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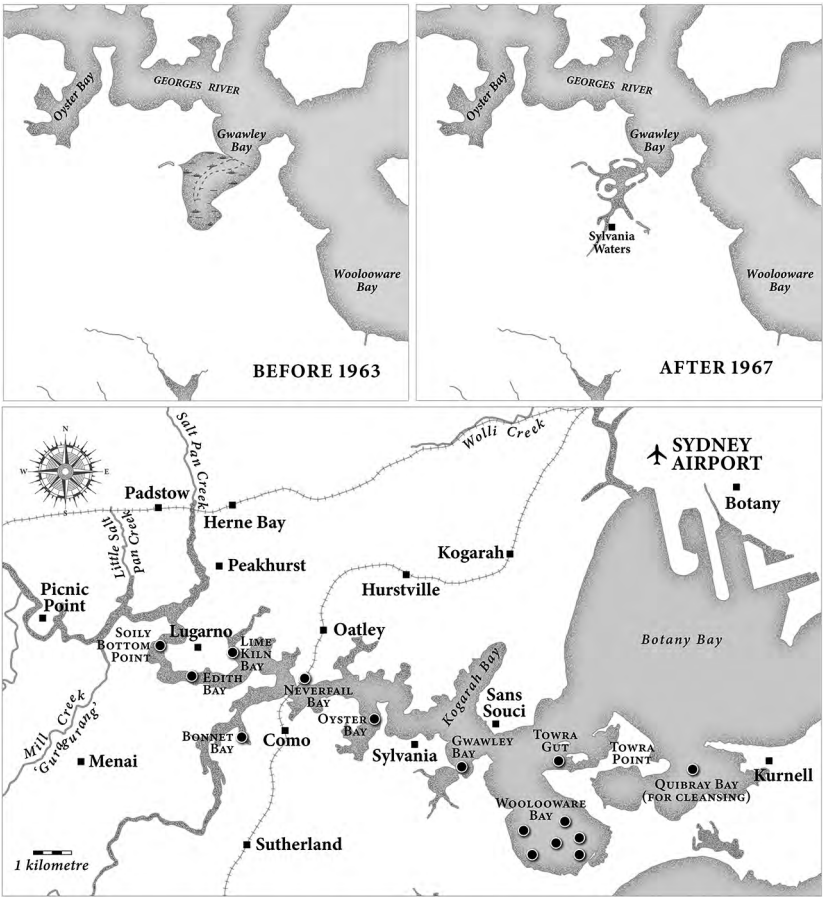
Outlooks and Oysters

The gentrification of the lower Georges River – pushed along by the changing technologies brought by the war and the expanding economy in its aftermath – exposed the rifts along class lines on the river.

Oyster production on the Georges River was booming in the early 1960s.¹ Harvests had been steadily increasing from the end of the war in the most actively farmed stretch of the river, from Lugarno downstream, past Kogarah Bay and the Woronora River, Kangaroo Point, Sylvania and Gwawley Bay and on to Towra Point. From the 1920s, oyster farmers had been troubled by oyster loss in colder months, initially called ‘winter mortality’ but later attributed to parasite infestation. The oyster growers had addressed this largely successfully by ‘re-laying’ their trays of oysters to the more sheltered areas of the waterway, such as Bonnet Bay in the Woronora River, during the colder winter months. These areas are typically less saline than the former main growing areas but, importantly, the ‘wintering’ involved having the oysters higher in the intertidal zone so that they spent less time each day in the water. This strategy required intimate knowledge of the river as well as access to wide areas to allow movement to shelter in winter then back to spending more time in the water in warmer months.

1 Statistics on oyster production sourced from the Department of Primary Industry, cited in Jackson and Forbes, ‘Oysters on the Georges River’; Derwent, ‘Oysters: The Canaries of Our Estuary’.

GEORGES RIVER BLUES



Map 5.1: Oyster farming areas in Georges River estuary, 1945–78.

