

LAKE ILLAWARRA – A BRIEF SUMMARY OF EVENTS

Situated some 90 kilometres south of Sydney and 10 kilometres south of Wollongong, Lake Illawarra has long been popular with local people and visitors to the region.

Lake Illawarra, or “Jubborsay” as called by the Aboriginals of the 1800’s has under gone many changes since it formed during the marine transgression associated with the last sea level rise some 7,000 to 20,000 years ago.

The lake is characterised by a coastal sand barrier and shallow flat bottom bed which is connected to the Pacific Ocean by a narrow shoaled channel that in the past has intermittently closed.

The lake has been an important asset in the Illawarra region (or in Aboriginal words, “Alowrie”, meaning high pleasant place by the sea) for a very long time and has a rich and diverse history, both Aboriginal and European.

Sighted in 1770 by Captain James Cook, the lake and the Illawarra region were first explored in 1796 by Matthew Flinders and George Bass. The first land grants surrounding the lake were made in the early 1800’s and cedar, tea tree and animal hides were initially exported. The area to the west of the lake proved to be ideal for growing crops and vegetables as well as dairying and development of the catchment had started by the 1840s.

Even tourism was a developing industry in the late 1800s when boats carrying 40 to 50 people each made excursions to Hooka and Gooseberry Islands.

In 1880 there were four fishermen working the lake to supply the Sydney market. Today the lake supports about 20 professional fishermen with an annual catch of some 200 tonnes.

In 1888 a coke works had started on the western side of the lake and in 1895 a smelting works near Kanahooka was constructed.

Attempts to create a permanent entrance to the lake commenced in the late 1890s when the Illawarra Harbour and Land Corporation started work to build a harbour within the lake to permit ocean going vessels to approach Elizabeth Point to ship coal, lead and other products. Work commenced with the building of a tie-wall from Windang Island but work stopped shortly after commencement and a harbour was later constructed at Port Kembla. Remnants of the tie-wall remain today. A proposal involving the construction of twin breakwaters to keep the lake open more often than has occurred historically in the past is presently being developed by the Lake Illawarra Authority.

By the early 1900s the population and associated development had expanded to locations around the entrance to the lake. Camping by the lake was popular as far back as the 1920s, where bookings at Windang House were always full during holiday periods.

In 1921 the famous court case, *Swan v Attorney General of NSW* was held. The Court found that Lake Illawarra was not a harbour or inlet to the sea, nor was Mullet Creek a creek or inlet of the sea within the meaning of the Crown grant. As a result any chance of a 100 feet (33m) Crown Reserve around the entire lake and its creeks was lost. At law, Lake Illawarra remains a non-tidal “inlet of the sea”. Since the 1940s Wollongong and Shellharbour City Councils and more recently the Lake Illawarra Authority have endeavoured to acquire and preserve as much foreshore land as possible to claw back some of the edges of the lake into public hands.

In 1938, a bridge was constructed across the entrance channel connecting the shores of the lake for the first time. The current bridge and causeway were constructed in the early 1970s.

During World War 2 precautions were undertaken to halt the forward movement of enemy tanks and wheeled vehicles in the event of the Japanese forces deciding to attack Port Kembla Steelworks. It was decided to construct two anti-tank ditches. One from Brownsville to the western shore of the lake, now known as the Tank Trap and the other at Kemblawarra from the eastern edge of the lake between Old Shellharbour Road to the Perkins Beach sandhills. This ditch has commonly been referred to as the second entrance to the lake, which it never was.

In 1949, Tallawarra Power Station was commissioned. The coal-fired power station was decommissioned in 1989. The NSW Government completed the sale of the site in 2003 to allow the construction of a gas-fired power station, which will provide cleaner energy and less green house gases.

As areas around the lake became more accessible, the population began to expand rapidly from 5,000 in the 1950s to about 90,000 today.

It wasn't until the early 1980s that all areas around the lake shoreline were sewered.

The significant increase in population growth and demand for development combined with runoff from agricultural activities in the catchment placed extreme pressure on the environmental health of the lake.

Environmental problems with the lake started to manifest themselves in the 1970s, when large algal blooms started to frequently occur. In 1988, Australian Prime Minister, Bob Hawke is reputed to have said of Lake Illawarra, "It might look alright but it's a bit on the nose, isn't it?"

In the dying days of the Unsworth lead State Government, it finally filtered through that the environmental problems of Lake Illawarra were so serious that addressing them was a major regional priority.

The Lake Illawarra Authority was established in 1988 with the task of repairing the damage that had occurred to the lake and its foreshores over the past 200 years.

With a waterway area of approximately 35 square kilometres and shoreline of 40 kilometres to manage the Authority faces a huge task to improve the environment of the lake and foreshores to a level that will sustain the aquatic environment and satisfy the community for future generations to enjoy.