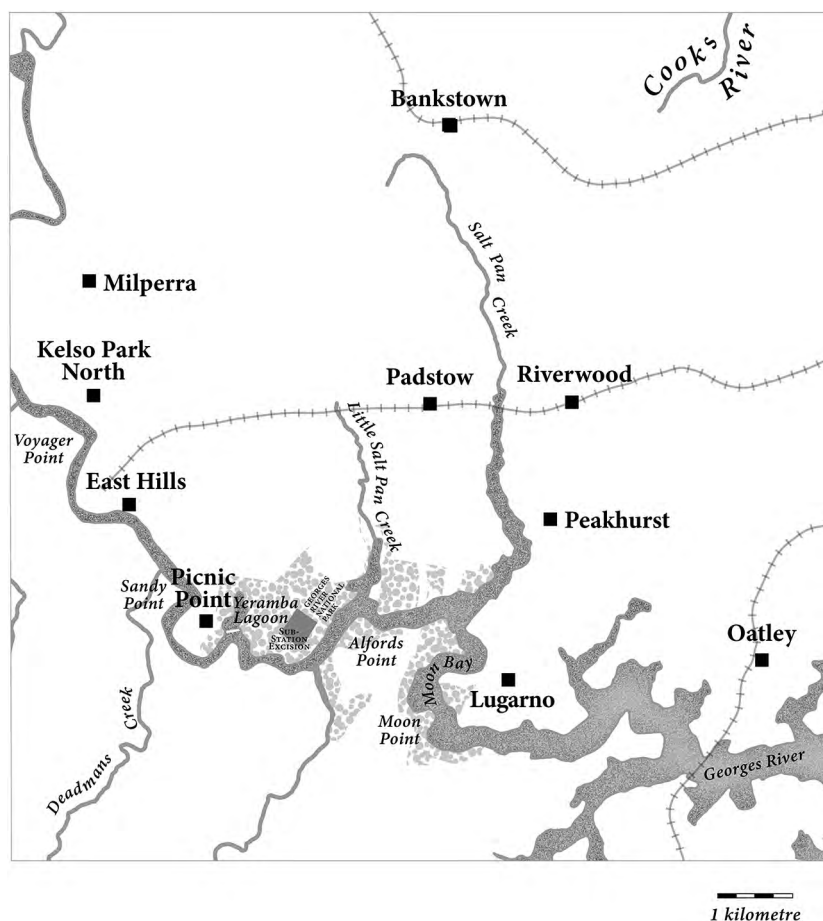


## 9

### **View from the Heights: Little Salt Pan Creek**

The first Georges River National Park had seen conflicts about mangroves. Some people, like George Jacobsen, wanted to keep them, but others, like Alf Stills, thought they needed to be chopped out to make way for parklands. For Alf and others in this early resident action group, mangroves did not count as 'bushland' or as 'river views'. In the early 1960s, another group of residents, those with 'exclusive waterfront blocks' on the southern shore between Como and Sylvania who formed the Georges River Oyster Lease Protest Association, had been very clear that oyster farms did not constitute 'natural' river views and they did not like mangroves much either. The oyster farmers, on the other hand, were pointing out by 1966 that mangroves slowed the flow of the river and protected their growing oysters. For kids who had grown up around the mangrove flats, like my brothers at Padstow and Alex Knight at Neverfail Bay, the smell of mangrove mud signalled freedom and adventure. For all of them, mangroves formed an essential component of a healthy river. So, it was not only George Jacobsen who was unhappy about the loss of mangroves as bushland.



**Map 9.1: Little Salt Pan Creek.**

Cartography: Sharon Harrup.

