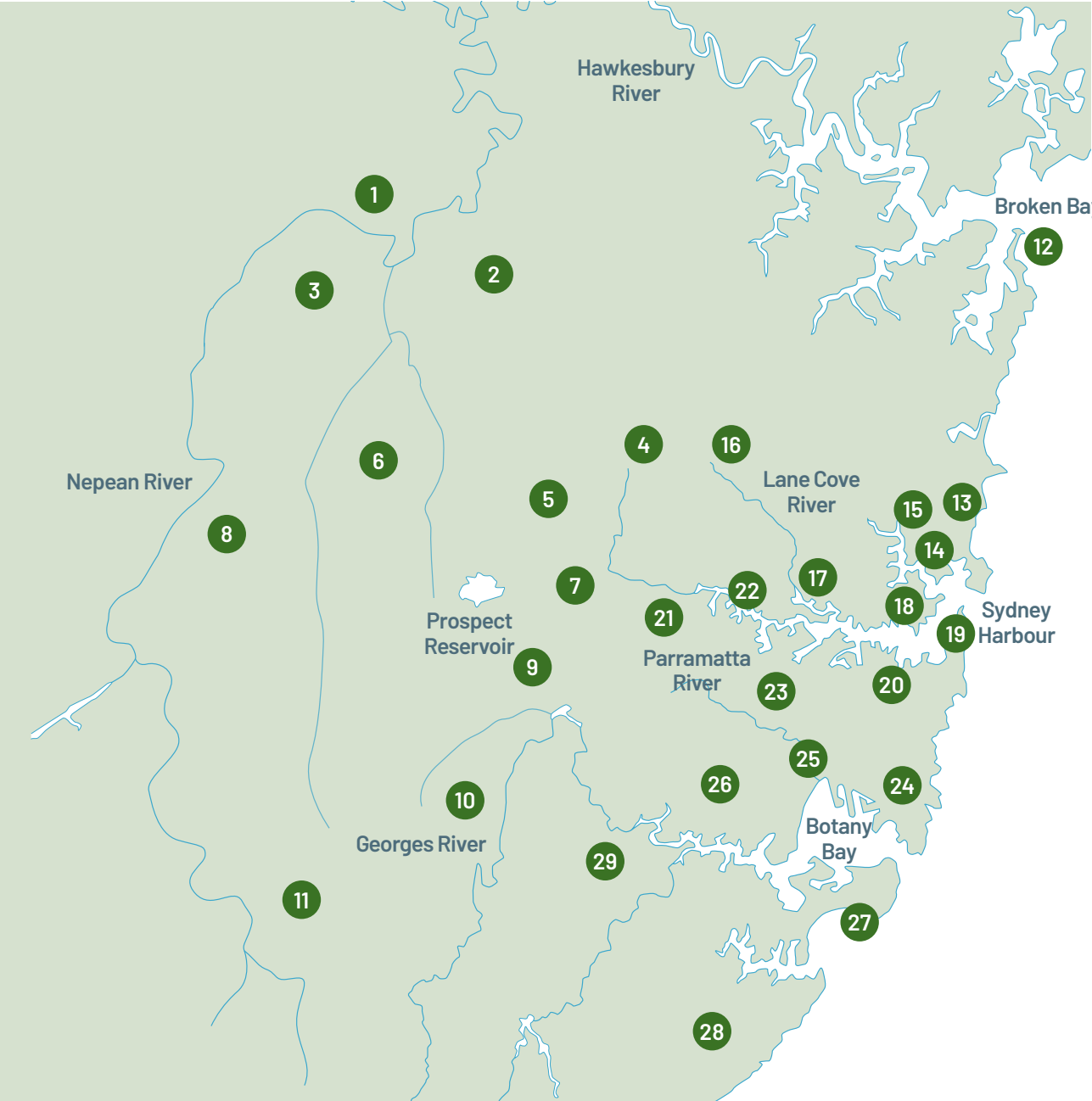
First Nations languages and nations in Greater Sydney and surrounding regions



Source: This map has been re-created based on the NSW Aboriginal Languages and Nations Map published by Reconciliation NSW, with their permission. It is just one representation of many other map sources that are available. The regions indicated are not definitive and the information on which the map is based may be disputed by some Traditional Custodians. We continue to learn about First Nations peoples traditional cultural ties to Country.

First Nations clans of Sydney

Interpretations of historical evidence suggest that at the time of colonisation, there were between 2,000-3,000 First Nations peoples living in the greater Sydney region. The population was divided into approximately 29 clans that formed larger language groups, although we are aware that more may have existed which were never recorded. The following map shows the location of the clans, including those in the Parramatta River catchment.³⁸



- | | | | |
|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Kurrajong | 9. Bool-bain-ora | 17. Cammeraigal | 25. Kameygal |
| 2. Cattai | 10. Cabrogal | 18. Gorualgal | 26. Bediagal |
| 3. Boorooberongal | 11. Muringong | 19. Birrabirragal | 27. Gweagal |
| 4. Bidjigal | 12. Carigal | 20. Cadigal | 28. Tagary |
| 5. Toogagal | 13. Cannalgal | 21. Burramattagal | 29. Norongerrag |
| 6. Gomerrigal | 14. Borogegal | 22. Wallumattagal | |
| 7. Cannemegal | 15. Kayimai | 23. Wangal | |
| 8. Mulgoa | 16. Terramerragal | 24. Maru-ora-dial | |

Source: Sydney Barani, 2013.

Clan names were usually derived from their totem combined with matta, a word to describe a place and gal, the word for man. So, in the case of the Burramattagal clan, the word Burra, was the name of their totem, the eel.³⁹

Clan groups varied in size from 25 to 60 people. First Nations peoples connected to their land spiritually through their particular clan that shared the same totem (usually an animal) as well as their ancestry, which was usually determined by the descendants of their father's family.⁴⁰

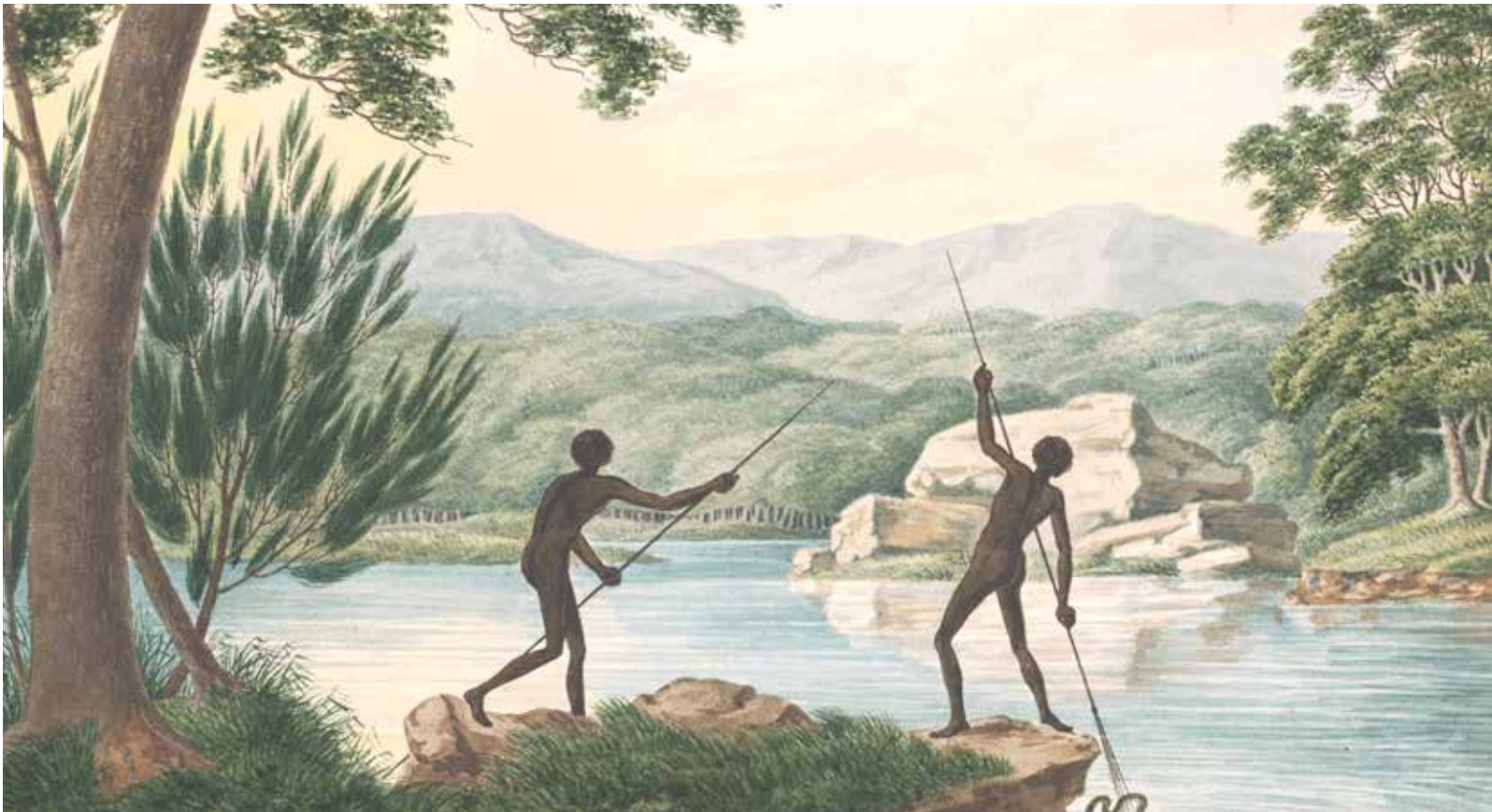
As men and women from the same clan were not permitted to marry, First Nations peoples were more broadly connected through larger communities or 'bands'. These groups comprised multiple families, including children and unmarried females, and often spoke more than one language. Band members were permitted to move beyond their boundary and usually interacted with each other regularly through fishing, hunting, and preparing food. They also came together for social and cultural events such as initiations and funerals and also to trade goods.⁴¹

First Nations land use and management

First Nations peoples care for Country using land management practices that are based on a profound knowledge of and respect for the environment. Prior to colonisation, this enabled them to create a system that was sustainable and supplied them with the food and raw materials they needed to make medicine, tools, shelters, and other items for daily living.

An integral aspect of land management was a thorough understanding of the seasons. First Nations

peoples followed seasonal calendars, such as the six-season Dharawal calendar, which are still used by some communities today. The calendar was based on observations of environmental indicators involving plants and animals, weather patterns, and the position of the stars, which was passed down through the generations. One such example is the Wangal people who would watch for the blossoming of the coastal wattle trees each year to indicate when the black fish were running in the Parramatta River.⁴²



Aboriginal people spearing eels. (National Gallery of Australia).

The calendar helped First Nations peoples manage the environment systematically by allowing them to anticipate and prepare for the availability of food sources, breeding seasons, and climatic changes. It also enabled different food sources to replenish after hunting and gathering, and land areas to recover after planting and harvesting. Seasonal calendars remain integral to First Nations traditional land management practices and are increasingly being used by Western land managers to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

Use of fire in land management

Fire is an important symbol in First Nations culture, which has been used for generations in hunting and cooking, to provide warmth and manage and care for the land. It also holds great spiritual meaning and is central to ceremonial practices and the sharing of cultural knowledge and wisdom.

Cultural burns are 'cool' or low-intensity fires that were applied to the landscape in a highly controlled way and self-extinguish. This traditional method of fire management prevented the oil in a tree's bark from igniting. Animals were given enough

time to escape, young trees survived, and grass seeds remained intact for regrowth. Invasive native species were also controlled with the appropriate fire for the type of Country.⁴³

Other agriculture and aquaculture practices

While not immediately obvious to British settlers, traditional knowledge reveals that First Nations people also used other land management practices throughout the catchment. Large agricultural fields of grain and yams amongst other produce, were observed near the Drummoyne area and extending west and north.

Further upriver, in the creeks and streams around Parramatta, eel farming was an important part of First Nations ceremony and culture. Burramattagal people made temporary dams in the creeks using sticks and rocks, and then guided the eels into purpose-built traps. First Nations people also created habitats for the balanced production of water environments by strategically placing obstacles in the path of the water to slow its speed.⁴⁴



Watercolour illustration of a group of Aboriginal people fishing, c1790s. (State Library of NSW).

Food sources

For the clans that lived along the foreshores of the Parramatta River, fish was a main food source and fishing was an important and regular activity. Women were primarily responsible for providing the clan with fish. They usually fished in canoes and less often from rock platforms using hooks and lines. Fishhooks were typically made from shell, although sometimes bone, stone or even bird talons were used, which were tied to lines formed from the twisted fibres of various tree barks.

The men fished from rock platforms or in shallow waters, using multi-pronged spears. Made from the flower stems of grass trees, the spear shaft was usually two metres in length and bound to several points (or barbs) fitted with pieces of animal bone, fish teeth, or hardwood.⁴⁵ When fish were scarce, the men also fished from canoes at night using burning bark torches or cooking fires for illumination.⁴⁶

Shellfish also formed a substantial part of the diet of these foreshore peoples, supported by the presence of shell middens that still exist on both sides of the river. First Nations people collected oysters, crabs, crayfish, and other shellfish directly from the rocks or from the sandbanks, and mudflats.

Further upstream and inland, First Nations groups relied more on other sources of food. Mullet and other freshwater fish were found in some of the creeks and streams, along with eels and freshwater mussels. In the woodland areas of the Cumberland Plain, land animals such as kangaroos, wallabies, possums, and water birds were hunted.

Men used spears to hunt larger animals, aided by the use of a woomera, a wooden spear throwing device that also served other purposes, such as a fire-making saw, a receptacle for mixing ochre, and in ceremonies. Smaller prey, such as possums, were hunted by smoking them out of nests and hollows or burning grass areas where they could be seen and caught more easily.

Plant foods also featured more prominently in the diet of the hinterland peoples across the Cumberland Plain, particularly root vegetables such as yams, nuts, berries, figs, and other seasonal fruits, and honey from native bees. Women were believed to have been the main gatherer of these foods, using wooden digging sticks, woomeras, and stone hatchets; however, there is little direct evidence of this in earlier colonial accounts, and may have been based on later observations in other parts of Australia.⁴⁷



Aboriginal people night fishing by fire torches. (National Library of Australia).

Raw materials

The flooding of the Parramatta River valley and creation of several distinct ecosystems over 7,000 years ago, resulted in the growth of a diverse range of plant life. In addition to the plant food resources that were available, First Nations people made good use of the mangroves, paperbarks, and reeds that lined the river foreshore. Further inland, the forests and woodlands across the Cumberland Plain provided an abundant source of wood for building dwellings, canoes, tools, and other items.

Paperbark tree

Also known as *Melaleuca quinquenervia*, the paperbark tree has long been regarded by First Nations peoples as a highly respected and important resource. It was used for a myriad of purposes such as bedding and roofing for shelters, wrapping babies, and carrying water. It could also be soaked in water and used to wrap meat or fish to cook on a fire, giving the food a smoky flavour. The tree is also known for its medicinal properties – the oil found in the leaves was applied as an antiseptic and the bark could be used to bandage wounds.



Example of a culturally modified or 'scar' tree, Parramatta Park.

Canoe building

Canoes were usually made from the bark of a she-oak (*Casuarina glauca*), bangalay (*Eucalyptus botryoides*), or stringybark (*Eucalyptus agglomerate*) tree. These species were chosen for their large, wide trunks and thick bark.

The canoe was made from a single piece of bark that was gradually separated from the tree using stone wedges. The bark was then softened with fire and tied at each end to form a pointed shape. The base was waterproofed using resin from the *Xanthorrhoea* (grass tree), which was also used to repair any small holes or leaks.

Canoes were an important mode of transport along the Parramatta River and its tributaries. They were regularly used for fishing, transporting supplies, visiting and trading with neighbouring clans, and attending ceremonial events.⁴⁸

While many culturally modified or 'scar' trees, as they are also called, no longer exist due to development and neglect, there are still examples throughout the Parramatta River catchment and elsewhere that serve as a living reminder of the responsible and sustainable use of natural resources and provide an important continuing connection to Country for First Nations peoples.⁴⁹

It is important to note that all First Nations sites in NSW are protected under the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974. It is an offence to damage or destroy them (including collecting artefacts) without prior permission of the NSW Government.

