

7

Garbage: 'Reclamations' and Casualties

*Don't it always seem to go
That you don't know what you've got
Till it's gone.¹*

Problems around the disposal of human waste have been present for human societies for millennia. Nearby, the Cooks River had suffered continuing pollution, both from human waste and the organic waste from noxious industries, throughout the nineteenth century. The problem was being worsened in the mid-twentieth century through the rapidly increasing area and density of industrial cities, and the Georges River was also facing an intense and rapid population rise.

An unprecedented garbage crisis added to this growing problem. Never in history had there been so much household and industrial garbage as began to accumulate after World War II (WWII) in all cities in capitalist economies – and Sydney was no exception. The garbage crisis that the Georges River – and all of Sydney – faced arose from a new economic model based on growth and consumption, producing new disposable materials and exponentially increasing scales of accumulation. Yet there was so little preparedness in any Western political structures that there was virtually no data for civil authorities to use to build a solution. This chapter will look in more detail at the origins and impact of the garbage emergency on the Georges River, the solutions proposed and the casualties these solutions created.

1 Joni Mitchell, 'Big Yellow Taxi', 1970.

Another significant change in the postwar world also began to shape the way people and environments interacted at this time. This was a new source of information on which Georges River resident groups, along with many others, could draw: the emerging science of ecology. It was beginning to circulate through the science community, and particularly among members of the Fisheries Branch, established during the 1950s within the New South Wales Chief Secretary's Department. However, the public role of these Fisheries biologists began slowly. They had little impact, for example, in the 1950s campaign for a Georges River national park. While George Jacobsen was one who came to glimpse ecological interactions, there had been no talks or visits from the Fisheries Branch or other biologists to the Picnic Point Regatta Association (PPRA) or even the National Park Trust.² Such interactions would become more common during the 1960s through organisations like the Oatley Flora and Fauna Society on the lower estuary, which invited speakers from a range of departments and universities to give educational talks about the local environment. The outcome, as will be discussed in later chapters, was that the resulting popular ecology grew to be a significant influence in the environmental campaigning of the late 1960s and 1970s.

The root cause of the garbage crisis was the major change in the economy of the developed capitalist world, which had drawn on new technologies and materials developed during the war to shift into what is now called a 'consumer' model. Rising wages and 'modernising' electrification encouraged increased spending on household appliances, clothing and other goods. In parallel, the packaging industry expanded to meet the needs of moving all these consumer goods in ever-wider trade circuits around the globe. The postwar decades saw an escalation in household waste, rising to alarming proportions in the later 1960s. We will consider this origin of the postwar garbage crisis before returning to the environmental casualties of the solutions implemented for it.

Harold Hunt, the chief health inspector at Bankstown Council, was just as disturbed by the garbage problem as he was by the sewage problems that had led him, in 1962, to endorse the closure of the Georges River to swimming and fishing. He made a lengthy submission directly to Bankstown Council about its garbage problem in 1968. The postwar

2 There are no references in Alf Stills's Collection, including in the minutes of the PPRA meetings; nor are there in references in the archives of the Georges River National Park (later State Parklands) Trust (NPWS Archive).

conditions, as well as rapidly changing both the demography and water quality of the Georges River area, had rapidly changed the economy. Postwar employment had enabled a greater degree of disposable income than had previously been the case, and the culture of the economy had changed to foster disposability of packaging and products. Over time, this packaging material became less biodegradable, as plastics and polystyrenes replaced paper and cardboard. Hunt wrote that, from 1958 to 1968:

A noticeable increase in the volume of refuse has occurred which has aptly been described as an 'explosion': – articles are purposely manufactured to have a short life, packaging has become a big business resulting in huge amounts of waste, the public has become more conscious of the need for clean air and, as a result, there is less incineration, twice-weekly garbage services have become more common, industries have been developed and their wastes, both liquid and solid, now provide our most difficult problem.

