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## Reflections, 1945–80

This book has asked two questions. First, what can we learn about ‘suburban resident environmentalism’ from the seven environmental conflicts along the Georges River from 1945 to 1980, which have been invisible in the histories of conservation in Australia?

The second question has been to ask about the relationship between these human histories and the histories of the non-human species that were the focus of their conflicts.

The first question is the more familiar one for historians: any activism is shaped by its time and place. This study shows that characterisation of this unquestionably ‘suburban’ life as if it were focused only within the private blocks of individually owned land is inadequate. Instead, environmental activism on the Georges River in the mid-twentieth century is comparable to the areas Sellers discusses, in that the broader environment was as important for residents as their individual block and house.<sup>1</sup> It will have become clear in these pages that suburbs aren’t monolithic or uniform, and that within areas often dismissed as ‘suburban’ there are wide differences. This book has considered seven ‘suburban’ environmental campaigns: one in the 1950s, another in the early 1960s, and the other five occurring close together along the river and often interacting from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s and beyond. Each of these campaigns was distinctive, as earlier chapters have shown, but just as important, there were many common themes. This chapter, while recognising the diversities, will consider what those common themes were.

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1 Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible*.

The residents were there for different reasons, but for all of them, the river was a part of their vision of the place. This was not an area where people saw their lives confined by the fences around their blocks. Some of the residents in the area in the postwar years were there by choice, and proximity to the river and open space were a strong factor in such choices. Others had not chosen to be there – the international refugees, the assisted migrants or the ‘slum cleared’ inner-city people – but some of them had used the river and its parklands to make new homes for themselves, or at least to make their stay there more meaningful. So for all of them, the river was a central part of their lives.

The suburban environmental campaigns, as suggested in earlier chapters and discussed below, were largely monocultural and rarely if ever recognised that Aboriginal people had a continuing presence along the river.<sup>2</sup> Yet, despite little consideration of colonialism and its continuing impacts, there was an awareness – expressed most clearly among the East Hills campaigners – that Aboriginal societies prior to British invasion and settlement had valuable practices in environmental management. In keeping with Aboriginal principles, a recurrent theme among upper estuary working-class residents like the Jacobsen family, who fished and hunted game for food, was that wildlife was not to be hunted for sport, nor wasted, but was instead to be utilised fully.<sup>3</sup> Maria Nugent has pointed out that settlers often accorded a limited role to Aboriginal people in their own histories as a source of authenticity about places and practices.<sup>4</sup> The theme was common among bushwalkers and early conservationists too that settlers who cared for environments and wildlife were under an obligation – as heirs to the idealised Aboriginal people assumed to be former owners – to honour such principles.<sup>5</sup> This romanticised vision of being heirs to vanished but noble environmentalists empowered conservationists although it also sustained the continued marginalisation of the many Aboriginal families who still lived in the area.

The early campaign in the 1950s to achieve the first Georges River National Park was fuelled by both the hopes and fears generated by the impacts of World War II. Federal decisions to increase industrialisation and population had very specific impacts on the Georges River, where

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2 For evidence to the contrary see Goodall and Cadzow, *Rivers and Resilience*.

3 Kevin, Colin and Carol Jacobsen, interview, 12 July 2006.

4 Nugent, ‘Historical Encounters’.

5 Harper, ‘The Battle for the Bush’; White and Ford, *Playing in the Bush*; Nugent, *Botany Bay*; Nugent, ‘Historical Encounters’; Banivanua Mar, *Decolonisation and the Pacific*.

state government goals to reduce inner-city overcrowding combined with rising manufacturing and immigration to increase the population in the Bankstown area at a faster rate than anywhere else in the city. The County of Cumberland Plan (CCP) brought hope but also fear. It proposed a 'green zone' stretching from the Royal National Park in Sutherland all the way to the Georges River, stimulating the hope that the bushland along the river would be valued as 'national' and belong to local people. Yet the CCP also argued for increased density in township 'residential' areas, worsening the fear that 'a rash of soulless blocks of two-storey flats' would 'run riot' across the area.<sup>6</sup>