Tool making

First Nations people in the Parramatta River catchment and throughout the broader Sydney region, used a wide range of tools and weapons to hunt and prepare food, make equipment and defend themselves. These included spears and spear throwers, digging sticks, grindstones, mogo (stone axes), clubs and shields. These tools evolved over time as climatic conditions changed and people were able to move across the land and gain access to new source materials or traded them with other clans.⁵⁰

Stone material required for making hard-wearing tools was not abundantly available along the coastal zone of Sydney. The most common local source of stone used were conglomerate pebbles found in Hawkesbury Sandstone and other eroded volcanic materials. Further inland on the Cumberland Plain, fine-grained siliceous rocks such as silcrete and quartz were also used as well as river rocks or iron stone for items such as axe heads.⁵¹

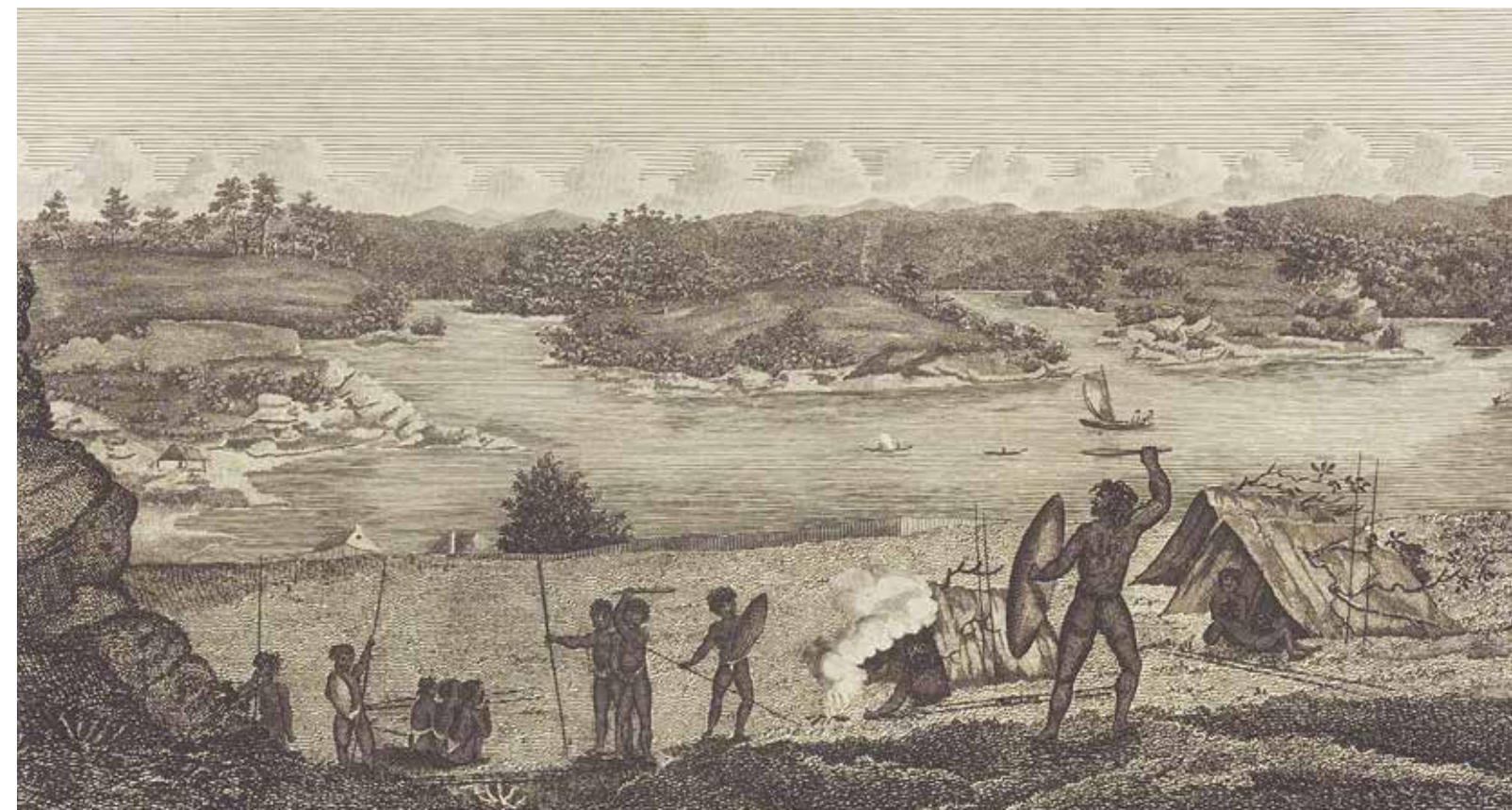
Following colonisation, many implements used were taken back to Europe with only a handful surviving in overseas museums. Only two pre-European stone axes from the Sydney region have survived, one of which is located in the Australian Museum.⁵² Most archaeological evidence for tools and equipment used in the Parramatta River catchment and surrounding areas has been limited to more durable materials such as bone, shell, and stone.

Shelters

The architecture of First Nations dwellings built prior to colonisation was dependent on the climate, natural environment, and available resources, family size and particular needs of the clan groups in that area. For example, on Rosemary Island, located off Australia's north-west coast, archaeologists have found evidence of First Nations stone houses dating back 9,000 years to the end of the last Ice Age.⁵³

Early colonial records describe three main forms of shelter used by the coastal First Nations peoples of the Sydney region: rock shelters and overhangs, huts made from sheets of bark, cabbage leaf trees, other plant material, and large hollow trees. Further inland in areas such as the Cumberland Plain, bark huts were the primary form of shelter.⁵⁴

The length of stay at a particular location may have been dependent on the availability of food and other resources, and First Nations peoples returned to the same camp sites many times. While there did not appear to be significant seasonal movement within the catchment area compared to other areas in Australia, coastal clans were believed to spend more time in the forested areas away from the coast during winter months.



Engraving depicting a camp near Cockle Bay with a view of Parramatta River. (National Library of Australia).



Male initiation ceremony. (Government Printing Office).

Traditional ceremonies and other cultural practices

Throughout the Parramatta River catchment, First Nations people gathered regularly to trade and perform a wide range of ceremonies that were deeply embedded in lore, kinship, and cultural practice. Early colonial records show that areas such as Hen and Chicken Bay at Abbotsford, Homebush Bay, Baludarra Wetlands, Parramatta and Cockatoo Island were important meeting places to trade food, special objects and raw materials, and hold special events such as corroborees, initiations, marriage exchanges, funerals, and combat rituals.

The purpose and nature of the ceremony usually determined who could participate. Sacred ceremonies, referred to as 'men's business' and 'women's business', were gender specific and held separately, away from the main camp. Other non-sacred ceremonies often included all members of the family, clan or community, although men and women performed different roles.

Music and dance were a sacred part of First Nations ceremonies that marked special occasions as well as everyday life. Songs were used to pass down ancient Creation and Dreaming stories to future generations, facilitate significant life events and

rites of passage, and impart practical knowledge on areas such as climate, seasons, food resources, and land management. Dance was incorporated to assist in the storytelling and often featured imitations of significant animals. Performers usually adorned themselves with body paint and other ceremonial dress and ornamentation to connect their physical body with the spiritual world.⁵⁵

Initiation ceremonies

Male initiation ceremonies were sacred and complex events held over several days. The purpose was to introduce youth to the spiritual beliefs and customs of their clan and train them in hunting and other skills. The ceremony often involved several evenings of dancing, after which an older initiated male claimed responsibility for each boy and supported them through the proceedings. The boys were not permitted to eat and left by themselves overnight. The following day the boys took part in symbolic hunting rituals and were trained in the use of a spear. In some clans, the final stage involved the removal of one or two front teeth from the right side of the upper jaw, in a practice known as 'tooth avulsion'.⁵⁶

Scarification and other body modification

The practice of 'scarification', which involved cutting or branding a person's skin to create raised, symbolic shapes and designs, was associated with male initiation ceremonies but performed on women as well. The markings were intended to indicate what stage of life a person had reached. In some clans, children aged between eight and 16 also had the area of skin between their nostrils pierced with a piece of bone or reed, which may have been part of an initiation ceremony, to indicate status or served another spiritual function.

Other forms of body modification involved the removal of the first two joints of the little finger on a female's left hand. It was believed that this procedure enabled women to control a fishing line more skilfully and was observed more in coastal than inland clans.⁵⁷

Combat rituals

Ceremonial contests and 'payback' rituals were a traditional form of conflict resolution and important part of First Nations culture. They enabled the clans to seek justice or retribution after a wrongdoing and hold those responsible to account. Offenders were usually punished by being clubbed or speared by the victim or his kinsmen. Ritual combats continued for several decades following colonisation and traditional customary law is still practised in some First Nations communities across Australia today.⁵⁸

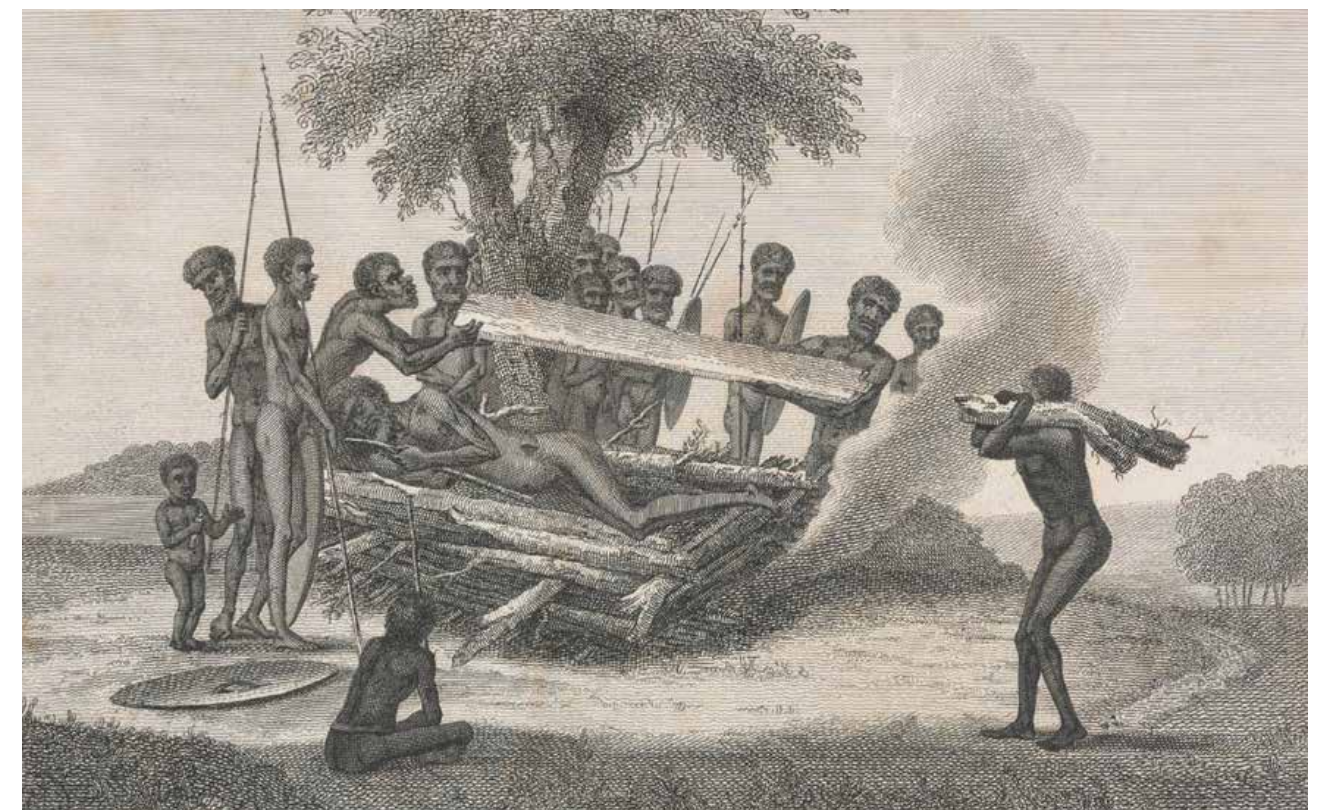
Death and burial practices

Death was a significant and deeply spiritual event for First Nations peoples that impacted many other aspects of their life. People feared the dead and often believed that death was caused by harmful spirits or other nefarious influences. An important part of the death process was to ensure the safe passage of the spirit into the afterlife and prevent it from returning and causing mischief for the living.

Graves were avoided and campsites were often abandoned if someone died. Following a person's death, the name of the deceased could no longer be spoken, and any person with the same name was obliged to use another one. People associated with the deceased were also restricted from eating certain food.

The type of burial was determined by a person's age, gender, and status. Personal effects such as tools, weapons or ornaments were often placed with the body, which were then either buried or cremated and then interred in shallow graves that faced a particular direction. The grave was covered with sand or earth, and rocks, branches, and other vegetation may also have been placed on or around it.

Due to the significant number of deaths caused by the smallpox epidemic in 1789, many First Nations people were quickly buried in sand dunes or middens by their kin or British settlers. Colonial accounts indicate that traditional burials had all but ceased around the Sydney area by the 1820s.⁵⁹



Traditional First Nations funeral and cremation. (Government Printing Office).

Colonial invasion

British attitudes towards colonisation

While the colonisation of Australia and treatment of First Nations peoples by the British would be considered illegal and abhorrent by today's standards, it is important to understand these actions in the context of the attitudes that pervaded the society of the time.

In 1774, Lieutenant James Cook (1728–1779) wrote in his diary referring to all his party's landings in the Pacific:

We enter their ports without their daring to make opposition. We attempt to land in a peaceable manner, if this succeeds it's well, if not we land nevertheless and maintain the footing we thus got by the superiority of our fire arms, in what other light can they then at first look upon us but as invaders of their country; time and some acquaintance with us can only convince them of their mistake.⁶⁰

By the time Cook claimed Australia, the British Empire was well-versed in the forcible occupation of lands to secure new territory and precious natural resources. Seeing themselves as technologically progressive and culturally superior, whose values were deeply rooted in Christianity and the ownership and cultivation land, they believed it was their moral obligation to bring civilised society to 'primitive' Indigenous peoples. This practice is also referred to as 'paternalism', a term coined in the late 19th century to define the way a state interferes with the rights of an individual against their will, in the belief they would be better off or protected from harm.

The decision to settle in Australia was due in large part to the overcrowding of British prisons, which had worsened when America refused to take more convicts after the American War of Independence in 1783. More than just a dumping ground for its convicts, however, the colony was expected to be self-sufficient by enabling those who had served their time or been pardoned to redeem themselves as farmers, whereby they would 'cease to be enemies of society... and become proprietors and cultivators of the land'.⁶¹

More importantly, the settlement was a strategic attempt to establish a base in the Pacific to limit Dutch, French, Portuguese, and Spanish expansion in the region. The British also hoped to secure valuable natural resources, including flax and pine tree spars found on Norfolk Island that were required for ship building.

A lithograph depicting Aboriginal peoples and the arrival of Captain Cook and his crew at Botany in 1770. (National Library of Australia).



Captain Arthur Phillip raises the flag to declare British possession of New South Wales at Sydney Cove, on 26 January 1788. (State Library of New South Wales).

When Cook set sail on the first of three voyages to the South Seas in 1768, his official mission was to observe the 1769 transit of Venus in Tahiti to determine the distance from the earth to the sun. He also carried with him secret orders from the British Admiralty to seek 'a Continent or Land of great extent' and to take possession of that country 'in the Name of the King of Great Britain'. However, the land was only to be claimed if it was uninhabited.⁶²

In fact, before he even left on his Endeavour voyage, Cook was given advice by the president of the Royal Society, James Douglas, 14th Earl of Morton (1702-1768):

*They are the natural, and in the strictest sense of the word, the legal possessors of the several Regions they inhabit. No European Nation has a right to occupy any part of their country or settle among them without their voluntary consent. Conquest over such people can give no just title; because they could never be the Aggressors.*⁶³

As Cook travelled along the south-eastern coast of Australia, he observed the presence of First Nations peoples, making the following observations:

In reality [they] are far happier than we Europeans, being wholly unacquainted... with the superfluous but also the necessary conveniences so much sought after in Europe they are happy in not knowing the use of them. They live [in a tranquillity] which is not disturbed by the inequality of condition, the earth and sea of their own accord furnishes

*them with all things necessary for life; they covet not magnificent houses, household-stuff & c. They sleep as sound in a small hovel or even in the open as the King in his palace on a bed of down.*⁶⁴

Despite these views, Cook and botanist Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1820) considered there were few 'natives' along the coast and deduced that there would be fewer or none, inland. They also did not see any evidence of agriculture or social and political order that the British could recognise or negotiate with, and so took possession on the basis that the land was terra nullius or 'land belonging to no one'.⁶⁵

Interestingly, it would take another 65 years before this idea was officially acknowledged. In 1835 Governor Bourke's proclamation implemented the concept of terra nullius upon which British settlement was based, reinforcing the notion that the land belonged to no one prior to the British Crown taking possession of it. Aboriginal people, therefore, could not sell or assign the land, nor could an individual person acquire it, other than through distribution by the Crown.⁶⁶

While many people at the time recognised that the First Nations peoples had rights in the lands, which was also confirmed in a House of Commons report on Aboriginal relations in 1837, the law followed and almost always applied the principles expressed in Bourke's proclamation. This would not change until the Australian High Court's decision in the Mabo Case in 1992.

Arrival of the First Fleet

When Captain Arthur Phillip (1738-1814) sailed into Port Jackson (or Sydney Harbour as it is better known) on 26 January 1788, the local First Nations people had little understanding of the devastating events that awaited them and would change their lives forever. In the decade that followed, it is estimated that 90 per cent of the First Nations population in the Sydney region would die as a result of the introduction of new diseases, direct and violent conflicts with colonisers, and the forceful occupation and acquisition of their land.