Yet there were many people who, like Alf, saw that the mangroves were expanding. Andrew Molloy has trawled through memoirs and found many uneasy references to the loss of earlier, clearer banks because of mangrove expansion rather than from garbage dumping or reclamation. Such memories came not only from the recreational fishers using boats launched from the jetties along the waterways, but also from swimmers and picnickers. The expanding mangroves were making the water more difficult for them to access, which added to their unease about losing 'safe' spaces to higher density development.<sup>1</sup> One was Betty Goodger, who

<sup>1</sup> 'More Object to Town Plan', *Bankstown Torch*, 20 August 1969, 3.

wrote in the *Bankstown Historical Society Newsletter* in 1992 that ‘people reminiscing about their childhoods around the turn of the century all commented on how clear the water was, and how few mangroves there were’.<sup>2</sup> Allan Smith, one of Andrew Molloy’s interviewees, was another who remembered that the mangroves came to the banks at Padstow much later than his 1920s childhood.<sup>3</sup> Defence Department aerial photographs confirm the absence of mangroves even as late as 1949.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, the greatest fear, which was held by the majority of the population, was about rising densities of housing – a fear fuelled by the County of Cumberland Plan and by the rapid increase in population in the Bankstown area, which had taken up so much of what had been earlier open space, whether market garden or ‘wasteland’, now subdivided and built on.<sup>5</sup> In June 1969, complying with Sydney-wide planning requirements, Bankstown Council announced its town plan, which endorsed the possibility of some areas moving from single block, freestanding homes to medium- or high-density housing. At first there were few objections but protests soon rose to a crescendo over the possibility of higher density development. As Mayor D. B. Carruthers recognised, many Bankstown residents feared that their town would become like the adjacent Canterbury Council area along the Cooks River, where many two-, three- or four-storey ‘walk-up’ blocks of flats had been built over the previous decades, as local owners of large house blocks had sold to developers.<sup>6</sup> The protests persisted and indeed escalated as high-rise and villa home developments began to appear. By late 1972, many more had been approved, leading to a *Bankstown Torch* editorial in December voicing widespread community fears about ‘the rash of two-storey blocks of soulless units’ that had occurred in Canterbury when ‘high density [was] allowed to run riot’.<sup>7</sup> I remember this anxiety about rising densities and loss of open spaces to have been widely troubling and commonly expressed.

2 Goodger, ‘History Notes’.

3 Molloy, *A History of Padstow*, 120, 242.

4 Haworth, ‘Changes in Mangrove/Salt Marsh Distribution’. Australian Defence Force photographs taken in 1930 and 1949.

5 Spearritt, *Sydney’s Century*, 116.

6 ‘Third of Population Will Live in Flats’, *Bankstown Torch*, 20 August 1969, 3; ‘More Object to Town Plan’, *Bankstown Torch*, 20 August 1969, 3.

7 Editorial, *Bankstown Torch*, 27 December 1972, 2. This concurs with my memories of the discussion around my home in Padstow from 1969 in relation to the town plan.

The debates over the city plan were being reported on the same pages of the local paper as accounts of evidence being given at the hearings of the Senate Select Committee on Water Pollution that was taking place at the same time. So local readers could see the continued debates over rising population and higher density housing framed by accounts of the massive pollution of the Georges River by sewage and industrial pollution – with both processes leading to the loss of riverbank open spaces. Just one example was 20 August 1969, when the third page was divided evenly (apart from a photograph of footballers and a supermarket advertisement) between an account of rising objections to higher density housing and the evidence of Dr W. B. Malcolm, senior biologist with the Fisheries Branch, that:

The majority of fish caught by both commercial and professional fishermen in NSW spent all or most of their lives in the estuaries ... These fish depended on mangrove swamps, river mud flats and shallow areas with marine grasses both for food and shelter, while marshlands adjacent to rivers were rich in organic and insect life on which fish fed after flooding and high tides. Rapid development of the metropolitan area so far as homes and recreation areas are concerned had despoiled many of the mangrove swamps and marshlands over the years, and were depleting these important feeding grounds ... Many swamp lands and river flats had been taken over as garbage dumps and playing fields, and waterfront home-owners had encroached onto the shallow areas with swimming pools and jetties.<sup>8</sup>

