



# The Botany Bay Program

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## THE BOTANY BAY PROGRAM

### WHAT IS IT ?

Thirty years ago - give or take a year or two - a few far-sighted people who lived on Botany Bay and its tributaries managed to persuade the state government of the day to undertake a study of the Bay's environment. Experts were hired and research commenced. When the results were published, it was bad news for the Bay. What many people had suspected was found to be true. The health of the waterway was under stress - from pollution, from sedimentation, from toxic wastes, from rubbish dumping and from other causes.

Despite the warnings, nothing much happened. Time passed. Things did not improve. It was business as usual; and the environment continued to suffer.

Then, in the late 1990s, community concerns were raised yet again. Sutherland Council, working with other bodies in the catchment, produced what came to be called the *State of the Bay* Report. That report triggered a serious move by all the Bay-side councils to lodge an application to the Federal Government for funds to enable work to start on an environmental strategy for the Bay and its catchment.

The application was successful and in May 2000 the Program was launched. Its final report was released in March 2002. At the time of writing the Program remains active, with effort being focussed largely on publicising the results of the Study and commencing work on some individual Bay improvement projects. The Southern Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils is the management body.

### WHAT ARE THE OBJECTIVES OF THE PROGRAM ?

The Botany Bay Program has as its long-term goal the achievement of sustainable development in the Bay and its tributaries.

To reach that goal will require sustained effort at the community and government levels, as well as agreement on the various roles which the Bay will be called upon to play in the future. These roles would see the bay as

- the city's and nation's premier entry and departure point for air travellers
- the State's leading seaport for the container and bulk liquid trades;
- a nationally-recognised focus for industrial activity, production, and research and development;
- a focus for aquatic and other forms of recreation, serving a catchment population of around 2 million people;
- a rich and diverse ecosystem incorporating significant terrestrial and aquatic habitats including those protected under international treaties;
- a setting for the custodial efforts of the traditional owners;
- a setting for suburban housing and related urban uses;
- the "birthplace of modern Australia";
- an educational resource.

A vision of a future Botany Bay would be one in which the Bay has achieved a reputation as the cleanest in the nation; where the quality and dynamics of the natural environment are respected and matched by a high quality built environment; where maritime, industrial, port and air transport infrastructure is designed, built and maintained to the highest environmental standards; where the bay's potential as a focus for tourism, sport and aquatic recreation is recognised and supported; and where indigenous as well as post-colonial culture and heritage are fully respected by all stakeholders.

## THE BAY - WHO, WHAT, WHERE ?

Botany Bay belongs to us all - to the members of the indigenous communities whose links with the Bay go back millennia, and to those of us whose associations are much more recent. It is a big Bay, linking many suburbs and localities around the Bay itself and along the tributaries of the Georges, Woronora and Cooks Rivers. The catchment itself covers about a third of the area of metropolitan Sydney - approximately 1,100 sq km.

Within that catchment there are about 24 local government councils serving a population in the order of 1.5 million people. Within the catchment, hundreds of community groups are active; at least 40 local conservation and environmental groups are known to be active within the Southern Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils area alone. All three levels of government are active in the catchment, with the State government holding most of the reins of power and influence over the Bay's future.

## WHAT HAS GONE WRONG IN THE BAY ?

Despite some successes the Bay's natural environment continues to deteriorate.

- Urban development (including ports and airports) has encroached on more than half of the Bay's shoreline and much of the riparian lands upstream.



- Dredging and foreshore development have been likely primary causes of significant local beach erosion.



- Seagrass beds have been lost or damaged in a number of locations.
- Water quality in the two major tributary rivers has declined.
- Oyster farming has virtually disappeared as a viable commercial operation.

- In many locations there has been a continuing decline in opportunities for primary contact recreation (eg swimming).
- Most remaining wetlands (including the ecologically important Rockdale Corridor wetland) continue to be degraded by stormwater and other pollution, by weed invasion and shoreline erosion, and by run-off and disturbance from major infrastructure projects.
- Visual and ecological values of river corridor foreshores are threatened variously by poorly designed development, by insensitive outdoor advertising structures, by the removal of trees and vegetation to enhance 'water views', by decay of old infrastructure, by stream channelisation, and by general neglect and inaction.
- Remnant bushland is succumbing to development, fragmentation, weed invasion and stormwater pollution.



- Wading bird populations (including migratory species) have declined over the past 30 years as habitats have been disturbed or lost.