Oyster farming took place in the lower estuary, at the sites indicated on this map, until the problems arising in the later 1970s, see Chapter 15. The small maps show how Gwawley Bay – previously a prolific oyster growing area – was developed by real estate agent L. J. Hooker throughout the 1960s to become Sylvania Waters. Subdivided for private sale as residential home sites, each block had a boat mooring jetty, with the first blocks going on sale in 1963. To build the estate, the developers dug out the existing mangrove and saltmarsh vegetation around the waterline of the bay and built 8 km of retaining walls to modify tidal flows. Cartography: Sharon Harrup.



Figure 5.1: Gwawley Bay oyster farming workers in 1958.

Gwawley Bay was largely transformed into Sylvania Waters in the early 1960s (see Map 5.1), with mangrove areas removed, canals created for power boat access, and jetties and other boat facilities for each waterfront block. Photograph by George Lipman, published in the *St George and Sutherland Shire Leader*, 'Flashback Friday', 6 July 2018. Courtesy of Nine Publishing.

Such knowledge had been built up over time. Many of the oyster farmers were from families like the Derwents who had lived around Oatley and other shorefront areas for at least five generations.² The Drake family was another that had generations farming on the river with both men and women working in the industry. Managing oyster growing and living close by, oyster farming families had a close experience of both land and water. Many children, girls as well as boys, had their own rowboats and were as comfortable rowing around family leaseholds as they were on the shores. It was a labour-intensive industry: both farm family members and local people worked in it, building racks and trays, assisting in tending the growing oysters, and sorting and shucking the oysters that were to be sold in bottles or on the half shell. Interviewed for this project, Bob Drake explained that his grandfather had taken up a lease when oyster farming first began on the Georges River. Born in 1941, Bob took up work in the oyster industry in 1954 at the age of 14, and went on to become president of the Georges River Oyster Farmers Association in 1978. The family had continued to live around Neverfail Bay, but succeeding generations, including Bob himself, farmed leases further downstream around the mouth of the Woronora River and in Woollooware Bay, on the western side of Towra Point.³

2 Many extended Derwent and Drake families lived near Neverfail Bay at Oatley. Norm Pilgrim and his extended family lived at Sans Souci on Botany Bay.

3 Drake, interview.



Figure 5.2: Oyster farmers Reg and Ken Humbley and Norm Pilgrim, Woollooware Bay, 1966.

Pilgrim was president of the Georges River Oyster Farmers Association and gave evidence at the Senate Select Committee hearings in 1969. Published in the *St George and Sutherland Shire Leader*, 'Flashback Friday', 6 July 2018. Courtesy of Nine Publishing.

The Derwent family too had farmed initially in Neverfail Bay, expanding and continuing to provide oyster farmers and workers in the industry. By the 1960s, members of the Derwent family held leaseholds in a number of Georges River areas. Laurie Derwent, also interviewed for the project, was born in 1953, spending much of his weekends and school holidays oyster farming from the age of 13, eventually taking up a lease himself and farming for some years.⁴ Later he joined New South Wales Fisheries and became involved in research and administration regarding pollution and oyster purification. While oysters remained a central interest shared by many members of these and other oyster farming families, they were at the same time members of the local community, and so they took part as well in community affairs. As Bob Drake pointed out, 'the oyster farmers were members of the community as well as other people' and they joined progress associations to 'put their view forward'.⁵ Another example is an aunt of Laurie Derwent, his father's sister, Evol, who married Ray Knight. Together they took leading roles in the local environmental activism aimed at stopping the reclamation of Poulton Creek (see Chapter 12).⁶

⁴ Derwent, interview.

⁵ Drake, interview.

⁶ Knight, interview. See Chapter 12, this volume.