In class terms, the resident action groups were mixed. Gentrifying residents (in areas newly subdivided like Padstow Heights overlooking Little Salt Pan Creek on the north side and downstream in Bonnet Bay and Sylvania Waters on the southern side) contributed both to the Georges River Oyster Lease Protest Association (GROLPA), which opposed the oyster farms, and to the Little Salt Pan Creek campaign against reclamation and garbage dumps. Yet many of those activists who could be considered professional, like the teachers in Lime Kiln Bay and those in Oatley Bay, had a history of Australian Labor Party and union activism. They saw themselves as being in opposition to the more affluent residents. Residents of the Oatley area contacted by Dave Koffel saw themselves as 'silvertails', but in the end discovered they held very little power.

Another complicated group were the oyster farmers. The work they did was hard manual labour, often in difficult and unpleasant conditions, whether handling trays on the water or shucking and bottling oysters in the sheds. At the same time, they were an aspirational group who saw their enterprises as small businesses, and insisted they be called 'farmers'. Yet they were dismissed by both councils and new gentrifying residents as unsightly and outdated, cluttering up the river views no matter how luxurious their products. It was only to be newly built alliances between such unlikely groups as the teachers and the oyster farmers that gave the campaigners the numbers they needed to put pressure on local government. Such alliances were often – eventually – successful in staving off the loss of the riverfront bushland environments.

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6 Editorial, *Bankstown Torch*, 27 December 1972, 2.

Each of the campaigns hoped to gain attention to achieve their goals, but their varied situations gave them differing supporters. The gentrifying residents with expensive land ‘with a view’ – like those at Little Salt Pan Creek and GROLPA at Sylvania Waters – received editorial sympathy from local press and even, at times, from local government, perhaps because of the rates they paid. The fishing people at the Moon bays had little support from either the press or councils, but were strongly supported by ecologists and the activist state Fisheries Branch, and, surprisingly by Eric Lewis, chief secretary in a conservative state government but nevertheless a geographer with an interest in environment. This question of river water quality activated also at least some of the professionals in local government, like Hunt and Howard from Bankstown, whose evidence to the Senate Select Committee claimed the spotlight at a national level.

Those who faced the most bitter local government opponents, almost simultaneously, were at Lime Kiln Bay, facing off against Hurstville Council, and those at Oatley Bay, confronting Kogarah Council. These campaigns chose different strategies, with Lime Kiln Bay campaigners proving highly effective in drawing in the state Opposition politicians from the Australian Labor Party, forcing the deteriorating conditions of the river into the metropolitan press and onto the state political agenda. Those around Oatley Bay – in the Save Poulton Park Campaign and in the Oatley Flora and Fauna Society – focused on education, mobilising networks of large conservation organisations as well as student and academic networks like the Society for Social Responsibility in Science. Yet, each of these campaigns also aimed to build alliances. The Lime Kiln Bay Committee practised energetic outreach to local people across all types of organisations as well as political figures, while the Poulton Park and OFF campaigners joined forces with the oyster farmers as well as the educators.

None of these campaigns achieved all the goals they wanted and some of the activists were left with a deep sense of failure. Yet, together – with different strategies and alliances – they changed the public conversation across these suburbs as well as in state and national politics.

Across most of the conflicts, from the early campaign to achieve the Georges River National Park, to the later downstream ones opposing dredging, dumping and reclamation, there was at least one common theme. Few of the uses to which residents put the river and parklands – even the powerboat races and water skiing that GROLPA wanted –

were solitary. There may have been some who fished or walked alone, exploring and observing, but most people were seeking social interactions: picnics among family or friends, or those organised by church groups, unions or progress associations; fishing with mates or talking with nearby fishers about baits and catches. Even the quieter areas associated with assignations – illicit or unconventional sexual contacts, beats or secret meetings – were expressions of social networks, however marginalised or repressed. Sociality was, therefore, a sustained element in the uses of the open spaces of this suburban area, and of the places that were defended in these environmental movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

