

**Submission
No 275**

**INQUIRY INTO PROPOSAL TO RAISE THE
WARRAGAMBA DAM WALL**

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Date Received: 6 September 2019

Wanting to raise the Warragamba Dam wall is crazy on so many levels. It won't solve the problem of protecting people on the flood plain of western Sydney from an extreme rain event and the money it will cost could be spent on many other better solutions. It would destroy a vast area of valuable bushland and habitat in one of the most pristine areas of the Blue Mountains. It would threaten our precious World Heritage listing.

But there's crazy, and then there's cruel. My submission is going to focus on the cruel. Raising Warragamba Dam is, I believe, the cruelest thing possible that the State Government could do to the Gundungurra people – the traditional owners of the southern Blue Mountains who have now been living with the consequences of Macquarie Street's cruelty for more than 200 years. It astonishes and saddens me that, in a supposedly more enlightened 2019, the NSW Government seems intent on delivering the Gundungurra another cruel blow.

As someone who grew up in the Blue Mountains, still lives in the Blue Mountains and works there as an outdoor adventure guide, it has been my privilege to spend a lot of my life on Gundungurra country. As a way of saying thank you for that privilege, I have tried to learn as much as I can about Gundungurra culture and history so I can share it with others. Here is what I know.

It was under the rule of Governor Lachlan Macquarie (1810-1821), that the Gundungurra started to feel the sting of colonial expansion via warfare and settlement. So began the loss of land, lives and culture. It is well documented in Stephen Gapps' *The Sydney Wars: Conflict in the early colony 1788-1817*. Macquarie himself wrote of soldiers and settlers attacking what was probably a Gundungurra group in 1814 "in the most treacherous manner ... a native woman and two children were in the dead hour of night, and whilst sleeping, inhumanely put to death." A local settler, Charles Throsby, who was sympathetic to the Aboriginal people, had this to say of the incident: "Perhaps it is not sufficiently known, that the people not content at shooting at them in the most treacherous manner in the dark, but actually cut the woman's arm off and stripped the scalp of her head over her eyes, and on going up to them and finding one of the children only wounded one of the fellows deliberately beat the infant's brains out with the butt end of his musket, the whole of the bodies then left in that state by the (brave) party unburied! as an example for the savages to view the following morning, therefore under these circumstances I hope I may be pardoned asserting that I do not wonder at the savages then seeking revenge in retaliation."

And so it came to pass. By 1816 Macquarie was writing: "The native blacks of this country, inhabiting the distant interior parts, have lately broken out in open hostility against the British settlers residing on the banks of the River Nepean near the Cow Pastures ... It will be absolutely necessary to inflict exemplary and severe punishments on the mountain tribes." A military detachment was promptly dispatched with orders that any dead Aborigines were to be "hanged up on trees in conspicuous situations, to strike the survivors with the greater terror". A massacre eventuated.

With their land and traditional way of life stolen from them, some Gundungurra still lived on their country in places like the Burratorang Valley, the Megalong Valley and the Kanimbla Valley in the southern Blue Mountains. Here they did what they could to survive and hold on to what they could of their culture.

But still white Australia had to keep taking from the Gundungurra. With the arrival of a train service in the late 1860s, the tourism industry started to grow in the Blue Mountains. And back then, many an early bushwalker chose to do his or her bushwalking armed with a gun to blast away at the wildlife. In his book *From Katoomba to Jenolan Caves – The Six Foot Track 1884-1984*, Blue Mountains historian Jim Smith reprints an advertisement from an 1888 Blue Mountains guidebook that advertised guided shooting trips along the famous bushwalking track. "Shooting! Shooting!" promises the guide, Sid

Bellingham. “The following is a list of the game obtainable: Scrub Wallabies, Rock Wallabies, Wombats, Tiger Cats, Native Cats, Wallaroos, Lyre-birds, Satin-birds, Cockatoos, Parrots. Sid has made arrangements at the neighbouring farms for those requiring good Hare and Possum shooting. Platypus Shooting on the rivers, where there is also, in season, good fishing for Perch, Back-brim, Black-fish, Eels, Fresh Water Herrings etc.” Sid helpfully went on to explain that “the shot chiefly used is No. 1, No. 3 and No. 6. Chilled shot is the best, and a few No. 10 cartridges are useful for gentlemen wishing to get small specimens.”

