

WCPS President's report for 2021/22

The past year has not been a normal one for the Society. Like everyone we have been affected by repeated waves of COVID and drenching rain. The impacts have been significant for the valley, the Society and for its activities. Some activities have been cancelled, but others have been maintained or restarted and even given extra attention. And we have dealt with new and continuing threats and recognised new ones emerging. And we've had email problems.....

One of the activities given extra attention this year was our planning session. This year we focussed strongly on identifying our priorities and the extent to which our activities addressed them, or left gaps. Under the general description of our work as being "Preservation, restoration, expansion of the natural and cultural heritage of the Wolli Creek Valley" we grouped our priorities around four major themes, and I have used them to structure this report.

Educating and raising awareness

Communications

The Wolli Creek Update has continued to be produced three times each year, thanks to various writers and reporters, the editorial and layout skills of Laura Zusters and the proof-reading efforts of the whole committee.

We have now scanned all the older print-only Update issues and will be uploading them to our website. This process has enabled us to resurrect the original numbering system and we can look forward to celebrating the 100th edition in the middle of next year. It's a fine history for a small organisation.

The website more generally is undergoing a revamp with a new organisation of the material and much revision and updating of the highly informative content. This is a big task being progressively undertaken by Deb Little, Tim Pullen, Gina Svolos, and Laura Zusters.

We continued to post material on Facebook and Instagram and have even been known to tweet, so that those who communicate most by social media are kept informed. Thanks to Abi Curtis, Laura Zusters, and Ute Foster for keeping this going.

Citizen Science

The Sydney Fungal Studies Group(SFSG) again visited the valley for forays to find and identify fungi and this has provided opportunities for WCPS members to join in and learn. The wet weather, although sometimes too much even for fungi, has produced some great fruiting bodies and some wonderful photos have been taken (my personal thanks to Valerie Atkinson for some real beauties).

Insect studies on the other hand have been suspended, but we do now have an extensive list of insects so far discovered in Wolli, courtesy of the Society for Insect Studies (SFIS).

Our bat counts (of Grey-headed Flying-foxes) were able to continue as before as they are held outdoors, with social distancing easily maintained. The Flying-foxes 'decamped' for a while, following food availability, but remained during winter 2022 when many other Sydney camps emptied. The Wolli Creek/Turrella camp is classified as a Camp of National Importance and it's clear that the Wolli camp is likely to be a permanent camp for the foreseeable future. There is now a boardwalk and signage in the camp area to encourage people to learn about and respect the Flying-Foxes (Wolli's are mostly Grey-headed, although Black Flying-foxes and even Little Reds have also turned up. Deb Little has continued to organise bats, people and counting devices to converge at the fly-out times (varying with dusk) to provide data that feeds into national figures about Flying-fox populations.

Bird surveys have also continued, with due precautions, and provide a continuing database of sighting records. We are now reporting these to the Birdlife Australia database after transitioning from the Atlas of Living Australia, which suited us less well. Thanks for seeing this go through smoothly go to Dorothy Luther, and to Ann Fardell for co-ordinating the survey groups.

Wildlife

Among various interesting sightings I can't resist mentioning the Brush Turkey(s) – seen at various points around the valley and nearby. These have been headed our way for some time and Wolli is an obvious point of a call. Please report in if you see one, especially if you discover one of their big mounds.

The year has also seen the usual appearance of Red-bellied Black Snakes, shy but venomous and to be treated with full respect, plus an unusual congregation of Water Dragons with seven sunning themselves on the same rock alongside Bardwell Creek

Naming rights

WCPS, via its TVT map, has always claimed priority (after First Nations people, of course) for the names of the features of the valley, especially the various track sections. However, Google Maps and others have labelled track sections otherwise and that error has been picked up by some Government agencies and consultants. Working with NPWS, we have got Google sorted, but confusion can still arise – at one stage cyclists were being sent along the Undercliffe Track while pedestrians were directed along Bayview Avenue! So, if you see, in apps or reports etc, references that don't conform to the TVT map names, please let us know.

Advocating for the Wolli Creek Valley

New threats keep turning up and old ones coming back.