Yet, despite the boom, Georges River oyster farmers had two related problems emerging early in the 1960s, both of which stemmed from the rapidly rising population along the river and from its complexity in terms of class. One was the rising level of human waste that was pouring into the river. The other was the increasing subdivision and development of land along the waterfront.

Human waste was a major problem for all the area's residents. Rising population, diminishing space and festering antagonism towards immigrants were only some of the many changes that the river saw in the first two decades after the war. The old mythologies that associated swamps with evil, or those that saw swamps and miasmas as the source of ill health, had been challenged in the later nineteenth century with the rise of germ theory and the recognition that waterborne contamination was a more serious threat than vapours and mists. In all cases, however, the limitations of the city's systems for disposing of human waste had reinforced the association between swamps and ill health. Little attention had been paid to the disposal of human waste in the Georges River area during the pre-World War I decades because the population had been sparse. Instead, attention had focused on the inner city and, particularly, on low-income areas like Redfern, from where human waste had been discharging into wetland on a tributary of the Cooks River at Shea's Creek, where the area drew its drinking water.⁷

The large military establishments along the Georges River, like Holsworthy and Milperra Soldier Settlement Cooperative, had never been sewered; instead, they drained human waste directly into the river. Families at Milperra had 'burial pits' where human waste was dumped but it too eventually leached into the creeks and swamps and then into the river.⁸ Infrastructure to allow piped sewerage for human waste disposal had begun in the inner northern suburbs of the city and then in its central areas, but had focused on municipalities with higher income residents and more powerful municipal councils. Residents in southerly areas were either burying their waste or using septic systems that, dug into unsuitable soils in many parts of Sydney, still led to leaching of contaminants into nearby waterways.⁹ Sewerage infrastructure had been intended for the more southerly suburbs but slow rates of population increase and then the Depression and World War II (WWII) halted work altogether.

7 Aird, *The Water Supply*.

8 Brooks and Burke, *The Heart of a Place*.

9 Aird, *The Water Supply*, 290–91.

With the end of WWII and the exponential rise in population on the northern banks of the Georges River, the issue of human waste became a very big problem. Sewerage infrastructure was expensive, so it was only slowly being extended to the immediate south of the city, including the Cooks River, with much of this area's human waste being directed eventually into the expanded ocean outfall system, although breakdowns and leakage continued. Yet even this imperfect infrastructure did not extend to the Georges River. In the upper estuary, from Liverpool around to Milperra, piped human waste flowed into one of several 'sewerage farms', like that at Fairfield, at which raw sewage was supposed to be treated but from which it was usually drained directly into the river. Protests from Bankstown led to the slow expansion of sewerage pipes to the eastern bank of Salt Pan Creek and then north, in an arc, around to Bankstown, reaching Bankstown Girls' High School in 1951. But human waste from all the area west of Salt Pan Creek and west of Bankstown drained sooner or later into the Georges River.¹⁰ Downstream, on the Sutherland side of the river, there was simply no sewerage infrastructure at all, and residents relied on septic disposal that was unreliable in wet weather. Again, waste flowed into the Georges River.

As the city's numbers escalated, fresh water for drinking became the most urgent priority, and what income was at the Water Board's disposal went towards the building of Warragamba Dam to provide potable water across the city. With no governments willing to provide resources for the extension of sewerage infrastructure in the south-western areas, the situation worsened until, in 1962, the government public health analyst Ernest Samuel Ogg tested the Georges River and reported the level of *E. coli* contamination from human waste to be above safe levels, naming the Fairfield Sewage Treatment plant as one of the sources of the contamination. Ogg ordered all swimming and fishing on the Georges River to be stopped, warning that the local oyster industry would be affected if action were not taken.¹¹ The municipal health inspectors in

10 Ibid., 153; 'Twenty-Year-Long Struggle Brings Sewerage at Last to Bankstown School', *Tribune*, 24 October 1951, 4, quoting from a recent *Bankstown Torch* article on the forthcoming flush sewerage connection to Bankstown Public School.