This shooting had a devastating affect on native wildlife and many of the plants that Aboriginal people had traditionally relied on. In 1896, a reporter from the Sydney Mail interviewed Billy Lynch, the “King of the Mountains”. William Lynch, son of a full-blooded Gundungurra woman and a convict father, was born in the 1830s and lived along the Six Foot Track where it crossed the Coxs River in the 1880s and 1890s before he moved to the Aboriginal community of The Gully on the outskirts of Katoomba. The Sydney Mail story said:

“Lynch remembers when ducks, kangaroos and shags were in large numbers, and when the rivers and ponds were full of black fish, perch, sprats, mullet and eels, especially in the Cox. On the other side of the dividing range were bream and cod. Lowries, king parrots, rosellas and the cockatoo parrots made the bush gay with their plumage, and the lyre bird was in numbers. Now all is changed. The old animals, birds, and fruits have gone. ‘How can you account for it,’ I asked. ‘For the white men have not shot the fruits.’ “ ‘I don’t know,’ was the reply of the old man, ‘but I suppose it is that the time for my people to be replaced by another had come, and so all the animals, and fruits, and birds they depended on vanish. It is not the shooting. There is not enough of that to account for it. It is just that their time has come too’, and in illustration he told me the bandicoot, once numerous had nearly gone, the kangaroo had gone. The wombat, formerly numerous, was now scarce, and those remaining had changed their habitat. Of birds, the bronze-winged pigeons were once numerous; they had disappeared. The once plentiful wonga pigeon was now few, and growing fewer. Then, of the native fruits, which were perishing with the natives, there was the geebung, which was now to be found only here and there, whereas it had been everywhere; the once plentiful burramung, a currant-like plant with the stone outside the fruit, had all but vanished within the last 30 years ... Those were the natives’ fruits, and they largely formed his food, but they were vanishing, like himself.”

In 2016 the Blue Mountains historian Jim Smith published a wonderful second edition of a book called *The Aboriginal People of the Burratorang Valley*. The front cover also includes a quote from a Gundungurra elder: “If we left the Valley our hearts would break.” And as sure as night follows day, the NSW Government ultimately forced the last Gundungurra to leave their beloved Burratorang in the 1950s to make way for the construction of Warragamba Dam and the resulting Lake Burratorang which drowned the valley to provide water for the people of Sydney.

As Jim Smith said when launching his book in 2016: “When people in Sydney turn on their taps, run a bath or fill up their pools they should be aware of where their water comes from and the sacrifice of the [Burratorang] community.”

What is more, the building of Warragamba Dam also drowned many of the sacred sites associated with the Gundungurra people’s most important Dreamtime story – the story of Gurangatch and Mirrigan. In what the Gundungurra call the gunyungalong, or “far past times”, Mirrigan was a tiger quoll while Gurangatch was an eel-like creature. One day Mirrigan tried to catch Gurangatch. The two fought and then Gurangatch fled, hotly pursued by Mirrigan. For the Gundungurra, the legacy of this fight and flight is the

spectacularly landscape of the Southern Blue Mountains that forms much of the catchment for Lake Burragorang.

At some unknown point in the 20th century – probably about the time of WWII – the Gundungurra lost their language as well as the last fluent speakers died. An incredibly important recent publication is Jim Barrett's book *Gandanguurra: The Language of the Mountain People ... and Beyond*. It gathers together all the written evidence that we have left of the Gundungurra vocabulary – about 1200 words from a language that probably contained at least 10,000.

What did this ancient language sound like? All I can refer you to is another wonderful book called *Cullenbenbong*, written by Bernard O'Rielly (1903-1975) and first published in 1944. O'Rielly's family were white settlers in the southern Blue Mountains (*Cullenbenbong* is a locality on the Coxs River in the Kanimbla Valley) in the second half of the 1800s and early 1900s when there were still Gundungurra living on the land and speaking their language. O'Rielly never learned the language, but he listened to it and had this to say of it:

“The language of the blacks was not made for white man's tongue and that is why it sounds like a blasphemy to hear him try to pronounce an aboriginal word. The language of wild Australia belongs to wild Australia. Similarly black man's words should never have been put on paper for there is nothing in our alphabet as we understand its sounds which would make the written word any nearer to the original than a feeble parody. A strange thing this language of nature; a haunting echoing softness might give way to unbelievable drama and there were dread words which made your spine creep with horror even though you didn't know their meaning.