Long-term factory-working residents of the Bankstown area, like those, for example, in Ryan Road, were protesting most loudly about the possibilities of flats in their street, using the channels of the local newspaper to ventilate their anxieties and anger.<sup>9</sup>

But the area was changing rapidly as the population numbers suggested. The swimming pools closed by Hunt and Howard in 1962 had been community and council-built pools, while the jetties had usually been built with local people's voluntary labour. By the early 1970s, there were patches of the area that were gentrifying. As incomes rose, the presence of private motor vehicles increased and dependence on public transport was reduced, making housing land along the river's sandstone escarpments

---

8 'Exhaustive Pollution Tests Soon', *Bankstown Torch*, 20 August 1969, 3. See also page 1 ('River Test for Pollution') and editorial for continuing comment on both issues.

9 'Exhaustive Pollution Tests Soon', *Bankstown Torch*, 20 August 1969, 3.

more accessible and, with its water views over river and creeks, more desirable – and, therefore, more expensive. The residents of the newly settled (and named) Padstow Heights had been able to afford not only cars but also the larger blocks of land available in this recently subdivided and sold area. They were the ones who were to become the most effective campaigners to save Little Salt Pan Creek.

Bankstown Council, desperate to solve its escalating ‘explosion’ of garbage, decided in November 1972 to put a garbage tip on the upper stretches of Little Salt Pan Creek.<sup>10</sup> This creek did have mangroves along its water’s edge in 1935 when a bushwalk along its waters was described, giving insight into how few houses were present and how little developed the area had been before the postwar population increase.<sup>11</sup> However, these mangroves were expanding and at least some early commentators saw no problem with getting rid of them. In December 1972, Sally Faulkner, a columnist for the *Bankstown Torch*, was enthusiastic about the council’s plans to get rid of the mangroves, both in Little Salt Pan and at Kelso Reserve, because she believed the area needed more accessible open space, but she complained that there were already enough playing fields:

Most people would agree that Bankstown is well endowed with sporting facilities and children’s playgrounds, but when it comes to getting away from it all for a family picnic in a natural setting, the choice is limited.<sup>12</sup>

Faulkner wanted an artificial freshwater wetland on the model of Bankstown Council’s work with the Georges River Trust, already completed at Yeramba and underway at Georges Hall. Her vision was for freshwater wetlands because these ‘natural settings’ would ‘attract wildlife back into the area and provide a haven of quiet’.<sup>13</sup> Her argument, then, was that the mangroves and the salt water had damaged the environment and what was needed was for council work to ‘reclaim’ the area to freshwater and ‘nature’.

10 Howard, interview, discussed in Goodall, Cadzow and Byrne, ‘Mangroves, Garbage and Fishing’.

11 E. Caines Phillips, ‘Where to Hike during the Week-End: Little Salt Pan’, *Daily Telegraph*, 30 November 1935, 7.

12 ‘160 Acre Nature Reserve Planned’, *Bankstown Torch*, 19 December 1972, 5.

13 Ibid.



**Figure 9.1: Padstow Heights residents, Mrs J. Pethyridge and daughter, 1973, showing mangrove views.**

Originally captioned: 'View of Little Salt Pan Creek from Seeland Place, Padstow Heights. Mrs. J. Pethyridge and her daughter Kylie Ann (9½ mths) and their pet dog Cleo enjoy the view from their home (No 21) Seeland Place Padstow Heights'. The photograph accompanied an article by Jon Powis entitled 'Ecology Action by the Text Book: How to Save Little Salt Pan Creek'. The mangroves are the low-lying vegetation in the central middle distance. Bankstown Council proposed to dig up the mangroves and replace them with a garbage dump, which would eventually be turned into playing fields. Courtesy of Nine Publishing.

A high-profile – and successful – protest movement soon emerged, however, in opposition to the council plan for the tip and reclamation. This campaign drew on the newest group of incoming residents. These were very different from the first arrivals in the 1950s when the population had expanded suddenly because the New South Wales Housing Commission had located its hostels and then housing developments in the area, bringing, as Col Jacobsen had put it, ‘new people’. These ‘new people’ had been similar to the other source of postwar population expansion – working-class and lower middle-class, owner-builder families who had been living with parents and relations in townships like Bankstown in the 1940s and had finally been able to buy a small block of their own, close to the railway lines.