11 Ogg's actual reports are elusive, although they are discussed widely. See Goodall, Cadzow and Byrne, 'Mangroves, Garbage and Fishing'. On Ogg's first report, see 'In NSW This Week', *Canberra Times*, 26 September 1962, 2; 'Chlorination Not Sufficient – Council Told', *Biz*, 17 October 1962, 1; 'Council Bitter on Pollution Problem', *Biz*, 24 October 1962, 3; 'Appeal May End Pollution Blame: Bid for Sewer Pipe to Sea', *Biz*, 16 January 1963, 4; 'Pollution Rise', *Biz*, 16 January 1963, 4; 'New baths for polluted river?', *St George and Sutherland Shire Leader* (hereafter *Leader*), 3 April 1963. On Ogg's first and second report, see Beder, 'From Pipe Dreams', 173, citing *Mirror*, 13 September 1962 and 19 September 1963.

Bankstown and other councils along the river acted, ordering the removal of all netted swimming enclosures in the municipality, like that at East Hills. They hoped that a public outcry might bring the funding needed for water quality improvement, but they were disappointed.¹² There was simply no outcry at all. Distaste at the worsening state of the river had already made the new Olympic pools like Bankstown Baths (opened in 1933) much more attractive than the river, and local people had abandoned the muddy brown river waters to swim in the crystal-clear pools, which, in the 1950s and 1960s, offered sociality for a new – younger – generation.¹³

While disposing of sewage was a major problem for everyone, not only the oyster farmers who grew their products in the river's water, the question of waterfront subdivisions involved particular class dimensions. Cars had become more affordable and more widely owned as a result of wartime engineering and a booming postwar economy. Dependence on railways and other forms of public transport had, therefore, decreased, allowing land at ever greater distances from public transport hubs to be released for subdivision. Water views were highly prized and so the value of waterfront blocks on both sides of the Georges River rose steadily. Consequently, the secluded bays where oyster farmers had held leases became increasingly visible. These subdivisions – notably those downstream, around Oatley Bay on the northern shore but particularly from Como eastwards to Kangaroo Point and Sylvania on the southern shore – were described by local aldermen and media as 'elite waterfront suburbs' and 'exclusive foreshore areas'.¹⁴ The Sylvania Waters estate, for example, began selling blocks in 1963. It had been developed by L. J. Hooker, largely by reclaiming the estuarine mangrove area, and building retaining walls to provide each block with water frontages and boating facilities.¹⁵ Residents across all of the riverfront suburbs were increasingly likely to own a high-powered speedboat, another outcome of wartime technological improvements in internal combustion engines. Those who did not own a powerboat themselves might still take part in, or be spectators of, the new sports associated with them – speedboat racing and water skiing.

12 Goodall, Cadzow and Byrne, 'Mangroves, Garbage and Fishing'. Howard, interview.

13 Bryan Brown, pers. comm.; my own memories from 1965 on.

14 'Oyster Talks Will Determine Future', *Leader*, 25 April 1966, 15; 'Controversy Likely on Oyster Lease Schemes', *Leader*, 8 June 1966, 3.

15 Pollon and Healy, *The Book of Sydney Suburbs*, 251. First blocks on sale in 1963.

From the later 1950s, councils and then progress associations began objecting to the presence of the oyster leases as ‘unsightly’ and insanitary, although without specific evidence of health hazards. These objections sought to have foreshores reserved for swimming, boating – often speedboating – and other recreation. Councils initially demanded that the Fisheries Branch rescind shoreside leases and force oyster farmers to move their racks into the centre of the bays and river.¹⁶ This, however, would have meant that the oyster leases would still be visible from the newly subdivided ‘elite’ suburbs.