The undisputed fact is that the amount of garbage per person has increased – but we are confronted with the problem of lack of data – no Council in Sydney has consistently weighted its refuse and no authoritative statement can be made regarding the amount of refuse being generated in Sydney nor the rate of annual increase.³

According to Hunt, all councils were experiencing dilemmas in trying to deal with this unprecedented torrent of both packaging and putrescible waste. The problem was not limited to Sydney or even to Australia; Hunt had compared solutions being devised in a number of comparable countries, including the US and the UK.⁴ Here he was commenting on a report on the garbage problem from the Local Government Association of New South Wales that proposed that each council could choose from a number of options to address this problem. Arising from his assessment of the US and UK situations, Hunt argued strongly that councils could not address this problem on their own but rather that state and federal governments needed to accept responsibility and provide coordination – and funds – to address this problem overall.⁵

3 Hunt, *Garbage Disposal*, 6.

4 Ibid., 9–12. There has since been significant research published on conditions in the US, notably by Melosi, *Garbage in the Cities*. There were differences in US and Australian conditions regarding the responsibility for waste removal and disposal in this period (corporate in US, municipal in Australia).

5 Hunt, *Garbage Disposal*. The W. D. Scott consultancy report was Appendix B to Hunt's submission to council.



Figure 7.1: An unidentified Sydney municipal rubbish tip.

This is similar to tips around Padstow operated by Bankstown Council, which I remember seeing as a child. There were piles of rubbish in the open and fire was used to reduce the volume. Government Printing Office 2 – 15100. Original negative held by State Library of New South Wales.

A particular dimension of the questions around garbage, water quality and the expansion of factories along the Georges River was the issue of class. The changing demographics of the area were based on the rapidly increasing numbers of factory workers. Spearritt argues that ‘the most spectacular growth in manufacturing jobs’ in the postwar years was in the municipalities of Bankstown and Parramatta. The number of people employed in factories in Bankstown in 1944–45 had been 3,346 but by 1953–54 there were 11,442 and in 1960–61 there were 25,159 factory employees. Liverpool, just a little upstream on the Georges River, similarly attracted new and relocated industrial plants, and David Jones moved its knitwear production from Surry Hills to Hargrave Park – a Housing Commission hostel area – because ‘that’s where the labour was’.⁶

⁶ Spearritt, *Sydney’s Century*, 114–16.

In addition to the ‘assembly line’ or ‘process’ workers who lived in the area, there were many others whose work related closely to this form of factory production, including the many managers needed to organise workers and marketing and the ‘time and motion study’ analysts who arranged these workers around the machinery. All these people brought families and, in these baby boom years, there were many young children and increasingly teenagers in areas associated with factories.

The County of Cumberland Plan (CCP) had envisaged neighbourhoods growing around centres of amenities and services that offered places for sociality and support as well as for products and consumption. As the CCP had fallen apart in so many ways, it is not surprising that these hubs of community life did not eventuate in most areas. Municipal councils may have attempted to fill the gaps, and certainly libraries and baby health centres did emerge, but, as Allport has pointed out, the structure that came to fulfil most of the functions the CCP had envisaged was the shopping centre.⁷

A related concern with environmental implications was anxiety about working-class youth, particularly young male teenagers and men who called themselves ‘bodgies’, ‘widgies’, ‘sharpies’ or ‘rockers’. It was feared these young people would become ‘vandals’ who would damage public amenities, challenge sexual morality and undermine social values.⁸ The solutions suggested by all, including the New South Wales Child Welfare Department in 1952, involved imposing ‘discipline’ – either through military service or through ensuring that ‘new areas’ had many playing fields and sports grounds to enable competitive sport.⁹ The expectation that organised sport would be a remedy for ‘juvenile delinquency’ was made explicit in 1963 when Rockdale Council agreed to sponsor sporting and after-school group activities in its parks – a plan it hoped would ‘combat juvenile delinquency in its area’.¹⁰

7 Allport, ‘The Unrealized Promise’, on the County of Cumberland Plan.

8 ‘Bodgies, Widgies Defend New Cult’, *Truth*, 18 February 1951, 3; ‘Dean’s Views on “Bodgies”’, *Sun*, 21 May 1951, 3; ‘Criminal Influence of Bodgies’, *Daily Telegraph*, 21 November 1952, 13; ‘The Bodgie-Widgie Cult: Its Bad Influence is Spreading’, *Mail*, 15 December 1961, 7. See also Moore, ‘Bodgies, Widgies and Moral Panic’.

9 ‘Criminal Influence of Bodgies’, *Daily Telegraph*, 21 November 1952, 13.

10 ‘Park Plan for Youth’, *Propeller*, 9 January 1963, 1. The *Propeller* was taken over by the *St George and Sutherland Shire Leader* (hereafter *Leader*) in December 1969.