The First Fleet consisted of 11 ships containing more than 1,400 people, including 759 convicts. When all the ships came to anchor in Botany Bay on 19 January 1788, Phillip saw a very different landscape to the one described by botanist Joseph Banks during his short stay as part of Cook's voyage along the east coast of Australia in 1770. Instead of meadows, Phillip found marshland and few trees, and the nearest river (now known as Cooks River) was swampy and incapable of supplying sufficient fresh water for the new colony.⁶⁷

In urgent need of a suitable site to unload his passengers, Phillip sailed north to investigate Port Jackson and Broken Bay, which Cook had not entered but recorded as being safe harbours. Phillip entered Port Jackson first, which he would later describe as '... one of the finest harbours in the world, in which a thousand sail of the line might ride in perfect security'.⁶⁸

Cook and Bank's accounts of the local Indigenous people were that they were 'weak, incurious and cowardly'. As the First Fleet made its way along the serpentine curves of Port Jackson, Phillip was therefore surprised to see so many armed men shouting from the cliff tops and later encounter a 'tough warrior culture' who were strong, skilled, and willing to defend their land.⁶⁹

After anchoring and exploring the harbour's southern shore where he discovered a freshwater stream (later called the Tank Stream), Phillip decided on Sydney Cove (called Warrane by the Gadigal people) to establish a settlement. Over the course of a week, the convicts and their children, officers and seamen were brought ashore, and the colony was formally proclaimed on 7 February 1788.⁷⁰

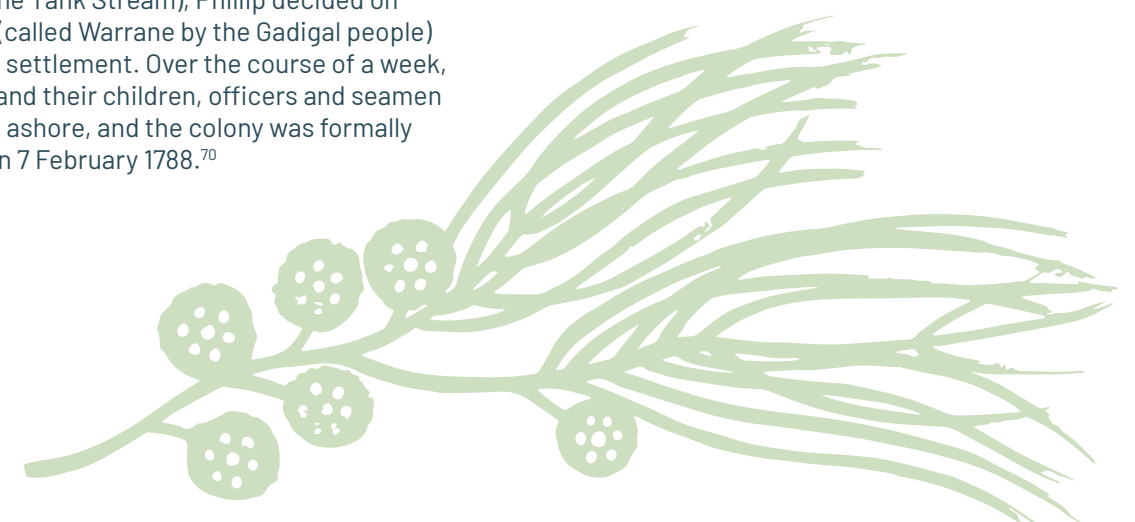
First encounters

Despite Phillip's clear orders to occupy the land and establish a new colony, he was genuinely interested in developing friendly and peaceful relations with the local Indigenous people and living 'in amity and kindness with them', so they could provide information and cooperation. In fact, there were initially harsh penalties for anyone who breached the rules and should 'want only destroy them or give them any unnecessary interruption in the exercise of their several occupations'.⁷¹

Although the First Nations people kept their distance from the new settlement in those first few months, initial encounters were said to be mostly cordial. One of the earliest recorded interactions between the two groups took place on the Parramatta River. In early February 1788, Captain John Hunter (1737-1821) and Lieutenant William Bradley (1758-1833) along with a party of marines conducted an initial exploration along the Parramatta River near what is now Canada Bay. They were instructed by Phillip to engage in friendly discourse with the First Nations population but also to establish their superiority over them.⁷²

On 3 February, Bradley recorded that a group of First Nations people had been observed in a cove on the northern side of the river. Upon seeing the soldiers, the people fled into the scrub. As a sign of goodwill, the British left a 'string of beads, cards, [and] pieces of cloth' at the camp.⁷³

Two days later the party travelled up the river again and observed more First Nations people in the various coves. Bradley and his men pulled onto the land near where they had left the gifts (now known as Breakfast Point), and invited the First Nations people from the northern shore (most likely the Wallumattagal people) to join them. A group of seven people in two canoes travelled across the river. Bradley later noted: 'They left their spears in the canoes and came to us. We tied beads etc. about them and left them our fire to dress mussels which they went about as soon as we put off'.⁷⁴





An early engraving of Ben-nil-long (Woollarawarre Bennelong) c.1798.

Woollarawarre Bennelong

Woollarawarre Bennelong (c.1764–1813) has long been regarded as one of the most notable First Nations figures of Australia's early colonial history. A member of the Wangal people, Bennelong, and Cadigal man, Colebee, were kidnapped in November 1789 as part of Governor Phillip's plan to learn about First Nations culture and improve relations between the two groups.

At the time of Bennelong's capture Lieutenant General Watkin Tench described him as being 'of good stature, stoutly made', with a 'bold, intrepid countenance'. His appetite was such that 'the ration of a week was insufficient to have kept him for a day', and 'love and war seemed his favourite pursuits'.

Colebee later escaped but Bennelong remained and developed close ties with Phillip. In May 1790 Bennelong also escaped and was spotted several months later with a group of First Nations people at Manly, one of whom wounded Phillip with a spear.

Bennelong returned to Sydney Cove shortly after where he adopted European dress and customs and learned to speak English. In turn, he taught the Dharug language and customs to several of the British officers and acted as an interpreter for the Governor. To show his gratitude, Phillip had a small hut built for him on what became known as Bennelong Point.

Bennelong's wife, Barangaroo, was a powerful and highly respected Cammeraygal woman. She was opposed to her husband's relations with the British colonisers and refused to take part in any of their customs. Barangaroo died tragically while giving birth in the hospital after Phillip denied her request to deliver the baby at the Governor's House.

In 1792 Bennelong and fellow kinsman Yemmerrawanne (1775–1794) travelled with Phillip to England. During their stay they were presented to King George III, attended the theatre and visited attractions such as the Tower of London. A year later Yemmerrawanne died from a chest infection and Bennelong longed to come home. However, it would be another two years before he could return to Australia in 1795.

During his time away, Bennelong's second wife Gooroobarooloo had left him, and his hut had been demolished. He attempted to maintain his European customs for a while but eventually returned to traditional life and became a respected Elder. Bennelong died at Kissing Point on 3 January 1813 and was buried on James Squire's estate with his third wife, Boorong.

Bennelong will be remembered for his contribution to facilitating some of the first cross-cultural communications between First Nations peoples and British colonisers and helping to foster peaceful relations for a time between the two groups.⁷⁵

Baludarri

Baludarri (c.1767–1791) was a young Dharug man who formed a close relationship with Governor Phillip and assisted with relations between the British and First Nations peoples in the early years of the colony. He was the eldest son of First Nations advocate Maugoran and his wife Gooroobera. Baludarri's name is the Dharug word for leatherjacket, a species of fish that was commonly found in some estuaries of the Parramatta River.

In April 1791 Baludarri and Gadigal man Colbee accompanied Phillip as guides and interpreters on an overland exploration from Parramatta to the Hawkesbury River. In an account of the expedition recorded by Captain-Lieutenant Watkin Tench, he noted that Baludarri was in high spirits throughout most of the journey but towards the end wanted to return home. He also refused to continue fetching food for the British as it was not shared with him and Colbee.

After the expedition, Baludarri was invited to live at the Governor's residence in Parramatta. A skilled fisherman, Phillip encouraged him to start a fishing trade with the local settlers, in the hope that 'this kind of trade system might take hold more broadly across the colony and underwrite a process of conciliation between the British and local Aboriginal groups'.

Baludarri built a new bark canoe, especially for the purpose and began trading when, shortly after, his canoe was destroyed by a group of convicts. Angered and adorned in ceremonial body paint, Baludarri confronted Phillip warning that he would seek retribution or 'payback' for the crime. Phillip assured him that the men responsible would be brought to

justice, however, Baludarri followed through on his customary obligations and speared another convict.

Phillip was left with no option but to outlaw Baludarri from the colony and order that he be shot on-site. Baludarri lived on the fringes of the settlement and managed to avoid capture or death, but in December 1791 he became seriously ill. While the exact cause of Baludarri's illness is not known, historians assume it may have been due to the smallpox epidemic that had spread throughout the First Nations population and killed many of his kin.

In response to Baludarri's condition, Phillip revoked his outlaw status and had him taken to Sydney Hospital where he was cared for by the Governor's doctor, but he died a few days later. Baludarri was interred in his canoe with his spears placed beside him and buried in the garden of Government House in Sydney. The funeral was arranged by Bennelong attended by both First Nations people and colonists, and is considered to be the first cross-cultural burial in Australia.

In 2008, a nature reserve in Parramatta was renamed the Baludarri Wetlands to acknowledge the legacy of this remarkable young Dharug man during his short life.⁷⁶





A view of part of Parramatta Port Jackson. (State Library of NSW).

Early colonial period

It did not take long for the actions of the British settlers to begin having a detrimental impact on the lives of the First Nations people, which created increased hostility on both sides. With no understanding of their connection to Country, traditional land management of natural resources and cultural protocols, the colonists set about clearing the land for agriculture, housing, and other purposes. Similarly, as food shortages started to impact the fledgling colony, the British began to overfish the rivers and streams and shoot kangaroos and other wildlife.

Initially, many First Nations people readily assisted the colonists with their fishing activities in return for a portion of the catch or other items such as food and clothing as well as alcohol and tobacco. However, as the fish and other local food supplies began to decline, the British grew less generous in their exchanges and many First Nations people were starving by the winter of 1788.

It is no surprise, then, that in July 1788 Phillip reported that the First Nations people were 'greatly distressed for food', and by September 1788, he was aware that 'they certainly are not pleased with our remaining amongst them, as they see we deprive them of fish'.⁷⁷

As a result of these actions, it is estimated that by 1790 the remaining forested areas around the southern shores of Port Jackson and along the Parramatta River, which had provided natural abundance for millennia, could no longer support a sustainable source of food for the First Nations people of the area.⁷⁸

Heading West – the impact of exploration and agriculture on First Nations people and Country

A priority for Phillip was to cultivate the land so the colony could produce their own food. Within two months of the First Fleet's arrival, three gardens had been established on the east side of the Tank Stream. By July, the Government Farm located in the area known as Farm Cove, which had previously been used as an initiation ground by the Gadigal people, had produced 'nine acres in corn'.

However, the sandy and rocky soil failed to yield sufficient crops for the colony, so on 22 April 1788 Phillip led an exploration party up the Parramatta River in search of a new farming settlement and to survey the limits of the harbour.

As the party made its way up the river, while not sighting any First Nations people, the men saw evidence of their existence. It is likely the clans living along the banks of the river would have had little or no contact with the colonists and were most likely watching them warily from the safety of the trees.

John White, the First Fleet surgeon, who accompanied the party on this journey, recorded the following observation about First Nations hunting practices:

We still directed our course westward, and passed another tree on fire, and others which were hollow and perforated by a small hole at the bottom, in which the natives seemed to have snared some animal.

*It was certainly done by the natives, as the trees where these holes or perforations were, had in general many notches [sic.] cut for the purpose of getting to the top of them.*⁷⁹

As the river began to narrow at what is now called Clyde, the party discovered a tributary running in a southerly direction. Unable to sail their boats up the narrow waterway they set off on foot to explore the area but could not penetrate the thick bush. The river was named Duck River after the men saw what they thought were a large number of ducks (as well as other abundant birdlife) but were actually eastern swamp hens.

The party reached the land of the Burramattagal people at the headwaters of the river on 26 April. They noted a series of hills, the highest of which Phillip named Belle Veüe (now called Prospect Hill). In a valley below Belle Veüe they saw a fire and near it 'some chewed roots of saline taste, which showed that the natives had recently been there'. It was not until their return trip to Sydney Cove on 28 April that the party finally engaged with some First Nations people:

*We passed the next day in examining different inlets in the upper part of the harbour. We saw there some of the natives, who, in their canoes, came alongside of the boat, to receive some trifles which the governor held out to them. In the evening we returned to Sydney Cove.*⁸⁰

After determining the area's suitability for agriculture, in November 1788 Phillip sent a second party to establish a new settlement at the headwater of the Parramatta River. Initially called Rose Hill, the name was officially changed to Parramatta on the King's birthday in 1791. The word Parramatta was taken from the Dharug word Burramatta and is commonly translated as 'the place where the eels lie down' or 'head of waters'.⁸¹

The Government Farm – Dodds Farm

The success of the colony's first farm was due, in large part, to the traditional land management of the Burramattagal people. The farm was located on the northern banks of the Parramatta River across from the Redoubt, a military enclosure built by Governor Phillip that consisted of army barracks, a convict camp, storehouse, and outbuildings.

The soil along the river was rich and fertile thanks to the regular practice of cultural burns by the Burramattagal people over thousands of years. The supply of fresh water from the river also proved essential to the successful growth of wheat, corn, and other food crops.

The farm's first overseer was the inexperienced James Smith, who was quickly replaced by Phillip's manservant Henry Edward Dodd (c.1752-1791), a highly skilled and more knowledgeable farmer. Dodd also proved competent in managing convict work gangs and played an important role in organising the farming at both Farm Cove and Rose Hill.⁸²

The success of the farm and rapid expansion of the second settlement came at a huge cost to the Burramattagal people. As more land was cleared to make way for colonial farms the local First Nations people were increasingly displaced from their lands and lost access to food and water sources.

Phillip's attitude towards the inland First Nations people was also markedly different from the one he held of the coastal groups. The settlement of Parramatta was intended as a deliberate invasion with 'well-organised military defences'. This firm and systematic approach, Phillip believed, was necessary if the colony was to succeed, however, it would require the First Nations people to relinquish their land.



Dodds Farm, Parramatta Park.

In 1790 Burrumatta man Maugaron travelled to Sydney to meet with Governor Phillip to protest the loss of his peoples' lands. This was the first recorded formal protest known in Australia. Unlike his earlier plan for peaceful co-existence, Phillip offered no consideration or concession for the loss of land: 'Certain it is that wherever our colonists fix themselves, the natives are obliged to leave that part of the country'.

Left with no option, Maugaron and his family moved to the area now known as Kissing Point, east of Parramatta on the north side of the river. Home to the Wallumattagal clan, it is believed that most of the local First Nations people had died due to the smallpox virus.⁸³

Despite the efforts of Maugaron and others who would bravely challenge the invasion of their country, Phillip and the governors who followed him remained steadfast in their pursuit of colonial expansion at the expense of the country's first inhabitants.⁸⁴

Daniel Moowattin

The relationship between Daniel Moowattin (c.1791–1816) and botanist George Caley (1770–1829) is one of the few examples of meaningful interactions between First Nations peoples and British settlers in the early years of the colony.

Moowattin was born on Burrumattagal land around 1791. Orphaned as a young child he was adopted by Richard and Mary Partridge who were convicts on the First Fleet. Richard Partridge (aka Rice) worked as a constable and gaoler after he was pardoned in 1797. He became known as the 'Left-handed Flogger' for his ability to work in tandem with right-handed floggers to inflict maximum injury and pain on convicts being punished.

Known as Daniel until his initiation, Moowattin changed to his Aboriginal name which means 'bush path'. Around the age of 14, he became a helper to botanist and explorer George Caley, who was employed by Sir Joseph Banks to collect plant and animal specimens for the colony of New South Wales between 1800 and 1810. Caley was the first botanist to conduct a detailed study of the Eucalyptus as well as native bird and animal life.

In 1805 Moowattin became Caley's official guide, translator and travelling companion. He helped the botanist locate many rare and unusual specimens that he would have been unable to find on his own. Unlike many of his peers, Caley had great respect and appreciation for the First Nations peoples' knowledge and skills. He was also sympathetic to the impact of colonisation on their lives.

Over the next few years, Caley and Moowattin travelled extensively together, including a trip to Van Diemens Land. In July 1807, during an expedition to find a koala for Caley, Moowattin discovered the Appin Falls on the Cataract River. Caley named the river after Moowattin but the name was later changed.

Caley was keen to take Moowattin with him on a visit to England. In a letter he wrote to Banks in 1808 seeking permission, Caley praised Moowattin's character and skills:

The native that I have been speaking of is the most civilised of anyone that I know who may still be called a savage and the best interpreter of the more inland native's languages of any that I have met with... I can place that confidence in him which I cannot in any other – all except him are afraid to go beyond the limits of the space which they inhabit with me (or indeed with any other) and I know this one would stand by me until I fell, if attacked by any strangers. His name is Moowattin.⁸⁵

In 1810 Moowattin was only the third First Nations person at the time to set foot in Britain. Like Bennelong before him, Moowattin dressed in European clothes and met several distinguished people, including former Governor William Bligh. He also visited the Royal Society in Kew and other well-known British institutions. During this time Moowattin took up drinking which angered Caley and led to a split between them.

Banks instructed Moowattin to return home in August 1811. After living with Caley's friend George Suttor in Baulkham Hills for a short time, Moowattin returned to the bush and worked as a labourer on a farm in Pennant Hills.

On 6 August 1816, he was accused of raping 15-year-old Hannah Russell who was the daughter of a local settler. Although Moowattin protested his innocence he was found guilty and sentence to death. On 1 November 1816, Moowattin became the first Aboriginal person to be legally executed by hanging in Australia.

Despite his unjust and tragic demise, Daniel Moowattin will be remembered for the invaluable assistance he provided to George Caley and his work that contributed to the development of a greater understanding of the natural world. He also helped forge better relations between First Nations peoples and British settlers by demonstrating first-hand, the depth and importance of traditional knowledge and cultural practice.⁸⁶

Impact of smallpox and other diseases

In addition to the loss of land and food, one of the most immediate consequences of colonisation was a wave of epidemic diseases, including smallpox, measles, and influenza, which spread throughout many First Nations communities.

In the decades that followed, as more First Nations people were displaced from their lands and interacted with the British colonists, the sexual abuse and exploitation of First Nations girls and women also introduced sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis and gonorrhoea in epidemic proportions.

Prior to the first smallpox outbreak in April 1789, George Worgan (1757–1838), a surgeon on the First Fleet, observed that the local people 'seemingly enjoy uninterrupted health, and live to a great age'.⁸⁷ By May of that year Governor Phillip learned from Bennelong that it had killed at least half of the First Nations people in the Sydney region. It is believed that several clans across the Cumberland Plain and on the north side of the Parramatta River had been completely wiped out.