The changes on the river were directly related to the changing postwar economy. There was a massive increase in population and industrial activity along the river, which brought significant diversification in class. Land prices rose more rapidly where river views were accessible, so, by the early decades of the twenty-first century, more affluent residents lived closer to the river while lower-income residents lived further away from the river. Yet it was lower-income residents who were the most common users of the parks.<sup>7</sup> There had been little progress in acquiring new open public space away from the river after the 1970s.<sup>8</sup> It had been the rugged, sandy or boggy areas close to the river that continued to offer the majority of open spaces for parks or remaining bushland in all the local government areas through which the Georges River ran.<sup>9</sup> Oyster farmers too needed the continued mangrove and saltmarsh swamps not only as a cleansing habitat but also to break the force of the tides and the wakes from the increasing numbers of speedboats on the estuary.

The socialities of the lower Georges River environmental campaigns had not been cross-cultural. During the mid-twentieth century, there were gatherings of Italian and Greek immigrants as well as of the continuing Aboriginal populations in the area, but these communities were not included in the more public gatherings of the majority Anglo-Irish populations along the river in the years from 1945 to the mid-1970s. Nor were members of the non-Anglo communities invited into, or included in, the suburban environmental campaigns considered in this paper. The state government pushed both residents and local government

7 Byrne, Goodall and Cadzow, *Place-Making in National Parks*; Cadzow, Byrne and Goodall, *Waterborne*; Goodall, Byrne and Cadzow, *Waters of Belonging*.

8 News South Wales Department of Environment and Planning, 'Open Space in the Sydney Region'.

9 Cunneen, 'Hands Off the Parks!'.

out of parklands management in the 1980s on the grounds of lack of diversity, but the government was concerned about formal qualifications and gender imbalances, not about cultural imbalances, and it took no action to redress such isolations.

Nevertheless, despite being relatively monocultural, it was sociality rather than solitary interactions with nature that was the more likely characteristic of all the Georges River campaigns from 1945 to 1980. A sense of working together motivated the activists in each of these campaigns and, as Dave Koffel and others have explained, involved extensive time and emotional commitments, with long hours after work and stressful meetings with local government councillors and officials. So the shared work and the shared anxieties all strengthened commitments.

Gender was a factor in these resident action environment campaigns. Families shared in all this campaigning, as memories and documents of each of these campaigns show – husbands and wives, sons and daughters, all took part in the letterboxing, fundraising and, often, in the planning. Most important, as was demonstrated by Evol Knight in the Poulton Creek dispute, was the role women could play in building person-to-person relationships across previously separated groups. There had been little interaction across decades between the oyster farming families and those of their neighbours who worked in land-based jobs, yet their interests had often been very similar. It was the personal and ‘behind the scenes’ roles that women could play as neighbours, friends and spouses that could draw people together in order to see how closely their goals coincided.

Further, in each campaign, from East Hills to Oatley Bay, women took active roles in initiating activities and in resourcing – through cooking and managing – the social events and working parties that kept these campaigns going. It seems too that it was women particularly whose interests in informal sociality were a theme in all the campaigns. The playing fields for competitive sport for which local government councils were so often calling for garbage dumping and reclamation were still often in use for sporting codes that, at their most elite levels, were predominantly for male players. At the level of local sports, girls were increasingly likely to be visible, taking part in long-established netball and hockey competitions and also, occasionally, in newly formed girls’ soccer and AFL teams. Nevertheless, the campaigns against escalating reclamation of swampland to create sporting fields were often fuelled

by undercurrents of resentment against the loss of wild places for the informal and non-competitive sociality that was shown in each campaign to be valued highly by women along the river.

Yet, in most groups, whether oyster farmers or land-based residents, it was men who were recognised as the spokespeople of the campaigns. It reflects the gender order of these areas that it was accepted both within the families and by formal bodies like local government councils that it would be men who took roles of public responsibility. Unmarried men or women, however silent they may be about sexual orientation and identification, were less visible; these suburban environments were undoubtedly difficult for men and women who were homosexual or in any way divergent from the nuclear family models.