***This is an extract from a statement presented by Bob Walshe at the launch of the Final Report of the Botany Bay Program in March 2002***

In presenting “a community perspective”, it is necessary to begin at the beginning – and the beginning has to be the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 1788 when the community around Botany Bay showed great interest in 11 sailing ships that were then arriving and anchoring a few hundred yards from here, off Bare Island.

The First Fleet diarist Watkin Tench spoke glowingly of a bay of “prodigious extent... [its] principal arm, which takes a south-westerly direction, being not less...than twenty-four miles from the capes which form the entrance”.

We know, alas, that six days later the Fleet departed for a “port” just a few hours sail to the north, a port named “Jackson” after an obscure

naval bureaucrat, a port which another diarist declared to be “the finest and most extensive harbour in the universe”!...In short, impossible to excel. So Botany Bay, which would have been enormously prized at any other location on planet Earth, was obliged to settle for undeserved secondary status.

Yet the Fleet’s six days in our bay of “prodigious extent” were brimful of historic significance, quite apart from the *fact* that the flag was raised here on the shore of Botany Bay, the claim to this country was laid here, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of January at Sutherland Point on Kurnell Peninsula – and that should be Australia Day, not the 26<sup>th</sup> when, after all, a mere repeat ceremony was staged at Sydney Cove.

During those six days, the visitors treated the Bay community with ambivalent condescension, on one hand describing them as “natives”, “Indians” and even “savages”, on the other feeling relieved to find them amiable, interested and even welcoming – if irritatingly curious to be told when the visitors would be leaving!

When Phillip sent an officer and sailors to clear land and dig sawpits on Kurnell Peninsula, the native community [so the diarists relate] “were displeased and wished them to be gone”, especially expressing anger at seeing trees cut down – though “only”, in one dismissive account, by “jabbering very fast and loud”...and there were apparently also “obscene gestures”.

The incident, I submit, was prophetic. Please tell me if, in our later more enlightened times, you could possibly recognise the following behaviour pattern:

- ▶ an authority or developer enters a locality without community invitation;
- ▶ authority tampers with environment without community consultation;
- ▶ authority dismisses as uninformed a resultant community protest;
- ▶ authority dismisses the community’s non-violent demonstration as “only jabbering fast and loud”?

Obviously the Kurnell ignore-the-community pattern was to continue for the ensuing two centuries and we and Botany Bay are the poorer for it. And we are here today because we sense that the times just might be a’changing!

## THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

Botany Bay is not the only example of a waterway in distress. Worldwide, there are probably hundreds – some beyond repair, others in reasonably good shape. If recovery is going to happen in our Bay, we need to look at success stories from other places – stories which offer evidence that solutions to complex environmental resource management problems can be found through ‘partnerships’ and other collaborative arrangements.

Examples of successes elsewhere have a number of common elements – pointing towards a possible formula for success in Botany Bay and the catchment.

- Strong support from community-based and non-government organisations (NGOs) is evident, leading to the development of voluntary partnerships. Such involvement is commonly facilitated by moves within the NGO sector to create coalitions or umbrella groupings, thus avoiding fragmentation and parochialism when it comes to consultation with government.
- They enjoy reasonable continuity of government funding, achieved by appropriate agreements and understandings. As funds flow from government, benefits flow in the opposite direction in the sense that successes bring dividends to all participants.

- Science plays a big part, both at a basic community education level and through research programs aimed at describing and measuring environmental phenomena over time and providing decision-makers with reliable information
- Community education enjoys a high priority and commensurate funding.
- Most programs are associated with a leading local university.
- They all have long time horizons, transcending short government administrative terms and often enjoying support from all sides of politics.
- They all enjoy cooperative arrangements between government agencies, with inter-sectoral and multi-agency partnerships being common.
- They all have a ‘champion’ at the top – a person or organisation with the respect of the various participants who can be seen as the responsible driver of the entire program.

They are seen by the public as being capable of engaging with and influencing existing agencies or institutions without actually being part of (or shelter-

## RESULTS OF THE PROGRAM TO DATE

- Late last year (November 2001) the State Government announced a decision to establish a Botany Bay Management Committee. It also declared the Government's intention to commence preparation of a 'single, coordinated Botany Bay management plan'. These initiatives flowed in part from the earlier report of the NSW Healthy Rivers Commission and are entirely consistent with the aims of the Botany Bay Program.
- At officer level, the Program continues to enjoy fruitful levels of cooperation with the many State government agencies which are involved in Bay management.
- The non-government sector is becoming increasingly involved, and the emergence of a coalition group is a major step forward. Several special BB events are already planned for the remainder of the current year
- University of NSW is establishing a special Botany Bay Studies Unit on the Kensington campus.