This fear of juvenile delinquents had certainly been present among the PPRA campaigners who worried that their ‘improvements’ to parks would be damaged by vandals. But these working-class activists were also worried about their own children, and were seeking ways to protect them from ‘bad influences’ by offering activities such as organised sports and recreation.¹¹ Many, however, yearned for the activities they had found so satisfying in earlier years, in particular, the picnics and informal outdoor sociality that had been so widespread throughout the early twentieth century.¹²

Escalating Reclamations

Although the Georges River National Park was downgraded in 1967, the goals and strategies of the trust had left a deep impression. Both Bankstown and Hurstville councils had been involved in the trust along with Sutherland, and the aldermen saw themselves as carrying on the goals of the trust, but there were earlier foundations. Many of these projects had first been planned in the 1920s but had been obstructed by the Depression and the war. Within the context of the challenges posed by the broader changes along the river – the increasing working-class population, the garbage ‘explosion’ and the expanding mangroves – these precedents added to the legacy of the Georges River National Park Trust. The earlier plans seemed to offer solutions to these challenges, leading to an escalation of the practice of reclaiming swamplands along the Georges River from Little Salt Pan Creek downstream to Botany Bay.

‘Reclaiming’ swamps by dumping garbage into them has a long history. It was common in Britain and Europe and, since the colonial occupation of the Georges River, had been pursued (although relatively slowly) by local communities in the building of picnic grounds and golf courses and by municipal councils. Chris Cunneen has pointed out that most parklands in Sydney were built on reclaimed swamps, including Centennial Park in the nineteenth century. On the Georges River, Bankstown Council had slowly dumped garbage in Kelso Swamp during the Depression and

11 The concerns of PPRA campaigners, both about ‘vandals’ and their own children, were evident in their collective interview, 22 March 2006. Powell, *Out West*.

12 Staples, interview, 27 May 2005.

before.¹³ Initially, local communities had welcomed such ‘reclamation’ of swamps, as it offered relief from insects like mosquitoes and from deeper subconscious fears about swamps as unnatural places that bred not only miasmas and illness but also more malevolent forces.



Figure 7.2: The impact of ‘reclamation’, seen here at Homebush Bay on the Parramatta River, c. 1950s.

‘Reclamation consolidation of spoil among mangroves’. Government Printing Office 1 – 07935. Original negative held by State Archives and Records Authority of New South Wales.



Figure 7.3: Duck Creek, Granville, 1939, ‘reclamation’ to turn creek into playing field.

Original negative held by State Archives and Records Authority of New South Wales.

With the massive increase in household waste that the postwar economy produced, the pace of reclamation increased exponentially. More significantly, it increased in the working-class areas of the Georges River because there was more apparently ‘vacant’ land into which garbage could be dumped. There was also more motivation by state and local governments to build sports fields to ensure that working-class youth were properly supervised and disciplined through competitive and organised sports. Surveys into the amount and use of ‘open space’ in various local government areas began in 1947 and was repeated with changing criteria and definitions in 1962, 1972 and 1982. These surveys were compared and analysed in 1985 by the New South Wales Department of Environment and Planning. The results suggested that councils with significant proportions of low socio-economic status populations tended to have substantial numbers of playing fields, although this varied according to population density and availability of potential locations. As Cunneen has pointed out, marshy, low-lying land had commonly been targeted for reclamation in order to build parks, and this process escalated

13 Cunneen, ‘Hands Off the Parks!’.

after WWII as garbage disposal became more problematic.¹⁴ Harold Hunt had identified the processes in the Bankstown area and had argued that this was a problem right along the river. He had demanded a unified federal policy rather than stop-gap solutions devised council by council or even state by state.

As mangroves were expanding, the goal of uprooting them and replacing the 'mangrove swamps' with parks and sporting fields was a common solution, particularly on the Georges River where they were increasingly evident (and unwelcome). 'Swamps' had become less visible than 'mangroves' or were frequently referred to as 'mangrove swamps' – as if the mangroves were the primary and causative factor. Memories of tropical swamps and mangroves in WWII battlegrounds in South-East Asia still circulated, confirming popular mythologies about mangroves as threatening, uncomfortable and unnatural.¹⁵

Councils expected they would have little opposition. In 1964, for example, Vincent Durick, Australian Labor Party state member for Lakemba, proposed that the removal of mangroves and the building of sports grounds would be an enhancement to the troubled Housing Commission hostel at Herne Bay:

