ENVS 3040 Student Report for SEE Change

Renaturalisation of Sullivans Creek, Kambri precinct.

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Introduction

Exploring Indigenous issues and the work of centering Country

From the beginning of our project, we recognized that it should place Country and Indigenous peoples at the centre and that we should prioritize the ways of thinking they represent, many of which remain marginalized. Some key ideas that motivated our thinking:

- Aboriginal peoples are custodians of places like Sullivans creek. For at least 20,000 years they have cared for this Country according to obligations under law. As non-Indigenous students, we feel it only right to defer to those who've not only managed the place for the longest period, but also successfully kept it healthy for that time. We also want to support and be mindful of obligations to care for country.
- Aboriginal peoples also draw a deep sense of identity from and with these places. Settler coloniser mindsets see rivers as separate from people, as inert and lacking agency, and as a "natural resource" to be commoditized, exploited, and extracted. As non-Indigenous students operating in colonial power structures, we want to try to give space to other knowledges, other ways of being, and other ways of relating to the environment. In our research¹ we've learned that Aboriginal peoples see rivers as more-than-human, as deeply interconnected with people and country, and as part of themselves. We wanted to recognise the ideas and give space for them where we could.

In attempting to do this, we realized that the scope of this project would not allow us to go slowly, respectfully, and in a way that gives sufficient time for us to build relationships with those same people whose knowledges we rely on and want to give space to. In conversations with Kate Harriden about the project and the creek she introduced the term and concept of *yindyamarra* from the Wiradjuri language, which we found helpful in beginning to understand these ideas of respect and patience from Aboriginal perspectives.

We realized that a six-week project did not give us enough time to meaningfully consult, nor for those consulted to reflect on and engage with the project. It takes time to have proper conversations, and it takes trust for them to be a place where people can be vulnerable and share their views, especially when they are so often excluded, or an afterthought.

We still wanted to do what we can to present these issues, but we want to stress that we have not done enough and could not do enough in this space. For example, we have begun the work to establish relationships with Ngunnawal people whose knowledges of this space are critical. We recognise, however, that SEE Change itself has begun other projects in that space. We would encourage the relationships between these two areas to be further explored!

Our primary recommendation for this report is to encourage those in the future who continue to work in this space, to give themselves and others enough time to go slowly, to

¹ Bawaka Country et al., "Co-becoming Bawaka: Towards a relational understanding of place/space," *Progress in Human Geography* 40, no. 4 (2016). And also: Bawaka Country et al., "Working with and learning from Country: decentring human author-ity," *Cultural geographies* 22, no. 2 (2015).

consult meaningfully, and to build relationships with Country and its First Nations custodians. *Yindyamarra*, in other words. Throughout this report we've attempted to represent different disciplines, stakeholder groups, and perspectives we believe could be further informed and enhanced by Indigenous perspectives but doing this will take time.

We hope this is helpful to future groups in building a clearer idea of areas to explore further, and where more work still lies ahead.

Introduction to Sullivans creek

During the urbanization process of Canberra city, extensive drain networks were established for managing water flows across suburbs, including in Sullivans creek. Before colonisation, natural water systems like these served as important food sources across Australia and were often used as pathways by Indigenous peoples²,³.

These natural cycles and cultural connections were disrupted by colonisation, which introduced significant physical modifications such as concrete drains⁴. These modifications have increased water flow, causing the water to move through the environment at accelerated rates⁵, and also interfered with the riverbank's ability to store water⁶. Sullivans Creek Catchment Group found that when wetlands are restored, it attracts more common species such as wood ducks and frogs, as well as encourages beneficial plant growth and biodiversity⁷. A 2009 feasibility study into integrated waterways management similarly recommended replacing concrete sections with weirs and ponds⁸.

These and other negative impacts associated with the concrete drains established throughout the creek have been a focal point of this report, alongside the social and historical contexts of colonisation that brought them about. Today Sullivans creek has mostly become a concrete drain⁹. However, it once was known for its ponds, floodplains, and rocky incised gullies¹⁰. There is evidence to suggest that renaturalising the creek can successfully

³ Steve Skitmore, Duncan Wright, and Matilda House, "Reclaiming space at Red Hill Camp: Community archaeology with urban indigenous groups," *Journal of Community Archaeology & Heritage* 6, no. 2 (2019).

⁴ S Maheepala et al., "Canberra integrated waterways: Feasibility study," (2009).

