



Cultural Connections: Ngunawal stories of Lake George



BUNGENDORE AND LAKE GEORGE CULTURE AND ECOLOGY NOTES

The Bungendore locality

Bungendore is a small rural town of around 4200 people (in 2016) in the Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council Local Government Area. It is located in the Southern Tablelands of NSW and in the South Eastern Highlands Bioregion. The climate typically comprises hot summers and cold winters, with a mean annual rainfall of 600-800 mm in which the highest falls are recorded in Spring. Mean maximum temperature is 19.6°C and the mean minimum temperature is 6.4°C.

The town is situated on alluvial flats and terraces associated with Turallo Creek, Halfway Creek and Mill Post Creek, within a general terrain of undulating plains and low hills. The elevation at Bungendore is 700 m with the scarp to the west rising to around 900 m in altitude. Turallo and Halfway Creeks are tributaries that drain to the southern shoreline of Lake George.

The Lake George basin extends 68 km by 19 km wide and covers a catchment area of about 930 km². When full, Lake George is the largest natural inland lake in NSW. However, it is a hydrologically sensitive, intermittent water body with a depth that has frequently ranged over the last 164 years between 0-7.3 m. When dry, the lake floor is often used for grazing sheep and cattle whereas, in 'lake full' conditions, the lake has been used for water sport and fishing.

Ecological values

The main vegetation types in the area include grasslands, a grassland-woodland mosaic, and Box-Gum woodland, with some low ranges occupied by dry forests. Much of the grasslands and Box-Gum woodlands have been cleared or modified for agriculture, such that Natural Temperate Grassland of the Southern Tablelands and White Box – Yellow Box – Blakely's Red Gum (Box-Gum) Woodland are nationally listed as threatened ecosystems under Commonwealth legislation.

The 25 ha Turallo Nature Reserve (about 3 km south of Bungendore) protects one of the region's best examples of Natural Temperate Grassland. It has a particularly high native plant species richness, with around 100 species recorded. Several remnants of Grassland and Box-Gum Woodland of considerable diversity occur at Sweeny's Reserve, Six-mile TSR and Duck Flat TSR. There are also important sites in the region for the nationally threatened species the Perunga Grasshopper, the Green and Golden Bell Frog, Mongarlowe Mallee, and populations of the Striped Legless Lizard, Latham's Snipe, Little Whip-snake, Hoary Sunray, and the Buttercup Doubletail orchid.

The Aboriginal history of the area

Aboriginal people are known from archaeological evidence to have lived at Birrigai around 25 000 years ago, at Wombeyan Caves near Goulburn around 10 000 to 12 000 years ago and in the lowlands surrounding Lake George about 4000 to 5000 years ago. It is estimated that there were about 400-500 Aboriginal people living in this area in 1850. They lived in a traditional lifestyle with rich, intricate ceremonial and ritual practices. There were clan groups of about 20 people and these clans were each responsible for a tract of country.

For Ngunawal people, the Lake George area is a special spiritual place where the Creator spirit resides. The Creator spirit made the land for Ngunawal people to survive, including the native vegetation for bush foods and bush medicines. In his serpent form, he is responsible for the creation of the waterways. All the natural resources of the land were utilised by Aboriginal people, including the fauna and flora, the flora for bush foods and medicines, and the fauna for food sources.

There are known quarry and ochre sites in the district (e.g. 'Mill Post', Defence Head Quarters Joint Operational Command), scarred trees (e.g. 'Burbong') and burial sites (e.g. 'London Bridge' near Burra Creek).

The Tinderry Mountains to the south near Michelago was another important place for Ngunawal people, providing an extensive outlook to distant places of cultural significance and being on the migration path of the Bogong Moth (a rich food resource for Aboriginal people).

Important food plants for Ngunawal people are described in the book "Ngunawal Plant Use", and include Silver Wattle, Black Wattle, Blackwood, Drooping Sheoak, Silver Banksia, Blakely's Red Gum, Native Cherry Tree, Chocolate Lily, Early Nancy, *Hardenbergia violacea*, Yam Daisy, orchids and Bluebells.