In my own area at the present time there is a section of wasteland which consists for the most part of mangrove swamps. It forms the upper section of Salt Pan Creek ... It is estimated that by controlled tipping of household refuse 1,250,000 cubic yards of rubbish will be disposed of. If this plan comes to fruition ... it will have a three-fold result. First it will overcome the problems of some metropolitan councils with regard to garbage disposal, which have become urgent ... Second, it will result in the reclamation of an area which is at present wasteland and an eyesore ... Third it will result in the provision of spacious playing fields.¹⁶

14 News South Wales Department of Environment and Planning, 'Open Space in the Sydney Region', 66–86.

15 See editor's response to letter, re: 'witnessing first-hand the damage mangroves can do in Papua New Guinea and Queensland', *Leader*, 21 August 1974, 21. Engineer A. H. Brewer, quoted below, had served in Borneo and his wartime memories may have coloured his advice to Hurstville Council.

16 V. P. Durick, ALP, MLA Lakemba, 21 October 1964, in New South Wales Legislative Council, *Votes and Proceedings*, vol. 54, 1522.



Figure 7.4: Goal posts erected after swamp ‘clearance’.

This Public Works photograph, titled ‘sewerage clearance’, shows a large, unidentified Sydney area where ‘clearance’ had occurred. Goal posts on the right are a lonely indication of the intended playing field. Original negative held by State Archives and Records Authority of New South Wales.

By 1968, many council officials along the river were aware of the recent expansion of mangroves and saw ‘mangrove swamps’ as offering the spaces needed for the sports grounds that would solve social problems, although this was not only in areas with higher working-class populations. All councils were suffering from the masses of expanding garbage. Hurstville Council Engineer Albert Brewer, for example, reported in 1968 that, at Lime Kiln Bay, ‘the mangroves ... are quite a new development’.¹⁷ Brewer, however, had served in WWII in Borneo, and so had fought in tropical mangrove forests.¹⁸ His lingering wartime trauma may have influenced his hostility to the expanding mangroves on the Georges River. In the following year, Brewer reported again on the ‘tremendous increase’ in Hurstville of mangroves, which he described as ‘a noxious weed and a cancerous growth’:

17 Dunstan, ‘Some Early Environmental Problems’, 3, citing Municipal Engineer A. H. Brewer in ‘Hurstville Municipal Council [HMC] Minutes, 5 September 1968’, Local Studies Archive, Hurstville Library, Georges River Council Libraries. Dunstan was the New South Wales state fisheries officer, Division of Fisheries and Oceanography, CSIRO, Cronulla. Note that Brewer had been in WWII battles in tropical Borneo and may have brought wartime memories of fear and pain among tropical mangroves to his depiction of temperate wetlands as ‘foul mangrove swamps’.

18 John MacRitchie, Georges River librarian, pers. comm.

It is tragic to see the waterways silting to this extent and anything that can rid the river of these unsightly mudflats and foul mangrove swamps should be applauded by everyone.¹⁹

While others in the municipal councils were more troubled by the removal of mangroves, they were even more alarmed by the expansion of the garbage problem. Kevin Howard, one of the health inspectors at Bankstown Council, explained the decision in the early 1970s to bury rubbish at the head of Little Salt Pan Creek and later to build playing fields:

The Little Salt Pan tip arose out of a thought that we were running out of tipping space ... One of my colleagues at the Council was looking after tips and his idea was to cut down the mangroves at the back of Padstow and do the filling job down there. They had playing fields they wanted to put in ... See it wasn't just a matter of 'let's get rid of a few more mangroves', it was: 'what are we going to do with the rubbish? We've got nowhere else to go with it!'²⁰

Through their expansion, particularly across the saltmarsh, the mangroves themselves had become the focus of municipal councils' reclamation plans, which, as Howard had observed, had arisen largely because of the need to dispose of an increased amount of household waste. The mangroves, however, had gained political as well as environmental dominance, and were mentioned far more often in council statements than the 'swamps' that had, for so long, been the major source of fear and dread.²¹

Meanings for Mangroves: Pleasures and Fears

For young people – and particularly for young boys with bikes – the riverbanks and mangroves were an important resource. This was a gendered experience in the postwar period, and it varied from area to area and between communities. In the Padstow area in the 1960s, boys rather than girls tended to explore the riverbanks, although there were

19 Dunstan, 'Some Early Environmental Problems', 1, citing HSC Minutes, 6 March 1969.

20 Howard, interview. These places were uniformly referred to as 'the tip' and trips to 'the tip' with parents and family formed a large part of childhood leisure in the 1960s. (Aside: I loved going to the tip with dad in the 1970s in suburban Melbourne. It was an adventure!) They may also now be known as a 'dump'.

