

Preface

In 2000 the Georges River seemed very familiar to me. But I had not counted on how much I hated and feared mangroves. I had grown up on the western side of Salt Pan Creek, at Padstow, in the 1950s and 1960s. I thought I knew the river because I had travelled by train to and from school every day for many years, over the rattly bridge across Salt Pan, on my way to Tempe then Kogarah then later into the city before I moved away in 1973. Yet it turned out that I only knew a short stretch of the river – the estuary from Milperra downstream to Salt Pan Creek. I was to find there had been a very different river downstream, from Lime Kiln Bay past the Woronora River to Towra Point. And the past, as they say, is another country, so even my stretch of the Georges River had a different history than I had expected.

I was able to learn something of the past of the river when I worked with Denis Byrne, Stephen Wearing, Allison Cadzow, Jo Kijas and Stephen Gapps on the history and present-day usage of the Georges River National Park, mainly on the northern side of a short stretch of river from East Hills to Salt Pan Creek. Our team of historians, a cultural archaeologist and a leisure sociologist traced the continuing history of Indigenous peoples on the river and the contemporary meanings of the park for Arabic-speaking and Vietnamese local residents. Yet there was one group whose story we did not tell. These were the people I had known best, the residents from the Irish and Anglo world who had lived on the river as settlers and later factory workers until the time I left.

I might have taken this unfinished work no further, but the local government authority where I now live in inner-city Glebe has begun to plant mangroves along the nearby waterfront of Blackwattle Bay to allow environmental regeneration. I was disturbed by the plantings – at first horrified to see what I saw as a threatening and invasive creature, however

endemic – and then surprised by my own emotional responses.¹ Where had this come from when I had learnt so much over the years about the important role of mangroves in ecological relationships? I realised I needed to return to the Georges River research to understand my own reactions to this plant and the ideas that swirled around it when I was growing up in the 1960s and 1970s.

I had continued to visit old friends and relations on the river since that early work, so I began exploring their memories of the river. It became clear that not only had river residents been vitally interested in the river in the 1950s, when they had campaigned for their own national park, but also that they had gone on to take part in many campaigns in the 1960s and 1970s to try to restore the river to ecological health as well as to sustain the rich social relationships they valued. I had moved away to become a student in the inner city, learning about other stories and other places – and I had missed some very important episodes in the river's story. Returning to this story, I realised I needed to broaden and deepen the focus if I was to better understand what these stories could teach me about the river I thought I knew.

Heather Goodall
September 2021

1 I was not the only Glebe resident who was troubled: see McManus, 'Mangrove Battlelines'.

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.