In 1964 the New South Wales Department of Public Health was reported to be developing a program of testing oysters for contamination in the Georges River but nothing eventuated.¹⁷ At the same time, the residents of the downstream suburbs organised themselves into the Georges River Oyster Lease Protest Association (GROLPA) and demanded that the oyster leases be removed from the Georges River altogether. GROLPA members included the new landowners of the expensive waterfront blocks at Sylvania Waters, where development had destroyed the shallow mangrove area of Gwawley Bay in favour of a series of canals that serviced powerboat-accessible jetties. In the state election campaign leading up to a poll in May 1965, the conservative opposition, through Liberal Party leader Robert Askin, took up this demand, appearing to promise to remove oyster leases from the views and waterways of these ‘exclusive’ suburbs.¹⁸

Askin went on to win the election, taking power from the Australian Labor Party for the first time in 24 years. But he was slow to act on the Georges River oyster leases. GROLPA secretary Dr P. Dawson worked through local progress associations and councils to push for government action. Sutherland Shire called on the new chief secretary, Eric Willis, to hold a conference to bring all the parties together, including the oyster farmers and the protest organisation.¹⁹ Willis agreed, circulating a set of briefing

16 Sutherland Council Development Committee Minutes, 16 March 1959, 7 March 1960, 16 September 1963, 1 June 1964 (complaining about the view of oyster leases from new subdivision), Sutherland Shire, ‘Meetings and Minutes’, accessed 3 February 2021, www.sutherlandshire.nsw.gov.au/Council/Meetings-and-Minutes; Sutherland Building, Health and Sanitation Committee Minutes, 14 October 1963 (objections from East Como and other Progress Associations to Sutherland Council), Sutherland Shire, ‘Meetings and Minutes’, accessed 3 February 2021, www.sutherlandshire.nsw.gov.au/Council/Meetings-and-Minutes.

17 Commonwealth of Australia, Senate Select Committee on Water Pollution, *Minutes of Evidence*, submission from UNSW Department of Food Technology, vol. 8, 1669.

18 ‘Conference to Discuss Oyster Leases Sought’, *Leader*, 13 April 1966, 7.

19 *Ibid.*; ‘Oyster Talks Will Determine Future’, *Leader*, 25 April 1966, 15.

papers with four options, including a map showing possible locations of offshore oyster leases.²⁰ None would have removed oyster leases from the river. The result was uproar!

The four riverside councils – Bankstown, Hurstville, Kogarah and Sutherland – rejected every one of Willis's proposals, as did a crowded meeting of resident protesters at Sylvania (identified in the local press as the 'elite' foreshore suburb between oyster farming areas in Oyster Bay and Gwawley Bay). The residents called for the complete removal of oyster leases by 1967. GROLPA, spearheading this opposition, argued not only that oyster leases were insanitary and unsightly but also that the locations indicated on Willis's map as possible offshore lease areas would disrupt boating routes – particularly the routes for high-powered speedboats, that, facilitated by the canals and jetties at Sylvania Waters, were increasingly owned and raced by more affluent riverside residents. Hurstville Alderman E. J. Curlisa agreed:

The river will become strangled by these leases! ... The river is a natural heritage of all the people and we must support them in demanding that the oyster famers quit.²¹

Other Hurstville Council and Sutherland Shire representatives were explicit: this was about money. The oyster lessees did not pay rates to the local government but the 'exclusive foreshore properties' did, so anything that reduced the value of those properties, like unsightly views of oyster leases, meant a financial loss to the councils.²²

The *St George and Sutherland Shire Leader* was no less blunt. Its front page on 29 June 1966 carried a wide-angle lens photograph of Gwawley Bay (at Sylvania), with a caption that began, 'The Battle Is Joined', continuing:

The basic incompatibility of homes and oyster leases is illustrated in this panoramic view of Gwawley Bay. On one side an expanse of leases – on the other, high-class home development.²³

The *Leader's* picture showed expansive oyster leases but no workers anywhere; it appeared this industry employed no one. As the paper told it, both local government representatives and waterfront residents wanted

20 'Controversy Likely on Oyster Lease Schemes', *Leader*, 8 June 1966, 3.

