

Narrabeen Lagoon a brief history

- **1770** Captain Cook's Log notes "some broken land that appeared to form a bay"⁶
- **1788** The first official European to visit, Governor Phillip, describes it as a large lake surrounded by a bog & large marsh, taking 3 days to walk around the lagoon.⁶
- **1801** Local Aboriginals describe the stream at the lagoon entrance as 'Narrowbine' to Lt James Grant, as he leads a search party north. The entrance was about 100m wide.⁶
- **1814** James Meehan surveys the area using the name 'Narrabang lagoon', then **1830** William Govett uses 'Narrabine Lagoon'. First land grants in **1815, 1816** and **1823**.^{10d}
- **1861** Bridge built across Dee Why lagoon, as settlements spread north.
- **1883** First bridge built across Narrabeen lagoon at Pittwater Rd (not 1884 as previously thought).^{10d}
- Late **1800s** Drilling in Deep Creek area for coal, gas & petroleum. No commercial deposits found.¹²
- **1897** Narrabeen Post office services 30 local residents, mostly farming families.
- **1911** Lagoon dredging starts, mostly in Eastern channel & around Wimbledon Avenue area.¹¹
- **1912** The area has 115 residents, 8 grocery shops, 5 boarding houses, 2 butchers.
- **1913** The tram service extends to Narrabeen, the "end of the line", bringing visitors to the Lakeside camp site. **1924** Spit Bridge opens, starting a boom in day-trippers.
- **1924-28** Drought. **1925** Ocean St bridge is built by Arthur Larkin. Dry lagoon bed is used for motorbike and car races, as well as biplane flights for 10 shillings.
- **1920s-30s** Lime company at Deep Creek extracts lime from shells in middens & sediments.¹²
- **1930s** Depression: homeless live in campsites at North Narrabeen and Deep Creek. German seamans camp at Deep Creek marked by rock engravings of swastikas & ship names.¹²
- **1940s** Major storms and floods in the Narrabeen area. Urban development spreads. Wakehurst Parkway and western bridges built in the war years & opened in **1946**.
- Post war: A boom period of broad-scale development & population growth. Improved access, transport & rise of the family car brings more day-trippers. Large fleets of 12ft & 16ft sailing skiffs raced in the lagoon waters, until the late **1950s**.⁶
- **1950s & 60s** Dredging in central basin.¹¹ **1954** the deteriorated Pittwater Rd bridge is replaced.⁹
- **1960s & 1970s** Rapid suburban development. Mid **1960s** began regular mechanical opening of the entrance to reduce flooding to new low lying houses.¹¹ Conservation groups mount increasing pressure for protection of natural areas in the catchment.
- **1970** Clean Waters Act restricts activities that affect water quality, eg. dredging.
- **1974** Legal protection to large areas with minimum subdivision 5 acre (IDO51).^{10a} Birdwood Park high dunes constructed to reduce wind-blown sand blocking the lagoon entrance.¹¹
- **1977** Narrabeen Lagoon Committee established, an active community group for nearly 30 years.^{10b}
- **1982** Rock wall built on north side of lagoon entrance to direct & assist flows.¹¹
- **1990s & on:** Urban sprawl into Belrose, Oxford Falls, Red Hill, Cromer Heights, Collaroy Plateau & Warriewood. **1991** part of Deep Creek catchment added to Garigal National Park.
- **1991** Coastal Environment Centre established on the northern foreshore of the lagoon.
- **1994** Pittwater Natural Heritage Association established to protect local environment.^{10c} Major bushfire burns large tracts of bushland in catchment, some houses lost.
- **1996** Warriewood Wetlands purchased by Pittwater Council from private ownership.
- **2005** Friends of Narrabeen Lagoon Catchment replaces Narrabeen Lagoon Committee. Lobbies local and State governments to address threats to the lagoon & catchment.
- **2007** NSW government grants \$1.9m for rehabilitation of the lagoon & creeks, in a joint 3-year project with Warringah & Pittwater Councils, including community education.

Sustainable living for thousands of years

The name 'Narrabeen' may have come from the Aboriginal 'Narrabang' (wild swan) or *Narrowbine* (the lagoon entrance).² The lagoon was of great significance to the indigenous 'saltwater people' of the Guringai, who depended on the abundant food sources of the area and had strong connections to the coast, flora and fauna.¹ The Black Swan inspired their culture as a totem.

The Guringai inhabited the wider region for some 20,000 years,² though their area would have contracted about 6500 years ago as the sea levels rose, flooding a 20km wide strip of coast and forming the coastal lagoons. There were 3 main family groups, interacting for trade and ceremonial occasions. The frequented 'Coastal Dreaming Track' was roughly aligned with Pittwater Rd and linked with tracks to Ku-ring-gai, Middle Harbour, Manly and the cultural icon of North Head.¹

The Guringai were very resourceful, living according to the seasons. Summers were spent harvesting seafood, with campsites at Middle Creek (Sport Academy site) and Mactier St Narrabeen. Local sites for food collection or ceremonies included the lagoon and entrance, beach, rock platform, Narrabeen Head, Cromer and Elanora Heights, Deep Creek, as well as ocean fishing using canoes.