- A Botany Bay web site is being created.
- A valuable library of maps, reports, photographs and other documents has been started.
- The Program has established close links with a number of similar interstate and international bay and estuary programs.

## WHAT NEXT ?

To a large extent, future progress on the Bay program will depend on maintaining and extending the level of enthusiasm for its aims within the non-government and local government sectors. A strong community focus backed up by a unified local government lobby will help to demonstrate to higher levels of government that the Program is a realistic one, worthy of strong official support. The involvement of the scientific community, industry, and the private sector generally is already gathering momentum.

## Botany Bay Trail—the Bigger Picture

There is considerable scope for a regional integrated passive recreation plan, linking discreet projects such as the *Botany Bay Trail* to walking and/or cycling trails throughout the Georges River Catchment, using the natural river corridors. There are existing and proposed trails and associated bush regeneration projects along the northern and southern foreshores of the Georges, the Woronora Valley, Cooks River, Salt Pan and Prospect Creeks, all managed by separate government and community partnerships.

### Quality of Life

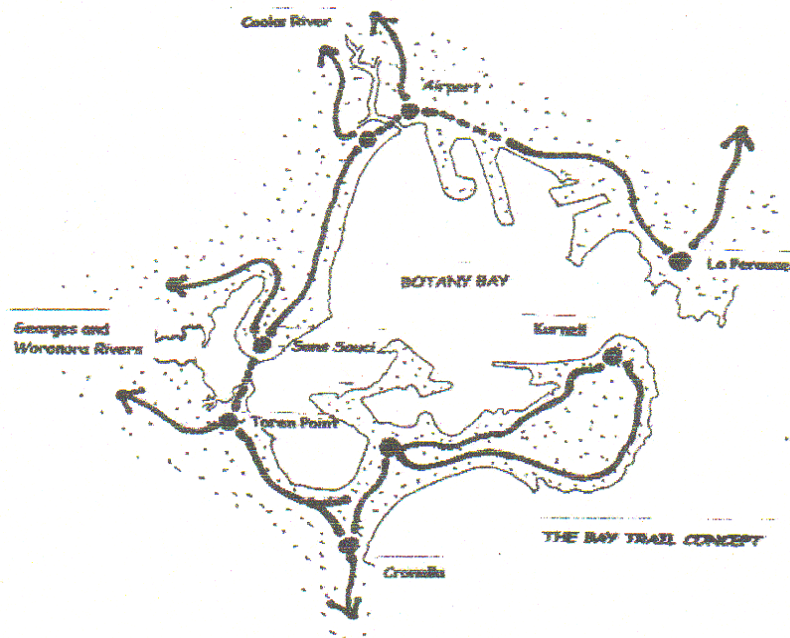
Real improvements to quality-of-life can be achieved from developing these networks or "greenways", such as:

- linking urban communities with quality open space for passive recreation and active conservation activities.
- integrating government and community towards a common goal.
- raising awareness of environmental quality and the importance

of the river system and its habitats for both wildlife and human communities.

- developing safe and attractive routes for sustainable transport options like walking and cycling to school, work, shops, rail and bus stations, benefiting those without ac-

- giving people greater opportunity to explore and appreciate their local heritage and so provide a greater sense of belonging to their community.
- maintaining and improving people's health and well being by encouraging greater involvement in physical activities.



cess to cars and those in lower socio-economic groups.

- developing and highlighting the existence of recreational opportunities on the doorstep, which negates the need to travel far by motorised transport, favouring the less affluent.

However it is crucial that the protection and enhancement of biodiversity is not compromised – thriving wildlife populations and attractive habitats not only indicate healthy and high quality environments but also give pleasure to significant numbers of people.

*The Bay Trail* in California provides a living example of how government and community can work together guided by a long term regional framework for action. Together they have created a network of pedestrian cycle and wheelchair user trails linking the cities of the San Francisco Bay Area.

To date over half of the 400 mile trail is in place, providing real quality of life improvements for several millions of people.

- Nick Benson, SSEC