21 'No Support Likely for Lease Plans', *Leader*, 22 June 1966, 12.

22 Ibid.; 'Meeting Seeks End to Leases in River', *Leader*, 29 June 1966, 3.

23 'Riverside Councils Opposed to Leases', *Leader*, 29 June 1966, 1.

the oyster farmers gone. Councillor B. Lewis from Sutherland suggested they go 'somewhere else on the coast', while GROLPA just wanted them gone – it did not matter where!²⁴

Yet some of the Hurstville aldermen were sympathetic to the oyster farmers, arguing, like Alderman E. J. Green, that oysters 'thrived' in the Georges River, more so than anywhere else on the New South Wales coast. Others were pessimistic about state government priorities, like A. A. Lawrance and N. W. Hobson from Hurstville who pointed out that the council could not ignore the export earnings of the oyster industry, saying: 'We would be wasting our time to try to move all the leases ... The Department has made up its mind that Australia cannot afford to lose this industry.'²⁵ The conflict between these 'exclusive foreshore area' residents and the oyster farmers would continue over the next decade. Meanwhile, it became increasingly clear that these same 'exclusive' suburbs were also contributing to the other problem that the oyster industry had.

This second problem was bacterial pollution arising from the lack of effective sewerage infrastructure on both the northern and southern shores of the Georges River. Government analyst Ernest Ogg's first report in mid-1962 had led to the closure of swimming baths, accusations about the failures of Fairfield and other sewage treatment works and a warning for the oyster industry. Yet the treatment plants and pumping stations he identified were not the only problem. A correspondent to a local newspaper, the *Propeller*, who 'preferred to remain anonymous', argued that there was severe overflow from septic systems sited close to the waterfront in the Como area, including Sylvania Waters, and, therefore, close to many of the main oyster growing areas.²⁶

Ogg's second report was even worse than his first! The *Daily Mirror* headlined the story 'Effluent Society', explaining that Ogg had made Georges River the focus of his second report because the Water Board had increased the chlorination level at its treatment works but done little else.²⁷ The *Propeller* led its first page with the headline 'Georges River Is POISONED!', quoting Ogg's description of the river as 'an open sewer'. It reported his finding that responsibility for water quality was so confused because there were too many bureaucracies managing waterways, including, among others, the Water

24 'Meeting Seeks End to Leases in River', *Leader*, 29 June 1966, 3.

25 'No Support Likely for Lease Plans', *Leader*, 22 June 1966, 9.

26 'Public Health Menaced', *Propeller*, 20 September 1962, 1.

27 'Effluent Society – That's Sydney Today', *Daily Mirror*, 19 September 1963, 11.

Board for sewage discharge, the Maritime Services Board for watercraft and speed controls, the Chief Secretary's Department with its Fisheries Branch, and the Department of Agriculture for commercial harvesting of aquatic species like fish and oysters.²⁸

Not only did oyster farmers risk losing their Australian markets but also questions were being raised about international markets for live oysters because they had not undertaken the purification process that was widespread through the UK. Early in 1964, a number of farmers came together to form a company to install the expensive purification equipment in an attempt to sell their oysters internationally.²⁹ The process of constructing and installing the equipment was lengthy, however, and the plant was only just 'ready to operate' in July 1966, after requiring substantial investment.³⁰ Oyster farmers estimated that it would lead to a doubling of the oyster price; however, by 1973 it had not been widely installed or used.³¹

The sewage input into the river was not necessarily a problem for the oysters, for as Dr R. A. Edwards, a food technology researcher, noted, 'the oyster grows well in water which is high in nutrients'.³² The Hurstville aldermen had observed that oysters 'thrived' in the Georges River and oyster farmers knew that it was a renowned 'fattening' area. Growers could purchase small oysters from production areas such as Port Stephens, transfer them to the Georges River racks and find they developed extremely well there, producing highly marketable harvests. They argued that, as oysters were filter feeders, they drew the nutrients from the water and expelled any damaging associated products, so they offered no risk to consumers.