⁵ Maheepala et al., "Canberra integrated waterways: Feasibility study."

⁶ K Harriden, "Potential impacts of slum urbanisation on channel bank storage in the Bang Pakong River, Thailand," *Water Practice and Technology* 7, no. 4 (2012).

⁷ "Sullivans Creek from concrete channels to a living environment," 2010, https://www.environment.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/575490/background_sullivans_catchment.p df.

⁸ Maheepala et al., "Canberra integrated waterways: Feasibility study."

⁹ "Constructed Wetlands," 2021, https://www.environment.act.gov.au/water/constructed_wetlands.

¹⁰ Environment Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate, "Constructed Wetlands."

² "Welcome to Red Hill Camp," 2021, https://redhillcamp.weebly.com/.

return ecosystems to a healthier state, enhancing water quality and flow, while improving biodiversity, and well-being for people. This in turn can bring economic co-benefits, which can help to sustain community work towards the creek's health.

The transformation of Sullivans Creek, back then and now

Sullivans Creek was previously named Canberry Creek by the first pastoral station on the site⁷ and subsequently renamed after William Sullivans settlement during the 1850s¹¹. Development in this area, including especially the construction of ANU's campus, significantly impacted the creek's original route. Ngunnawal elder Wally Bell explains that beforehand, the creek waterways were used to guide people without the need for compasses or maps¹². Sullivans Creek acted as a pathway to Galambary (Black Mountain), a meeting place for ceremonies¹³. Much of that landscape is unrecognizable after these changes. Wally says after Sullivans Creek was readjusted for the constructions of Chifley Library in the 1960s these old pathways, a part of Indigenous heritage, had been dramatically disrupted.

Today, despite some limitations, Anne Martin, director of the Tjabal Centre is positive about the ANU's broader approach to reconciliation¹⁴. Other ANU academics like Dr. Virginia Marshall and Kate Harridon have contributed meaningfully to our work, and the broader discourse on cantering First Nations peoples and perspectives in future water management projects like this. Martin too emphasized that progress should be achieved collaboratively with all levels of the ANU communities and Indigenous communities.

"You cannot ever forget this campus stands on Aboriginal land." says Martin.

¹¹ Australian National University, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Trail* (2021), https://services.anu.edu.au/files/guidance/Aboriginal_Heritage_Trail2.pdf.

¹² Australian National University, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Trail.

¹³ Australian National University, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Trail*.

¹⁴ Ben Lawrence, "That's a RAP - ANU reflects on reconciliation," *Woroni* 2019, https://www.woroni.com.au/news/anu-reflects-on-reconciliation/.

Biodiversity

Ecosystem functions of Sullivans creek, and riparian zone renaturalisation

Stream systems like Sullivans Creek play an important function in ecosystems transporting nutrients and sediment, providing habitat for wildlife, recharging groundwater, and protecting upland landscapes from inundation events¹⁵. They also provide crucial services as part of the broader hydrological cycle, where water is transported off the landscape back to estuaries and the ocean¹⁶. Ensuring stream health involves reducing pollution and maintaining high quality water, as well as protecting channels and banks from erosion¹⁷. A healthy creek ecosystem consists of essential biotic and abiotic factors which interact to connect with each other to create an ecological community (Figure 1), including the aquatic zone, the riparian zone, and the upland zone (Figure 2).



Figure 1 - Ecosystem services in Sullivans creek highlighting biotic and abiotic factors.

¹⁵ "Stream ecology," 2021,

https://serc.si.edu/research/research-topics/biodiversity-conservation/stream-ecology.

¹⁷ Smithsonian Environmental Research Center, "Stream ecology."

¹⁶ Water Rivers Commission, "Water notes: advisory notes for land managers on river and wetland restoration," (2012).



Figure 2 - Sullivans Creek in the Kambri precinct, with the upland zones, potential riparian zones, and aquatic zones highlighted. Unedited image from HUON 2020.