Another thread that runs through all these campaigns is the fear of loss of spaciousness, a rising population and the erosion of open spaces. Yet these campaigns were each quite clear that what they wanted was not simply ‘green space’ – the generic term in use today in which ‘green’ can refer to grass or manicured parks and playing fields. These campaigns all wanted to keep native, uncultivated and wild bushland – exactly as the Poulton Creek campaign had printed on its sticker: ‘Keep bushland in our suburbs.’ They were each campaigning to protect *bush* – vegetation that was understood to be endemic and that was not manicured or tailored into a ‘garden’ but instead reflected some sort of original condition. Mangroves were the key representative of all the rest of the ‘bush’ that these campaigns were trying to protect; if they could save the mangroves, they could save the adjacent, more complex, habitats, both on land and underwater, and so protect the animal, fish and birdlife that might need that habitat.

During interviews, few people remembered faecal contamination of the river as one of their motivating factors, even though it had resulted from the population increase of which they were so anxiously aware. Instead, campaigners focused on a horror of being suffocatingly crowded. One of the qualities about suburban life in the Georges River area was the sense of an uncrowded world in which ready access to the river was central. The river was a core of the imagined landscape within which local people lived. This had been central to the campaign to gain the Georges River National Park in the 1950s and to defend it in the 1960s.

As the population increased more rapidly in the Bankstown local government area (LGA) than in most other areas, the anxiety about losing this sense of spaciousness rose rapidly through the decades. The example of neighbouring LGAs was often raised, where medium-density housing had mushroomed with walk-up blocks of four-storey flats.<sup>10</sup> But whereas the campaigners in the 1950s were anxious about losing access to daily living and recreational space, the campaigners of the later 1960s and 1970s, with greater awareness of ecology and the relationships between species – human and non-human – were fearful not only of crowding among people but also of the irretrievable loss of habitats and environmental networks in the more-than-human world. All these elements had been present in the Little Salt Pan Creek campaign: the anxieties of long-term residents about losing spaciousness and the fears of newer, more affluent, residents about losing their views of native bushland.

These environmental campaigns were attempts to conserve riverine environments, above and below the water. So, while most were focused on the low-lying waterlogged places called swamps, few of these campaigns demonstrated the interests that appear most commonly in the conservation campaigns to defend what are today called ‘wetlands’, which often focus on birdlife. This was despite the fact that, in earlier years, there had been evidence of many species of birds on the Georges River and its large swamplands like Kelso. Population increase, subdivisions and small-scale ‘reclamations’ for golf courses from the 1920s had reduced these habitats and undermined the bird population.

Instead, the most tenacious defence of the Georges River swamps from 1945 to 1980 came from fishing people. In working within the river’s waters, fishers shared many interests with oyster farmers, but fishing people had an even greater commitment to the uncultivated and ‘wild’ dimensions of the river’s ecology. This interest was present in the campaign for the original Georges River National Park but became particularly prominent in the campaigns around Great Moon Bay and Towra Point, where the threat to fish from dredging was most urgent. Yet, in all the campaigns, the swamps that were to be destroyed by ‘reclamation’ were valued as nurturing environments for aquatic species, including immature fish and crustaceans. This concern highlighted the role of mangroves in linking with networks of living species, demanding a refusal to privilege

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10 As noted in Editorial, *Bankstown Torch*, 27 December 1972, about neighbouring suburbs where blocks of flats had ‘run riot’.



an orientation to land only but rather to recognise the ecology of the whole river, above and below the waterline. This was compounded in the postwar years by well-founded anxieties about toxic discharge from the rapidly increasing number of factories along the river as well as from the experimental Lucas Heights nuclear reactor.

