

Georges River system

To establish a rationale for organising the generic and geographically specific recommendations for the Georges River, (which will constitute the final outputs of the study), it is necessary to establish an overview of the key characteristics and status of the river as a system.

This overview provides the basis for identification of elements or areas most sensitive to change or under threat.

The brief overview that follows defines the four main topics of the study from a total river perspective, by summarising the river's:

- scenic quality and built environment
- foreshore access and public open space
- cultural heritage and natural environment.

Given the close relationship between built environment and scenic quality, these are summarised together; similarly the integrated nature of public open space and access requires that these are also summarised together. The status of the natural values and cultural heritage of the river is described in so far as it has direct relevance to the main topics.

Built environment and scenic quality

The scenic character of the Georges River is defined by its highly diverse geography. Between the extensive sandstone bushland of its headwaters to the urbanised environment of its conjunction with Botany Bay, the river passes through cleared low-lying land in its middle reaches, before passing into the steep Hawkesbury sandstone topography of the Georges River National Park.



Areas of high scenic quality even where the topography is relatively flat.

The varied geology and topography has determined the evolution of land uses and built form in the river corridor and some of the most evident changes to scenic values.

While parts of the river corridor, such as the national park, the Holsworthy river frontage or tributaries such as O'Hare's Creek remain in pristine scenic and environmental condition, the progressive urbanisation of the river corridor and its catchment have brought about changes to the river's scenery that continue to threaten its integrity.

Since the Second World War, the relatively scattered low developments on the bushland stretches of the river have given way to more substantial estates on the ridges and progressive intensification of lot development from ridge to shore.

The nature of new development seems random in location, extent and character, bearing little direct relationship to the river, unlike historic focal points such as the Lugarno Punt crossing or the development of Como with the presence of the railway station. Nor is there visible evidence of consistently applied development controls.

The low-lying floodplain upstream of Sandy Point to and beyond Liverpool has long been cleared of vegetation for agricultural and sand extraction. Although built form on this stretch is less evident (in part because of topography), the quality of much development on the foreshore, the absence of any clear river focus of foreshore reserves or river access, and the increasing problem of bank erosion convey a sense of a neglected riverine landscape.

The headwaters of the Georges River have long been unaffected by any substantive residential development. However recent subdivisions



New urban development in the foreshore area showing little relationship with the river.

in Wedderburn, Minto and Appin are beginning to change the rural landscape of this part of the river. Unless carefully controlled, many of the environmental effects of this development will also have a bearing on the downstream landscape.

The principal scenic change in the bays and foreshore of the lower river is intensive development on long existing properties. In many cases up to three buildings may now occupy a lot that once contained a single dwelling. Visual detractors include bridge design with limited consideration for the river context, powerline routes crossing ridgelines, and sewer infrastructure visible in many locations from bay to upper reaches.

Design and management of many of the foreshore reserves in the Georges River National Park display a homogenous local park character entirely at odds with the exceptional bushland context. Likewise the army do not appear to be accountable for the environmental or visual impacts of foreshore erosion created by exercises on the river, such as between Pleasure Point and Sandy Point.

The river reveals gross pollutants that have both visual and environmental impacts, as do the prolific weed plumes in the creeks.

Much of the river retains sections of very high scenic quality, including some areas of the built environment. The issues raised, however, highlight the potential for considerable ongoing threats to the river's scenic quality from cumulative impacts, where no systematic planning appears to be in place to inform, guide and control local decision making on the river's future.



A heavily developed area of the foreshore.

Foreshore access, recreation and leisure

The nature of public access to and along the river corridor is highly varied in type and extent.

Most travellers experience a brief view of the river from one of seven elevated road crossings. These crossings provide cues for access into the local road system from which the river can be reached from numerous locations.

Four railway stations are situated within one kilometre of the river. The most concentrated private transport access to the river focuses on major parks and public boat launching facilities. The ramps are mainly located in the lower stretches of the river. The standard of the Upper Reach boat ramps is low and not allied to significant open space and recreational facilities or urban centres.

The most extensive public access to and along the river corridor is the local or district public footpath networks. These paths have been planned primarily on a local basis, in some cases providing circular routes in larger reserves, but with no strategic basis for establishing a regional system for the river as a whole.

The concept of a Great Southern Walk has been driven by community interests. This is a reflection of the limited regional strategic planning focus on regional walking routes in the south of metropolitan Sydney.

Pedestrian access across the river is limited with only one pedestrian-only bridge (at Voyager Point). The remaining crossings are usually high level, high speed roads, providing only limited footpath access to the river foreshores.



Old and new crossings of the river.

Public open space in the river corridor varies from small local parks in a predominantly bushland setting such as at Simmos Beach in the upper reaches to major parklands at Chipping Norton Lakes and the extensive bushland of the Georges River National Park. Very few parks provide a foreshore experience that draws on their local landscape character and many do not appear to have access to the river. Exceptions to this would include Oatley Park and Carrs Bush Park.

