

NEWS

Wanda wetlands woes

Claim that heritage site is neglected

BY CHARLIE ELIAS

A CLAIM that Port Stephens Council has not been fulfilling its obligations to care for a place of special significance to the local Aboriginal people has been refuted by the council.

Maiangal Knowledge holder and custodian, Nelson Bay's Carol Ridgeway-Bissett believes that the council has failed in its obligations to care for Wanda Wetlands, a sacred women's place which has special significance to the Worimi people.

"The wetlands today is in a sorry and neglected state," Ms Ridgeway-Bissett claimed.

"Instead of the 50m buffer zone, which is supposed to protect all its borders, we can see that recent road and drainage works have pushed into the wetlands on Soldiers Point Road. Undergrowth has been cleared unnecessarily and a drain under the road feeds water and rubbish directly into the wetlands."

In response to the claims, a council spokesperson confirmed that the land in question was a sacred women's site in the Mambo Wanda Wetlands Plan of Management, adopted by the council on February 28, 2006. [https://www.portstephens.nsw.gov.au/grow/development-controls-plans-and-strategies/open-space-and-recreation-planning]

"We treat the reserve as a women's site and when doing bushland management works, we only ever send in female teams to manage the site," the spokesperson said.

"The reserve is managed

as one of 72 bushland sites covered by our Natural Area Management Program. We allocate our funds and any grants we receive annually using our innovative and award-winning Bushland Assessment Tool.

"This tool has been developed to consider a wide range of factors and prioritise how we invest funding to best manage natural areas. Under the current model, the reserve is in the second-highest category of sites and receives annual funding of \$3,500. This equates to two days ecological restoration works by a contractor."

As for the rubbish, the spokesperson said that Wanda Wetlands was not on a regular roster for rubbish clean up, "however if there are issues, we encourage community members to lodge a request and our public places cleaning team will respond. The Mambo Wanda Wetlands Landcare group also pick up a lot of the smaller litter during their monthly working bees."

Ms Ridgeway-Bissett said that she was shocked to discover on a recent walk where fishbone fern had grown rampant and many pathways had overgrown and were impenetrable on the wetlands northern border with Salamander Oval.

Wanda Wetlands is a 13ha parcel of land between Wanda Avenue and Soldiers Point Road in Salamander Bay. In 1997 after a seven-year battle to save it from being a housing subdivision, Wanda Wetlands was declared a place of special significance to the Worimi people.

The Newcastle Herald



INFORMATION: The information on the edge of Wanda Wetland, erected by Port Stephens Council. Picture: Supplied



CLEARED: These photos supplied to the Examiner show the cleared trees and open drain from recent roadworks allowing rubbish to enter Wanda Wetlands.



stated in March 1997: "The wetlands is an Aboriginal sacred site and was used by the Worimi people for birthing and burial purposes." According to Ms Ridgeway-Bissett, it is the only remaining ecosystem of its type on the Tomaree Peninsula, being wetland forest with old growth in excess of 120 years. "Wanda provides a rich habitat and sanctuary for a variety of wildlife including several endangered species. These include the greater

broad nosed bat, the little bent wing bat, the koala, squirrel glider and wallum froglet. This information, with photographs, is located on the site and has been erected by the council." Ms Ridgeway-Bissett said it had been a long hard struggle to protect Wanda Wetlands. "It has been saved in the past by many people in the community who have appreciated its cultural and natural significance."

"In 1994 the wetlands was

registered with the National Parks & Wildlife Service. Five years later Port Stephens council entered an agreement with the NPWS for the preservation of the land called Wanda Wetlands.

"Under this agreement it was believed the council would develop a Plan of Management and begin investigations into the wetlands as a place of heritage significance.

"There is still no Plan of Management and all the roadwork or tree lopping occurring near the designated 50m buffer zone needs to

be closely supervised. This is a sensitive eco system, and much closer supervision should have been exercised."

The council spokesperson said that the council had not approved any tree removal from the area. "The pink ribbons are used to establish monitoring plots for the Bushland Assessment Tool."

On the Plan of Management, the spokesperson said that only a few reserves have a specific plan of management. "All other reserves, including this one, are managed under our Natural Areas Plan of Management."

Wanda 'win for people'

THE people crowding the gallery at Port Stephens Council erupted last night as council-owned land at Salamander Bay was rezoned a nature reserve.

After seven years residents had won the battle to have the land on Wanda Ave rezoned as part of a voluntary conservation agreement with the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

The zoning means the council and the National Parks and Wildlife Service will protect the land's natural and cultural heritage while the council maintains ownership.

'The council has entered into discussion with National Parks and Wildlife, including making Wanda an Aboriginal place of significance,' Cr Darryl Dawson said.

The site is significant for a number of reasons, including that it houses a koala habitat and is of Aboriginal cultural value.

Worimi traditional custodian Carol Ridgeway-Bissett said the zoning decision was a boost for those who had fought for the land.

'It shows what people power can do,' she said.

— **Mardi Boardman**