

## Traditional story of Sydney Harbour

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### Boora Birra

*A long time ago, when there was no evil in this land, the sea was further to the east than it is today, and the place called Boora Birra stood high in the deep valley which it guarded. This valley was the home of the Parra Doowee, the Eel Dreaming Spirit. Now Boora Birra was a special place for women, who, when needed, carried out the ceremony called Butoowee there. Every child, when they reached a certain age was taken to Boora Birra where they were taught certain things, and received protection from any evil spirits which could enter them and cause them to do evil things. Because the land between the deep valley and the sea shore was flat and easy walking with plenty of food, the people became fat, lazy and forgetful.*

*The men no longer honoured the spirits of the animals they hunted and killed, and they wasted much of their prey, eating only the parts they liked the most and leaving the remainder to rot away. The women no longer taught their children the ways of the people they no longer paid their respects to the Earth-mother, or gave thanks to the food they received so easily. The children grew to manhood and womanhood without being taught the laws and why it is necessary to obey those laws.*

*They formed themselves into bands that roamed the flatlands destroying the gunyas of the old, stealing fishing spears and hunting weapons and using them to fight the members of other bands. The people would hear them coming and conceal themselves high upon the Boora Birra. From this vantage point, they watched with trepidation as one band approached the home of the Great Eel guarded by the old warrior, Kamarai. Kamarai heard the noises of the approaching group and went to welcome his visitors. But he was quickly surrounded by the lawless ones who laughed at his clumsy actions as he tried to avoid the jabbing of their spears. Bleeding from many wounds, the old man fell to the ground. In a deep pool in the river, the Great Eel heard the commotion and heard the cries of help from his old friend. It swam up to the surface of the pool. The lawless ones saw the Great Eel and threw their spears at him in fear as it pulled itself up out of the water. Its great body moved toward its old friend as the last spear of the lawless ones struck its tail.*

*When it saw that Kamarai had died of his wounds, it cried out in grief and pain and struck the ground with its great tail, dislodging the spear. The earth began to shake violently and a great chasm opened up in the ground following the fleeing lawless ones and swallowing them as they fled towards the flatlands. Then a storm came in from the sea and the waves crashed along the flatlands until they reached the cliffs that marked the beginnings of the highlands.*

*“Let this be warning” the Great Eel said. “The laws of this land must be obeyed, and the proper ceremonies must be carried out in the proper manner. It turned to look at the Boora Birra, slowly being engulfed by the waves. “And the Boora Birra will now be a place where the sea creatures take their children to teach them the laws of the sea. But you may visit, safely from time to time, so that you remember why the laws must be passed on to the young. And because good lessons can always be learned from evil, this place will be safe for the people to hunt and to fish and to live and teach the laws”*

*The Great Eel slipped into the water and with a splash of its tail disappeared beneath the waves. The people watched the waves hoping for a glimpse of the Great Eel as it made its way to its new home. One of the children, a young boy, went to the waters edge then looked back at his mother and smiled and spoke in a voice that was not his. “Until we forget again” he said “until we forget again”*

### Significance of the coal loader site

The coal loader sits in the land of the Cammeraygal people, one of the tribal groups in what is now known as the Eora Nation. Phillips curiosity about the Aboriginal owners is evident in his writings, in February 1790, he wrote to the Colonial Office in London with the following comment:

*about the north-west part of the harbour there is a tribe which is mentioned as being very powerful....The district is called Cammerra; the head of the tribe is Cammerragal, by which name the men of that tribe are distinguished. A woman of this tribe is called a Camerragalleon.....*

Linguistically, the Aboriginal people of the North Sydney area belonged to the Kuringai or Guringai group of speakers. Ross citing Capell (1976) argues that this language was spoken from the north side of Sydney Harbour to as far north as Lake Macquarie.

The prehistoric Aboriginal sites along the peninsula demonstrate a wide range of cultural practices (eg art works, occupation sites and burial). A suite of sites of diverse types within relatively close proximity has research potential and archaeological significance. They are a valued demonstration of the Aboriginal ownership of, and connection to the land which has enduring spiritual and educational value to both the present day Aboriginal community and the wider community.

### Heritage sites

The first recording of an Aboriginal site was made by J.F Mann in the early 1840's which was later referred to in 1899 by W.D Campbell who made sketches of the whale engraving as well as a shelter with art. Later recordings indicated engravings, rock shelters with art and shell middens. A burial within a sheltered occupation site which also contained stencilled art at Balls Head was the subject of an archaeological excavation in the 1960's (Miles 1964; Bowdler 1971). There has also been a report (Philip Mulvey pers.comm.) of excavations and collections of artefacts made by Shore Grammar Master.

In 1963, Rosemary Taplin made a series of recordings of some of the sites on the peninsula and found additional engraved figures adjacent to the Whale carvings which had been missed in the previous recordings.

Philip Mulvey, while resident at the coal loader site collected an Aboriginal stone axe head from a sand/rock shelf exposed at low tide immediately off the Caltex site foreshore which is currently in his possession.