But the blocks closest to the creeks and rivers, like Padstow Heights overlooking Little Salt Pan, had not been taken up until long after the initial Housing Commission hostel residents and the owner-builders of the 1950s had moved in. Only in the mid-1960s did Padstow Heights, previously regarded as ‘out the back’ and isolated, become attractive. The growing ownership of cars meant that these incoming homeowners were no longer dependent on living close to railway stations.<sup>14</sup> For them, it was the view and the surrounding environment that was attractive. Their land purchases had included a distant view of the river, so the expanding mangroves allowed a pleasing, dense, green *bush* expanse over which to glimpse the water’s edge. These new residents seldom had close encounters with the muddy, smelly, snake- and spider-inhabited wilderness that the boys on bikes were enjoying around the same time.<sup>15</sup>

Mr C. Austwick, spokesperson for the protesting residents, pointed to the valuable iconic role of mangroves as *bush* when he said in December 1972:

Apart from residents’ natural reluctance to have a garbage tip over their back fences, the group was also concerned that one of the few remaining areas of natural bushland should be destroyed. It is a marvellous place, an adventure ground for hundreds of children, and a haven for numerous wild animals and birds ... All this would disappear and in return we would have a garbage tip for years, and eventually, playing fields. No one could possibly think a flat playing field is an improvement on the glorious water views we now have.<sup>16</sup>

14 Molloy, *A History of Padstow*, 157–63 and 122, with photograph of undated page from the *Sun*, c. 1978, reporting local real estate agents identifying ‘top streets’ in the area as being in ‘Padstow Heights [sic] developed only since the mid-sixties’.

15 Powis, ‘Ecology Action’.

16 ‘Residents Set to Force Council into Court’, *Bankstown Torch*, 27 December 1972, 1.

The residents of this Padstow Heights group were not acting alone. Kevin Howard, the health inspector at Bankstown Council who was troubled by the garbage dumping plans, was also contacting local media and politicians to alert them. Yet he did not remember being in touch with the Padstow Heights activist group nor was he aware of the East Hills and Picnic Point residents who had been so active in campaigning for the national park in the 1950s, despite sharing membership with George Jacobsen on the park trust in the 1960s.<sup>17</sup> The communication between, and the memory of, these local movements did not circulate for long.

The Little Salt Pan Creek campaign against the garbage tip was successful because it drew on the cultural capital of the recent, more affluent, wave of residents, whose efficiency was suggested by this headline in *Nation Review*: 'Ecology Action by the Text Book: How to Save Little Salt Pan Creek'. The campaign counted among its ranks executives with management training, four medical doctors, a pharmacist, a pathologist, accountants and a company secretary.<sup>18</sup> This was a very different employment and class profile than those who had been living in the areas close to the river in the 1940s and 1950s and certainly very different from those from East Hills involved in the 1950s campaign for a national park. This 1970s campaign to save Little Salt Pan Creek was organised with precision and efficiency, using the media to apply strong pressure to Bankstown Council, which capitulated within months. The continuing opposition from George Jacobsen and others over the years had made Bankstown Council sensitive to criticism about its environmental policies and this campaign added momentum to its later decisions to adopt more careful policies on conservation.

There had also, of course, been persistent voices within the senior staff of Bankstown Council itself. As has been discussed in previous chapters, Harold Hunt, the council's chief health surveyor, had made extensive and powerful submissions in 1969 on the extent of sewage and industrial pollution of the Georges River to the Senate Select Committee on Water Pollution. Hunt's response to state government plans for solid waste disposal made to council in 1968 had been just as scathing. He had argued, on the basis not only of his experience in Bankstown but also his research internationally, that the federal government needed to develop

---

17 Howard, interview, discussed in Goodall, Cadzow and Byrne, 'Mangroves, Garbage and Fishing'.

18 Powis, 'Ecology Action'.



a coordinated national plan for waste disposal so that local government bodies were not left to manage an insoluble problem with scattered facilities and few resources.

