

# 2019-2020 ANNUAL REPORT



[www.cooksriver.org.au](http://www.cooksriver.org.au)



## Acknowledgement

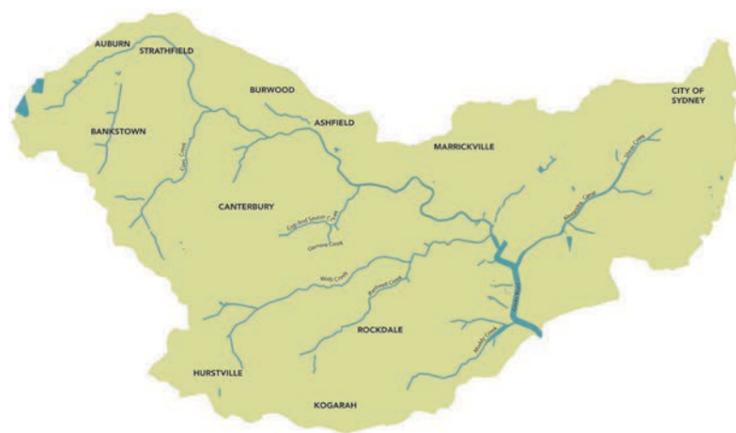
The Cooks River Alliance respectfully acknowledges the Wangal, Cadigal and Gameygal, the Traditional Custodians of the Cooks River catchment, and also acknowledges other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have made the river their home. The Alliance pays respect to Elders past, present and future. For over a thousand generations, the Cooks River catchment has been home to Aboriginal people who have fostered cultural and spiritual connections to the river as it evolved over many millennia.

## The Catchment

The Cooks River begins as a series of small watercourses near Graf Park in Bankstown and flows 23km in a generally easterly direction to enter Botany Bay just south of Sydney's Kingsford Smith Airport. It runs through some of the most heavily urbanised and industrialised areas in Australia.

The river's catchment covers about 100km<sup>2</sup>. The care and control of the river is a complicated issue as responsibility is shared between nine local councils, Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council, Sydney Water, the NSW Government and industry.

The Cooks River catchment provides many benefits which contribute to the community's well-being and quality of life, including wetlands and bushland that provide vital habitat, as well as many parks and facilities. All people living in the catchment, regardless of their proximity to the river, can make a difference to its health and quality.



## Alliance long-term outcomes

- 1 An Alliance of connected community and Cooks River catchment land managers is continuing to maintain and improve river and catchment health.
- 2 Aboriginal relationships and leadership are integral to catchment actions.
- 3 Catchment land managers are implementing water sensitive cities actions.
- 4 The quality and volumes of water flowing to the Cooks River from all parts of the catchment better reflect the natural water cycle.
- 5 Native habitats are thriving and connected across the catchment.
- 6 The catchment is resilient to climate impacts.

## Message from the Chair

In a year of bushfires, smoke-filled skies, ash rain, and flash flooding, the many challenges facing our environment were brought to the fore. At home, severe Sydney storms devastated the Cooks River which broke its banks and roared in flood.

In our second year of the Cooks River People's Plan, I'm pleased to report we have made significant progress against our key focus areas of partnerships, advocacy and communities.

It was a major year of planning with important local and state government planning instruments being updated and developed to align with the Greater Sydney Commission's new District Plans. Alliance member councils have utilised planning instruments and strategies to provide actions for a healthier Cooks River and catchment. The Alliance also commenced Stage 2 of the Coastal Management Program.

The immense value of our local waterways and green spaces was highlighted during the first COVID-19 lockdown which saw people flocking to the Cooks River in high numbers for outdoor exercise. Although the pandemic altered operations from the last quarter, we made the most of opportunities presented by working online to enable meaningful collaboration across the catchment.

The strengths of our strong river community were on display throughout the year. The Alliance Cooks River Changemakers program saw the development of five new community-led activities. The Cooks River Clean Up and Paddle Against Plastic event broke last year's record with 429 people getting involved to remove 1.2 tonnes of rubbish from the water and on land.

The Alliance also secured an additional \$210,000 in funding through Australian Government and Landcare grants enabling community engagement in river care across the catchment.

We thank our member councils and community for their ongoing support and contribution throughout the year including a special thank you to City of Canterbury Bankstown for hosting the Alliance. Thank you also to our valued Alliance staff for their continued dedication to championing the river through this difficult year.

We look forward to another fruitful year ahead.