Beach dunes were high, broken by a few ancient walkways and had many shellfish middens. Winter was often spent inland (eg. Middle Harbour, Roseville) harvesting bush foods and hunting land mammals.



'A rich variety of bush tucker'¹³



Warrigal Spinach - a bush food from the lagoon foreshores

Familiar with the times of breeding, migration, flowering and fruiting, they would harvest and encourage their favoured foods to flourish as sustainable supplies:

- **Coastal lagoons** were a cultural focus, and a source of food and fibre from plants, birds, reptiles, mammals, fish, shellfish and prawns.¹ Many rock engravings exist in key protected sites of the catchment, often depicting hunting scenes.^{3,4}
- **Plants for food, nectar, dyes & tools** included Banksia, Dianella lily, grass trees, Lillypilly, Cabbage Tree Palms, grasses & yams. Smouldering Banksia cones were used as fire coals.¹ Cooking and even flesh wounds could be wrapped in Paperbark.

- **Nothing was wasted.** Teeth, bones, quills, feathers, claws, shells and rock were used for decorations or tools for sewing, fishing, cutting, harvesting or sharpening spear tips. Animal skins were used for winter warmth, sleeping mats or baby slings. Surplus dyes, shells, hooks and salt were traded widely.¹
- **Food production** by firestick farming, horticulture and animal management practices helped sustain food sources such as emus. Fish farming included oyster farming, fish traps and cages, even using dolphins to herd fish for capture (eg. mullet and tailor). Bird rookeries, as egg sources, were actively protected from predators such as dingoes and spotted cats. Over-harvesting was prevented by strong codes of punishment for taking more than was needed. Only a select few could eat fish roe or bird eggs. Large fish were not to be taken, as these female or elder fish sustain the fish population and teach migration routes to their young.³



With European contact, much of the local population died from disease or were forced away. A tragic loss of elders, knowledge and culture resulted. Local communities and the Aboriginal Heritage Office now help safeguard Guringai culture and heritage, which is celebrated annually at the Guringai Festival.

'Respect and understanding was shown for the source of food... conducive to the wellbeing of our food resources...leading to minimal environmental impact on the food chain and resulting in long-term sustainability of the food source.'³

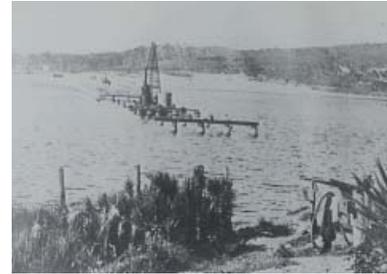
Europeans change the landscape

'Discovered' in the late 1700s by Europeans, the lagoon had large seagrass meadows and extensive fringes of wetland, reeds and Sheoaks. Early accounts show that the lagoon was deeper than today, with clear waters, a sandy bed and abundant birds, fish and prawns able to support commercial fishing. The northern lagoon shore had ancient trees full of roosting birds at night – "egrets, cormorants, pelicans, thousands of [birds]...the noise was deafening... if [birds were] startled awake".³ The Narrabeen sand spit had thick groves of lillypilly and tall figs.

"The popular charm of the upper waters will always be the creeks which penetrate far inland and receive the little rills and tinkling cataracts which in rainy seasons and flood-times roll down great torrents to the lake ...it is a delightful wilderness. come out again upon the lake, all calm and sacred with the hush of late afternoon, to a little bay here smooth as glass. . . even the tall feathers upon the marginal reeds do not stir, and if there is any wind from the oaks above it is the softest "whish"..."

Every line about it is absolutely beautiful, from the sky to the beach. The hills are lofty. . . grand as beautiful upon any sunny day when upon the lowlands the honeysuckles twinkle and glisten. . . When all the rounded crowns of the gums are lit as masses of cumuli cloud by a mid-day sun, when ferns and undergrowth seem actually silver gilt with the magical effect of the light and air, when higher, wet rocks flash like jewel facets, and huge crag masses frown through a sparse and distorted growth, and cut the sky in bold or fantastic shape. . . Take advantage of it now as it is, for surely as human nature will seek to surround itself with natural beauty, it will become an outpost of the great city 'ere long" Myers 1886⁵

Some 100 years later, even with many land grants and farms, it was still renowned for its natural beauty and wildlife - popular with day trippers for boating, bathing and picnics, especially at Deep Creek up to the 1930's. With the advent of bridges, trams, then roads and cars the area was rapidly developed.



1925 - Ocean Street Bridge Construction



1930s - Living in Narrabeen Campground



1942 - Narrabeen Flood



1946 - Wakehurst Parkway Opening

The timeline overleaf shows that within 200 years of Europeans arriving, they had dramatically changed the landscape and the lagoon's ecology.

Though much of its natural beauty still remains today, the health of the lagoon and its catchment are under threat from the impacts of urban development – we can each help protect it by learning about our local environment, helping restore it and reducing our impacts at home and beyond.



Bank Stabilisation - Narrabeen Lagoon

References

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13. Photo: Botanic Gardens Trust. For information see www.rbsyd.nsw.gov.au

Prepared by the CEC 2008. Indigeneous content approved by the Aboriginal Heritage Office.