

A STATE OF THE ENVIRONMENT REPORT FOR LAKE ILLAWARRA

By Elisa Arcioni

Lake Illawarra or Jubborsay as it's known in one Aboriginal language, is the lake 10km south of Wollongong. It's really a shallow coastal lagoon, with one semi-permanent entrance at Windang. Lake Illawarra is beautiful, supporting a range of native flora and fauna. It is also a recreational resource for the local community and an economic resource, supporting a small fishing industry. However, the lake is suffering from pressures around it - stemming from the residential, agricultural and industrial development in the catchment.

Lake Illawarra's catchment is the area forming a natural basin from which water runs into the lake. This area stretches from the escarpment to the ocean and falls between small foothills to the north and south. The area was once covered in native vegetation - mangroves, water plants and wetlands at the edges of the lake and rainforest and woodlands beyond that. The catchment was an abundant camping and hunting ground for the local Aborigines including the Wadi Wadi peoples.

However, red cedar was found on the hills, fertile floodplains were spotted on the flats, coal was discovered in the escarpment. The local Aborigines were outnumbered, whites took over and populated the area dramatically - with people and livestock. Industry was established at Port Kembla, after the failed idea of having the lake as an industrial port. Agriculture took hold and the need for houses led to reclamation of the wetlands and clearing of the flats.

The massive changes caused increased runoff into the lake: silt, pollutants like industrial chemicals, nutrients like fertilisers and sewage. The edge of the lake lost its natural filters (wetlands and vegetation) and lost the habitat and nesting areas for birds and small animals. What to do?

There are two approaches needed: rectify the existing degradation and prevent future deterioration of the lake's environment. The Lake Illawarra Authority was established in the late 1980's to deal with rectification. Despite ongoing criticism about HOW they're doing that, the Authority has had success in improving the foreshore, installing artificial wetlands and promoting the lake as a recreational resource to be protected. The problem is they only have power to do things in the lake body and

foreshore, not beyond that where most of the problem start.

To prevent further deterioration, we need to have a coordinated approach covering the whole catchment so all the government agencies in the area work together and consider the environment when making their decisions. This is called catchment management.

The need for such an approach was first raised when a community action group emerged in the 1970s to highlight the fact that the lake needed help. That group changed name and form through time, first known as the Lake Illawarra Management Committee, working within local councils and getting all the government groups together. Then it became the Illawarra Catchment Management Committee, continuing their work but looking at the whole of the Illawarra. The group did masses of research and created strategies for councils to adopt in order to consider the lake in their decision-making. They were incredibly successful in getting the community involved and implementing some changes.

But, the changes were slow and the Carr government needed a new PR exercise. So, the state government changed the system, abolished the local group and created a huge Southern Catchment Management Board. Too broad, too big, lacking in community connection and no longer focused on the lake or even the Illawarra. I have hope they will be effective in changing the development process, but don't hold your breath. Unfortunately, they lack funding and power to force their strategies into action, despite the amount of effort being put into them.

From one small community group working on the ground, we've now got a maze of government regulations, plans, policies, departments, and strategies that are all relevant to the lake. They are trying to integrate how it all works, but it doesn't seem to be working. Instead, there is resurgence in community action - there's a new lake group worried about how the Lake Illawarra Authority is doing its job, there are bushcare and landcare groups working on streams, headlands and the foreshore of the lake. These are communities of local residents

taking nature into their own hands - literally. Now there is the Revive Our Wetlands program, starting at Coomaditchie and hopefully spreading out closer to the lake in the future.

Protecting the lake is really about the community and government working together to provide the recreational facilities and housing people want, but to do it in a way that protects the lake, making hard decisions along the way. To get involved or get more info on any of the groups mentioned, see the contact list below.

Wollongong City Council:
www.wollongong.nsw.gov.au

Southern Catchment Management Board:
www.cmb.org.au/southern

Lake Illawarra Authority:
www.lia.nsw.gov.au

Landcare/Bushcare:
<http://www.wollongong.nsw.gov.au/community/bushcare/index.html>