Those inflicted with the deadly virus tried to isolate themselves, however most were later found dead 'either in excavations of the rock or lying upon the beaches and points of the different coves'. For those who had managed to escape before being struck down by its debilitating symptoms, they tragically spread the virus to other communities along the south-eastern coast. It wasn't until early June 1789 that the British finally saw First Nations canoes return to Sydney Cove and noticed several families whose pock-marked faces suggested they had survived.⁸⁸

Over the years, there has been much debate over how First Nations people contracted smallpox. In his doctoral thesis on introduced diseases among the Aboriginal people of colonial Southeast Australia 1788–1900, Peter J. Dowling presents several theories.⁸⁹ The first is that the disease was not smallpox but actually chickenpox, although records, including those written by Governor Phillip, suggest it was the former. The second is that smallpox was introduced either by Macassan traders and fishers from Sulawesi in Indonesia and then spread along the east coast of Australia through First Nations trade routes, or by a visiting French squadron led by La Pérouse, which arrived at Botany Bay a few weeks after the First Fleet.

The third more disturbing theory is that the deadly virus was introduced by the British themselves, either accidentally or deliberately. Records indicate that vials containing dried smallpox scabs had been brought by the British to be used for 'variolation', a rudimentary form of inoculation used by the British from the early 1700s. This may explain why none of the British contracted the virus when it broke out. The smallpox vials may have been taken by a convict

or First Nations person, or released intentionally by the British who, faced with insufficient soldiers and dwindling ammunition, used the virus to quell increasing attacks by the First Nations people.

Regardless of the cause, smallpox had a traumatic and lasting effect on First Nations peoples. Not only was it devastating in terms of the rapid and unexpected loss of life, the lingering symptoms of the virus also impacted their ability to gather food and water, leaving them vulnerable to starvation and other diseases.

Women, particularly those who were pregnant, were also more at risk of catching the virus than men. This loss would have had a significant long-term impact on the kinship system, future marriage arrangements, and social interactions. Similarly, the death of so many Elders would have disrupted the transfer of knowledge and traditional practices. Over time, many clans with only a few surviving members had to combine in order to survive, however, the resulting loss of culture and identity would leave an impact that is still felt by many First Nations communities today.

First Nations resistance and colonial frontier conflicts

As the colony continued to expand across the Cumberland Plain and beyond, and more land was cleared for farming, First Nations peoples became increasingly dispossessed from their land. To add to the issue, ex-convict settlers were armed with muskets for 'protection against the natives'. This decision led to a brutality and lawlessness that developed amongst many settlers and was the cause of so much suffering and loss for the First Nations peoples who lived on the frontier.

No longer able to source their food through traditional means, those who had survived the ravages of smallpox and regrouped after their clans were decimated, were hungry and resorted to taking maize and other produce as it was portable and easy to eat. Given that the crops were grown on traditional lands, many would have considered the food as rightfully theirs.

As the maize raids increased, so too did the response from the settlers, which led to bitter and deadly conflicts on both sides. In the 'Battle of Toongabbie' in 1794 as it came to be known, a militia of armed watchmen were posted to guard the Toongabbie Farm that Phillip established in 1791 using convict labour to grow crops of barley, maize, and wheat. After a group of First Nations men brazenly and repeatedly tried to raid the farm, the watchmen reportedly fought and killed three of them and severed the head of one of the slain men. In her book, *The Colony*, Grace Karskens theorises that it was more likely that the watchmen ambushed the First Nations men while they slept, which was one of the only ways they could kill them.⁹⁰

Faced with the increasing threat of musket fire and loss of land, shelter and resources, First Nations people resisted by killing livestock, destroying farmhouses and setting fire to crops. Their actions may also have been a result of their traditional practice of payback, responding to acts of violence, particularly against women.

By May 1801, conditions had deteriorated to such a point that Governor Philip King (1758–1808) issued an order that all First Nations people (with a few exceptions) were to be ‘driven back from settlers’ habitations by firing on them’. This decision had a significant impact on relations between the two groups. Not only were settlers now effectively allowed to shoot First Nations people at will, they were also no longer allowed to let them into their homes. Years of shared reliance based on exchanges for food, goods, and labour were eroded overnight, leaving many First Nations people without a reliable source of food.

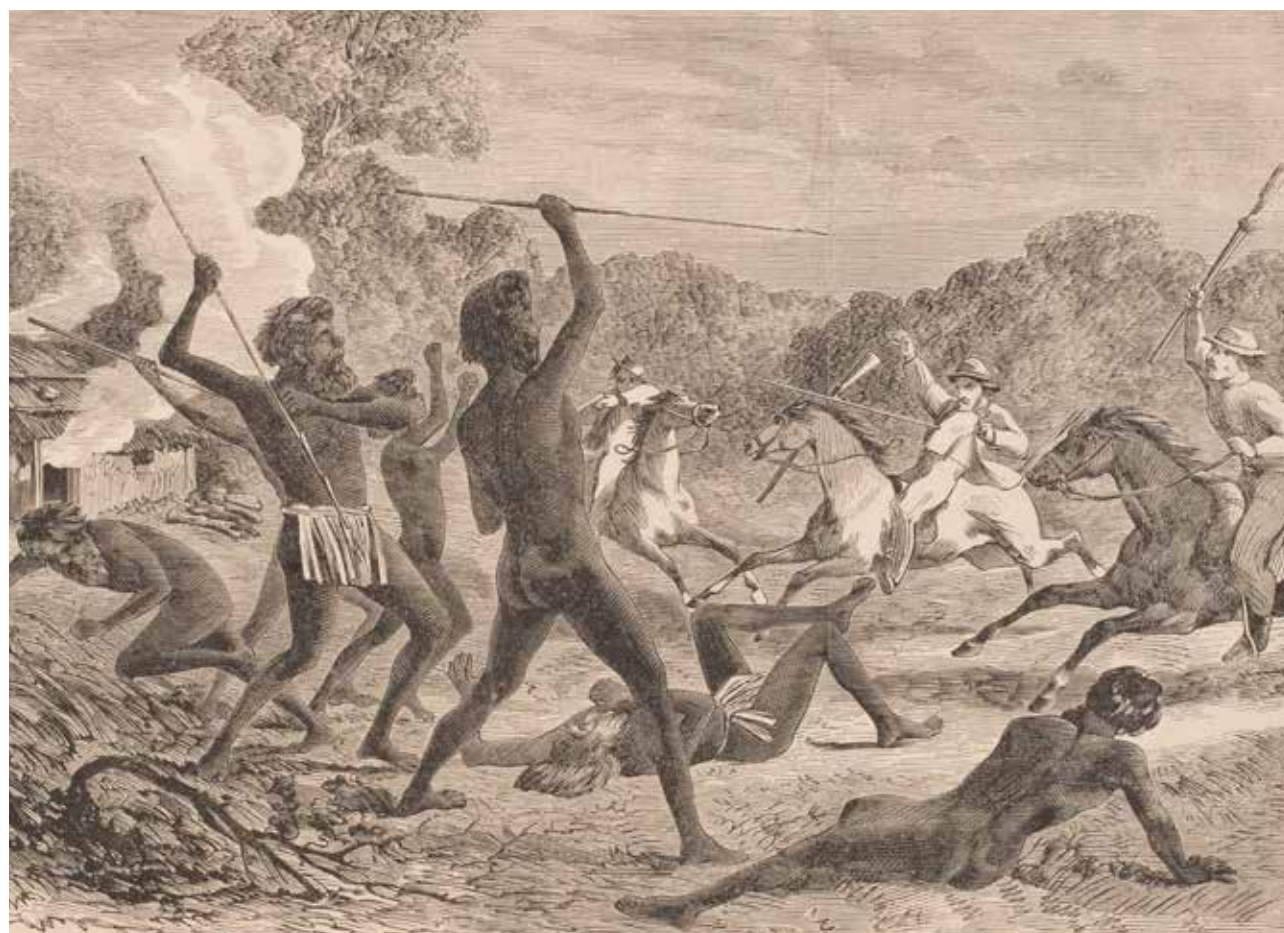
Efforts were made by the First Nations people during that time to negotiate access to land and waterways. On one occasion a group of Elders met with Governor King, most likely at Government House in Parramatta, and made the following request regarding the neighbouring Hawkesbury River, north of Sydney:

...they did not like to be driven from the few places that were left on the banks of the river, where alone

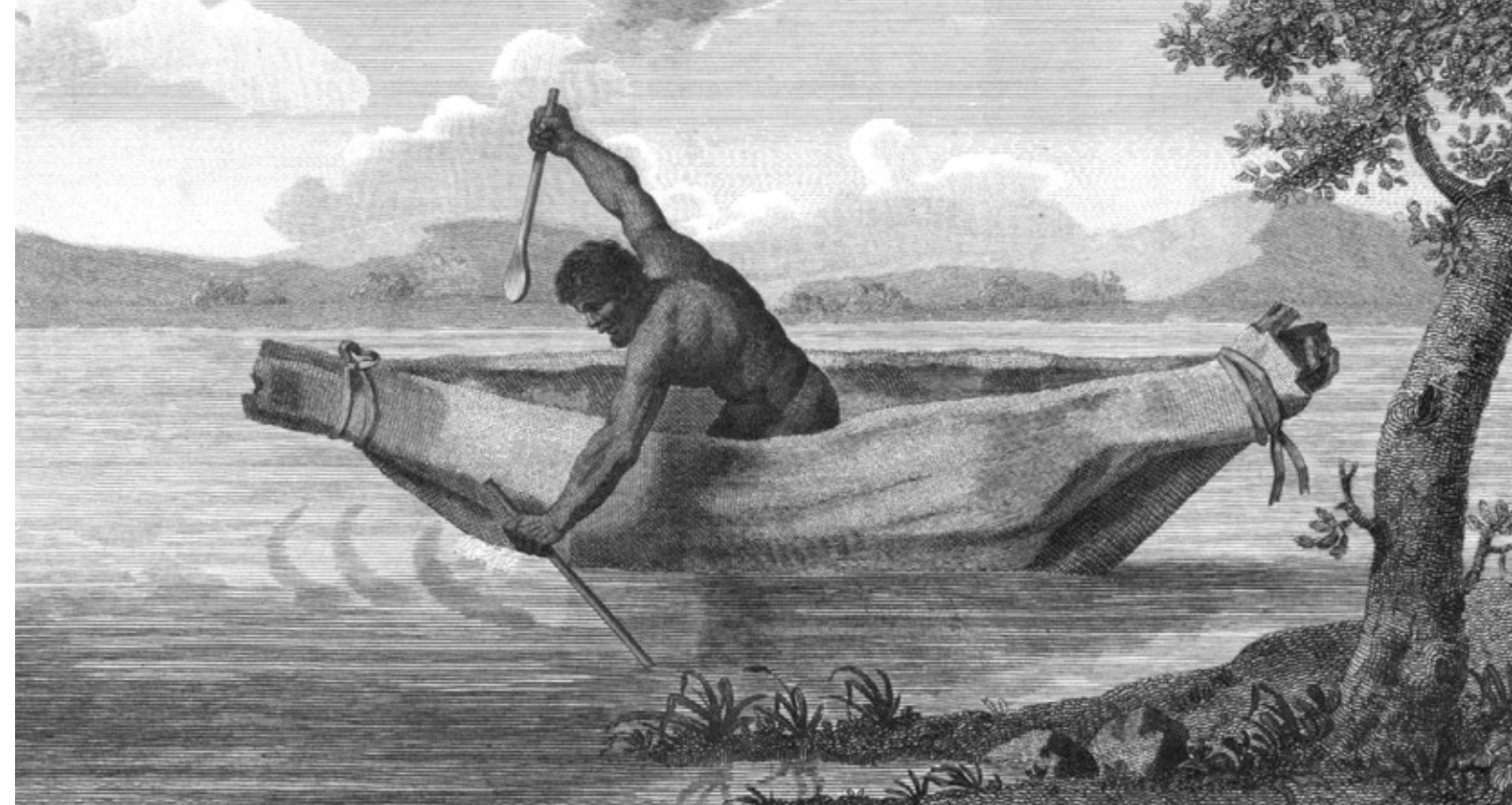
*they could procure food; that they had gone down the river as the white men took possession of the banks; if they went across the white men's ground the settlers fired upon them and were angry, that if they could retain some places on the lower part of the river they should be satisfied and not trouble the white men...*⁹¹

King saw this as a reasonable request and promised the Elders that no further settlements would be established lower down the river. However, the competition for fertile land meant that this agreement was short-lived and King continued to use the practice of banishing First Nations people from their own lands and food sources in an attempt to weed out the troublemakers. He also exploited clan rivalries by forcing the men to relinquish and help track and find those responsible for the conflicts.

First Nations resistance and the conflict that ensued would continue well into the 19th and early 20th centuries, resulting in further killings and several massacres in NSW and other parts of Australia. In what became known as the ‘Frontier Wars’, it is estimated that at least 20,000 First Nations people and between 2,000–2,500 Europeans were killed. These events further split First Nations peoples into two groups, being either ‘savage’ or ‘domesticated’ and continued to diminish their civil rights and access to traditional lands and way of life.



Wood engraving of the Aboriginal frontier conflict. (State Library of NSW).



Pemulwuy (also known as Pimbloy). State Library of Victoria.

Pemulwuy and the Battle of Parramatta

Pemulwuy (c.1750–1802), also known as Pimbloy, was a member of the Bidjigal clan who ran a 12-year guerilla war campaign against the British. In December 1790, Pemulwuy speared John McIntyre (1754–1790), a convict and Governor Phillip's gamekeeper who was known for his brutal treatment towards Aboriginal people. From 1792, Pemulwuy led a series of raids on colonists, mainly at Parramatta, Prospect, Toongabbie, and the Hawkesbury River.

Pemulwuy's attacks were usually as ‘payback’ for atrocities committed by the settlers, including the kidnapping of First Nations children. In response to his actions Governor Phillip proclaimed him an outlaw and offered a reward for his capture or death as well as ‘any six Bidjigal or their heads’.

In March 1797, Pemulwuy led a sustained attack with 100 First Nations warriors, in what became known as the ‘Battle of Parramatta’. The group attacked the Toongabbie government farm before storming into the town of Parramatta. This bloody encounter was significant in that it was the only time in the history of NSW that First Nations people ever entered a town in large numbers to fight against the military.

Pemulwuy was quickly identified and shot seven times. Initially thought to be dead, Pemulwuy was instead severely wounded. In a show of mercy and admiration, the soldiers took him to the hospital at Parramatta where he eventually recovered and escaped one night into the darkness, still wearing his leg-irons. The Bidjigal people believed his incredible escape was achieved by turning himself into a bird.

Pemulwuy was finally killed by settlers in June 1802. His head was removed and preserved in alcohol and sent to Sir Joseph Banks in England for research and display, which was common at the time. This gruesome delivery was accompanied by a letter from Governor King who commented, ‘Although a terrible pest to the colony, he was a brave and independent character...’⁹²

After his death, Pemulwuy became known as the ‘Rainbow Warrior’, most likely because of his ability to unite the different First Nations groups in the face of adversity. Pemulwuy's son, Tedbury (c.1780–1810), continued his father's war against the British settlers prior to his death in 1810. He was believed to have been involved in what was probably the last attack on settlers near Parramatta, which was reported in the *Sydney Gazette* on 3 September 1809:

*Some of the distant settlers have had recent occasion to complain about the conduct of the natives, a few among whom have manifested a disposition to mischievous acts. A man by the name of Tunks in company with another was attacked near Parramatta by three blacks, among whom was young Bundle and Tedbury, son of Pemulwuy, who was shot some years since on account of his murders, and the horrible barbarities he had exercised on many solitary travellers. The son appears to have inherited the ferocity and vices of his father. Upon this occasion he pointed his spear to the head and breast of Tunks, and repeatedly threatened to plunge the weapon into him; but other persons fortunately appearing in sight, the assailants betook to the woods. Several other such attacks have been made but as Tedbury is stated to have always been of the party which consisted but of two or three it may be inferred that a spirit of malevolence is far from general...*⁹³

Lachlan Macquarie and the Native Institutions

Much has been written about the significant contribution made by Lachlan Macquarie (1762–1824) and his wife, Elizabeth (1778–1835), to civilising and advancing the colony of NSW. Unlike his predecessors, Macquarie held more progressive and humanitarian views on the welfare and treatment of the First Nations peoples and was keen to improve relations between the European and Indigenous communities that had deteriorated in the years prior to his arrival. However, those views were based on the premise that the First Nations peoples would become ‘domesticated’ and ‘industrious’ members of society, based on Christian values.⁹⁴