There was virtually no regulation nor accounting of the contents of factory discharges into the river and very little about volumes, as the Senate Select Committee found in sittings from 1969.<sup>11</sup> Yet the State Pollution Control Commission, established by the New South Wales Government to respond to the same popular concerns as the federal Senate Committee, proved itself in the Oatley Bay dispute to have little real power over the Kogarah Council, which was committed to garbage dumping and reclamation for sports grounds. The experience of fishing people extended from the killing associated with hunting through to insight into the psychology of aquatic species, as well as awareness of preferred habitats and concerns over sustainability. It has been the case in Africa and South Asia that hunters have become some of the most effective conservation advocates as they have shifted their knowledge from predator to protector. On the Georges River, the tireless conservationist Bernie Clarke, as a former commercial fisher, is one example, as is Kevin Howard, the Bankstown health inspector who drew on his recreational fishing experience to inform his approaches to the problems of garbage disposal and river conservation. It is notable that Clarke learned about birdlife and migratory species only while he was campaigning to save Towra Point, although he rapidly incorporated this into his advocacy.

The determination of the Georges River campaigners to focus on the environment they lived with, however polluted it was, is one of the reasons these campaigns do not appear in the histories of Australian conservation. Unlike mainstream conservation organisations, which tended to be more interested in wilderness, the suburban environmentalists wanted to intervene in, and improve, environmental quality where they lived – even if it was damaged. This was a particularly distinctive element in the Oatley Bay campaign for Poulton Creek and its banks, which came to focus on the educational value of these polluted and compromised estuarine ecologies for inquiry-based learning for schools and for the public. This had been raised in other campaigns, like that at Lime Kiln Bay, but it was most

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11 Birch, Evenden and Teutsch, 'Dominance of Point Source', demonstrated the validity of the concerns, although there was little confirmation at the time.

developed downstream around Poulton Creek and Oatley Bay. And across all these campaigns, both the working-class campaigners of the 1950s and the aspirational teachers and oyster farmers of the lower Georges River in the 1970s were focused on their own surroundings. They chose not to spend their energy on distant 'wilderness' areas. Instead, the Georges River suburban environmentalists, even as the area gentrified, campaigned in the present to protect the polluted, damaged river at their doors – however much they might hope to heal that damaged environment in the future.

Perhaps the other reason these campaigns have not attracted analysis as conservation campaigns is that, despite their attempts, they did not gain support from the progressive union movement. The New South Wales Builders Labourers' Federation (BLF) had, by this time, initiated their widely publicised 'green bans' strategy (see Chapter 8), but there was very little involvement of the BLF in the Georges River area. The Lime Kiln Bay campaigners appealed to the Municipal and Shire Council Employees' Union for support, as it covered the workers who dug up the mangroves and bushland at the councils' instructions and then dumped the silt and garbage on the razed mangroves and swamplands. The leadership of this union was aligned with the conservative wing of the Trades and Labor Council and demonstrated emphatically, in its rejection of residents' calls for support, that it was not interested in challenging the councils on this issue or developing a policy on environmental matters.

Despite their green bans, even the rank and file leadership of the BLF recognised that union members were divided on questions of support for heritage conservation and urban planning to foster social justice and environmental conservation. Only after many meetings and internal debates did a significant proportion – although still not all – of the membership decide to support the green bans policy.<sup>12</sup> This process and policy attracted articulate and politically active groups in university and conservation circles, drawing attention to a whole series of inner-city disputes in which unionists were prepared to confront big, multinational development corporations in order to defend low-income and socially disadvantaged residents' interests.<sup>13</sup>

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12 Burgmann and Burgmann, *Green Bans, Red Union*.