“If you listened to the aborigines speaking together you didn't hear a jumble of foreign words, you heard the sighing of trees, the voice of birds, the sounds of storm and flood and wind, the rolling of rocks in a landslide; you heard stark fear and infinite sadness. There was never joy; that may have been always so, or perhaps because black man's star was setting.

“It is with regret then and some shame that the name *Cullenbenbong* must be written here; how cold and lifeless it looks in white man's type, yet to hear it pronounced by the black warriors of the old Kanimbla tribe was to hear majestic thunder re-echoing amongst the granite mountains of their hunting grounds.”

Now the raising of the dam wall threatens to rob the Gundungurra of more of their cultural sites, including the last of the *Mirrigan* and *Guringatch* sites not already drowned by Lake Burragorang.

Another important recent publication is *Aboriginal Heritage of the Blue Mountains – Recent Research and Reflections* edited by Kelvin Knox and Eugene Stockton. It includes a prologue from Gundungurra women *Kazan Brown* and *Taylor Clarke* – mother and daughter – that addresses the dam wall raising. They talk of the land of the Gundungurra as being a living, cultural landscape where their ancestors walked for thousands of years.

“Sadly some of our culture has been lost to time and ‘progress’; flooded and hidden behind the *Warragamba Dam* wall and beneath the waters of Lake Burragorang,” they lament. “Access to what culture we know of is still highly restricted, if not completely forbidden, which is truly devastating. A lot of people argue that we all need to make way for progress and development – a new story – regardless of the cost to our environment and history. Our Gundungurra country is still an important cultural story.

“Our story – the land, people and culture – is at risk again with the proposal to raise the *Warragamba Dam* wall. We are deeply concerned that this will be the beginning of the end for our culture and history. We have already lost access to so much of history, much of which we can only read about in books like this one. From where we stand, and where

many of my brothers and sisters stand, as contemporary Aboriginal people, we think we have already lost enough. We have sacrificed enough, and we cannot lose the precious little heritage we have left. We know that our Aboriginal neighbours, the Dharawal, Wiradjuri, Eora, Darug and Darkinjung people, and many other people, share our concerns.

“Our place – which we share with you – is still a cultural landscape filled with story and heritage. Like our ancestors cared for country, we want it acknowledged, respected and preserved for our descendants and society. We ask that you respect our living culture. And, we invite you to read this book to experience our heritage and that of our neighbours.”

I hear what these women are saying and I want my elected government to hear them and heed their words about the impact raising the dam wall will have on the Gundungurra people.

The role of government is to do things that serve the greater good. I firmly believe that the raising of the Warragamba Dam wall does not create a greater good for the people of NSW. Even if it was a policy that did, I would still urge the NSW Government not to go ahead with it because the Gundungurra people have already suffered enough over the past 200 years and to deliver them another cruel blow would be an outrage.

I'll finish by asking you to reflect on the words of the great poet John Donne:

No man is an island,
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manor of thy friend's
Or of thine own were:
Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind,
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee.

Over the past 200 years, the people and government of NSW have been party to murdering and mutilating Gundungurra men, women and children; forcing the Gundungurra off their traditional land; destroying the animals and plants the Gundungurra traditionally lived on; destroying the Gundungurra language; drowning the sacred sites of the Gundungurra's most important Dreaming story. To the best of my knowledge, we have never tried to right these wrongs by giving the Gundungurra native title over their traditional country or paying them royalties for the role their traditional country now plays in slaking the thirst of several million people in Sydney. And now our state government is proposing to drown more of their most sacred cultural sites.

If my elected government goes ahead with the dam wall raising, there can be no doubt that will diminish the Gundungurra and that in turn will diminish me and every other Australian. The bell will toll for us all. Instead, let us do the right and noble thing and – at the very least – do absolutely nothing to that dam wall.