21 See Goodall, 'Frankenstein, Triffids and Mangroves', for old fears regarding swamps and miasmas.

girls who knew the banks too.²² Oral histories offer glimpses of the many ways in which boys knew the riverbanks and the expanding mangroves. One from the east of Salt Pan Creek, around Lime Kiln Bay, was Robert Haworth, who recalled experiences of the 1940s. For him, the mangroves offered retreat and sanctuary – once the terrors of the snakes had been braved – where he could read undisturbed by gangs of his young comrades from Mortdale.²³

Another set of stories comes from friends who were boys in the 1960s. Glenn Goodacre and my brothers, Craig and Mark Goodall – with the wonderful mobility and independence that bikes afforded them – could show off, speeding down the steep hills like Dilke to reach the shelter of the mangroves. There they could do all sorts of forbidden things: feast on a bag of broken biscuits bought cheap from Woolies; play around, or in, the big pipes along the banks; scale the heights of the railway bridge that crossed the creek; marvel at the amazing orb spiders (*Nephila*) that favoured mangroves to spin their glistening webs; or wonder at the many other insects that inhabited the rich, muddy environments of the mangroves.²⁴ Girls like me and my friends did not think it cool to hang out in the mud (even if we could ride bikes) and were perhaps more fearful about venturing into the wild riverbanks. Our attitudes reflected the effectiveness of a broader tendency to discourage girls from being alone in dense bush, suggested to us as a place where ‘bad things’ happened to women, leading us – rightly or wrongly – to see ourselves as more vulnerable than our brothers.

Some people remember being taught explicitly that the overgrown riverbanks were frightening places. Young boys, for example, were warned against riverside scrub as beats where men might meet others for illicit sex.²⁵ In a period when homophobia was common and ignorance widespread, it was difficult, if not impossible, to express same-sex attractions openly, and

22 Sharyn Cullis's memories were of Prospect Creek, 'my patch'. Her home backed onto the creek, and she kayaked. Her father, Fred Cullis, recalled fishing, swimming and collecting bird eggs at Sandy and Rocky points, Swingy Bridge and Horseshoe Bend in the areas around Milperra. He said pollution became noticeable about 1955, with froth on the water, especially on weekends, as toxic wastes were released from surrounding factories ('they thought no one would notice then'). He phoned an Alderman who asked him to keep an eye on the river there. See Sharyn Cullis, interview notes, 10 May 2007; Fred Cullis, interview. See also Knight, interview, for the experiences of girls in oyster farming families on the Georges River in the 1960s and 1970s.

23 Haworth, interview.

24 Goodacre, interview; Craig and Mark Goodall, interview.

25 Goodacre, interview; Craig and Mark Goodall, interview.

choices were few. There were either secluded beats or there was silence. Some of this anxiety on all sides – among men and women – was overcome through the excesses of technology. ‘Chuckling wheelies’ on pushbikes – or more noisily on motorbikes – over the drier areas of salt-scalded land behind the mangroves might damage the fragile vegetation, but it helped the riders to feel stronger against the wild, dark banks. The perils and the joys of secluded places – even once they had been ‘disciplined’ – is a theme to which we return in the final chapter.²⁶

The experiences of girls in oyster farming families could be very different. One oyster farming daughter, Maxine Drake, grew up at Gunyah Bay (or Gungah Bay) and has written a vivid and informative book for children about the industry. Recalling the pleasures of her 1970s childhood, playing on boats and exploring the mudflats, Maxine wrote: ‘The only tree that can grow in salt water, mangrove forests make safe breeding places for fish and crabs. They are magical places that keep the river healthy’.²⁷ Alexandra Knight has explained that, like her, all the children of the extended Derwent families, including the girls, were comfortable exploring the waters of the Georges River.²⁸ The oyster farming sheds, equipment and boats in Neverfail Bay all belonged to their family members or to close friends.²⁹ Alex remembers frequently walking through the mangroves at the end of Wyong Street and jumping onto one of the punts heading off up or down the river to the oyster racks. Each of these boats was, after all, owned by one or other of her uncles or close relations. She would be able to roam around, on or near the oyster leases for as long as she liked and then, when she was ready to come home, there was always a relation to catch a lift with. This sense of comfort and safety on the river allowed her to come to know the river far better than those of us who had been firmly confined to dry land or the tangled mangroves or the old swimming enclosures.