Kevin Howard, mentioned earlier, had supported Hunt, his senior officer, at the Select Committee hearings and had endorsed his attempts to mitigate the problems of uncontrolled waste dumping and toxic pollutant release into the river. Whereas Hunt had drawn on international studies and statistics, Howard drew on his formal training as a health inspector and his own long experience as a Georges River fisherman as well as the observations of other experienced fishers. He had put all these resources to good use in contacting media and passing on information in support of the Little Salt Pan campaign, including his refutation of CSIRO (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation) researcher G. A. Mills who asserted that neither oysters nor the river itself carried industrial pollutants.<sup>19</sup> These experiences convinced Howard to take up further study and he enrolled in a diploma of environmental studies at Macquarie University in Sydney. Late in 1973 he wrote an investigative report on the state of the Georges River, presenting it as his final essay and then submitting it to Bankstown Council. His work extended the reports Hunt had submitted in the later 1960s, reviewing the issues facing the river in 1973. Howard's assessments offer valuable insights into the state of the river five years after Hunt's impassioned pleas for its defence to the Senate Select Committee. Building on his knowledge as a fisherman, Howard pointed out that all the recoverable sand for building had been dredged from the freshwater sections of the Georges River by the mid-1940s, after which sand mining had begun in the estuarine sections of the river between Liverpool and Padstow on Salt Pan Creek. He argued that the sand mining was 'reducing the area of gently sloping intertidal zones', leading to a reduction in 'the shallows' with an inevitable damaging effect on immature fish and crustaceans.<sup>20</sup>

Howard stressed mangrove loss in three of his five key conclusions. He pointed out that 'mangrove removal has been popular for the past 30 or 40 years' but that now the Fisheries Branch and at least some local government bodies had a better appreciation of the damage caused by doing so. In Howard's assessment, the greatest impact had been on the abundance of all fish and crustacean species. As he explained, there had

19 'Oysters' Future "Not So Bright", *St George and Sutherland Shire Leader*, 14 March 1973, 29.

20 Howard, 'An Essay on Contemporary Change', 3.

been no systematic collection of figures, so his sources had to be the observations of experienced fishers. This led him to believe that numbers among all species had decreased significantly and he saw the removal of mangroves as habitat for immature fish and crustaceans as a critical factor in this decline.

His second point was that the loss of both mangroves and saltmarsh in reclamation projects had led to a severe reduction in the numbers of birds along the river, and his third point was that sewage pollution continued to be severe along the river. He estimated that 45 million litres of sewage was being released into the river from all sources each day in 1973. In his view, this release had led directly to the loss of a 1.2-kilometre (0.75-mile) stretch of mature mangrove trees at East Hills. While a fourth key point reiterated the health problems associated with sewage pollution, Howard's final key conclusion was that, in spite of all his earlier arguments about mangrove removal, there were some areas in which mangroves were expanding. He argued this was due to rising silt deposition into creek beds, leading to the expansion of mangrove stands into what had previously been deep water. His example was Salt Pan Creek, where the expansion of mangroves was confirmed in Defence Department aerial photography from 1930 onwards.<sup>21</sup> His report demonstrated that, even with determined advocates like Hunt and Howard on the council staff, action by one local government authority alone was not enough to save the river.<sup>22</sup>

---

21 Discussed in Haworth, 'Bush Tracks and Bush Blocks'; Goodall, Cadzow and Byrne, 'Mangroves, Garbage and Fishing'.

22 Howard, 'An Essay on Contemporary Change'.

This text is taken from *Georges River Blues: Swamps, Mangroves and Resident Action, 1945–1980*, by Heather Goodall, published 2022, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/GRB.2021.09](https://doi.org/10.22459/GRB.2021.09)