Unsurprisingly, the conflict over the very presence of oyster farms in the downstream areas of the river continued. After Willis's inconclusive conference, Sutherland Council turned again to Ogg's 1962 and 1963 reports about sewage pollution. In October 1966, it asked the Government Health Department again for a formal survey of the extent of pollution

28 'Georges River is POISONED', *Propeller*, 26 September 1963, 1.

29 'Scheme to Crash World Markets by Local Oyster Growers', *Leader*, 16 March 1964, 3. Farmers were going to establish a company to install purification equipment 'to open up international markets'.

30 See *Australian Fisheries Newsletter* 25, no. 7 (July 1966): 23–25.

31 Commonwealth of Australia, Senate Select Committee on Water Pollution, *Minutes of Evidence*, submission of the Oyster Farmers Association, vol. 8, 1668; 'Pollution "Won't Harm an Oyster"', *Leader*, 7 February 1973, 21 (quoting from Norm Phillips, president of the NSW Oyster Farmers Association, with photograph).

32 Commonwealth of Australia, Senate Select Committee on Water Pollution, *Minutes of Evidence*, vol. 8 (13 March 1969), 1685.

in the Georges River.³³ The government seems to have done little; it failed to commit funds for any major sewerage infrastructure and yet was unwilling to lose the oyster industry. This left GROLPA frustrated but unable to pursue further action.



Figure 5.3: Cover image, *Australian Fisheries Newsletter*, July 1966.

Georges River oyster growing site with workers clearly visible, probably taken at Woollooware Bay. Courtesy of National Library of Australia.

33 'Infected Oysters in Georges River', *Leader*, 5 October 1966, 11.

Oyster farmers decided to take their own steps, commissioning the University of New South Wales (UNSW) to undertake a systematic study of the contaminants in live oysters at key Georges River growing sites. While awaiting the UNSW report, and given the lack of sympathy for oyster farmers in the local press, industry members took full advantage of an opportunity for substantial exposure in the state government's *Australian Fisheries Newsletter*, published in July. The issue featured the Georges River oyster production sites on its front cover (with workers!), with more photographs inside of the industry's workers, including a farmer, Ed Lewis, at Woollooware Bay, vistas of abundant cultivation and stories of scientific innovation to promote profitable – and healthy – local and international sales.

In demonstrating the expansive nature of the industry, the photographs of prolific Georges River oyster cultivation left little doubt about the source of tensions between the industry and the shoreside residents who wanted unimpeded access and open water views.

UNSW Food Technology Department researchers G. C. Wells and R. A. Edwards conducted the requested survey in 1967, reporting a bacterial contamination problem with oysters from four key oyster farming sites: Woollooware Bay, Oyster Bay, Gwawley Bay and Towra Gut (off Pelican Point).³⁴ The researchers explained that oysters filtered the surrounding water as food, utilised the nutrients from sewage contamination and ultimately excreted the bacteria that was harmful to themselves as well as humans. However, there was a delay in this process, so newly harvested oysters might retain some harmful contaminants during transport and storage. The researchers tested for bacteria once a week over 10 weeks in April, May and June of 1967 both in the water itself and in the flesh of freshly opened farmed oysters. The results demonstrated a problem with bacterial contamination harmful to humans at each site. Two of the sites (Woollooware and Oyster Bays) tested above internationally accepted maximum levels on three occasions of the 11 sampled and the remaining two sites (Gwawley Bay and Towra Gut) were above the level on four occasions. While the researchers identified sources of contamination as the sewage treatment plants at Liverpool and Fairfield and a pumping station near Woollooware Bay, they also blamed garbage dumping by

34 Commonwealth of Australia, Senate Select Committee on Water Pollution, *Minutes of Evidence*, vol. 8 (13 March 1969), 1669–74.

councils and leakage from private septic tanks all along the southern shore of the river. The levels of bacterial contamination in water and oyster flesh were significantly worse after heavy rain.

