

TOWRA'S GREAT WALL REVISITED

Is Towra the Shire's best good-news story?

Invited to visit Towra after a five years absence, **Bob Walshe** of Sutherland Shire Environment Centre, found the change in the area remarkable.

I DIDN'T NEED pushing when Milton Way said, "You must come with the next Friends of Towra working party to see what's happened".

A dozen of us, bushcare enthusiasts like Milton, met at the stables on Captain Cook Drive and trudged the track to Towra Nature Reserve, dive-bombed all the way by fierce little black mosquitoes.

With us was ranger Georgina Eldershaw of National Parks and Wildlife Service, commenting learnedly on the plants, birds, insects and animals we passed.

Towra a treasure. Towra is one of the Shire's special treasures.

Aborigines hunted and fished there when kangaroos, echidnas,

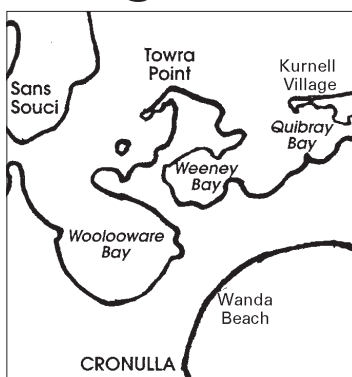
lizards and birds abounded.

Captain Cook mapped the wonderful freshwater Towra Lagoon which had been sheltered for a thousand years from Botany Bay storms by a wide beach and a low sand dune at the back of the beach.

But like the rest of Kurnell Peninsula, the Towra area suffered neglect and was plundered for sand and timber. Few people until recently knew it existed.

Fortunately, one local man, who had camped on Towra as a boat-happy boy in the early 1930s, fell in love with the area and was to wage a lifelong and often lonely struggle to "save Towra".

Meet Bernie Clarke, environmentalist. He settled at Oyster Bay, and on returning (wounded) from



AIF service in New Guinea found time while working and raising a large family to campaign on Bay/Kurnell/Towra issues.

He played a leading role in opposing Federal Government efforts to establish a "second airport" on Towra, 1965-74, and then in persuading the Whitlam Labor Government in 1974 to buy-back a large part of Towra from private owners and make it a "nature reserve", for \$3 million. (It was shifted to State control in 1979.)

In 1974 too, Towra Point was proclaimed "a wetland of international significance" under the Ramsar Convention, obliging Australia to protect it, especially as a sanctuary for migratory birds.

Save the beach! Save the lagoon! The achievements of the 1970s delighted Bernie – but a new threat burst on the scene in the same decade, a monster rising out of the depths of Botany Bay.

A destructive new wave-pattern began to strike across from the northside of the Bay because fifty million tonnes of sand were excavated from the bottom of shallow Botany Bay to extend Kingsford Smith Airport and Botany Container Port.

Deepen the bottom and you double the wave velocity! Surround the Airport and Port with rocky buffers and you redirect the waves that surge through the heads, so that they are hurled against the southside of the Bay – against Towra beach! *Here's a picture story of what has followed...*



Towra assaulted. The new wave-regime pounded Towra beach through the 1970s and 1980s, shrinking its width by 50 or more metres. By the 1990s, it was assaulting the lines of majestic casuarinas ("she-oaks") high up on the beach, poisoning them with salt and undermining and toppling them. Only the low dune at the back of the beach sheltered Towra Lagoon. But, inexorably, big storms overtopped the dune and poured salt water and sand into the Lagoon, devastating the freshwater fauna that had flourished in it for aeons.



Second fight-back succeeds. Acknowledging the hessian-bag mistake, NPWS turned to tough geotextile bags, each filled with 500 kilos of sand. In June 2000 the "great wall of Towra" was reconstructed, with 1300 bags across 120 metres of beach. *In the picture*, the white bags of the top of the wall are showing, and on-site loose sand has been piled against the wall on either side. Again an effective barrier! Even so, the beach will continue to be eroded by wave-assault from the Bay's northside, so NPWS is to "renourish" Towra Beach with 60,000 tonnes of sand drawn from sand accumulations in the Bay.... On 29 December 2000, 27 volunteers planted the artificial dune with 2400 wattles, casuarinas, pigface and NZ spinach (pictured nine months later; the Bay to the right, Lagoon to the left).



The first fight-back. Action urgent! Bernie Clarke, assisted by Sutherland Shire Environment Centre, won a \$25,000 grant in 1997 from the Carr Government to erect a sandbag wall to "keep the Bay at bay". He wanted geotextile bags but was overruled and had to settle for hessian bags. Starting in September, eager groups of volunteers filled and placed 9000 bags. It was an effective levee – but not for long. The hessian rotted within months under stress from sun, salt and sand. A savage storm in 1999 again sent an overwash of salt water into the Lagoon.



The recovering lagoon today. Ranger Georgina and Friends of Towra volunteers are ecstatic at the growth of their plantings, some already 2 metres high and now interspersed with naturally seeded banksias and other natives. The Friends return monthly to carry out weeding and further revegetation.

Our
Community
Our Environment



Our Shire

Our
Sutherland
Shire
Environment
Centre

Suite 4, Level 1,
2-4 Merton Street,
Sutherland, NSW 2232
Ph 9545-3077
Web: <http://ssec.org.au>

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You might like to join the Friends of Towra? Ring convenor, Patrick Medway (02) 9556 1537.

The Environment Centre's Towra/Kurnell website can be consulted: www.ssec.org.au