Threats to the bushland

As President, I continued to wrestle with Sydney Water over its proposal to destroy Wolli bushland for its Odour Control Unit. We seemed to be making some headway when the whole proposal was put on hold while Sydney Water investigated another option. We won't know the outcome of that until at least September-October, so it may only be a temporary averting of that particular threat. This is a long-running

issue and seeing the proposal off in its Sydney Water version is essential to completing the Regional Park.

Failure to consult by Sydney Water's contractors in June 2022 (plus a really poor internal Review of Environmental Factors) led to a swathe of Wolli bushland being cleared below Johnston St to make a route to a sewer access shaft. We accept that the re-lining of the sewer is necessary work, but it could have been done much more sympathetically had we been consulted. Sydney Water has been fulsomely apologetic and will be providing the Society with funding to enable some measure of restitution to be undertaken. More such Sydney Water work at the western end of Wolli Creek Regional Park will take place in the following months, but for this, consultation is being handled much better. Peter Stevens, Deb Little, Georgina San Roque, and Peter Semple have been heavily involved in assessing the situation and dealing with Sydney Water and their contractors.

A lesser threat emerged with a proposal to take a new power cable, serving the proposed M6 motorway tunnel, across the valley starting in Bray Avenue. Discussions with the proponents have shown this to be a bigger threat than when first explained, but mostly the cable will go underground in a bored tunnel below mostly lawn area, the creek and the railway line. However, there will be some damage to the lawn area and possibly to nearby vegetation in order to construct and access a pit at the bushland end of the bore.

One threat we failed to avert some years back was the destruction of a distinctive ecosystem at Beverly Grove, Kingsgrove. This was outside the Regional Park area and we misguidedly believed the bushland was safely preserved already. The bushland was to be 'offset' against similar bushland elsewhere under the State Government's highly dubious 'biobanking' scheme, which has been progressively watered down. Assiduous research by the persistent Deb Little finally found out what the offset turned out to be – a narrow strip of vegetation surrounding the former Castlereagh Liquid Waste disposal site near Londonderry. This was vegetation serving as a buffer and visual barrier for the site and was highly unlikely ever to be cleared anyway.

Industrial sites

Some continuing threats involve developments and businesses in areas surrounding the valley. Two in particular are worthy of note. A demolition and building materials processing business has been operating at 75 Henderson St in the Turrella industrial estate. The operation on the site was unapproved and a subsequent DA was refused by Bayside Council, but Council's powers to deal with it in any expeditious manner seemed highly constrained. But the persistent work of Debra and Chris has, with Councillor Ann Fardell's help, kept Council moving, slowly, towards ending the operation.

Council has been similarly constrained over a much longer period dealing with the civil engineering storage and machinery parking business at 1-9 Henderson St. This business has ignored the 30m riparian zone across the site, set by the former Rockdale Council. The riparian zone had all vegetation removed and was then hardened. Despite our best efforts over a number of years, led by Joanna and Debra,

Council has achieved little by way of control – the planning laws and processes required so favour businesses that very little has happened. We are now following up (thanks to Gina) on the conditions of consent that were finally imposed by Council on the continued use of the site – these should have been met by now, but there is little evidence of this in relation to the riparian zone.

Threats from users and planners

The COVID/rain combination has brought new problems for the bushland. COVID kept people away from gyms and their usual venues for exercise; rain meant that the Wolli Track was muddy and boggy and even flooded in places. Combined, they showed us the first signs of what overuse might look like: walk-arounds where there was mud, and bike tracks and rock scrapes in a number of places and no doubt illegal ride-arounds too. The result is widening of tracks, damage to trackside vegetation and the creation of extra tracks. While it is good that more people are getting out into the valley, but we need that to be coupled with sensitivity to other users, to plants and to native wildlife. The installation of extra signage by NPWS and WCPS, reminding everyone that the Wolli Track is forbidden to cyclists, may be helping with the more sensitive, but seems not to deter others.

And a new threat is just beginning to be discerned in the State's establishment of the Sydney Parklands Trust with amazing powers to take over the management of parkland, including regional parks, even from NPWS. The motivation appears to be to facilitate the introduction of more revenue-raising activities in parks across Sydney. A similar push may lie behind the local proposals for Wolli in the Canterbury-Bankstown Council's Wolli Creek Corridor Plan, but we are only just coming to grips with these.