When the oyster farmers were finally heard at length, they made a number of arguments.³⁵ One was that they had been developing this industry over a much longer time frame than the recent arrival of the shoreside residents. This was of course true, although the Dharawal owners may have viewed this argument with amusement. More importantly, the oyster farmers pointed out that these new 'exclusive' developments had not been able to provide all they advertised for the incoming owners. The developers at Sylvania Waters, for example, had not been able to secure Water Board sewerage infrastructure, so all the blocks in this new 'elite' development were reliant on septic disposal of human waste, which flowed into the river whenever rain was heavy. Rather than the oyster farmers endangering the foreshore residents, it was actually the new developments and the resulting flow of human excreta into the river that was endangering the oysters, the industry and, indirectly, the oyster farmers themselves.

It was notable too that the oyster farmers were presenting a changed view of mangroves. Whereas in the early years of the industry, they had harvested mangroves from the Georges River and then from the Minnamurra River to use mangrove wood for catching spawn, in 1969 oyster farmers argued that mangroves needed to be protected because they offered shelter for growing oysters. Mangroves, the oyster farmers pointed out, fulfilled an essential role in defending the oyster racks by shielding them from turbulent river flow and tidal changes, not to mention the new problem of severe turbulence from speedboats.³⁶ Oyster farmers interviewed by the *Australian Fisheries Newsletter* in 1966 had already explained another aspect of this defensive role: mangroves sheltered oyster racks that had been moved into shallow, warmer bays during winter to protect them from the illness known as 'winter mortality'.³⁷

But the most important argument the oyster farmers made was that the bacterial contamination of the water was a federal and state government responsibility. It had been government that had sited military installations along the Georges River and then failed to provide them with sewerage.

³⁵ Ibid., 1667–68, 1675–91.

³⁶ Ibid., 1680.

³⁷ See *Australian Fisheries Newsletter* 25, no. 7 (July 1966): 23–25.

It had been government decisions that had increased industrialisation and correspondingly increased the population to provide the workforce to staff the factories. And it had been government decision-making that led to the Metropolitan Water Sewerage and Drainage Board failing to provide effective sewerage infrastructure to all these areas, as well as to the newer 'waterfront' developments on the lower estuary. Given this burden of responsibility, it was appropriate that federal and state governments should fund the remediation of the river. Further, it was clear that only the federal government had the technical and planning capacity to address a problem that was particularly acute in the Georges River but that afflicted many other urban centres as well. This was the same argument later developed by Harold C. Hunt, the chief health inspector at Bankstown Council, and it was one that the Senate inquiry members took very seriously.

In 2016 Laurie Derwent described oysters as 'the canaries in the coalmine' for the contamination of water.³⁸ His reference was to the use of canaries to signal dangerous gas in underground mines in the UK: if the air was dangerous, the canary would die. The oysters did indeed signal a warning about the rising contamination of the river, although the effect was the opposite of that on the canary: as the nutrient level increased in the Georges River, the oysters thrived. As discussed in later chapters, the oysters were unfairly targeted in contamination scares. The early protests against the industry arose largely from demands for unimpeded water views by waterfront property owners and from concerns by local government about threats to property values leading to reductions in rates. Nevertheless, the issues of water quality were very real and the oyster farmers were far more active in seeking data on the contamination and trying to develop remedies than were local government and landowners. The waterfront landowners like the GROLPA campaigners were still hoping they could nudge or force oyster farmers to move along.

Mangroves, another more-than-human species that appeared to be thriving in changing conditions, were not under any form of human direction except the bulldozer.

38 Derwent, 'Oysters: The Canaries of Our Estuary'.

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