

**Submission
No 351**

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

Name: Professor Grace Karskens

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School of Humanities and Languages

9 September 2019

Mr Justin Field, MLC

Chair

Select Committee on the Proposal to Raise the Warragamba Dam Wall

Legislative Council

NSW Parliament House

Macquarie St

SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Mr Field,

I appreciate the opportunity to make this submission to your Inquiry on raising the wall of Warragamba Dam.

I am Professor of History at the University of New South Wales. My areas of research include early colonial and Aboriginal history, environmental history and archaeology. Over the last twenty years my work has focused on the history, geography and ecology of the Nepean and Hawkesbury Rivers, from the 50,000 years of Aboriginal history of the rivers and adjacent Blue Mountains up to the present day. I have a deep understanding of the interlinked environmental, cultural and historical significance of this region. I work closely with local Aboriginal people on projects which recover and revitalize Aboriginal culture and language.¹

¹ Grace Karskens, *People of the River: Lost Worlds of Early Australia*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, forthcoming 2020; Grace Karskens, *The Colony: A History of Early Sydney*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 2009; Grace Karskens, 'Yellomundee: A Human Landscape' (with Eugene Stockton and Michael Jackson), in Kelvin Knox and Eugene Stockton (eds), *Aboriginal Heritage of the Blue Mountains: Recent Research and Reflections*, Lawson, NSW, Blue Mountain Education and Research Trust, 2019, 33-44; Grace Karskens 'Life and death on Dyarubbin: reports from the river', *Griffith Review*, 63, January 2019, 102-106; Grace Karskens et al 'Ruined Castle Shale Mining Settlement, Katoomba NSW: Report on a Pilot Survey', (with Rebecca Parkes, Shawn Ross, Adela Sobokova, Tanya Evans, Penny Crook, Susan Lupack, Fiona Leslie and John Merson), *Australasian Historical Archaeology*, vol. 36, 2018, 86-92; Grace Karskens 'Fire in the forests? Exploring the human-ecological history of Australia's first frontier', *Environment and History*, 2018, published online DOI:10.3197/096734018X15254461646378; vol. 25,

I wish to draw the Inquiry committee's attention to the negative impacts that raising the wall of Warragamba Dam will have on the natural and cultural environments of this region and on local Aboriginal people, who will once more suffer the loss of their cultural places and landscape.

The original construction of Warragamba Dam in the 1950s drowned the existing early and much-loved colonial landscape of the Burratorang valley, and hundreds of significant Aboriginal sites, including the 'Hands on the Rock' site and Lacey's Creek Shelter. The Burratorang was one of the few places in Australia where Aboriginal people and settlers managed to negotiate a way to share this Country peacefully. Gundungurra people still live in the area today.² Our understandings of the ecologies, geomorphology and floods, and Aboriginal history, culture and archaeology have increased exponentially since the 1950s. The Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area (GBMWA) has been recognized for its environmental significance not only to Australia, but to the whole world. As the World Heritage Committee noted earlier this year, the proposed wall flies in the face of this recognition, as it will irreversibly damage an important zone of the GBMWA's natural areas (4,700ha), destroy the single wild river system surviving in Sydney and will put 48 already threatened species at further risk, including the Regent honeyeater and the Camden White Gum (both critically endangered).³

The area that would be flooded by the proposed wall is also rich in Aboriginal cultural sites, which miraculously survived colonisation as well as suburbanization and other developments. Much of Sydney's Aboriginal landscape survived farming and grazing, only to be destroyed by urban expansion and industry – the Penrith Lakes Scheme further downstream for example destroyed scores of Aboriginal sites between the 1980s and 2010.⁴ The report prepared by Niche – Environment and Heritage⁵ for the area in question is totally inadequate in terms of accurately recording the existing Aboriginal

2019, 391-419; Grace Karskens 'Floods and flood-mindedness in Early Colonial Australia', *Environmental History*, Vol. 21, No 2, 2016, 315-42.