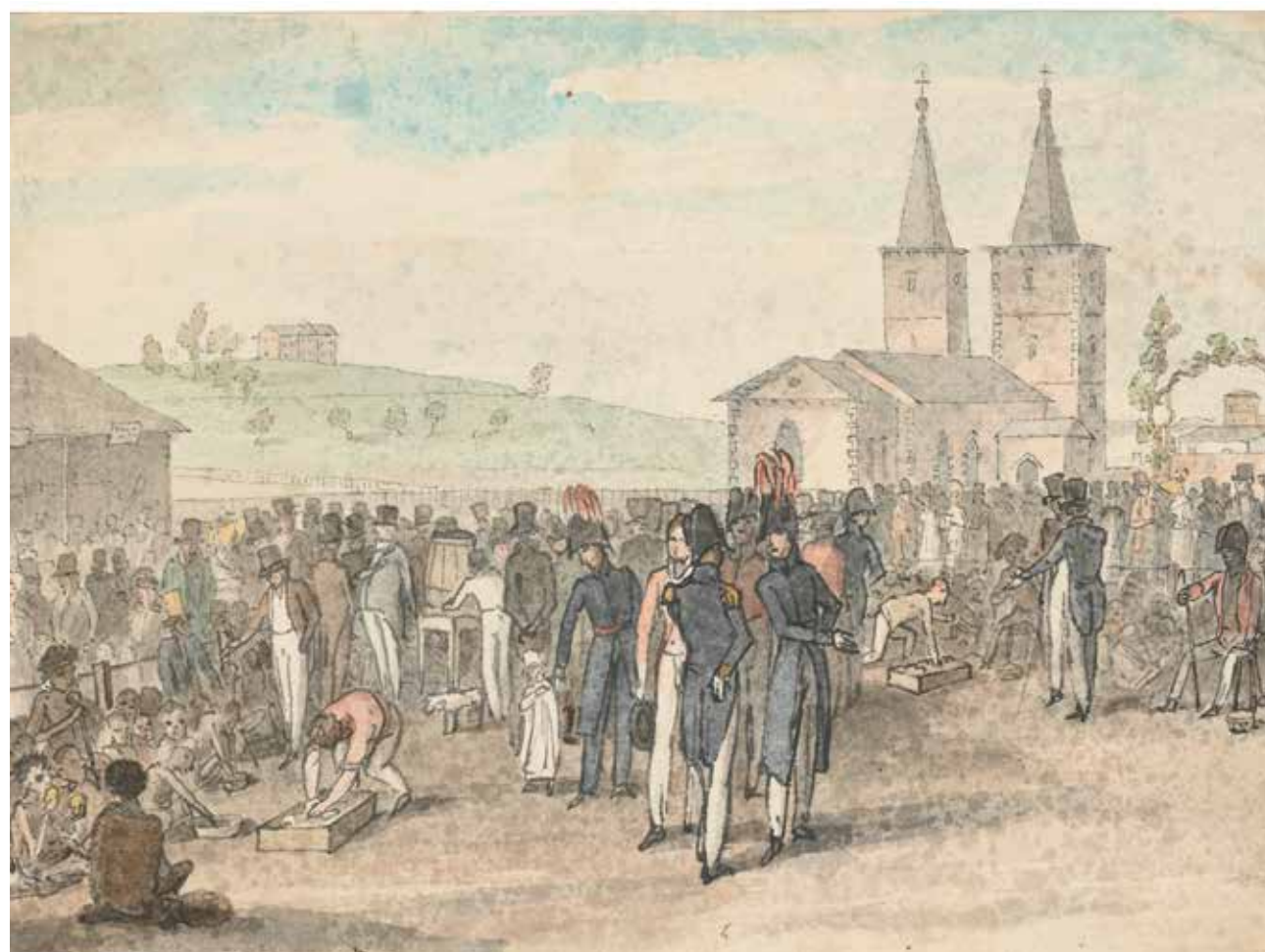
Macquarie’s tenure also coincided with the growth of British evangelical religions, such as the Methodists, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Unlike the more established and conservative Anglican Church, these faiths believed in the importance of preaching scripture to the masses, and missionary work based on education and social reform that would lead to spiritual conversion. Several of these churches established missions in NSW and elsewhere and supported the process of cultural assimilation and

the forced removal of children from their families in the late 19th and 20th centuries.

Macquarie allocated land to First Nations clans across Sydney with the aim of training them in European farming and agricultural practices. However, most were unwilling to participate and returned to their traditional lands and customs.

Macquarie also awarded land grants to those First Nations people who had distinguished themselves in the service of the colony. One notable example was Dharug men Colebee (c.1760–c.1831) and Nurragingy (dates unknown). They were the first Aboriginal men to be granted 30 acres at South Creek by Macquarie in 1819, which came to be known as ‘Black Town’, for their assistance in quashing violent clashes between the local First Nations people and settlers across the Cumberland Plain.

First Nations peoples continued their resistance over the forced dispossession from their lands. Macquarie abhorred any kind of defiance and exacted severe punishments on anyone who instigated uprisings. It was this stern approach that led to several punitive expeditions, including the Appin Massacre in April 1816, where at least 14 men, women and children were massacred when soldiers shot at and drove them over the gorge of the Cataract River.⁹⁵



The Governor attending the annual meeting of the First Australians at Parramatta. (National Library of Australia).

Annual Parramatta ‘Feast Day’

In an attempt to quell conflict on the western edge of the colony and acknowledge the loss of livelihood experienced by the First Nations peoples due to settlement, in 1814 Macquarie established an annual ‘Public Conference’ at Parramatta for First Nations peoples across the colony of NSW.

Those who attended were offered a ‘feast’ of roast beef, bread, and jugs of ale. The following year incentives such as blankets, clothes, and shoes were introduced, and land grants were offered to ‘settled and industrious adults’. By 1816 more than 300 First Nations people attended the annual event.

The same year, Macquarie also began the practice of presenting breastplates as well as British uniforms to worthy First Nations ‘chiefs’ in recognition of their services to the colony (considered offensive by many First Nations peoples). The authorities believed the ceremony was a way of fostering better relations with the First Nations communities.⁹⁶

Parramatta Native Institution

The annual Feast Day also served as an opportunity to recruit students for a new ‘Black Native Institution’ at Parramatta. Macquarie’s aim was to educate and civilise students through practical training and religious instruction.

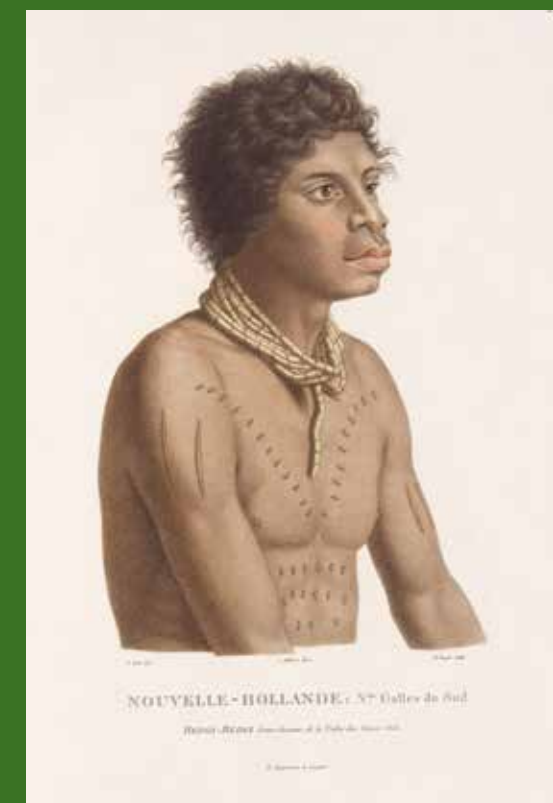
The institution opened in January 1815 with four students, increasing to 20 students at its peak. Most parents reluctantly allowed their children to attend, fearful of the ‘men in black clothes’ who would come and take them from their homes. Some children who were sent to the school had been removed from their families following the Appin Massacre.

Students learned reading, writing, arithmetic, and bible scripture. There was also a focus on practical skills with girls taught domestic duties and needlework while boys were trained in farming and machinery.

Children were expected to stay until their mid-teens and not permitted to leave the grounds or see their parents except for once a year at the annual conference and feast. Regardless, some children only stayed at the institution for a short time and returned home. Parents were so distressed at not being able to see their children that in 1815 an open-slat fence was built so they could observe them while at school.

In August 1821 several children died making the other First Nations children fearful and compelled many of them to run away from the school.

The institution remained open until 1822 and was relocated to Blacktown the following year. During that time a total of 37 students attended. Despite the low enrolment rate, Macquarie deemed the project to be a success, particularly the academic achievements of gifted student Maria Lock and the resulting marriages of two students to ‘suitable’ First Nations men.⁹⁸



Hand-coloured engraving of Bidjee-Bidjee (also known as Bidgee Bidgee). National Portrait Gallery of Australia of Australia.

Bidgee Bidgee

One of the first Aboriginal men to receive a breastplate was Burramatta man, and Maugoran’s youngest son, Bidgee Bidgee (c.1787– c.1836). After distinguishing himself on board colonial vessels employed in the fishing and sealing trade, and as a tracker to help capture Chief of the Cow Pastures Tribe, Coggie, Macquarie appointed Bidgee Bidgee ‘Chief of the Kissing Point Tribe’. He also reserved an unspecified area of land for him, however, the grant was never acted upon.

Bidgee Bidgee spoke English well and was known as a gifted mimic who could imitate ‘the manners of every officer and person in the colony’. He also frequently visited the home of First Fleet convict and successful brewer and businessman James Squire at his home in Ryde. Bidgee Bidgee led the Kissing Point clan for 20 after Bennelong’s death. He asked to be buried next to Bennelong on Squire’s property, but it is unsure if his wishes were fulfilled.

Influential chaplain and magistrate of NSW, Reverend Samuel Marsden, wrote of Bidgee Bidgee and the Aboriginal people of Kissing Point in his obituary in 1836:

I am very apprehensive very little can be done for Aborigines from Sydney to Parramatta all along the north side of the river, there is but one original Native; the rest are all dead; tho’ they were very numerous in these districts.⁹⁷



View of 'Lloydhurst' homestead and the former Blacks Town Native Institution site. (Blacktown City Library).

Black Town Native Institution

In 1823, two years after Governor Thomas Brisbane (1773–1860) replaced Macquarie, the Parramatta Native Institution was moved to South Creek, at what became known as 'Black Town', where 500 acres had been put aside for a new First Nations settlement.

The Institution was operated by the Church Missionary Society (CMS), and 14 children were transferred to the site under the care of George and Martha Clarke. Accommodation in the first six months consisted of a few basic sheds while a 'substantial building' and several smaller cottages were being constructed.

After the Clarkes left in 1824, the institution's administration was restructured and placed under the management of William Walker (1800–1855), a Wesleyan Methodist minister. Walker separated the children by gender and sent the boys to the Male Orphan School in Liverpool. He was paid five pounds for each child he acquired, which included a five-year-old boy who had been brought to the institution by an First Nations person from Bathurst after martial law was imposed in 1824.

In late 1824 the institute was closed and amalgamated with the Orphan Schools and renamed the Female Orphan Institution in Parramatta. It was later reopened in 1825 and repairs were made to the schoolhouse. By 1827, 17 Aboriginal and five Maori children were enrolled, which was still well below the building's capacity of 60 students. The ongoing viability of the school was also affected by the drought and worsening economy. Students were subject to strict rations and several children died from sexually transmitted diseases.

In 1829, the institution finally closed, and the children were initially transferred to the care of Rev. Robert Cartwright who eventually reassigned them to the Wellington Valley Mission in 1833.⁹⁹

Legacy of the Native Institution

Macquarie, and the governors who followed him, were genuine in their belief that the institution would:

*...effect the civilisation of the Aborigines of NSW, and to render their habits more domesticated and industrious', with the 'hope of producing such an improvement in their condition as may eventually contribute to render them not only more happy in themselves, but also in some degree useful to the community.'*¹⁰⁰

However, it is evident that the real intention of the institution was to control and conform First Nations people to a European and Christian way of life, starting with the children, and to eliminate their languages, culture and traditions. It also introduced the practice of separating children from their families, which helped form the policies that led to the systematic, forced removal and assimilation of children, known as the 'Stolen Generations'.

The site of the Blacktown Native Institution remains a culturally and spiritually significant place for First Nations people. Ownership of the site changed several times over the following two centuries and was used for a variety of purposes, including dairy farming. In 1982 the site was purchased by Land Commission NSW (Landcom) for subdivision and development, which was never undertaken. In 1986 the Darug Local Aboriginal Land Council prioritised the preservation of the site following archaeological investigations that identified the possibility of ancient camping and burial grounds and silcrete quarry sites as well as the original institution's building footings.

For almost two decades Landcom worked with Darug community representatives, technical consultants, and Blacktown City Council to consider ownership options and future plans for the site. In October 2018, the Blacktown Native Institution site was finally returned to the Darug people.¹⁰¹

Maria Lock

One of the most well-known students who attended the Parramatta Native Institution was Dharug woman Maria Lock (also Locke) (1805–1878). Maria was born in 1805 at Richmond Bottoms near the Hawkesbury River. She was the daughter of Yarramundi, 'Chief of the Richmond Tribes' whose family belonged to the Boorooberongal clan.

Maria was the first Aboriginal child to be admitted to the Native Institution. A bright and capable student, Maria is believed to have won first prize in the anniversary school examination in 1819. In 1822 she moved to the home of the Rev. Thomas Hassall (1794–1868), under the care of his wife, Anne. It was there she met and married her first husband Dicky who was a son of Bennelong and had also attended the Native Institution. Tragically, Dicky became ill and died within weeks of their marriage.

In 1824 Maria married Robert Lock (1800–1854), a convict carpenter who was placed under her supervision. Their marriage was the first sanctioned between a First Nations person and a convict. The Locks settled on a small farm at the Native Institution, but later moved to Liverpool to work for Rev. Robert Cartwright (1771–1856).¹⁰²

After her brother Colebee died, in March 1831 Maria petitioned Governor Ralph Darling (1772–1858) for his land grant at Blacktown. She received 40 acres that was granted to Robert on her behalf, but the claim was hampered by Cartwright who was uncomfortable with their proximity to his adjoining land. Frustrated, Maria persisted and in 1833 she was granted another 40 acres at Liverpool in Robert's name.

*...in Trust for the said Maria Lock during her life for the sole and separate use without the control of her present or future husband she may have and remain in trust for the Heirs of the said Maria Lock by you her present husband the said Robert Lock begotten.*¹⁰³

This was the first land grant offered to a First Nations woman in the colony. Maria eventually received Colebee's 30-acre grant in 1843 and a further 30 acres in Blacktown in 1844.

The couple had ten children, nine of whom survived to adulthood. Maria died on 6 June 1878 and was buried beside her husband at St Bartholomew's Church of England, Prospect. Her burial registration read 'Last of the Aborigines from Blacktown'. Maria's land holdings were divided amongst her children and were occupied by her descendants until around 1920 when the land was considered as a First Nations reserve but was later revoked by the Aborigines Protection Board.

Thousands of Dharug people can trace their heritage through Maria to Yarramundi (c.1760–c.1818) and his father Gomebeeree (c.1740–?), in a continuous link that stretches back to the 1700s.

Artist impression of Maria Lock. (Leanne Tobin).



A shifting settlement

Changes in attitude and treatment of First Nations peoples in the mid to late 1800s

As the 19th century progressed, attitudes towards First Nations peoples continued to deteriorate. This was due in part to radical changes in political, social, and scientific reasoning during The Enlightenment. New concepts such as the Theory of Evolution formulated by Charles Darwin in 1859 supported the commonly held view that black races were physically and intellectually inferior and 'doomed to extinction'.

As a result, Europeans began to categorise the First Nations peoples of the Sydney colony into two broad groups: those who still lived their traditional and 'savage' way of life; and those who had succumbed to the temptation of alcohol, promiscuity, and other vices and lived in poverty and squalor in the streets. Despite these pessimistic viewpoints, some Europeans still believed that First Nations people could be 'civilised' and productive members of society. On 17 March 1805, *The Gazette* reported:

*We reflect with pleasure of the possibility of our Natives been gradually weaned from their indolent habits, and rendered useful in society. Several of their youth are at this time employed in the various ceiling gangs in the Straits, upon lay, and evince an ardent inclination of contributing every possible exertion to the common advantage. We cannot sufficiently extol the humane conduct of the owner(s), who taking by the hand such as are inclined to industry, not only rescue them, individually, from the wants peculiar to the savage state, but found a basis of future amity upon the indissoluble ties conscious obligation.*¹⁰⁴

Macquarie's annual Native Feast at Parramatta ended in 1833 where between 700–800 First Nations people gathered to take part in ritual combat and receive their annual issue of blankets and clothing.

The Reverend Thomas Hassall's (1794–1868) description of the 1833 ritual combat closely resembles accounts of similar contests held in Sydney in the 1790s and at earlier feasts, indicating that First Nations people still took part in some traditional ceremonies:

There were probably six or seven hundred blacks assembled at their camps. The women of each party had first to be placed at a safe distance. The men painted themselves with white pipe clay and red ochre and thus, without any clothing, the two parties advance towards each other in a half circle, in ranks three and four deep, armed with spears, boomerangs, nullah-nullahs, waddies, and shields. When within a hundred yards or so of each other, the battle began. The spears flew across the half circle in great profusion, but were well parried by the shields. Then came the boomerangs, striking the

*ground first, and then rebounding in all directions among the enemy. These are dangerous weapons and cannot be warded off so well as the spears. After a little time, the contending parties closed in, and a hand-to-hand fight with their nullah-nullahs or waddies ended the affray. Three blacks were killed and a number wounded. Next day, notwithstanding, both parties assembled at the feast together and made friends.*¹⁰⁵

As the NSW colony continued to expand during the mid to late 1800s, ongoing violence, disease, and dispossession had a significant impact on the local First Nations population which declined during this time.¹⁰⁶ The increasing urbanisation and gentrification of Sydney meant there was a push to remove First Nations people from 'civil' society and public view, so the government established unmanaged reserves on the outskirts of town, such as the one at La Perouse, and in regional areas for them to live on. In the Parramatta River catchment area, many of the First Nations people who remained there likely moved to smaller settlements and camps that were set up in Plumpton, Sackville (north of Richmond), and 'The Gully' at Katoomba.