Ecological function of riparian zones

A riparian zone is an area of land running alongside a moving body of water such as a creek, river, or stream. These areas are often the most fertile part of the landscape as they retain and intercept nutrients from both the adjacent stream and upland runoff¹⁸. The mosaic structured habitat is ideal for supporting diverse faunal and floral ecosystems and communities, due to the variable ecosystem communities that provide food, water, shelter and facilitate species interactions resulting in high productivity and biodiversity¹⁹. Ecological functions of riparian zones include habitat for both aquatic and terrestrial fauna and flora, bank stabilization, provision of dead and living organic matter, sediment capture, processing and retention of nutrients and moderation of temperatures through shade provision²⁰. While natural disturbance is frequent in riparian zones, vegetation roots bind soils and stabilize moist and erosion vulnerable edges²¹. The zones function as a buffering system between the upland and water system by removing suspended sediments from overland flow and providing a means for water to be filtered through their permeable soil and vegetation composition, removing contaminants before reaching the creek²². These zones have a strong influence on energy and matter flows between terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems²³. This occurs through the transfer of riparian plant matter and litter to streams and the influence of animal interactions of consumption and redistribution. These zones provide energy sources for adjacent aquatic systems through the transfer of riparian plant matter and litter to streams. To maintain healthy riparian zones, connectivity in the extent

https://diemproject.org/sensitive-ecosystems/riparian-and-creek-ecosystems/.

²¹ Discovery Islands Ecosystem Mapping (DIEM), "Riparian and Creek Ecosystems."

²² Likens, *Encyclopedia of inland waters*.

¹⁸ Gene E Likens, *Encyclopedia of inland waters* (Elsevier, 2009).

¹⁹ "Riparian and Creek Ecosystems," 2019,

²⁰ Philip S Lake, Nick Bond, and Paul Reich, "Restoration ecology of intermittent rivers and ephemeral streams," in *Intermittent Rivers and Ephemeral Streams* (Elsevier, 2017).

²³ Eugènia Martí et al., "Flood frequency and stream–riparian linkages in arid lands," in *Streams and ground waters* (Elsevier, 2000).

and timing of flows and the movements and species of animals and invertebrates must be maintained²⁴. Restoration of riparian zones is a way to isolate the creek from disturbances such as the daily traffic and car pollution, heavy foot traffic, spread of exotic plants and contaminants such as litter and road runoff²⁵.

Riparian restoration projects

Lachlan River Riparian Restoration Project - Central West Local Land Services and NSW Government 2019²⁶: The Lachlan River located in NSW near Condobolin opened applications for local land managers to participate in the restoration project in 2019. Priority actions for the project investment included fencing of riparian zones for protection, stock management and erosion control, provide an alternative for off stream watering points, weed control, pump screens to protect fish populations and restoration of native vegetation through understory planting. Central West Local Land Services with the NSW Government is running the restoration and is providing funding for services such as pest animal control, Cultural Heritage surveys and technical support for landholders who reach the eligibility criteria. Project Standards were also provided, outlining necessary costs and services that would be required for the project to ensure that processes are completed effectively and to standards that can be carried on in the future. Standards such as exotic plant control, monitoring and evaluation, where applicants must adhere to maintaining records for the duration of the project agreement, Cultural Heritage surveys, which are to be conducted prior to groundwork commencement and the retention of dead standing fallen timber and bush rocks. A similar project is being conducted by the Central West Local Land Services and NSW Government on the restoration of the Macquarie River riparian zone, with the same Project Standards and service funding available.

Powell's Creek Naturalisation - Diona and Sydney Water 2017: The Powell's Creek project in Sydney (2017) involved the transformation of 850m of riverbank by the removal of degraded concrete channels and replacing the channels with sloping sandstone banks and native plants. Before the project construction began, the Diona restoration group engaged with the local community, providing them with an overview of the project, timing, and construction methodology to identify any local concerns with which tangible solutions could be found²⁷. Diona and Sydney Water also completed the Johnston's Creek naturalisation project in October 2021, which outlined a similar process of replacing old concrete banks and naturalising the banks with native plants and vegetation to improve biodiversity and bank stability⁹.

²⁷ "Powells Creek Naturalisation," 2021,

https://www.diona.com.au/projects/project/powells-creek-naturalisation.

²⁴ Likens, *Encyclopedia of inland waters*.

²⁵ Lake, Bond, and Reich, "Restoration ecology of intermittent rivers and ephemeral streams."