<http://envhis.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/full/emv186?jkey=Bg7hWhLYBYhKZ37&keytype=ref>

Grace Karskens, 'The Blue Mountains Crossings: new histories from the old legends', *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, Vol. 16, 2014, 197-225; see also The Real Secret River: Dyarubbin Project, <https://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/arts-social-sciences/news/uncovering-real-secret-river-0>

² See Jim Smith, Smith, 'Rock Art of the Burratorang Valley', in Kelvin Knox and Eugene Stockton (eds), *Aboriginal Heritage of the Blue Mountains*, Lawson NSW, Blue Mountain Education and Research Trust, 2019, 109-56.

³ Jamie Pittock, *Managing flood risk in the Hawkesbury-Nepean Valley: A report on alternative flood management measures to raising Warragamba Dam wall*, Canberra, Australian National University, 2018, p.4; 'UN concerns about Warragamba dam plan labelled "extreme embarrassment" for NSW', *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jul/04/warragamba-dam-plan-threatens-blue-mountains-world-heritage-status>

⁴ Grace Karskens, 'Water dreams, earthen histories: Exploring urban environmental history at Penrith Lakes and Castlereagh', *Environment and History*, Vol. 13, No. 2, May 2007, 115-54.

⁵ Niche – Environment and Heritage, "Aboriginal Cultural Heritage – Warragamba Dam Raising" Reference No 30012078 prepared for Water NSW, 24 June 2019

sites, let alone assessing the cultural significance of the area to Aboriginal people and the potential for future for scientific and cultural research. It surveyed only around 27% of the affected area, and then rated most of these 300+ sites as having 'low value'. The lack of proper scientific survey and of cultural understandings of Aboriginal landscapes in this report are both laughable and outrageous.

There are bigger issues at stake here too. Recent research on Aboriginal sites and artefacts has revealed that Aboriginal people have lived on the Nepean River for at least 50,000 years; it is among the longest continuously occupied areas in Australia. These cultural sites are linked along songlines which make up a complex, interwoven Aboriginal sacred landscape. They cannot be seen as a series of discreet 'spots', each to be 'assessed' individually. Preferably they should never be moved, as they are connected to each other and are integral to Country.⁶

Aboriginal people, including the Gundungurra whose Country this is, have survived the worst catastrophes that can befall any people, anywhere. Today they want to conserve and care for their remaining places, which connect them back to their ancestors, culture and spirituality. To ignore their wishes and destroy these landscapes and places is to continue the process of destruction wrought by colonisation and dispossession in the first place.

If as a people and a nation we are serious about reconciliation and telling the truth about our past, we cannot continue to destroy the places and landscapes which are so deeply significant to Aboriginal people.

Yours sincerely

Professor Grace Karskens FAHA FRSN

⁶ Karskens, *People of the River*, chapter 1; G. C. Nanson, R.W. Young, and E. D. Stockton, 'Chronology and palaeoenvironment of the Cranebrook Terrace (near Sydney) containing artefacts more than 40,000 years old', *Archaeology in Oceania*, vol. 22, 1987, 72-78; G. C. Nanson, and R. W. Young, 'Comparison of Thermoluminescence and Radiocarbon Age-Determinations from Late-Pleistocene Alluvial Deposits near Sydney, Australia', *Quaternary Research*, vol. 27, 1987, 263-9; Eugene Stockton and Gerald Nanson, 'Cranebrook Terrace Revisited', in *Archaeology in Oceania*, vol. 29, 2004, 59-60; Williams, Alan N., Burrow, Adrian, Toms, Phil S., Brown, Oliver, Richards, Michelle, and Bryant, Tessa, 'The Cranebrook terrace revisited: recent excavations of an early Holocene alluvial deposit on the banks of the Nepean River, NSW, and tier implications for future work in the region', *Australian Archaeology*, DOI: 10.1080/03122417.2017.1392834.