*Maryanne Duggan*

**Cr Maryanne Duggan**  
Chair Cooks River Alliance



Council	Representative	Meeting attendance		
		Oct 19	Feb 20	May 20
Bayside	Clr Andrew Tsounis		✓	
Canterbury Bankstown	Clr Khal Asfour (Mayor) Clr Clare Raffan	✓		✓
Inner West	Clr Darcy Byrne (Mayor) Clr Colin Hesse	✓	✓	✓
Strathfield	Clr Maryanne Duggan (CRA Chair) Clr Nella Hall	✓	✓	✓

 Focus Area 1:

## An Alliance of valued partnerships

### Cooks River Catchment Congress 2020

20 participating organisations

4 Catchment Congress meetings held



9 draft indicators for river health across environmental, social and economic values

### Partnerships across the catchment

100% of stakeholders satisfied with Alliance partnership

98% agree the Alliance effectively facilitates collaboration

96% agree the Alliance provides useful info for my organisation



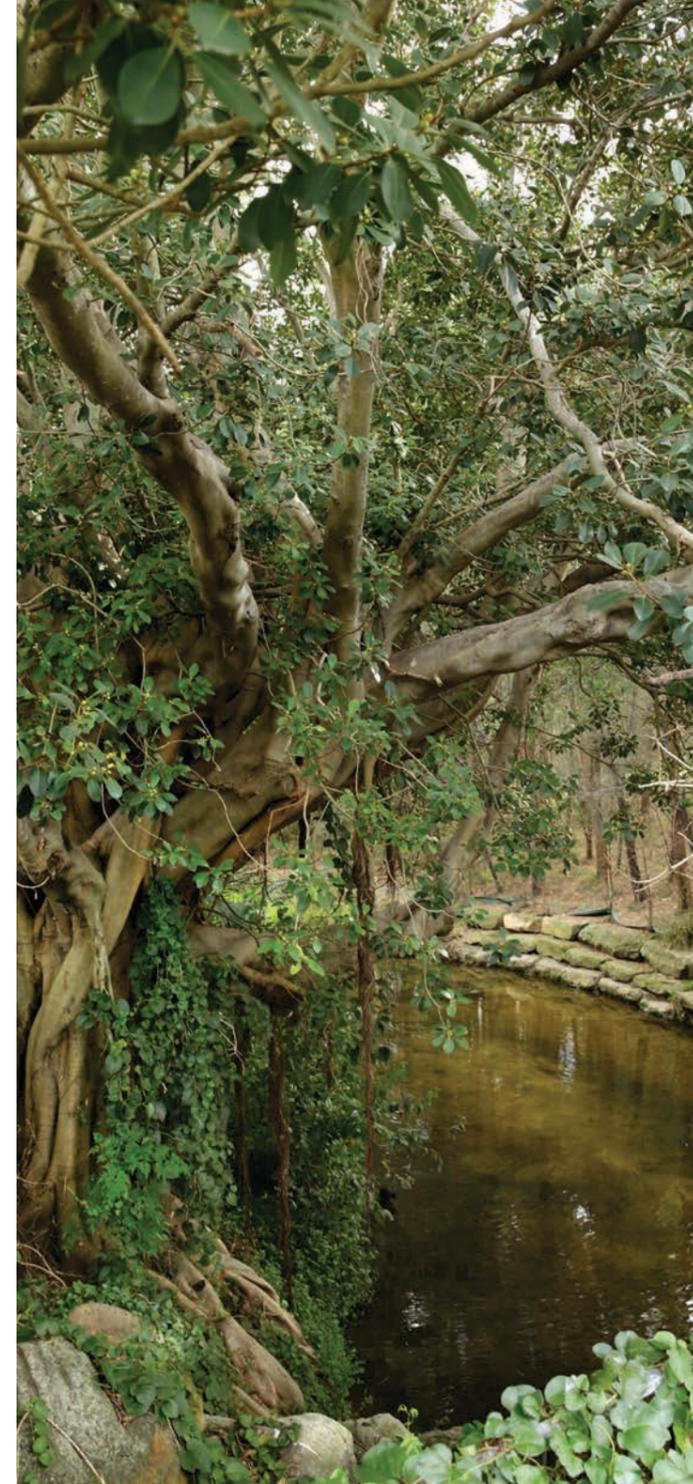
96% agree Alliance activities lead to a healthier river

94% agree the Alliance effectively advocates for the river

*"CRA activities are well-planned, run and facilitated and their objectives are clear. Participation by all parties is actively encouraged and supported."*

*"Gets the right partners in the room to effect action."*

- From stakeholder feedback survey



## Cooks River Catchment Congress 2020

How can we comprehensively measure the health of the river and its catchment?