13 Bacon, 'They Huffed and They Puffed'; Jakubowicz, 'The Green Ban Movement'.

The resulting alliances, including the development of the Total Environment Centre (TEC) in 1972, forced shifts in the environment movement, directing attention to urban questions, social justice conflicts and the role of major development companies in environmental questions. The TEC, founded by two Georges River residents, Milo Dunphy and Bob Walshe (then still teaching but increasingly involved with environmental politics), reflected the motivating force of the environmental problems at their backs – on the Georges River. Yet the TEC focused attention throughout most of the 1970s on confrontations with big multinational corporations, like the oil companies with refineries in Botany Bay, rather than on less dramatic and small-scale confrontations with local government councils over the intractable problems of waste disposal. The 1976 TEC report on the Cooks River was important but was not to be repeated in other suburban rivers. The enemies of the Georges River resident environmental advocates did not pose such dramatic David and Goliath confrontations – they were not global transnational corporations. It was harder to mobilise strong support for campaigns about confrontations with local councillors (however ridiculous those confrontations might be) concerning unpleasant but common problems like human waste and fly-blown garbage.

The second question of this study – about how the human and non-human histories of the river were related – remains unresolved, but it is possible to sketch out some conclusions.

As always, non-human species were changing – often rapidly – and, in urban conditions, this was occurring at unprecedented rates by the mid-twentieth century. While many species were undergoing changes, the most apparent were those occurring in the large aquatic plants (or macrophytes) along the river. Mangroves drew most of the attention, both from the environmental campaigners and their opponents, even though they were not the only species undergoing changes in distribution or behaviour. But they were the largest and the most visible. And they had also accumulated a large amount of cultural baggage in European culture and medicine, being historically viewed as sources of miasmas and diseases at the most mundane level, and of malignant spiritual forces at the more immaterial level. This cultural baggage from Europe had been intensified among white Australians as they had experienced colonial control and then warfare in the tropical areas of South-East Asia and Papua New Guinea. The long-established European fears of ‘fens’ and ‘bogs’ had been exacerbated by persistent post-traumatic stress disorders after the horrors

of tropical mangrove swamp battlefields in South-East Asia in WWII for many of the Australians who had, like Brewer, taken on public service as municipal engineers or in similar roles.<sup>14</sup> Mangroves, both in myths and in recent wartime experiences, were the species that inhabited *both* land and water, meaning they were seen as unnatural as well as malevolent.

For opponents of environmental campaigns, mangroves were a continuation of this negative past of disease and evil. Mangroves were a pest species that indicated a damaged environment that needed to be 'reclaimed' and healed to become dry land. Such hostility was often directed at the activists campaigning to save them. As Dave Koffel remembers, the Hurstville aldermen told him and the other Lime Kiln Bay campaigners that they were 'all communists defending a mosquito-ridden swamp'.<sup>15</sup> Such vitriol (and such politicised hostility) was seldom made public, although there were some councillors from Hurstville and Kogarah who allowed themselves to be quoted along these lines, including Albert Brewer, Hurstville's municipal engineer who called mangroves 'a foul and noxious weed and a cancerous growth' in 1969, and the Kogarah councillors who called mangroves 'a stinking, mosquito-infested swamp' and a 'dirty, stinking mass' in February 1974.<sup>16</sup>

The more common public stance was that of the 1974 Hurstville Engineer's Report, written by a different municipal engineer, E. Anderson. His report was just as negative as Brewer's 1969 statement, but Anderson was able to give even more evidence that mangroves were expanding in that area. He drew on recent quantification of mangrove distribution since 1930 to argue that what the council proposed was really going to be for the best (it would mean more playing fields, about which the councils were under so much lobbying pressure) and would make very little difference to the existing mangrove cover.

The environmental campaigners opposed 'reclamation' altogether, arguing that it would lead to the removal of all estuarine species and the creation of flat playing fields, picnic areas and golf courses. So they argued against

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14 'Editorial: Why Keep an Eyesore?', *Leader*, 7 August 1974, 2. See also the editor's response about 'witnessing first-hand what damage mangroves can do in Papua New Guinea and Queensland', in letter to the editor, 'Mangroves Do Give Support for Wildlife', *Leader*, 21 August 1974, 21; Gullett, *Not as a Duty Only*, 9.