Monitoring what goes on

One piece of good news has been the start of our monitoring program – I'm keen to see more people help by monitoring the Wolli Track (the Wolli section of the Two Valley Trail), streets adjacent to bushland, local newspapers, and local Council agendas. This is something that can be done off-committee and with only a small commitment of time needed for each person involved. Alerting the Society to situations and items of significance means that we can often get them fixed by the appropriate agency or deal with them ourselves.

We've already had considerable success with this with our team of track monitors who frequently walk sections of the bush track and report in, using a checklist of the sort of thing that they might see. Our thanks to Chris Jordens, Valerie Atkinson, Alan Mitchell, and occasional others for their reports. The other areas of monitoring are ones that I would be delighted to see members take up a small part in.

Bardwell Valley

This is part of the Wolli catchment and part of the original name of the Society (too many keystrokes, so we became WCPS). Bardwell Valley has always been a poor relation for the Society's resources as there has been so much to work on in Wolli itself. Bardwell needs a champion to start on changing this.

Earlier this year I interested several Bayside Councillors in a Bardwell Valley loop walk and was set to take them on an exploratory walk. That has yet to happen – the proposed route has some things that need fixing and much of it was so sodden as to be damaging to walk on. Still on the agenda though.

Heat Islands and biodiversity

We've also written to Bayside and Canterbury-Bankstown Councils in the context of the availability of State grants for increasing canopy cover to mitigate the 'heat island' effect, expected to be exacerbated by climate change. We urged the Councils to ensure that plantings used local species, including shrubs and groundcovers that would support Wolli bushland biodiversity and provide food and habitat for the movement of native animals.

Completing the Regional Park

We are coming up to a vitally important area of advocacy for the Valley. Although its preservation was promised in 1988 (Coalition Govt) and the establishment of the Wolli Creek Regional Park committed to in 1998 (ALP Govt), we have yet to see inclusion of its full area under NPWS management. This is despite WCPS campaigns over the years, including 1999, 2006, 2010, 2018. While much of the remaining land is simply awaiting formal gazettal, there are some areas still to acquire.

Awaiting acquisition and key to the connectivity of the bushland are five sections at the eastern end of the valley. They constitute just 2% of the Park area. Four of them are in private hands but zoned Open Space and effectively inaccessible to their owners. The other is owned by Sydney Water and is where it was proposed to build the Odour Control Unit. This is likely to figure largely in the following year.

As part of the context for our campaign to have these five blocks acquired and after much discussion, the committee developed a picture of what we want for the future of the Wolli Valley bushland.

Enhancing Habitat, Protecting Wildlife

Protecting the Wolli Track

La Nina and the extended rain period we have had has shown up a lot of areas where the Wolli Track through Wolli Creek Regional Park gets significantly affected by water and mud. NPWS has been able to target some of the worst affected stretches for boardwalk installation and hopefully that will continue in future years. While it detracts from a 'natural' experience, boardwalks can be an important protection for adjacent plants and the track itself and they do encourage sticking to the proper track.

NPWS has also been active with the installation of additional signage, and is planning for Park maps at major entry points. Deb Little and I have been providing feedback on the proposals. NPWS is also moving forward with 'masterplan' proposals for the future of Turrella Reserve, and our input to that is being led by Gina Svolos

Protecting native wildlife

While we welcomed the new signage, not least because it stresses the on-leash status of the Park for dogs, especially along the Track, we were much more ambivalent about the proposal to include a formal confined off-leash area and dog playground on part of Turrella Reserve and have raised various pros and cons with NPWS.

Protecting (native) wildlife in our densely urban area means reducing the impacts of humans and dogs on that wildlife. Both can disturb nesting birds and roosting Flying-foxes by their very presence. This is especially the case with off-leash dogs, hence our concerns about attracting more dogs to the area. Protecting wildlife also brings a focus onto roaming cats and we will be hearing more of this over the coming months.