²⁶ "Riparian Restoration Project Fact Sheet," 2019, https://centralwest.lls.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/1183624/Lachlan_revised-factsheet-.pdf



Figure 3 - Past and present structure of Sullivans Creek in the Kambri precinct and potential future services for restoration of the area

Learning from these projects, we can gain a better understanding of the processes involving riparian zone restoration and the benefits this provides to the ecology of the creek ecosystem. In Figure 3, the past, present, and potential future structure and services of the Sullivans Creek ecosystem are outlined. A detailed plan for the ecological restoration of Sullivans Creek is beyond the scope of what we can deliver, but we hope the research provided on the potential benefits in riparian zone restoration can encourage further research and inform further consultation in the future.

Economics and Ecology

Flood prevention and mitigation

In February 2018 the Australian National University campus closed due to flooding of Sullivans creek. Flood waters reached the bottom level of Chifley Library causing significant damage to property and assets including books. Many other buildings and parts of construction sites were flooded during this time. The ANU has not released the full cost of damages but the incident highlighted potential economic impacts to ANU campus of further flooding.

The weir was built to help prevent future flooding by diverting water flow through the region. The cost of this project was estimated at \$1.8 million by the Huon construction company who oversaw the project. Tasks included clearing, grubbing and earthworks, supply and installation of geosynthetic clay liner (GCL), supply and installation of gabion mattress, and installation of a reinforced concrete weir. A GCL and gabion mattress were required due to the creek's periods of intense waterflow and were part of the flood mitigation scheme.

The belief of the implementation of these sturdy banking options is that the walls of the creek would not break down and overflow causing rapid build-up of silt further down the river and flooding up into the campus. From an economic perspective focused exclusively on the loss and damage of ANU property, the costs of a project of development like this greatly outweigh the costs of damage during periods of flooding and replacing lost assets.

Extending the renaturalisation project throughout the region offers opportunities for further flood mitigation in suburban neighbourhoods. The implementation of flood mitigation renaturalisation should be done differently to the way in which it has been done across the ANU. The use of a GCL and gabion mattress, although effective at stopping silt breakdown, is ugly and scarring on the natural landscape. The Johnston's Creek project in Sydney involved natural revitalisation with flood mitigation techniques such as overflow ponds, improving bank stability with the introduction of native plants and using rock pools as bank stabilisers. This project cost around \$20 million for a 600-metre revitalisation and the current project has strengthened the banks and improved water flow so that the flood capacity of the area is estimated to be nil. This effective but expensive project not only focused on flood mitigation but also aimed to improve the general health of the ecosystem.

We believe that the economic benefits of correctly implemented flood mitigation techniques in the Sullivans creek region will bring down costs of natural disaster recovery across the region and recommend that efforts be made to revitalise in a way that minimises the economic impacts of flooding.

Economics and Wellbeing

Riparian zone improvement

The increased biodiversity of an area does not directly correlate with increased economic activity but there are studies indicating large scale naturalisation of water systems can stimulate the surrounding economies. Most studies have focused on regions with fishing economies, a feature of Sullivans creek that does not exist due to the catchment's inability to sustain fish populations in certain areas, but these findings do suggest renaturalised areas can nonetheless become assets to a community. The benefits of a healthy riparian zone include improved water quality with increases in the health of animals, a decrease in pest species that damage the natural eco-system and surrounding yards, opportunities for diversification of economies including agroforestry, provisions of wind shelter for local animal species, and decreased bank erosion. Increased flood mitigation measures can also secure the capital value of the land, and renaturalised areas potential increase land value and economic activity through aesthetic improvement, community engagement, and eco-tourism respectively.

ACT Wellbeing framework

Given the intention to renaturalise Kambri Creek by removing concrete from the channels, an argument must be presented as to why these creeks are important, and why resources should be prioritised in order to fully develop these channels. An initiative in Sullivans Creek within the context of ANU can be created using the ACT well-being framework²⁸. A connection between two indicators within the ACT framework can be applied to create a bridge that is a meeting place – echoing a meaning of the word Kambri gifted to the ANU precinct through which the creek runs. The two indicators are health, and identity and belonging. The subtopics of these indicators include valuing indigenous perspectives and support for multiculturalism. The indicators on health are mental health and a healthy lifestyle. Given above data on biodiversity and the economic benefit of tourism for First Nations people, the Creek then can become a meeting place for the diverse

ANU student population and First Nation peoples to serve both purposes.



Figure 4 – Possible intersections between wellbeing, economics, and Indigenous knowledges at Sullivans creek.

²⁸ "ACT Wellbeing Framework," 2021, https://www.act.gov.au/wellbeing.

