

# **Environmental disasters**

Aboriginal care of the fragile Australian environment was disrupted by British colonisation. Natural disasters proliferated as never before as the land and sea were exploited.

Bushfires are feared in Sutherland Shire, as in other parts of Sydney that have embraced nearby bushland.

Over the years the natural erosion of the Shire's beautiful coastline has intensified as a result of human activity. In addition, the destruction through mining of the once magnificent sand dunes is a sad loss.

Scientists predict such trends will intensify unless Australians act to combat the impact of global warming.

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### **Bushfires**

Bushfires are a fact of life in Sutherland Shire, as in other parts of Sydney that have embraced nearby bushland. For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century fire brigades were made up of a mixture of volunteer and professional firefighters, funded by the NSW and local government and insurance companies.

Sutherland Shire's first fire brigade was established at Cronulla in 1930. The second was at Sutherland, with AW Austin, appointed the first fire captain in 1937. After his resignation in 1940 Albert Raymond Victor Paton, known as Ray, took his place.

Paton's daughter Val Nicholson recalled how the family's shop – with living quarters at the back and bedrooms upstairs – in East Parade Sutherland was 'more or less the fire station'. The fire engine and equipment took up half her father's workshop from where he ran an engineering business. He was responsible for a large area and was always busy as there was so much bushland in Sutherland Shire, especially at places such as Bonnet Bay.

The fire brigade was mostly voluntary but the men received a 'very small stipend'. Val recalled that firemen were often in businesses they could leave if necessary. Men such as shop keeper George Heavens and Ralph Brinsley, who had a joinery business, were both active firefighters. She regarded these as 'very special men'.

In December 1956 newspapers described 'pitiful scenes' at Engadine as a severe bushfire raged. The following October Engadine was again under threat as Sydney was ringed with bushfires. One fire came within 50 metres of the Bundeena post office, and homes were destroyed at Grays Point. At Jannali firemen assisted by school children fought a two-mile fire front as it raced towards Soldiers Road.

Near the end of a prolonged drought in 1968, homes in Loftus were threatened as fire raged in the nearby Royal National Park. Val Nicholson will never forget that year. Even though not far from retirement, her father 'was gone for days' at a time, and one occasion she and her husband Doug found him in bushland near Engadine and made him come home and rest. Ray may have been exhausted but he was also proud they had managed to save a house at Yarrawarrah.

While triumphs such as this were heartening, terrible tragedies are also commonplace when bushfires rage. On two separate occasions in the 1980s there were tragic deaths in the Royal National Park. In November 1980 five volunteer firefighters lost their lives and again in January 1983 another three firefighters were killed.

Sadly, many homes were destroyed in the terrible bushfires that struck Sydney in January 1994 when the suburbs of Waterfall, Heathcote, Sutherland, Jannali, Como, Bangor, Menai, Illawong and Alford's Point were affected and a woman lost her life in Lincoln Crescent, Jannali. Although Val and Doug Nicholson evacuated their Bonnet Bay home, it narrowly escaped this massive conflagration.

## **Beach erosion**

Cronulla and North Cronulla Beaches have been severely eroded over the last century. The natural processes of depletion and sand deposition were disrupted when native vegetation was cleared and frontal dunes flattened. Construction of hard surfaces in the form of rock pools, seawalls and concrete aprons has exacerbated the problem.

The most dramatic beach erosion has occurred at North Cronulla where a sea wall was first built in 1921. Massive storms, especially in 1942 and 1946, destroyed this and caused extensive erosion to the beach. Sebire's kiosk collapsed in 1946 when huge seas destroyed its foundations. Less than ten years old, North Cronulla Surf Lifesaving Club, which had been moved after storms in 1932, was also undermined and in danger of collapse. It was demolished shortly afterwards, and in 1950 bricks from this building were used to build the current clubhouse.

When Cronulla Beach seawall collapsed in June 1950, old electric light poles were used in a desperate attempt to prop it up. As sand was washed away a gaping hole opened up in front of the surf club. Club members, volunteers and local police under the direction of Sergeant 'Tiny' Titcombe worked for two days and nights filling sandbags and stacking these to prevent the club's foundations being undermined.

An iconic building – the 'Red House' overlooking the beach between North Cronulla and Wanda Beaches – was another victim of the Pacific Ocean. A 'hangout' for surfers, it was demolished in the 1960s after its foundations were eroded. What is now Elouera Beach – where a surf club was established in 1967 – was traditionally referred to as Red House Beach in honour of this local landmark.

In May and June 1974 Cronulla's beaches were once again eroded during severe winter storms. The North Cronulla seawall collapsed – the second one in this location to do so. At the end of that year a dune stabilisation program for five kilometres north of Wanda Beach was launched. In order to replenish sand lost from Cronulla Beach by erosion, sand was mined from the dune behind Wanda Beach in the late 1970s.

A 'Seabee' armoured seawall was constructed at North Cronulla in 1985. These cost-effective units, considered to have high structural resistance, have been built in a number of locations throughout the world. The one at North Cronulla has ameliorated the impact of the sea to a certain extent, but not completely.

## **Sand dunes – a Sydney icon**

Extensive sand hills, now destroyed by mining, once stretched from Wanda Beach to Kurnell. Vegetated prior to white settlement, by the 1930s these dunes were bare, and moving north-west to Quibray Bay.

In 1937 local people unsuccessfully urged the NSW government to create a 'national reserve' by resuming 3000 acres of privately owned holdings to add to the 259-acre reserve that stretched from Wanda Beach two-thirds of the way to Boat Harbour.

Controlled by the Department of Lands, this reserve had been gazetted in 1886. In the 1930s, however, sandhills were appreciated more for their profitability than their environmental or aesthetic qualities, with Shire clerk David Kirkby commenting that the sale of sand would have recouped the cost of this purchase had it been made.

In the post-war years as the building industry ramped up, thousands of tonnes of sand were removed daily, while heavy vehicles wreaked havoc on nearby roads. In 1958 Metropolitan Sand Ltd was found to be illegally removing sand north of Cronulla sewerage treatment works – only one of many similar transgressions. This was a time when sand mining was in progress along much of the NSW coast, mostly for rutile but in Sutherland Shire for building sand. By the late 1960s sand trucks operated to and from the Kurnell peninsula 24 hours a day.

As the Shire population increased and the shortage of playing fields became critical Sutherland Shire Council applied in 1961 to mine sand from the reserve. The funds generated would be used to develop a sports complex north of Wanda Beach. Although the sports complex never eventuated, Council-operated and private sand mining proceeded in the reserve in the 1960s and 1970s. Soon there were holes 60 to 80 feet deep where giant dunes had once stood and north of Wanda Beach a ‘hard fill’ tip operated from 1968 to 1973, filling in areas where sand mining had occurred.

In 1978 Sutherland Shire Council sought to end sand mining even though three companies – Hooker Industrial Sands, Pioneer Concrete and Breen Peninsula Holdings – still operated on the peninsula. The latter waged a legal and public relations offensive against the Council with full page advertisements in local and metropolitan newspapers.

Finally in July 1980 the Council formally recommended to the State Planning and Environment Commission that sand mining cease. Despite inquiries, environmental plans, legal action and strong resident hostility it continued for many years. Although a section of the dune area received state heritage listing in 2003, extraction of building sand had destroyed heath, woodland and freshwater swamps. The majestic dunes that older residents remember so well had all but disappeared.

## References

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