Other First Nations people moved to missions established by Christian churches on land that was granted by the government. Despite earlier, unsuccessful attempts by some missionaries to establish churches in the colony, those who succeeded, such as the Wesleyan Mission Society, were tasked with teaching First Nations people Christian ideals and training them for menial occupations.¹⁰⁷

Those First Nations people who remained in Sydney found work as fishing and hunting guides, unskilled labourers, and domestic servants. The discovery of gold around Bathurst and Orange, north-west of Sydney, in the 1850s also led to many jobs. A few First Nations people were supported by wealthy and sympathetic landowners in the region while others retreated to the bushland on the fringes of town where they continued traditional practices of hunting and gathering and traded fish and timber to make a subsistence living. By the mid to late 1800s, the increase in free settlers who were willing to do menial tasks meant there were fewer opportunities for work.¹⁰⁸

Towards the end of the 19th century, the movement to make Australia a federation was gaining support, due in part to increasing white nationalism and the belief that First Nations people were a dying race. In 1881 a Protector of Aborigines was appointed in NSW, which was replaced in 1883 by the Board for the Protection of Aborigines. The Board had far-reaching controls over most aspects of First Nations people's lives, including the complete power to remove First Nations children from their families. The decisions and actions of this and other authorities that followed throughout the 20th century would have a devastating impact on First Nations peoples that is still felt to this day.



Distributing blankets to Aborigines, New South Wales, c.1888. (State Library of NSW).

Annual blanket distribution and lists

The distribution of blankets initiated by Macquarie was established as an annual event by Governor Darling in 1826. The scheme aimed to assist in negotiations with various First Nations groups across the colony and suppress potential uprisings and resistance. It was also used to conduct a census or 'blanket list' to monitor the First Nations population.

The first distribution was conducted on the King's birthday, 23 April 1827, involving blankets and cheap ready-made clothing known as 'slop'. This initial offer was enthusiastically taken up by First Nations people who moved closer to Parramatta and Sydney, so in 1829 the distribution was limited to blankets.

It is thought that the success of the scheme may have been due to the value First Nations people placed on the blankets, which were considered similar to traditional skin rugs and reflective of the traditional practice of gift exchange. However, by 1844 Governor George Gipps (1790–1847) abolished the scheme believing the First Nations peoples were no longer a military threat and reliant on 'indiscriminate charity'.

Local authorities and clergy appealed this decision, and in 1848 Governor Charles FitzRoy (1796–1858) resumed the scheme. It continued until the 1880s when the distribution of blankets was placed in the control of the Aborigines Protection Board and abandoned altogether in the early 20th century.¹⁰⁹

Blanket lists provide one of the only sources of information about the existence and location of First Nations people in the Parramatta River catchment (and elsewhere) during the 1800s.¹¹⁰ By then, traditional clan names had been replaced by Anglicised place titles, such as the 'Parramatta and Prospect tribes' (Burramattagal/

Cennemegal or Warmuli), 'Concord tribe' (most likely Wangal), 'Duck River tribe' (believed to be Burramattagal who relocated due to the spread of settlement in Parramatta) and 'Kissing Point tribe' (located on the traditional lands of the Wallumattagal who were thought to have moved to Duck River after 1836).

The 1837 blanket list for the Parramatta region shows that 30 blankets were distributed to First Nations people of which only a handful of recipients were from the Concord, Duck River, and Kissing Point tribes. While not all First Nations people would have taken up the offer of a blanket, lists in subsequent years reflect the steady decline of First Nations populations in these areas. This view is supported by Parramatta Police Magistrate Gilbert Elliot (1796–1871) in his response to a circular letter from the NSW Legislative Council Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines in 1845:

*From enquiry we find that the last of the Aborigines of this district died three or four years ago; about half a dozen of the aborigines from other districts occasionally come into this district.*¹¹¹

It is likely that many First Nations people in the catchment may have died from old age or diseases introduced by the new wave of European migrants, while the younger people joined other groups or moved to settlements on the fringes of the city such as the ones established at La Perouse, Plumpton, Field of Mars in North Ryde and Sackville on the Hawkesbury River. There is also evidence that some First Nations people remained in places such as Blacktown and Emu Plains, continuing to live on what had been their traditional campsites until at least the mid-1800s.¹¹² Regardless, the disappearance of so many people resulted in the wholesale and devastating loss of generations of traditional knowledge and culture for the First Nations people of the Parramatta River catchment.

A white Australia

The Federation of Australia in 1901 occurred during a period of increased racism towards First Nations peoples and other non-white nations. During the 1800s the Australian colonies experienced a growth in non-white migration, especially during the gold rushes. Many migrants later relocated from the goldfields to the towns and cities, working for less wages or opening businesses in competition with European merchants which created hostilities. The introduction of workers from the Pacific Islands (known as 'Kanakas') in Queensland further angered Australians who believed they were being denied work opportunities that rightfully belonged to them.

Australia's evolving image as a country was based on the concept of a progressive society comprised of a skilled, white labour force. Popular nationalistic magazines such as *The Bulletin* upheld this idealistic

notion with its slogan, 'Australia for the White Man', which remained on its masthead until 1960.¹¹³

One of the first bills to be introduced to the new parliament in 1901 was the Immigration Restriction Act. Also known as the 'White Australia' policy, non-European migrants were made to sit a 50-word dictation test in a language chosen at the discretion of the immigration officer. The test gave officials the power to deny an applicant for several reasons, including whether they were from an 'undesirable' country, had a criminal record, or were considered 'morally unsuitable'. As a result, only a very small number of non-white migrants passed the test and were allowed entry. Exemptions were granted to non-European visitors entering Australia temporarily for work, education or to visit family.¹¹⁴



White Australia march of the great white policy, composed by W. E. Naunton, 1910. (National Library of Australia).

The introduction of two additional acts (the Pacific Island Labourers Act 1901 and the Post and Telegraph Act 1901) further limited the opportunity for non-white migrants to live and work in Australia by banning the use of imported labour and making it compulsory to employ only white workers on any vessels that carried Australian mail. The Immigration Restriction Act and dictation test remained in place until 1958.

Australian Constitution

Australia's Constitution, which came into effect on 1 January 1901, united the colonies under a federation known as the Commonwealth of Australia. First Nations peoples were not included in this agreement. When the constitution was being drafted First Nations peoples were excluded from any discussions concerning the creation of a new nation on their traditional lands.

Two sections regarding First Nations peoples were included in the original Constitution because it was widely believed they were a 'dying race' and would not need to be included in a census or given representation.¹¹⁵

Section 51(xxvi) The Parliament shall, subject to this Constitution, have power to make laws for the peace, order, and good government of the Commonwealth with respect to: ...The people of any race, other than the aboriginal people in any State, for whom it is necessary to make special laws.

Section 127 In reckoning the numbers of the people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, aboriginal natives should not be counted.

In addition, control over all matters relating to First Nations peoples remained in the hands of state governments (except the Northern Territory which was under the responsibility of the Commonwealth Government). This meant they were not subject to Commonwealth laws and financial support in relation to wages and social security benefits such as maternity allowances and old age pensions. While regulations and conditions varied from state to state, the overall position and status of First Nations peoples remained relatively similar across the country.

As a result of the 1967 Referendum, these sections of the Constitution were amended to officially recognise and legislate for First Nations peoples. Although the changes marked a significant milestone in the fight for equality, further constitutional reform is still needed to recognise and support the sovereignty, representation, and self-determination of First Nations peoples.

Assimilation, settlements and the Stolen Generations

Despite the commonly held view that First Nations peoples would eventually die out, which persisted well into the 20th century, the increase in children of mixed Aboriginal and white parentage (called 'half-castes') shifted the government's approach towards First Nations peoples from one of 'protection' to 'assimilation'.

By separating fairer-skinned First Nations people from the 'full-blooded' population, it was believed that over time, each successive generation would become more European until they were absorbed into white society altogether. While assimilation policies promoted the notion that First Nations peoples would enjoy the same standard of living as white Australians, the reality was that they were helping to create a cheap source of labour for farming, industry and domestic service.

The Aborigines Protection Act of 1909 gave the Aborigines Protection Board significant legal powers to 'provide for the protection and care of aborigines'. It was the first piece of legislation that dealt specifically with First Nations peoples in NSW. While it applied to all First Nations peoples, the legislation contained specific conditions for children, including the right of the Board to remove youths from First Nations reserves and place them into service. The Act was revised several times over the following five decades, however the most notable amendment was made in 1915:

*The Board may assume full control and custody of the child of any aborigine, if after due inquiry it is satisfied that such a course is in the interest of the moral and physical welfare of such child. The Board may thereupon remove such child to such control and care as it thinks best.*¹¹⁶

This change essentially gave the Aborigines Protection Board the power to remove a First Nations child from their parents at any time and for any reason, without having to establish in court that they were neglected.



Group portrait of Aboriginals from La Perouse and elsewhere. (State Library of NSW).

Reserves, stations, and missions

First Nations peoples across Australia were forcibly relocated to reserves, stations, or Christian missions. While each institution served a slightly different purpose, their collective aim was to erase every aspect of First Nations peoples cultural identity. People were prohibited from speaking their languages or continuing their traditions and ceremonies and were punished if they were caught.

Conditions varied depending on the type of place and location but were typically very poor with overcrowding and inadequate food, clothing and sanitisation. Disease epidemics often spread

throughout communities and thousands of First Nations peoples, especially children, died.

Families were often separated and sent to locations far away from their traditional lands to live with other First Nations peoples from different language groups. This often created tensions as people dealt with longstanding clan rivalry and competed for limited resources.

Residents were required to work for their food and board but were paid a fraction of the amount earned by white people. Most of their wages were managed by their 'employers', on behalf of the Aborigines Protection Board, which they never received.

Station and mission managers controlled almost every aspect of First Nations peoples lives, including food and clothing allocations, when they could leave, work and even marry. The managers also had legal guardianship of their children.¹¹⁷



The Stolen Generations

Children deemed 'white' enough were forcibly taken from their parents to be raised in institutions, fostered out, or adopted by white families, nationally and overseas. Known as the Stolen Generations, these children were forced to reject their heritage and culture and adopt a new identity. In some cases, children were told that their biological parents had given them up or died, and many were never able to reconnect with their parents later in life.¹¹⁸

Many children suffered extreme physical, psychological, and sexual abuse. Tragically, some children died, and most were left with lifelong disempowerment, shame, and humiliation which has led to intergenerational trauma that is still being experienced today.

In NSW alone there were more than 40 government or church-based homes, camps and other institutions where children were sent. Some were run as commercial farms where the children were used as slave labour and never paid for their work. Institutions such as the Cootamundra Girls' Home¹¹⁹ and Kinchela Aboriginal Boys Training Home¹²⁰ at Kempsey were notorious for their harsh treatment and physical and sexual abuse.

Girls who were sent to Cootamundra were trained to become domestic servants and farm hands. Most stayed until the age of 14 and were then sent out to work in wealthy non-Indigenous households. Many girls were physically and sexually abused and became pregnant in domestic service, only to have their children, in turn, removed and institutionalised. Generations of First Nations women passed through Cootamundra Girls' Home, and others like it, until it closed in 1969.

At Kinchela, boys aged between four and 14 years were subjected to appalling living situations and cruel and brutal treatment. Deprived of their family and culture, many boys experienced routine humiliation, beatings and sexual abuse throughout their stay.

Released when they turned 18 with little or no formal education and social skills, the men were poorly equipped to enter 'society'. Many tried to reconnect with family but were often rejected for not being able to identify with their First Nations heritage. Some men developed alcohol and substance abuse issues which often led to homelessness and incarceration. The home operated for almost five decades until its closure in 1970.



Aboriginal children, c.1890-1898. (State Library of NSW).



Parramatta Girls Industrial School

The Parramatta Girls Industrial School (also known as the Girls Training School and Parramatta Girls Home) was established in 1887 on the former premises of the Roman Catholic Orphan School. Located close to the Parramatta River, the site was used by Burramatta women for ceremonies prior to colonisation and remains a spiritually significant place for First Nations peoples.

The school served as the main child welfare facility for girls in NSW from 1887 to 1974. First Nations and non-Indigenous girls were sent there usually as a result of a welfare complaint or criminal offence. Most were sentenced to a standard committal period of six to nine months 'training'; however, the duration of their stay was only determined after they were admitted, and many remained there for years.

More like a prison than a school, the overcrowded conditions included dormitories of up to 36 beds and no other furniture. Girls were deprived of any individuality, possessions, and privacy. Mirrors were banned and doors were removed from the toilets and showers. Speaking was not permitted for most of the day and family visits were restricted to once a week or fortnight.

Girls were subjected to a rigorous and monotonous routine of cleaning, domestic training, and meals. Punishments ranged from loss of rewards or privileges to beatings and many girls were raped by the untrained officers. Those who were 'difficult' to manage were given anti-psychotic or sedative drugs or sent to the notorious Hay Girls Institution. Both the Parramatta and the Hay Institution for Girls were officially closed in June 1974.¹²¹

While all the girls who attended the Parramatta Girls Industrial School were left with lasting trauma, First Nations girls suffered additional humiliation and racial abuse. They were punished for speaking in their

languages or practising their culture in any way and, unlike the non-Indigenous girls, were not allowed to receive visitors. When the First Nations girls were released, they did not know 'who they were or where they were from.'¹²²

Legacy of the Stolen Generations

It is estimated that anywhere from one in ten to one in three First Nations children were forcibly removed from their families between 1910 and 1970.¹²³ The decision to remove and assimilate these children into white culture was an act of cultural genocide and gross violation of their human rights. Despite the commonly held view at the time that these children would be 'better off', statistics show that as adults they have poorer mental and physical health outcomes, lower standards of education and opportunities for employment, and higher rates of substance abuse, homelessness, and incarceration than those who were not removed.

In many instances, the loss of culture and identity has made it difficult for survivors of the Stolen Generations to reconnect with their families. The trauma and suffering so many of these children experienced has also impacted their ability to parent, often continuing the cycle of neglect and abuse that they endured.

Over the past five decades, individuals, communities and organisations, such as the Healing Foundation, have been working to reconnect members of the Stolen Generations, address the ongoing impact of intergenerational trauma, and advocate for financial compensation.

Recognition and reconciliation

The fight for recognition and equality for First Nations peoples that grew throughout the second half of the 20th century was instigated 30 years earlier by Worimi man and First Nations activist Fred Maynard (1879–1946). A member of the Stolen Generations, in February 1925 Maynard founded the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association to protest the continuing control of the Aboriginal Protection Board and advocate for the right of First Nations people to self-determination.¹²⁴

Day of Mourning and Protest

A decade later, as white Australians celebrated the 150th anniversary of the landing of the First Fleet on 26 January 1938, around 100 First Nations men, women and children defiantly gathered at Australia Hall in Sydney to hold what became known as the Day of Mourning and Protest, and called for the following resolution:

WE, representing THE ABORIGINES OF AUSTRALIA, assembled in conference at the Australian Hall, Sydney, on the 26th day of January, 1938, this being the 150th Anniversary of the Whiteman's seizure of our country, HEREBY MAKE PROTEST against the callous treatment of our people by the white men during the past 150 years, AND WE APPEAL to the Australian nation of today to make new laws for the education and care of Aborigines, we ask for a new policy which will raise our people TO FULL CITIZEN STATUS and EQUALITY WITHIN THE COMMUNITY.

This protest would ultimately lead to the formation of National Aborigines Day Observance Committee (NADOC) in 1957, which continues to this day as NAIDOC (National Aboriginal and Islanders Day Observance Committee).¹²⁵



Day of Mourning on 26 January 1938. (State Library of NSW).



Freedom riders at Bowraville, NSW in 1965.

Relocation to the cities

With the increasing closure of First Nations reserves by the Aboriginal Protection Board, many First Nations people returned to Sydney and surrounding regions in search of work and accommodation. Most were subjected to racial discrimination by non-Indigenous landlords, business owners and the wider community. Suburbs like La Perouse, Redfern, and Harris Park near Parramatta became havens in a hostile city where people could find jobs, connect with family members, and belong to a community.¹²⁶

Under the Housing for Aborigines (HFA) scheme established in the late 1960s, the Housing Commission of NSW built public housing specifically for First Nations applicants, much of it located on large public estates in areas such as Mount Druitt in Western Sydney.¹²⁷ Rather than providing genuine social welfare, the program attempted to engineer 'respectable' suburban communities to facilitate the ongoing assimilation of First Nations peoples into white society. Dwellings were designed around the western nuclear family model, which did not accommodate extended family groups and kinship responsibilities.

Tenants were expected to maintain their homes and gardens to a high standard and were subjected to regular inspections, despite many of them growing up on reserves or in institutions. Many First Nations people also travelled regularly to spend time on Country, pursue seasonal work opportunities, and attend to family business.

As a result, the long waiting list for social housing, arduous application process and strict eligibility criteria, meant that many First Nations people were unsuccessful in securing tenancies.

Decade of First Nations activism

Influenced by the Civil Rights Movement in the USA, the 1960s was a period of significant social change for First Nations peoples. In 1962, the electoral act was amended to extend the right to vote to all First Nations peoples.

The 1965 Freedom Ride, led by University of Sydney student and First Nations activist, Charles Perkins (1936–2000), conducted a two-week tour of regional areas in NSW to raise awareness of disadvantage and racism facing First Nations peoples across Australia at the time.¹²⁸ A year later, Gurindji man Vincent Lingiari (1908–1988) led 200 of his people from the Wave Hill Cattle Station in the Northern Territory, in a seven-year walk-off and strike to demand better work and pay conditions.¹²⁹ And, after 10 years of campaigning, the 1967 referendum saw a resounding 90 per cent of Australians vote in favour of amending the Constitution. This change allowed the Commonwealth to now make laws affecting First Nations peoples (previously the responsibility of the state governments) and also to include them in the census.¹³⁰

Despite this progress, it would take until 1969 for the NSW Aborigines Protection Board (which changed its name to Aborigines Protection Welfare Board in 1939) to be abolished, ending an unprecedented era of systematic control, dispossession, and persecution of First Nations peoples.