Economics and Indigenous perspectives

Indigenous cultural and eco-tourism

When trying to identify the economic benefits associated with renaturalising Sullivans creek, we tried to decentralize the ideals of western economics and look to further understand how knowledge, health, and wellbeing can increase economic productivity for all of those who interact with the Sullivan creek system.

The revitalization of Sullivans Creek offers potential opportunities for local Indigenous tourism companies and similar organisations. During August of 2021 community Elder, Uncle Wally Bell ran a guided tour of the heritage sites that exist on the Australian National University Campus. Part of this tour includes the inspection of the Kambri/Sullivans creek area with detailed descriptions of the history that Indigenous people have with the region. We will not attempt to paraphrase this learning as we feel it will do a disservice to the Elders who took this tour. The tour was funded by the ANU and free to attend, allowing students and visitors to understand the region in which they study and live. The tour also allows people to see parts of history that have existed long before colonisation began in Australia, giving some insight to the connection that Indigenous Australian peoples such as the Ngunnawal have with the Country around Sullivans Creek specifically.

The significance of the knowledge shared and learned cannot be understated and indicates an opportunity for growth within the tourism sector around Sullivans creek. The Beyond Drains project, submitted for funding by anthropologist Dr Kirsten Wehner, works in conjunction with Sullivans Trails²⁹ and aims to foster cultural and social connections between Canberra residents and the local existing waterways. Their project aims to explore three interconnected themes: Indigenous knowledges, participatory art, and creative interpretation and citizen science. Similar projects are being pursued in this space, representing a range of potential ways for knowledge to be shared, and new relationships with Country to be explored by the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities that share it.

We believe that community-led and governmental support for the Tourism industry within the Kambri Canberra region will lead to the set up of Indigenous Tourism and allow for them to capitalize on the growth opportunities of Indigenous-led tourism. The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) has through the Minister for Indigenous Australians, the Hon Ken Wyatt, AM, MP secured more than \$2.9 million to fund Indigenous owned tourism businesses and community organizations³⁰. Thus, allowing for the continued support of Indigenous led tourism opportunities. We believe this flowchart gives an idea on how economic growth and Indigenous led-tourism can grow in the Kambri region:

²⁹ "Kambri Creek," 2021, https://www.sullivanstrail.com/.

³⁰ National Indigenous Australians Agency, "Funding boost for the Indigenous Tourism Sector," 2021, https://www.niaa.gov.au/news-centre/indigenous-affairs/funding-boost-indigenous-tourism-sector.



Figure 5 - An outline of how renaturalisation interrelates with economic and social benefits

Canberra and the Sullivans Creek region have the ability to seize and capitalize on this growth market, but we feel that it is important to recognize the distinction between Western and Traditional ideals when it comes to the capitalization of an area such as this. We recognize that not all Indigenous Australian peoples will feel comfortable with westerners capitalizing on the knowledge that has been passed on for generations. We are not aiming to mold Indigenous Australian peoples' futures into the ones that Western cultures hold as important but rather are offering a market that can be used by Indigenous people. We must also recognize that there is hesitancy sharing this knowledge with a culture that has massacred and not recognized Indigenous peoples since colonization. We believe that if these projects are done successfully the narrative of growth must be defined by Indigenous peoples and that we as outsiders can only help to aid this narrative by working on healing and resolving the bonds that have been broken between Indigenous peoples. We understand that this economic gain may be considered as a manipulation of the Indigenous peoples but hope with correct implementation we could ensure all economic benefits, knowledge passed on and employment opportunities are given to Indigenous Australian Peoples first.

Policy Recommendations

- Focus future research on Indigenous perspectives, voices, values, knowledges, and ways of being. Give ample time for consulting and communicating with Indigenous peoples.
- Move slowly on any new changes. Focus on what is happening already. Help reinforce current positive changes and communities that are fostering biodiversity on the creek. SEE change can play a positive and impactful role using its social network to facilitate bringing stakeholders together for collaboration.
- Build on existing work around deep observation/awareness tours for Sullivans creek, as a way for ANU students and the broader community to acknowledge country, learn from First Nations peoples, and provide positive mental health outcomes to students through mindfulness³¹ and socialisation.

³¹ "Mind Seeds Video: Practicing mindfulness using the five senses," 2021,

https://health.anu.edu.au/news-events/news/mind-seeds-video-practicing-mindfulness-using-five-senses.

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