Remediation at Jackson Place

There has been a long and rather sorry saga connected with the land opposite the Jackson Place cottages. The changing state bodies in charge of roads inherited this land from purchasing decisions made during the earlier proposals to build an above-ground M5E motorway through the valley's bushland.

Transport for NSW (TfNSW) has agreed to the transfer of the land to NPWS for the Park, but because it has a (relatively low) level of contamination from illegal dumping, it has had to be remediated before NPWS can accept it. That remediation is expensive and has been a stop-start affair for over a decade. But it is now underway, and seems to be progressing, albeit slowly, hampered by the rain. Committee member Kitty Hauser, her partner, Peter, and Judy Finlason have been very active in monitoring and interacting with TfNSW and keeping WCPS informed.

Hartill-Law Underpass

Another stop-start improvement has got underway at the Hartill Law Avenue bridge. We have long pressed for a better walkway under the bridge to avoid walkers having to cross busy Hartill-Law Avenue. Working with the former Canterbury Council, we had reached agreement that in the process of repair the facing of the ramp leading up to the bridge, a hard surface walkway would be included. That had reached the design stage when Council amalgamations took place and it has taken until now to get the project re-invigorated. But work has recently started and, while it is not without its problems, it looks like the ambition to have a 4.5km walk through Wolli without crossing a road is soon to be realised. The area under the bridge goes under in floods and will not always be passable, but most walking won't be done at those times.

Stormwater problems

We have pressed Canterbury-Bankstown Council to include another needed enhancement in its program of works. This is the installation of a Gross Pollutant Trap (GPT) on the stormwater section of Paperbark Creek, above Bray Avenue. This is the last major stormwater channel emptying into Wolli east of Bexley Road to lack a GPT. Such a GPT would catch street rubbish and reduce the silt flowing into Paperbark Creek and thence into Wolli Creek. Council's response has been non-committal.

There was a catastrophe with another stormwater treatment installation along Highcliff Road this year. A rain garden/swale was constructed there in the verge as part of funding provided by the incoming ALP government of 2007. This directed stormwater along a planted swale, intended not only to collect street rubbish and trapped silt, but also to remove some of the nutrients, taken up by the planting, thus improving water quality downstream.

The swale worked well until a foolish intervention by a resident set in train a cascade of consequences that eventually led to it being semi-blocked and unable to cope with the huge downpours we have had. The side of the swale collapsed in several places, sending unchannelled water onto the steep slope below. The water washed out what proved to be an old roadside dumping area and masses of historic rubbish was swept down and onto the Track below, along with much silt. It is unclear if the swale can actually be repaired, but it will certainly be expensive and is likely to take considerable time. The stormwater is Council's responsibility, so the costs will lie with it. Meanwhile the water flow is still uncontrolled and causing further damage.

Historic litter remains a problem in a number of areas in the Park, but it is of course still being generated and deposited in streets, shopping centres, car parks etc. Kitty Hauser has taken up the issue for the Society and will direct our efforts into support for actions in a general Cooks River catchment litter strategy commissioned by the River Canoe Club under a state grant.

Bushcare activity

The major direct contribution the Society makes to enhancing habitat is the bushcare work undertaken by our volunteers. This work is co-ordinated by Georgina San Roque, with herself, Pat Thomas, and Deb Little providing well-experienced supervision for less experienced and beginner volunteers. Julie Deady has provided able administrative support, maintaining our records of volunteers, attendance and hours (important for reports and for insurance purposes). An important statistic to note is that our volunteer hours provide the equivalent of a full-time employee. And, because of expert supervision, they come with skills that are expensive to hire, though we do that too, when there are grants or our own funds available. We have been working closely with our current bushcare contractors, Bush Habitat Co-operative, whose efforts support those of our volunteers where greater knowledge is needed or in situations considered too complex or too risky for volunteers.

Bushcare work has been disrupted by both Covid and rain. The Covid suspension of work was rapidly overcome with the implementation of Covid-safe protocols (we work outside and can readily socially distance, but there are other issues as well). Rain has proved more of a problem. Working in the rain, or with dripping wet vegetation, detracts from the fun aspect of the work and sodden soils can make weed removal both easier and harder.