Aboriginal Tent Embassy

Political activism continued with the creation of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra in 1972 to protest a court decision over mining operations on Aboriginal land to demonstrate for land rights. The Racial Discrimination Act introduced in 1975, established equality before the law for all people regardless of race, colour, or national or ethnic origin.¹³¹

The Mabo decision and Native Title Act

Legislation around Indigenous land rights and native title claims progressed with the introduction of the First Nations Land Rights Act in 1976, which was the first legislation that enabled First Nations peoples to claim land rights for Country where traditional ownership could be proven. In 1992 the High Court of Australia handed down its landmark decision in *Mabo v Queensland*, which ruled that native title exists over particular kinds of lands, and that Australia was never *terra nullius* or 'empty land'.¹³² This was followed a year later by the Native Title Act that recognises the rights and interests of First Nations peoples in land and waters according to their traditional laws and customs.¹³³

Bringing Them Home report

The remainder of the 20th century saw an increased focus on Indigenous health and welfare as First Nations communities began to establish their own organisations, such as land councils, legal and health services.

In 1997, the landmark *Bringing Them Home* report¹³⁴ was tabled in federal parliament, which was the result of a national inquiry that investigated the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families.

People's Walk for Reconciliation

As the new millennium began, support for reconciliation and healing continued to grow. The People's Walk for Reconciliation in May 2000 is the largest political demonstration ever held in Australia, involving more than 250,000 people who crossed the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

In 2002, Valerie Linow (1941–) became the first member of the Stolen Generations to be awarded compensation in the NSW Victims Compensation Tribunal for the sexual abuse and injuries she suffered after authorities removed her from her family.

Sorry Speech & Closing the Gap

On 13 February 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made a formal apology to Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and particularly the members of the Stolen Generations, to acknowledge the pain, suffering, and loss of those people whose lives had been so adversely affected by past government policies of forced child removal, dispossession, and assimilation.¹³⁵

The same year, the Coalition of Australian Governments (COAG) launched *Closing the Gap*, a national framework that aimed to provide a coordinated strategy to improve the health and wellbeing of First Nations peoples.¹³⁶



Aboriginal Tent Embassy in front of the Old Parliament House, Canberra.

Black deaths in custody rallies

In 2020 thousands of protesters took part in ‘Black Lives Matter’ rallies in cities and towns across Australia to march against Indigenous deaths in custody and the killing of African-American George Floyd, who was murdered by a white police officer. In 2021 additional protests were held nationally to mark 30 years since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody handed out its final report.

Attitudes around Australia Day

The debate around changing the date of Australia Day to recognise First Nations peoples has grown in recent years. For many Indigenous and Non-Indigenous peoples, 26 January is referred to as ‘Invasion Day’ or ‘Survival Day’, which represents the start of dispossession and marginalisation for First Nations peoples. Over the past few years, rallies have been held across the country in support of changing the date. Many organisations now offer employees the option to work on Australia Day instead of celebrating the public holiday.

Uluru Statement from the Heart

Between 2016 and 2017, more than 1200 First Nations representatives were engaged in regional forums across the country to develop the Uluru Statement from the Heart. Issued on 26 May 2017, this historic document achieved a unified position on constitutional reform based on three key elements: ‘Voice, Treaty, Truth’.

The statement recommends a constitutionally enshrined First Nations voice to Parliament, along with a ‘Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about Indigenous history’. Makarrata is a Yolgnu word meaning ‘a coming together after a struggle’.¹³⁷

Even though the Aboriginal Elders involved called for the government to pass a Treaty Act rather than hold a referendum to decide its future, the statement was rejected by the Federal Government on the grounds that a voice to Parliament would not be ‘either desirable or capable of winning acceptance in a referendum’.

Since the Uluru Statement from the Heart was released, work has progressed slowly on establishing a constitutionally enshrined Indigenous voice to Parliament. In December 2021, the Federal Government published the Indigenous Voice co-design final report which outlines the steps needed to establish Local and Regional Voices.

In May 2021, the Uluru Statement from the Heart was awarded the Sydney Peace Prize. The Statement was recognised for ‘bringing together Australia’s First Nations peoples around a clear and comprehensive agenda; for healing and peace within our Nation and delivering self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, that enables Australia to move into the future united and confident’.¹³⁸

Following the federal election in May 2022, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese committed to implementing the Uluru Statement from the Heart in full and holding a referendum to establish an Indigenous Voice to Parliament.

At the Garma Festival held in north-east Arnhem Land in July 2022, the Prime Minister outlined the details of the government’s Indigenous Voice to Parliament referendum question: ‘Do you support an alteration to the constitution that establishes a First Nations’ Voice?’

During the following year, groups in favour of or against the Voice campaigned across the country. The referendum was held on 14 October 2023 and the proposal was rejected nationally, and by a majority in every state and territory, except the Australian Capital Territory.

Understanding First Nations peoples’ disadvantage and inequality

Although significant progress has been made in many areas over the last few decades, First Nations peoples continue to experience widespread socioeconomic disadvantage and health inequality.

Results from the 2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census showed that First Nations peoples’ life expectancy is, on average, 8 to 9 years lower than that of non-Indigenous Australians. The First Nations Health Survey held in 2018-19 reported that 46% of people had at least one chronic condition, up from 40% in 2012-13. Almost 25% of First Nations peoples also reported having a mental or behavioural condition.¹³⁹ Some rural and remote communities throughout Australia still do not have access to clean, safe drinking water, sanitation and affordable healthy food, which is strongly linked to extremely high levels of diabetes and renal disease.¹⁴⁰

Housing and homelessness remain a key issue. While overcrowded conditions in First Nations households have been steadily declining over the past decade, in 2018-19, 18% of First Nations peoples were living in overcrowded dwellings, compared with only 5% of non-Indigenous Australians. First Nations peoples also account for 22% of the homeless population nationally, and almost one third of First Nations peoples aged 15 and over had been homeless at some time in their life.¹⁴¹

While the number of First Nations peoples who completed Year 12 or its equivalent increased from 32% to 47% between 2006 and 2016, it is still well below the level of 79% achieved by non-Indigenous people in the same period.¹⁴²

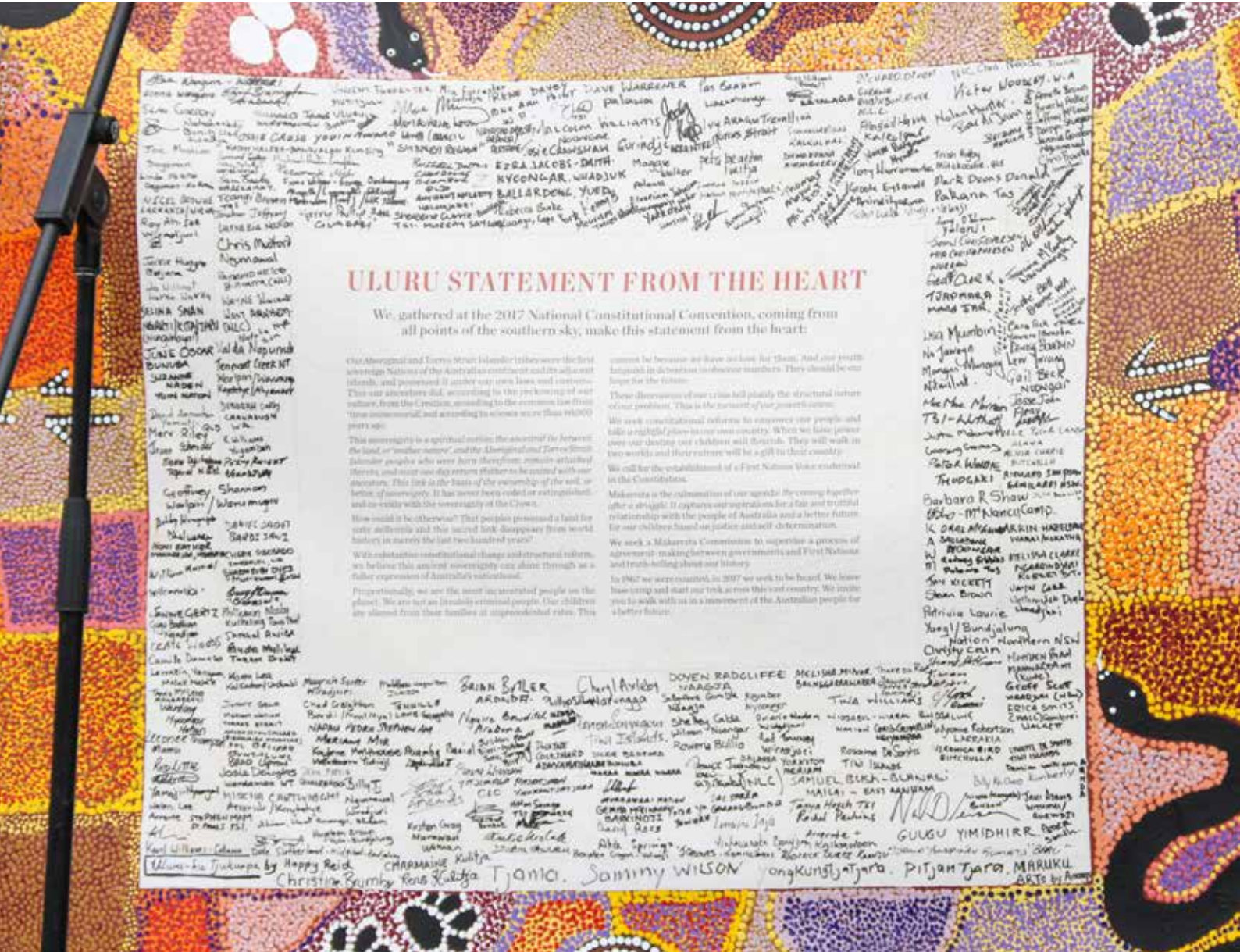
There is also a similar disparity in employment rates with only 47% of First Nations peoples aged 15 to 64 employed compared with 72% of non-Indigenous people. First Nations peoples were also about three times more likely than non-Indigenous people to be unemployed.¹⁴³

In 2016, First Nations prisoners accounted for 27% of the total Australian prisoner population, even though they make up only 2.8% of the Australian population aged 18 years and over.¹⁴⁴ More concerning, the national imprisonment rate for First Nations adults is more than 15 times higher than that for non-Indigenous adults. Since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody handed down its findings in 1991, a further 489 First Nations peoples have died in custody throughout Australia.¹⁴⁵

While the factors contributing to First Nations peoples disadvantage are varied and complex, researchers suggest the ‘deeper underlying causes include “intergenerational trauma” resulting from the ongoing and cumulative effects of colonisation, loss of land, language, and culture, the erosion of cultural and spiritual identity, forced removal of children, racism and discrimination’.¹⁴⁶



Uluru Statement from the Heart shown at the Yabun Festival 2018 in Victoria Park, Camperdown, NSW.





5. First Nations peoples of the Parramatta River catchment today

Despite the ongoing impacts of colonisation and historical injustices, First Nations peoples throughout the Parramatta River catchment and elsewhere continue to maintain strong connections to Country and culture. Today there are many organisations dedicated to increasing self-determination and wellbeing for First Nations communities, through initiatives that support the preservation of language, traditional knowledge and cultural practices, and foster reconciliation and healing.



Aboriginal Heritage Garden at Nurragingy Reserve, Doonside. (Blacktown City Libraries).

Housing issues affecting First Nations people

The Parramatta River catchment is home to more than 9,800 First Nations people, most of whom live in the Blacktown local government area.¹⁴⁹ Due to the dispossession of traditional lands and legacy of the Stolen Generations, many residents and their families were most likely born or lived in other parts of the country and moved to the region over time. However, descendants of the Burramattagal, Wangal and other clans of the Dharug people continue to live and work throughout the catchment.

While there has been a gradual improvement across most social indicators for First Nations communities in Western Sydney over the last two decades, access to affordable and quality housing is seen as a key determinant to closing the gap on many health and socioeconomic issues.

A study conducted by Blacktown City Council in 2016 showed that there were significantly higher rates of rented housing (particularly social housing), and lower rates of home purchases or ownership by First Nations residents compared to total Blacktown City households.¹⁵⁰

First Nations people were also over-represented among those using homelessness services and the homeless population in general.

Overcrowding remains a significant issue for First Nations communities in Western Sydney. Competition for social housing and lack of access to affordable private housing, means that people are often forced to live with family and friends for extended periods of time.

Social housing that was built decades ago and based on the traditional, western, nuclear family model, fails to cater for extended family structures and cultural kinship responsibilities. Lack of space for sleep and other social activities contributes to poor physical and mental health outcomes, especially among children.

In June 2022, the NSW Government announced \$554.1 million in funding to fast-track the delivery of new and upgraded homes for both social housing and housing for First Nations communities over the next four years.¹⁵¹

In delivering this initiative, it is important that government agencies consult with local First Nations communities on house design and surrounding infrastructure, which reflects and supports cultural values and connections to kinship and Country, and will contribute to the significant improvement of life outcomes for First Nations peoples.

Council and community support of First Nations peoples

In recent years, local and state government and community groups have increasingly been committed to recognising and respecting First Nations cultural beliefs, customs and traditions. Many councils work in partnership with their local First Nations communities to recognise and preserve stories and places of cultural significance.

There are also efforts to revive and encourage the use of First Nations languages, through initiatives such as renaming council wards, streets, parks and other landmarks, creating cultural heritage sites, walks and tours, and installing First Nations signage, artworks and other interpretive and educational displays.

Councils regularly include Welcome to Country or Acknowledgement of Country ceremonies at key events, and acknowledge and participate in national and local awareness days and events such as

NAIDOC Week, National Reconciliation Week, and National Sorry Day. Councils also conduct cultural awareness training for staff and offer events and activities for the community to learn more about First Nations history and culture. Many councils with larger First Nations communities offer relevant resources, services, and support to assist with health, education, and employment matters.

Several councils in the Parramatta River catchment (and elsewhere) have released or started the process of preparing Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs). RAPs aim to progress reconciliation and healing by building strong and trusting relationships based on truth-telling and self-determination, advocating ongoing respect and understanding between cultures, and creating meaningful and sustainable opportunities within local communities.



City of Canada Bay Council staff take part in a Walk on Country with Uncle Jimmy Smith, a Wiradjuri man from Erambie in Central West NSW and Aboriginal cultural educator.

Council information and resources

Blacktown City Council

Dharug (Darug/Daruk/Dharuk) Land

Aboriginal communities

Council provides a comprehensive range of information, services and support for First Nations peoples in their area.
<https://www.blacktown.nsw.gov.au/Community/Our-people/Aboriginal-communities>

Aboriginal Advisory Committee

Blacktown City Council's Aboriginal Advisory Committee consists of people who live or work in Blacktown City. The committee advises Council on the needs of its First Nations communities.
<https://www.blacktown.nsw.gov.au/Community/Our-people/Aboriginal-communities#section-4>

Blacktown City Reconciliation Action Plan

Blacktown City Council's Reconciliation Action Plan (PDF, 5MB) aims to build positive relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other Australians.
<https://www.blacktown.nsw.gov.au/Community/Our-people/Aboriginal-communities#section-5>

Digital Library – Indigenous Studies

Discover the culture, traditions, language, and stories from the past and present of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the City of Blacktown. Access research resources (including Indigenous family history information), online exhibitions and digitised collections.
<https://www.blacktown.nsw.gov.au/Services/Libraries/Digital-Library/Digital-Library-Indigenous-Studies>

More information

Contact: Mark Gibson, Community Development Officer – Aboriginal
Email: Mark.Gibson@blacktown.nsw.gov.au
Phone: 9839 6167 / 0410 712 594

Burwood Council

Wangal Land

History and Heritage

Find out about the first inhabitants of the local area, the Wangal people.
Website: <https://www.burwood.nsw.gov.au/Our-Council/Our-Burwood/History-and-Heritage>

City of Canada Bay

Wangal Land

The Wangal People

Learn more about the Wangal people who occupied the area now known as the City of Canada Bay for at least 10,000 years.
Website: <https://www.canadabay.nsw.gov.au/bay-run-history>

City of Canterbury Bankstown

Dharug and Eora Land

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander information, events and resources

Find out about First Nations history and places of significance and significant cultural events recognised in the Canterbury Bankstown local area.
Website: <https://www.cbcity.nsw.gov.au/community/cultural-services/aboriginal-torres-strait-islanders>

More information

Contact: Barbara Grant, Indigenous Community Development Officer
Email: barbara.grant@cbcity.nsw.gov.au
Phone: 9707 9863

City of Parramatta

Burramattagal Land

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community information

Parramatta has always been an important meeting place for First Nations people. Learn more about the history and culture of the Burramattagal people as well as services and support for First Nations peoples living in the area today.
Website: <https://www.cityofparramatta.nsw.gov.au/community/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-community>

Parramatta's Aboriginal Heritage

City of Parramatta has a database of known First Nations archaeological and historic and cultural sites and information about the location of land that could contain First Nations sites. The protection of First Nations heritage is maintained by the relevant planning controls applicable to the Parramatta Local Government Area.
<https://www.cityofparramatta.nsw.gov.au/visiting/what-is-heritage/parramattas-aboriginal-heritage>

Keeping Place

The Keeping Place was established by the City of Parramatta in consultation with Dharug Traditional Custodians to provide a safe space for First Nations cultural material and knowledge to be conserved and celebrated on Country.
Location: PHIVE, 5 Parramatta Square, Parramatta.
Contact: Karen Maber, Keeping Place Officer.
Website: www.cityofparramatta.nsw.gov.au/phive/about/keeping-place

First Nations Advisory Committee

The First Nations Advisory Committee advises Council on strategic matters and on projects of Council and other stakeholders. The Committee also raises issues important to local First Nations communities including the local Traditional Owners.
<https://www.cityofparramatta.nsw.gov.au/council/your-council/governance-of-the-council/advisory-committees>

More information

Contact: Steven Ross
Email: sross@cityofparramatta.nsw.gov.au
Phone: 9806 5465

City of Ryde

Wallumedegal (Wallumattagal) Land

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

City of Ryde offers information on the history and culture of First Nations peoples and support services for communities in their area.
Website: <https://www.ryde.nsw.gov.au/Community/Aboriginal-and-Torres-Strait-Islander-communities>

Aboriginal History

Learn more about the Wallumedegal people who occupied the Ryde area and surrounding suburbs.
<https://www.ryde.nsw.gov.au/Library/Local-and-Family-History/Historic-Ryde/Aboriginal-History>

Cumberland City Council

Dharug (Darug/Daruk/Dharuk) Land

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander information

Council provides a comprehensive range of information, services and support for First Nations peoples in their area.
Website: <https://www.cumberland.nsw.gov.au/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander>

Aboriginal heritage in Cumberland

Find out about the range of significant First Nations sites throughout the Cumberland region.
<https://www.cumberland.nsw.gov.au/aboriginal-heritage-cumberland>

Hunter's Hill Council

Wallumedegal (Wallumattagal) Land

Indigenous Heritage

Learn more about the original habitants of the local area, the Wallumedegal people.
Website: <https://www.huntershill.nsw.gov.au/council/about-council/our-history/indigenous-heritage/>

Inner West Council

Gadigal and Wangal Land

Aboriginal Community

Council provides a range of information, services and support for First Nations peoples in their area.
Website: <https://www.innerwest.nsw.gov.au/live/community-well-being/aboriginal-community>

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee

This group assists Council with matters related to services, programs and activities for First Nations peoples living in the local area.
<https://www.innerwest.nsw.gov.au/contribute/community-engagement/local-democracy-groups/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-advisory-committee>

More information

Contact: Deborah Lennis, Cultural Advisor
Email: Deborah.Lennis@innerwest.nsw.gov.au
Phone: 9392 5755

Strathfield Council

Wangal Land

Aboriginal history

Learn more about the original habitants of the local area, the Wangal people.
Website: <https://www.strathfield.nsw.gov.au/history/aboriginal-history/#:~:text=In%20the%201700s%20the%20Wangal,area%20now%20known%20as%20Strathfield.>

For updates to this list, and information on services, support and resources provided by our other members organisations, visit: ourlivingriver.com.au/firstnationspeoples.