26 Kelleway, interview; Kelleway, ‘Ecological Impacts of Recreational Vehicle Use’. See also Byrne, ‘Time on the Waterline’.

27 Drake, *Georges River Tale*, 5. Maxine Drake’s father, Bob Drake, was interviewed for this project, see Chapter 5, this volume.

28 This draws on the memories of Alex Knight. See Knight, interview.

29 See Drake, *Georges River Tale*, 15, for a wonderful hand-drawn sketch of the Derwent and Drake homes and oyster sheds and gear at Neverfail Bay.

Early Solutions and Their Casualties

‘Reclamations’ – which made ‘real’ dry land by dumping various types of filling onto saline swamps along the Georges River – had begun at least as early as the 1920s, as discussed earlier, but it had been done at a relatively slow pace. Even in the 1940s, as Harold Hunt had pointed out, amounts of household garbage had been relatively low because backyard incinerators had been used to burn moderate amounts of waste. So garbage disposal was done ‘on the cheap’.³⁰ But, with the noticeable increase in garbage occurring over the 1950s, the ‘reclaiming’ of swampland began to accelerate.

The first casualties were the mangroves and saltmarsh that were uprooted and covered with dumped garbage. These areas were the habitat of many species of birds that became the second and, perhaps, more serious casualties, as this bigger impact was harder to notice until it was too late. Kel Connell and Kevin Jacobsen have both remembered the importance of Kelso Swamp and other wet places along the river as the source of ducks and other birds that were shot for sport and also for food for hungry families during the Depression.³¹ Recalling more peaceful memories of the profusion of birdlife and flowers, Zina Laundess, who lived on Bransgrove Road, remembered that, in the 1930s, Kelso was:

A beautiful tidal stream that came in and made a swamp the size of a racetrack. It was very pretty with she-oaks all around and wild birds who came to roost in the night times. On the other side off towards East Hills there were numerous wild flowers – Boronias, Five Corners and many more. At springtime, I used to love to wander through it.³²

Sue Rosen has recorded the extensive work Canterbury Council undertook in 1964 to ‘reclaim’ 70 acres on upper Salt Pan Creek, including 50 acres of ‘swampland’.³³ Meanwhile, Bankstown Council, in collaboration with the Georges River National Park Trust, was busy ‘reclaiming’ 100 acres

30 Hunt, *Garbage Disposal*, 5.

31 Kevin, Colin and Carol Jacobsen, interview, 12 July 2006; Connell and Seitch, interview, 5 May 2006.

32 Zina Laundess, quoted in Molloy, *The History of Panania*, 244.

33 Rosen, *Bankstown*, 148, citing Bankstown City Council (BCC): PF 122-1 (Reclamations); ‘Georges River Polluted with Sewerage Outfall’, *Bankstown Torch*, 16 April 1953, 1; ‘Pollution of Georges River Protest’, *Bankstown Torch*, 30 April 1953, 1; ‘Swamp Land May be Mecca Soon for Tourists’, *Bankstown Torch*, 28 October 1964, 1; ‘Garbage Plan for Swamp in Creek’, *Bankstown Torch*, 28 October 1964, 1.

of saltmarsh at Picnic Point, with the freshwater Yeramba Lagoon to be constructed by ‘bulldozing thousands of mangroves and the construction of a weir to keep out salt-water from the Georges River’.³⁴ Kelso Swamp too had been damaged by 1964, when W. H. Dane, the Bankstown Council administrator, described the outcome of the bulldozing and dumping there, the same place where Zina Laundess had remembered the ‘wild birds who came to roost in the night times’.



Figure 7.5: Aerial photograph of Kelso Swamp, 1 May 1951, showing extent of the wetlands in that year.

There had been higher than average rainfall in 1950, but the limits of building in the area demonstrates the usual broad extent of swamp and low-lying land. Courtesy of Spatial Services, NSW Lands. Sheetname: Sydney, Film: CCC466, Run R17, Frame 57. Creative Commons.

³⁴ Ibid., citing Bankstown Municipal Council Files. PF 122-1 (Dredging).



Figure 7.6: Aerial photograph of remains of Kelso Swamp, 1 January 1970.