The continuing wet has promoted the growth of both natives and weeds (did you know that, for one, Morning Glory can, under favourable conditions, grow one metre a week?). And erosion becomes an issue, requiring care in how much soil we expose.

But the work has continued on and new volunteers are still being inducted and trained up the long learning curve involved. In our chosen sites we are holding our own and even making a fair bit of progress despite the weed growth. But in areas where we don't have the resources (particularly experienced supervisors) to work, I fear things are going backwards.

And to add to La Nina's iniquities, the storage area that we use for bulky items has been flooded several times. While materials are stored above floor level, the continuing damp atmosphere was not doing them any good. Our one major effort to clear out the mud and water made us all aware of how much worse it would have been for residents in Lismore and other major flood areas. Thanks to the good roll-up of volunteers who turned up at short notice to work on this; changes have subsequently been made to water flow, but it looks as though we will have to do it at least one more time.

Maintaining WCPS as a community organisation

Adapting to COVID

Covid has had its impact on a number of activities, but in the general social mode of adaptability, we switched committee and sub-committee meetings to online ones and were able to carry on. We even had our annual planning session electronically and have followed that up with several discussions in committee meetings to gain a clearer picture of the agreed priorities for the Society's many areas of interest and action and to identify where our current activities don't match up with the priorities. I think this has been helpful in structuring our thinking and providing a touchstone against which to examine whether to commit our limited resources of time and funds to new matters that appear.

Some other things got cancelled, so there was no Annual Dinner last year, no bat picnic this year, and walks and kayak trips went into suspension. With another wave of Covid building as I write, it's unclear when we will be able to confidently restart these things.

But we are planning as if we can, with a kayak trip with the River Canoe Club slated for September (thanks to Kate Flannery and to Gina Svolos), and the Annual Dinner this year set for October 20 (thanks to Julie Deady, Julie Muir and Gina Svolos for undertaking the organisation of this).

Award for Judy Finlason

I note with pleasure that Judy Finlason, a founding member and long-time committee member and activist for the Society, was awarded the Jack Munday Environment and Heritage Award by Canterbury-Bankstown Council early in 2022. Judy's contribution over many decades has had a key role in sustaining the Society and giving it a strong emphasis on the involvement of schools and children.

This emphasis still remains and is currently being pursued by Kitty Hauser and Abi Curtis and we are currently engaging with a parents and children initiative to get the

young off their screens and into the outdoors (the Parent-initiated program is called Heads-up).

The back office

Steady on-going things that are vital to the Society's functioning include managing our income and expenditure and the placement of our funds plus the statutory reporting we have to do as an incorporated association and various other governance matters, for which I thank Treasurer Abi Curtis.

Our IT functioning has been the domain of Tim Pullen for many years and he has continued that role since leaving the committee last year. He and others have been grappling with very vexing problems with the emails from, and sometimes to, our @wollicreek.org.au mailboxes. This was precipitated by changes to Google's security requirements for emails to @gmail accounts, which many WCPS members use. We may be coming out of the woods on that, but we've been lucky to have Tim's efforts to tackle the problem.

Also vital is the maintenance of our membership records and our relationship with our members (without whom we could do very little). This role, and many others, is carried by Gina Svolos, with whom many members would have communicated. Gina has been particularly assiduous in following up on those members who need several reminders before they renew their membership. Our members provide a critical source of funding for the Society's activities as well as, by their numbers, enabling us to focus the attention of politicians.

Funding news

Fundraising is always a priority and the Annual Dinner's contribution to it is very significant and we've missed that for two years now. As for everyone, costs keep rising. It is in this context, and with some reluctance, that we have decided that the time has come to raise membership fees, which have remained the same for seven years now. To soften the blow, we also decided to move membership to a financial year basis, rather than a calendar year and to extend everyone's current membership by six months to fit with the change. The new arrangements will come into force immediately.

One unexpected bit of funding came our way courtesy of Grill'd in Leichhardt, which made us their community group of the month for customers to donate to a particular local community group, resulting in a donation of \$100 to us; received with thanks, pleased to be selected.

Finally, coming up at the AGM in August is a clarifying amendment to the Society's constitution and members will be receiving notice of the motion to achieve that with this report.

Peter Stevens
President
July 2022