Colonial settlement

Colonial settlement sites often overlay favoured Aboriginal traditional camping places and travel pathways. In 1820 Joseph Wild, a former convict turned bushman and explorer, was one of the first white men to visit the local area apparently known to Aboriginal people as "Bungadow" (now Bungendore). Climbing the nearby hills Wild saw "*the fires of the natives who appeared numerous.*" Following their course southward Wild's party camped beside the east bank of the lake between two creeks and next day on a creek at the lake's southern point. The land was "*fit for any purpose, clear of timber – a strong westerly wind occasioned a heavy rolling surf like the ocean. ... A very wide valley clear of trees and superior land runs from the southern end of the lake upwards of twenty miles – this night the water of the lake fell six inches ... The lake was brackish and unfit for use, extending from N. to S. at least thirty Miles.*" A single island in the lake was inhabited by "*multitudes of white gulls*", while the woodland was generally "*Box and Blue Gum with a little Stringy Bark. Emu very plentiful and seen in small flocks – tracks of some large kangaroos found but none seen in the neighbourhood – swans, geese and ducks of different kinds in abundance, but it was too cold to catch fish.*"¹ The exploratory party of Dr Charles Throsby passed through the area a few months after Wild, in search of the Murrumbidgee River, having persuaded Governor Macquarie to accompany them as far as Lake George.

The settlement of Bungendore grew from 1825 as a result of its location at the junction of roads between Goulburn and Braidwood, east down to the coast, south to Queanbeyan and on to the Monaro. Bungendore was gazetted in 1837 and facilities established soon after including the Harp Inn in 1838 (now operating as the Lake George Hotel), the post office in 1840, courthouse in 1864 and railway station in 1885.

Before the coming of the railway, during the 1870s, boats were used to carry wool across the lake and for meteorological surveys. In 1874 a steamboat was launched to celebrate Queen Victoria's birthday. Colonial settlement also brought 'sportsman' to the Bungendore-Lake George area. Koalas were plentiful near the lake and were easy shooting, as were the platypus that lived in the area.²

Environmental management issues in the area

Much of the local area has been grazed for over a century and most of the vegetation has been cleared. Land use has been restricted largely to grazing because of generally thin, rocky soils and low rainfall. Sand and coarse aggregate resources are utilised in the regional construction industry. Low areas are subject to major invasion by the weed Chilean Needle-Grass, while some hilly areas have major incursions of the weeds Serrated Tussock and St John's Wort.

¹ Queanbeyan District and People, Errol Lea-Scarlett, Queanbeyan Municipal Council, 1968, pp2-3

² An Expedition to Weereewa: Lake George, Jill Waterhouse, Canberra Museum and Gallery, 1999, p17

Some relevant online information resources

White Box-Yellow Box-Blakely's Red Gum Grassy Woodland and Derived Native Grassland – CR (Cwlth)/ White Box Yellow Box Blakely's Red Gum Woodland – E (NSW) -

<https://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publicshowcommunity.pl?id=43>

<http://www.environment.gov.au/epbc/publications/white-box-yellow-box-blakelys-red-gum-grassy-woodlands-and-derived-native-grasslands>

<https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/threatenedspeciesapp/profile.aspx?id=10837>

Natural Temperate Grassland of the South Eastern Highlands – CR (Cwlth) –

<http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publicshowcommunity.pl?id=152>

Mongarlowe Mallee (*Eucalyptus recurva*) – CR (Cwlth, NSW) –

http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publicspecies.pl?taxon_id=11004

<https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/threatenedSpeciesApp/profile.aspx?id=10310>

Perunga Grasshopper (*Perunga ochracea*) – E (ACT) –

[https://www.environment.act.gov.au/cpr/conservation and ecological communities/threatened species factsheets/factsheets2/perunga-grasshopper](https://www.environment.act.gov.au/cpr/conservation%20and%20ecological%20communities/threatened%20species%20factsheets/factsheets2/perunga-grasshopper)

Green and Golden Bell Frog (*Litoria aurea*) – V (Cwlth), E (NSW) –

http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publicspecies.pl?taxon_id=1870

<https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/threatenedspeciesapp/profile.aspx?id=10483>

Buttercup Doubletail (*Diuris aequalis*) – V (Cwlth), E (NSW) -

http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publicspecies.pl?taxon_id=21588

<https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/threatenedspeciesapp/profile.aspx?id=10235>

Striped Legless Lizard (*Delma impar*) – V (Cwlth, NSW) -

http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publicspecies.pl?taxon_id=1649

<https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/threatenedspeciesapp/profile.aspx?id=10211>

Useful contacts for further information

South East Local Land Services

<https://southeast.lls.nsw.gov.au/>

NSW Biodiversity Conservation Trust

<https://www.bct.nsw.gov.au/>

Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council

<https://www.qprc.nsw.gov.au/Home>

Buru Ngunawal Aboriginal Corporation

<http://www.buru-ngunawal.com/>

Molonglo Conservation Group

<http://molonglo.org.au/>

EnviroAg

www.enviroag.com

Small Farms Network – Capital Region

<https://smallfarmscapital.org/>