Most had been lost by 1964 as reported by Bankstown Council administrator W. H. Dane, but this 1970 aerial photograph shows the carving up of the swamp for playing fields. Courtesy of Spatial Services, NSW Lands. Sheetname: Penrith, Film: 1908, Run R21, Frame 5130. Creative Commons.

Dane reported:

We have found that the Kelso Swamp abounds with bird life, but this area – which apparently had been a home for thousands of birds for years – is disappearing quickly. The Kelso Swamp is being filled with rubbish and eventually fifteen playing fields will be formed on this former swampland.³⁵

‘Reclamations’ that damaged the habitat of birdlife along the river were not the only challenges bird species were facing. The memories quoted earlier pointed to the hunting of ducks and other water species for food during the Depression, and no doubt this continued with increasing pressure as the population grew so rapidly. Based on my own memories of growing up in Padstow, the gendered recreations of young boys in the bush in the 1950s and 1960s included hunting for birds. Little boys,

³⁵ ‘Swamp Land May be Mecca Soon for Tourists’, *Bankstown Torch*, 28 October 1964, 1; ‘Garbage Plan for Swamp in Creek’, *Bankstown Torch*, 28 October 1964, 1.

especially, hunted them with shanghais (slingshots or catapults) and, later, with air rifles, and sought out birds' nests to plunder for eggs to add to collections. While such recreations meant those young boys learnt a great deal about bird habitats and habits, they were rightly seen as threats to birdlife. The New South Wales chapter of the Gould League of Bird Lovers was founded in 1910 in Wellington after successful activity in Victoria. The league was taken up strongly in the New South Wales Public Schools Curriculum, with teachers encouraging students to join and pledge to protect birds. It was hoped that these pledges and the league's education about Australian birdlife, as well as competitions to identify birds and imitate their calls, would help to conserve local bird species. The league initially had a strong hold in the public school system in New South Wales, reinforcing the interest in nature study that the new 1905 curriculum endorsed.³⁶ This interest persisted in some areas, as Robert Haworth recalled about the Mortdale area in the 1940s. He claimed that girls at Mortdale Public School were particularly likely to take part because of an affinity with the moral dimension of the league's call to protect bird species. Of greater interest at Mortdale, however, were the bird call competitions. Mortdale Public were the champions, with boys as well as girls excelling year after year during the 1940s in the Sydney-wide competitions.³⁷

By the 1960s, however, the loss of habitat because of the expanding 'reclamations' had significantly reduced the readily sighted birdlife, eroding support for the Gould League. While the league continued to be known in the public schools I went to in the late 1950s and early 1960s in Padstow and Kogarah, few children joined. People going to school in the East Hills to Salt Pan Creek stretch of the river in the 1980s had simply never heard of the Gould League.³⁸ There may have been more habitat remaining on the southern side or further downstream, but the rising

36 Gould League, [Home Page], accessed 14 January 2021, www.gould.org.au/; Roberts and Tribe, *The Gould League*. See Kass, *Educational Reform*, 146, quoting an optimistic 1913 acting chief inspector who attributed to the Gould League such intervention that: the destruction of bird life has dwindled nearly to vanishing point'.

37 Robert Haworth, pers. comm., 8 July 2020.

38 Andrew Molloy, pers. comm.; Kass, *Educational Reform*, 174. John Huxley suggests the peak of membership was in the 1950s. Huxley, 'Down Binoculars'.

population and the expanding ‘reclamations’ were taking a toll by then. The New South Wales chapter was disbanded in 2011, but Gould League Australia groups continue to exist today in some rural areas.³⁹

These early experiences of environmental interest on the Georges River while some habitat persisted shaped the later careers of many of the children attending public schools in the 1940s and 1950s, encouraging them to take up careers in ecology across a number of disciplines and professions.⁴⁰ As the Georges River became even more damaged during the 1960s, it was sometimes these young people or their families who became active in campaigning against a new wave of ‘reclamation’, addressed in the following chapters, that suddenly burst into view in the late 1960s.

39 See, for example, those on the far South Coast of New South Wales at Eden and Bournda (near Tathra). Houston, ‘Former Bird Calling Champions’.

40 Kass, *Educational Reform*, 159; Haworth, interview. After his early training as a plumber, Bob Haworth took an active role in the Terania Creek protests against rainforest logging in 1979, completed doctoral research in geography, taught at the University of New England and has written since, among other studies, analyses of mid-twentieth-century habitat change on the Georges River. See, for example, Haworth, ‘Changes in Mangrove/Salt Marsh Distribution’.

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