Natural environment

The ecology of the Georges River has been well described in baseline studies and the biodiversity of the river corridor has been progressively chronicled over recent years, particularly in relation to threatened communities and habitats such as wetlands, saltmarsh and seagrass communities.

Given that the study starts from the precept that the natural systems of the Georges River are the fundamental bedrock on which the future planning of the river is based, the principal focus of the study is on the reciprocal influences of the natural environment on built form, foreshore access and recreation.

Such interrelationships are often complex and management dilemmas can frequently arise where the perceived dominant natural values may lead to planning decisions that actively work against other important values such as cultural, social, recreational or economic benefits. In this respect the recognition that Georges River is an urban waterway requires that the means by which environmental goals are achieved may in many cases result in quite different outcomes in different parts of the river, when based on context and the balance of values.



Recreation use dependant on access to the river and the presence of boat ramps and wharfs.

Some specific issues that arise include:

- consideration of the impacts of development on the diverse natural systems of the river
- creation of weed plumes in bushland and waterways that have direct scenic impacts
- the nature of access to the foreshores
- alienation of the river corridor from public view and access
- physical removal of riparian flora and fauna
- limitation or control of public access in areas of high natural sensitivity or in threatened habitats
- absence of coordinated information and interpretation of the river and its natural systems.



One of the few pedestrian crossings of the river.



Visual values are sometimes at variance with the natural systems.

Cultural heritage

The Georges River and tributaries contain a diverse array of items and areas considered to possess non-Aboriginal cultural heritage significance. The nature and extent of heritage items and areas range from individual elements such as seawalls, jetties, boatsheds, houses and gardens to large continuous areas of foreshore in parks, recreation reserves, 'pleasure grounds', national parks, and on other government lands or large private estates. These require analysis and sensitive conservation and management to retain their values for present and future generations.

Scenic and landscape heritage

The scenic and landscape qualities of many parts of the Georges River corridor strongly contribute to the heritage significance of the area. The Woronora River and many parts of the lower Georges River have retained a sense of naturalness that is highly valued by the community. The impressive Hawkesbury sandstone cliffs and headlands, steep topography and relatively large areas of remnant bushland contrast with the waterforms of enclosed bays, coves and drowned creeklines to produce a landscape of high visual interest that is prized for its picturesque qualities. These natural areas, including the mangrove and seagrass communities, also have scientific and research significance.

In some areas such as Sylvania and Sans Souci, the cultural landscape of Sydney suburbia has mostly obliterated the natural landscape. In other less developed areas, such as parts of Lugarno, the cultural landscape of terraced gardens, houses, boatsheds and

jetties harmonises with the remnant bushland and natural shoreline, particularly where native tree cover has been retained.

There are also landscape types in the study area that are very rare. One example is the foreshore areas of the upper Woronora River where all the cottages and boatsheds lining the foreshore were purchased by the NSW Government and demolished. This example reflects government policy responses to changing community attitudes towards environmental conservation in the 1970s and 1980s. Now this area is slowly being reclaimed by the bush, yet the seawalls, gardens and a diverse array of exotic trees still remain, providing an enigmatic cultural landscape of ruins.

Built heritage

The investigations undertaken for the study have identified many items of built heritage in the study area. These are not evenly spread but occur as single items or as small groups. The remnants of old stone seawalls, jetties and river crossings have a collective significance representing the early trading and transportation functions of the Georges River. Small groups of inter-war period weekenders dot the foreshore in some areas and demonstrate changing social conditions and leisure customs.

There is also a diverse array of building types and styles along the river that reflect changing economic conditions, lifestyles and varying design responses to their sites. The best examples have heritage significance for their rarity or ability to demonstrate the historical themes and social changes that have shaped the character of the area.

Aboriginal heritage

The Georges River foreshore has varied types of Aboriginal heritage. All Aboriginal heritage places cannot be accounted for by one layer of information, such as a 'site' map showing grid references and locations of Aboriginal heritage. Heritage is found in layers and levels over time and space and incorporates intellectual knowledge of culture and heritage. A few of the different types of Aboriginal heritage are:

- culturally shared heritage items: intellectual and artistic property e.g. literature, art and dance are found in all groups and communities
- landscape and heritage place differences: the Georges River passes through different environment types the landscape within each area influences the choice of resources, the location of campsites, and walking trails or dreaming places
- historical differences: relating to people and country
- contemporary similarities: the projects instigated by Aboriginal communities and others to protect heritage.

The modification of the environment, primarily by the use of fire, is a common feature of all Aboriginal groups and behaviour, and the techniques and knowledge to manage that landscape are considered part of the intellectual heritage. The stories of ancestral figures, the creation of species and their relationship to each other and the land, and the pathway travelled, leave no physical trace except the landscape itself. This heritage is significant and part of the living Aboriginal tradition or culture.



Old boathouses make an appropriate transition between land and water.



The river and its creeks provide a glimpse of the history of Sydney.