15 Koffel, interview.

16 Hurstville Shire Engineer A. H. Brewer, quoted in Dunstan, 'Some Early Environmental Problems and Guidelines in NSW Estuaries', 3; 'Angry Residents Rout Protesters', *St George and Sutherland Shire Leader*, 27 February 1974.

the uprooting not only of mangroves but also of saltmarsh overall, and all the associated salt-tolerant species like casuarinas and ti-trees. At first the expansion of mangroves along the sheltered banks of the lower estuary was little noticed. It was only in the 1950s that the groups considered here began to identify the changing accessibility of the river's banks. While there was open conflict among the Picnic Point Regatta Association and Georges River National Park campaigners, some people drew a general distinction between mangroves and other endemic species, which allowed Alf Stills, for example, to condone mangrove removal, although George Jacobsen held out for total protection.

By the later 1960s, the mangroves were impossible to ignore; however, the rapidity of their expansion was hard to admit in a campaign that was arguing that nature was fragile and needed protection. To do so would risk undermining their case. Nor were the causes of mangrove expansion understood. No campaign documents link local causes like sewage contamination of river water with mangrove expansion and there was no recognition at all of global human-induced climate change in that period, so sea level or temperature rise was simply not considered.

During this time too, knowledge of ecological relationships was just beginning to be disseminated, demonstrating the importance of mangroves for the health of the river itself. This drew both fishing people and commercial users like oyster farmers into the earlier coalitions of land-based riverbank users who had protested the 'reclamations'. By no means could it be said that mangroves became anyone's much-loved 'charismatic species', but attitudes were shifting. Many dimensions of mangrove biology were becoming better known and some were useful for campaigning, such as the mangroves' capacity to filter and clean river water.

Most notably, the elements of mangrove biology that were invariably drawn on for campaigning emphasised their nurturing capacity; that is, their capacity to protect and feed the immature life stages of fish and other aquatic species. This anthropomorphic, nurturing and *maternal* role for mangroves was consistently used in campaign literature and appeals, no doubt because it was the most likely to evoke empathy among audiences and counter existing prejudices against the species.

While such arguments formed the expressed campaign language of press releases and correspondence, the very size and visibility of the expanding mangroves made them valuable to the campaigners – it allowed them a clear body of vegetation to defend. The ‘bush’ that campaigners wanted to retain was complex and had many species, so it was easy to refer to in general, but harder to specify. Saltmarsh was nondescript and unobtrusive in Sydney, which was towards the northerly upper limit of its range, so it was much less noticed, even by botanists at that stage, who did not begin to research temperate saltmarsh until around 1990.<sup>17</sup> Saltmarsh too, therefore, made a less useful ‘environment’ to defend. Instead, it was the broader complex, called ‘mangrove swamp’, that could use the better known and more visible mangrove plant as a symbol of the wider landscape – both saltmarsh and ‘bush’ – that needed to be conserved.<sup>18</sup>

On the Georges River estuary, the human histories came to be shaped by mangroves, whether the opposing groups responded with disgust, like the advocates of ‘reclamation’, or with protective defence, like the resident environmental campaigners, the ‘mangrovites’. Had the mangroves not been invading both saltmarsh and open water, the municipal ‘reclaimers’ would have had fewer strategies to solve their exploding garbage problem. Had there been no expanding, smelly, confronting mangroves, pushing into everyone’s attention, the activists would have had little readily identifiable ‘bush’ to defend in order to save the social relationships they valued. While the mangroves themselves were not pleasant, furry or cuddly, their representation as maternal nurturers of baby fish allowed them to play a role as charismatic species to save the wider swamps and bushlands.

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17 Peter Fairweather, pers. comm., 2019; Fairweather, ‘Ecological Changes Due to Our Use of the Coast’; Saintilan, *Australian Saltmarsh Ecology*. There is only one early article on mangroves and saltmarsh, but it’s not Georges River-focused and is concerned with zoning and distribution. See Clarke and Hannon, ‘The Mangrove Swamp’.

18 LKBPC, Press Release 1, December 1973, LKBPC Archive; *OFF Newsletter*, August 1974.

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