The protection of the 6 middens, 8 rock shelters (some with stencilled art) and the burial site are to follow the recommendations as outlined in the CMP. It is important that attention is drawn away from these sites and that their presence be noted by appropriate signage and / or artwork which the CMP suggests should be located near the main engraving site. The sites identified by MLALC as 'unsuitable for public use' are not to be publicly documented. The general principle should be to do as much as is necessary and as little as possible.

The only exception is the Whale carving which will be a central feature as it is at one of the various gateways to the site. During pre-design consultations with Allen Madden (Cultural and Education Officer at the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council) and David Watts (North Sydney Council) the idea of removing the road and exposing the full extent of the carving as outlined in the CMP was agreed upon, and the work is to be carried out under their close supervision. It was also indicated that aspects of the work to reveal the remainder of the carving will be incorporated into an education program for students learning about the Aboriginal sites.

During consultations with Allen Madden, David Watts and North Sydney Council, it was decided that the fence around the carving is to be removed and replaced with a grown element around the perimeter, as well as an audio component explaining the story which engages the visitor in an educational understanding of the Aboriginal use of the site.

At this meeting it was also determined that the removal of the paint in the grooves of the carving could cause further damage, and will therefore be left as is.

Close consultation with both Allen Madden and David Watts is imperative, both during the design process (protection of sites) and during construction (in case of exposure of more sites/artefacts).

## Interpretation

Both the protection and interpretation of Aboriginal heritage sites in this project is to represent 'best practice' and will be an example of the future direction. Avoiding cultural stereotypes, the 'signage' is to effectively tell the stories of the traditional use of the land and indicate the presence of hidden sites.

The 'signage' itself may be audio components that when triggered by a visitor, tell stories orally, continuing an important tradition in indigenous communication.

A report by Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council and Mary Dallas for North Sydney Council suggests that interpretation should not be undertaken unless remedial work is carried out on the sites. Interpretation should be based on the following principles;

- That Aboriginal heritage be celebrated
- The public increase their awareness and understanding of Aboriginal sites and the value of Aboriginal cultural heritage
- Aboriginal sites are protected by Law
- The Aboriginal community have a legitimate interest in the protection and management of their sites and the right to be involved in any decision-making process regarding their future use
- Some sites are sensitive or have special significance and cannot be promoted or made public

## Aboriginal opportunities in redevelopment

It is important to connect traditional heritage with the contemporary expression of culture so to express the living and continuing nature of Aboriginality and its presence in Sydney. The site represents an interface to Aboriginality in Sydney and so should retain a local identity, which is at the forefront of modern culture but still retains the spiritual strength of pre-colonisation. Contemporary culture finds new ways to tell old stories and tells new stories in old ways.

- **Performance space**

One of the new uses of the site could be performance of traditional and contemporary dance on the coal loader platform. Early consultations with dance troupes indicated that the best surface to dance on would be sand.

- **Bush tucker / medicine garden**

As part of the educational component of sustainability on the site, there is an opportunity for the inclusion of both bush tucker and medicines in the form of a garden. Arranged in the six Aboriginal seasons, the garden would include plants used for ceremony, healing properties, men and women's plants, seasonal indicators, decoration, food, fire, habitat and implements.

- **Aboriginal land management**

Continuing the educational component of sustainable land management would be the inclusion of the traditional management of the land by Aboriginal people in various parts of the country.

- **Art and stories**

The story of Boora Birra holds particular relevance to the use of the site as an educational tool for sustainability as the people were punished for wasting food and not obeying the laws of the land. There is an opportunity for local artists to be involved in both the interpretive signage components of the site as well as the broader art program earmarked for future development.

- **Tribal Warrior**

The Tribal Warrior Association is Australia's leading maritime training provider for Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth. The Sydney Harbour tours provide a unique, authentic, and satisfying land/water based experience for tourists, corporations and schools.

The TWA has recently requested (11 Oct 2005) a joint submission with Council for community use of the old Quarantine Station at Berry's Bay, which will become the home of the Tribal Warrior. All of the above components at the Coal Loader site could be used by the Tribal Warrior to enhance the experience of the Sydney Harbour Tours.

### Process and consultation

The following list indicates stakeholders that may contribute to specific aspects of the project where their expertise and advice is required. The broader Aboriginal community will be invited to the community consultations managed by (Penny at North Sydney Council). It is proposed that Alison Page will report the findings of this specialist group to the larger community group.

- **Pre-design**

- Allen Madden (Cultural and Education Officer at the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council)
- David Watts (title at North Sydney Council)

- **During the design process | reference group**

- Bangarra Dance Theatre (performance space)
- Powerhouse Museum (land management research)
- Boomalli Artists Cooperative (art program)
- Tribal Warrior Association (needs for tour)
- Allen Madden (Cultural and Education Officer at the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council)
- David Watts (title at North Sydney Council)

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### References

**Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council** *Story of Boora Birra* Redfern NSW

**Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council** *Footprints on Rock* Redfern NSW

**Golden Mackay Logan** *Waverton Peninsula Conservation Management Plan* May 2000

**Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council and Mary Dallas** *Aboriginal Archaeological assessment of Waverton Peninsula* 2000