First Nations organisations and support services

The Parramatta River catchment and surrounding region is home to a wide range of organisations, programs, and events that aim to improve the health, social, and economic wellbeing of First Nations communities and also help the broader community learn about First Nations peoples and their culture. For updates to this list, visit: ourlivingriver.com.au/firstnationspeoples.

AES (Aboriginal Employment Strategy)

Address: Head Office, 1/13-17 Cope Street, Redfern NSW 2016 (other offices throughout NSW)
Phone: 1300 855 347
Email: info@aes.org.au
Website: <https://aes.org.au/>

AES (Aboriginal Employment Strategy) is a national Aboriginal recruitment and group training company that empowers Aboriginal people through brokering employment opportunities and supporting our candidates to have successful careers through mentoring, coaching, training, and specialist support.

Aboriginal Legal Service

Address: 33 Argyle St, Level 8, Parramatta, NSW 2150, Australia (other offices throughout NSW)
Phone: (02) 8836 3400 (Criminal Law Practice; (02) 8836 3444 (Care & Protection and Family Law Practice)
Website: <https://www.alsnswact.org.au/>

Aboriginal Legal Service is the primary legal service for Aboriginal peoples in NSW and the ACT. They deliver free, culturally appropriate legal advice, representation, information, and referrals. They also advocate to combat injustice and reform discriminatory laws.

Baabayn Aboriginal Corporation

Address: 252 Luxford Road, Emerton NSW 2770
Phone: (02) 8608 6054
Email: info@baabayn.org.au
Website: <https://www.baabayn.org.au/>

Baabayn aims to connect with individuals and families in a welcoming environment, providing them with support and links to services that help them heal from the past and nurture their sense of confidence and pride in the future.

Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative

Address: 55/59 Flood Street, Leichhardt NSW 2040
Phone: (02) 9560 2541
Email: boomalliartgallery@gmail.com
Website: <https://www.boomalli.com.au/>

Established in Chippendale in 1987 by 10 Aboriginal artists, the group helps to promote and advocate for Aboriginal Artists in regional and metropolitan areas, whose language groups exist within NSW. They also provide promotional, educational, and copyright support for their members.

Butucarbin Aboriginal Corporation

Address: 28 Pringle Road, Hebersham NSW 2770
Phone: (02) 9832 7167
Email: koori@ozemail.com.au
Website: <https://butucarbinaboriginalcorporation.com/>

Butucarbin is a non-profit Aboriginal organisation that runs a range of group and individual community development and adult education programs and activities, to help improve the social, economic, emotional and cultural development of the Aboriginal community in Western Sydney.

Community Junction Inc

Address: Corner Debrincat Ave and Oleander Road, North St Marys NSW 2760
Phone: (02) 9673 3908
Email: info@communityjunction.org.au
Website: <https://www.communityjunction.org.au/>

Community Junction Inc is a local not-for-profit organisation located in the Penrith Local Government Area, which provides a range of no or low-cost programs and services, including children's, youth, Indigenous and community programs in response to local interests and needs.

Darug Custodian Aboriginal Corporation

Address: PO Box 81, Windsor NSW 2756
Phone: 0415 770 163
Email: info@darugcorporation.com.au
Website: <https://darugcorporation.com.au/>

Darug Custodian Aboriginal Corporation is a not-for-profit organisation that has been active as in Western Sydney for more than 40 years. The group aims to educate the wider community about Aboriginal people and their culture, and assists with educational programs on culture, cultural sensitivity, language and cultural delivery across all education sectors.

Deerubbin Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC)

Address: 73A O'Connell Street, North Parramatta NSW 2151
Phone: (02) 4724 5600
Email: Reception@deerubbin.org.au
Website: <https://deerubbin.org.au/>

Deerubbin LALC aims to develop its land holdings to create opportunities and benefits for the Aboriginal community, in turn strengthening the confidence and self-reliance of Aboriginal people and families.

Dharug Ngurra Aboriginal Corporation (DNAC)

Address: PO Box 441, Blacktown NSW 2148
Phone: (02) 9622 4081
Email: info@dharugngurra.org.au
Website: <https://www.dharugngurra.org.au/>

The DNAC offers information to assist family origins and connections, and also aims to develop a cultural centre for Dharug research to preserve kinship ties for future generations.

Gilgai Aboriginal Centre for the Aged & Disabled

Address: 2 Bindaree Street, Hebersham NSW 2770
Email: ceo@gilgai.org.au
Phone: (02) 9832 3825
Website: <https://www.gilgai.org.au/>

Gilgai is a long-standing community home care provider in Western Sydney, providing aged care and disability services to Aboriginal and non-Indigenous clients on Dharug land. Gilgai also offers training and support to home care providers that have Aboriginal clients within their organisations.

Greater Western Aboriginal Health Service (GWAHS)

Address: Various locations throughout Greater Western Sydney
Phone: 9836 7300 (Mt Druitt), 4729 7300 (Penrith), 4782 6276 (Katoomba)
Email: enquiries@gwahs.net.au
Website: <https://www.gwahs.net.au/>

GWAHS is a health service for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Western Sydney, Nepean and Blue Mountains regions. Services include GPs, health checks, chronic disease programs, men's health, drug and alcohol and mental health and child and family services.

Gundungurra Tribal Council Aboriginal Corporation

Address: 14 Oak Street, Katoomba NSW 2780
Phone: (02) 4782 9767
Email: info@gundungurra.org.au
Website: <https://gundungurra.org.au/>

Gundungurra Tribal Council Aboriginal Corporation is a non-profit organisation that was founded to strengthen, preserve and protect the culture and heritage of the Gundungurra people. They offer cultural tours, events and other experiences in the Blue Mountains region.

Kimberwalli

Address: 1 Mimika Avenue, Whalan NSW 2770
Phone: (02) 9853 3333
Email: kimberwalli@det.nsw.edu.au
Website: <https://kimberwalli.com.au/>

Kimberwalli is a unique initiative to support young Aboriginal people in Western Sydney to transition from school to further education, training or employment.

Koori Mail

Address: PO Box 117, Lismore NSW 2480
Phone: (02) 6622 2666
Accounts: accounts@koorimail.com
Editorial: editor@koorimail.com
Advertising: advertising@koorimail.com
Website: <https://koorimail.com/>

Established in May 1991, the *Koori Mail* is a fortnightly national newspaper reporting on the issues that matter to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. All profits go to Indigenous Australians, in the form of dividends for their owner organisations, scholarships for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, and sponsorship of Indigenous community events.



First Nations organisations and support services (cont.)

Kurranulla Aboriginal Corporation

Address: 15 Jannali Avenue Jannali, NSW 2226
Phone: (02) 9528 0287
Email: manager@kurranulla.org.au
Website: <https://kurranulla.org.au/>

Kurranulla provides high-quality culturally appropriate services to achieve meaningful and long-lasting outcomes for the local Aboriginal community living within South East Sydney. They offer a range of programs, activities, and events for schools, businesses and the community to strength their understanding of Aboriginal Culture.

Marist 180

Address: 36 First Avenue, Blacktown NSW 2148
Phone: (02) 9672 9200
Email: Shannon.Thorne@m180.org.au
Website: <https://marist180.org.au/>

Marist 180 provides a range of programs and services to help young people create positive change in their lives.

Marrin Weejali Aboriginal Corporation

Address: 79-81 Jersey Road Blackett NSW 2770
Phone: (02) 9628 3031
Email: tony@marrinweejali.org.au
Website: <https://marrinweejali.org.au/>

Marrin Weejali provides culturally safe alcohol, other drug and non-acute mental health counselling, referral and advocacy services to members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community of Western Sydney, and also to other people in need of assistance.

Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council (MLALC)

Address: Level 2, 150 Elizabeth Street, Sydney NSW 2000
Phone: (02) 8394 9666
Email: metrolalc@metrolalc.org.au
Website: <http://www.metrolalc.org.au>

The MLALC is primarily responsible for the conservation and land management of Aboriginal sites and relics within its boundaries, makes claims to Crown lands and acquires and manages land on behalf of its members, and provides suitable and affordable housing for Aboriginal people in the area.

Murama Healing Space

Address: Newington Armory Wharf, Riverwalk, Jamieson Street, Sydney Olympic Park NSW 2127
Email: murri_star@yahoo.com.au
Website: <https://murama.com.au/murama-healing-space/>

Murama Healing Space at Sydney Olympic Park provides a hub for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples to come together to foster learning, healing and reconciliation. The community-led initiative runs art projects and exhibitions, workshops and other programs to help all members of the community understand, respect and celebrate Aboriginal knowledge and history.

Muru Mittigar Aboriginal Corporation

Address: (Head Office) 111 Henry Street, Penrith NSW 2750
Phone: (02) 4730 0400
Email: info@murumittigar.com.au
Website: <http://www.murumittigar.com.au/>

Muru Mittigar seeks to create a better understanding of Aboriginal culture in the wider community by creating new jobs, developing workplace skills training, and increasing sustained employment opportunities for Indigenous Australians. Visit their website for more information on the Cultural Education Centre in Rouse Hill, Community Finance Hub in Penrith, and Native Nursery located in Llandilo.

Ngroo Education Aboriginal Corporation

Address: C/- Tregear Public School, Wilkes Crescent Tregear NSW 2770
Phone: (02) 9835 6056
Email: admin@ngrooeducation.org
Website: <https://www.ngrooeducation.org/>

Ngroo Education Aboriginal Corporation works to improve opportunities for Aboriginal children to achieve their potential by increasing their level of participation in mainstream early childhood education and care, and other relevant services and settings.

NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) Inc.

Email: kerrie.walden@det.nsw.edu.au
Website: <https://www.aecg.nsw.edu.au/>

The NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) Inc. is a not-for-profit Aboriginal organisation that provides advice on all matters relevant to education and training which represents the Aboriginal community viewpoint, and offers opportunities for professional development.

NSW Aboriginal Land Council (NSWALC)

Address: Level 6, 33 Argyle Street, Parramatta NSW 2150
Phone: (02) 9689 4444
Email: yuseph.deen@alc.org.au
Website: <https://alc.org.au/>

The NSWALC is committed to ensuring a better future for Aboriginal people by working for the return of culturally significant and economically viable land, pursuing cultural, social and economic independence for its people and being politically proactive and voicing the position of Aboriginal people on issues that affect them.

Sydney Regional Aboriginal Corporation (SRAC)

Address: 51-57 Henry Street, Penrith NSW 2750
Phone: (02) 4721 1536
Email: info@SRAC.ngo
Website: <http://www.srac.ngo/>

SRAC aims to improve the health, social, emotional and economic wellbeing of Aboriginal people through a range of consulting and outreach services and children’s, aged and disability programs.

The Shed – Mt Druitt

Address: Corner Emert Parade and Weber Crescent, Emerton NSW 2770
Phone: (02) 9628 6317
Email: menshealth@westernsydney.edu.au

The Shed was established in 2004 as a partnership between Western Sydney University, MHIRC and the Holy Family Church at Mount Druitt. The group provides support for men with mental health issues and offers assistance to obtain public housing, legal services and financial counselling.

Western Sydney Aboriginal Men’s Group

Phone: 0499 366 262
Email: Brendon.Kendall@health.nsw.gov.au
Facebook: www.facebook.com/Western-Sydney-Aboriginal-Mens-Group-184041622389/

The group provides a safe and supportive environment where men can meet, have a sense of belonging and share life experiences.

Western Sydney Aboriginal Regional Alliance (WSARA)

Email: administration@wsara.org.au
Website: <https://wsara.org.au/>

WSARA aims to consult with, listen to, and advocate for local Aboriginal people to increase their wellbeing, healing and culture, by accessing culturally appropriate services and programs.

Western Sydney Local Health District

Website: www.wslhd.health.nsw.gov.au/

Western Sydney Local Health District (WSLHD) provides a diverse range of public healthcare to more than 946,000 residents in Sydney’s West as well as services to those outside our catchment from specialty state-wide centres of expertise. Visit the website to contact each of their hospitals: Auburn, Blacktown, Cumberland, Mt Druitt and Westmead, community health centres, District Office and other key services.

WentWest Primary Health Network (Aboriginal Health Team)

Address: 1A/160 Hawkesbury Road, Westmead NSW 2145
Phone: (02) 8811 7100
Email: wentwest@wentwest.com.au
Website: <https://wentwest.com.au/>

As part of the Primary Health Network, WentWest works in consultation and partnership with local GPs, allied health professionals, and community bodies in Western Sydney as well as the broader health sector, to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of medical services for patients in the region.

Yarpa NSW Indigenous Business and Employment Hub

Address: Level 7, 203-209 Northumberland Street, Liverpool, NSW 2170
Phone: 1300 017 177
Email: info@yarpa.com.au
Website: <https://yarpa.com.au/>

The Yarpa Hub helps to build relationships and connect First Nations peoples to business and employment opportunities across NSW. They also work to empower market leaders in breaking down barriers to engage First Nations communities, people and businesses.

Yilabara Solutions

Address: (Head Office) Level 5, 33 Argyle Street Parramatta NSW 2150 (other offices throughout NSW)
Phone: (02) 7255 8571
Email: contact@yilabara.org.au
Website: <https://yilabara.org.au/>

Yilabara Solutions is a fully owned and controlled Aboriginal organisation that delivers a range of employment and training services and supports businesses to meet their corporate social responsibility objectives.

The future of the Parramatta River

The Parramatta River has experienced more change in the last 200 years than any time in its history. The impact of agriculture, development, and industry along its shores that started with European colonisation has been well-documented. As a result, we have lost forever the pristine waterways and surrounding land, and many native species of plants and animals, that had been respected and cared for so well by the river's Traditional Custodians for tens of thousands of years.

While there have been genuine efforts in the last 30 years to reverse or mitigate some of the damage done to the river and its fragile ecosystems, many of the policies written and actions taken in the past have had little or no input from First Nations stakeholders.

By acknowledging First Nations peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the land and waterways, and continuing to learn more about their intrinsic connection to Country, it is incumbent upon us to prioritise First Nations custodial role in the protection, preservation, and planning around the future use of the river and surrounding land.

This not only includes opportunities for First Nations communities to provide leadership and expertise in policy making and planning decisions for the river, but also opportunities for First Nations businesses to contribute to projects and initiatives that will achieve greater cultural awareness, engagement, and inclusion.

The growing global movement to protect the rights of nature may also have an impact on the future governance and management of the Parramatta River.

This movement aims to recognise the inherent value and rights of natural systems and to shift the focus of decision-making from solely considering human interests to also the interests of the natural world. If successful, this movement could lead to increased conservation efforts and more stringent protections for the Parramatta River that would ultimately help preserve and restore the health of the river ecosystem. This could result in a range of benefits for the plants, animals, and people who depend on the river, including improved water quality and habitat health and increased recreational opportunities.

Such a shift in the recognition and management of the Parramatta River catchment will be required to mitigate the effects of climate change. As one of Australia's most densely populated catchments, predicted sea level rise could lead to increased flooding and erosion. This would

have a significant impact on many foreshore areas, limiting opportunities for recreation and harming fragile ecosystems and the wildlife that depend on them.

Similarly, the forecast average temperature rise in Sydney of 3°C by 2050, and increased urban heat island effect due to further development, present a serious risk to the health and wellbeing of both people and wildlife.¹⁵⁴

It is only by taking a holistic approach to land and waterway management with First Nations traditional knowledge and culture at its core, supported by modern techniques in water quality monitoring, water sensitive urban design and environmental controls, that we will be able to achieve meaningful and lasting change for the Parramatta River and protect Country for future generations.¹⁵⁵

Sunrise on the Parramatta River.

6. Notes

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