Historically, water quality has been the focus of Cooks River health assessments, but there are numerous elements that make up a healthy river system.

How many birds and fish call the river home? How far does the urban tree canopy extend across the catchment? How are people interacting with the river for recreation and business?

These questions start to paint a much more comprehensive picture of Cooks River and catchment health and identify more targets for improvement.

At this year's Catchment Congress the Alliance gathered stakeholders and experts from the University of Maryland to develop a Waterway Health Report Card tailored specifically to the Cooks River that showcases its many environmental, social and economic values. The first report card is due to be published in 2021.

## Partnerships across the catchment

Planners, engineers, educators, communicators, natural resource managers and many other staff from Alliance councils have again worked together closely this year to enable Alliance projects. Additionally, Sydney Water staff have participated in projects and in 2021 Sydney Water will join the Alliance. The City of Sydney have also continued to support the development of the Coastal Management Program.

The Alliance continued in a partnership with the Cooperative Research Centre for Water Sensitive Cities and the Sydenham to Bankstown Research Synthesis Project was a finalist in the NSW Planning Institute of Australia annual awards.

The Alliance also participated in NSW Landcare this year, hosting the AGM and conducting a river tour.

The Alliance is committed to its mission of united action for a healthy Cooks River and catchment. We invited stakeholders from member councils, government agencies, industry, research and education organisations and community to rate their experience of participating in Cooks River Alliance activities. Responses highlight 100% of stakeholders are satisfied with the Alliance partnership.

 Focus Area 2:

## Advocacy for the health of the river, catchment and habitats

### Coastal Management Program (CMP)



Cooks River Catchment CMP Area

**Stage 1 Scoping Study completed**

**6 working groups guiding CMP development**

**85 individuals contributing from 35 organisations**

### Advocacy and communications

**\$210,000 in grant funding for community engagement in river care**

**6 submissions advocating for waterway health**



**3 tours of the catchment**

**2 online tours of the river**

**12 presentations across video, radio, workshops and events**



## Advocacy for the health of the river

The Alliance made three submissions to the Minister and NSW Coastal Councils regarding funding for the Coastal Management Program (CMP). The Alliance also successfully advocated that protecting the Cooks River's coastal areas goes hand in hand with managing its freshwater sections and the wider catchment. Therefore an innovative whole of catchment approach is being applied to develop the Cooks River Catchment CMP.

The Alliance made a submission on behalf of Sydney's catchment groups to the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) review of Sydney Water's water prices. This submission highlighted

the importance of Sydney Water's waterway health improvement program. The Alliance was also a panel member during a public forum for the Sydney Water Price Review. In the final report IPART approved almost \$80 million to allow Sydney Water to improve waterway health.

The Alliance also made submissions to the NSW Government on the Sydney Gateway Road Project and on Redirecting the Future of Plastics in NSW. Both submissions emphasised the importance of water sensitive urban design.

## A whole of river and catchment plan

The Alliance is bringing together stakeholders from across the catchment to develop a long-term strategy and program of actions to improve the health of the Cooks River using the NSW Coastal Management Act. The Cooks River Catchment Coastal Management Program (CMP) ensures a legislatively backed, certified program of works for Councils and partner organisations with co-funding from the NSW Government.

More than 85 individuals from 35 organisations are working across various issues to determine current and future risks, vulnerabilities and opportunities. These includes an examination of: Aboriginal heritage and culture; other heritage; biodiversity; assets and governance; climate change and coastal hazards; and stormwater and flooding.

The CMP is a five-stage process that is expected to be completed by 2024. To learn more visit [www.cooksriver.org.au/cmp](http://www.cooksriver.org.au/cmp)

## Communities taking action

### Litter in the catchment

**\$49,000** Australian Government grant to reach 44 schools

More than **13 tonnes** of rubbish removed from river at Alliance-supported community events



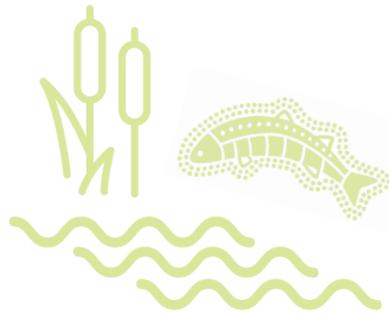
**1500+** bags of rubbish collected across the catchment through NSW Corrective Services partnership representing \$110,000 value to member councils

**900+** interactions through Cooks River catchment model demonstrations

### From Yana Badu to Kamay

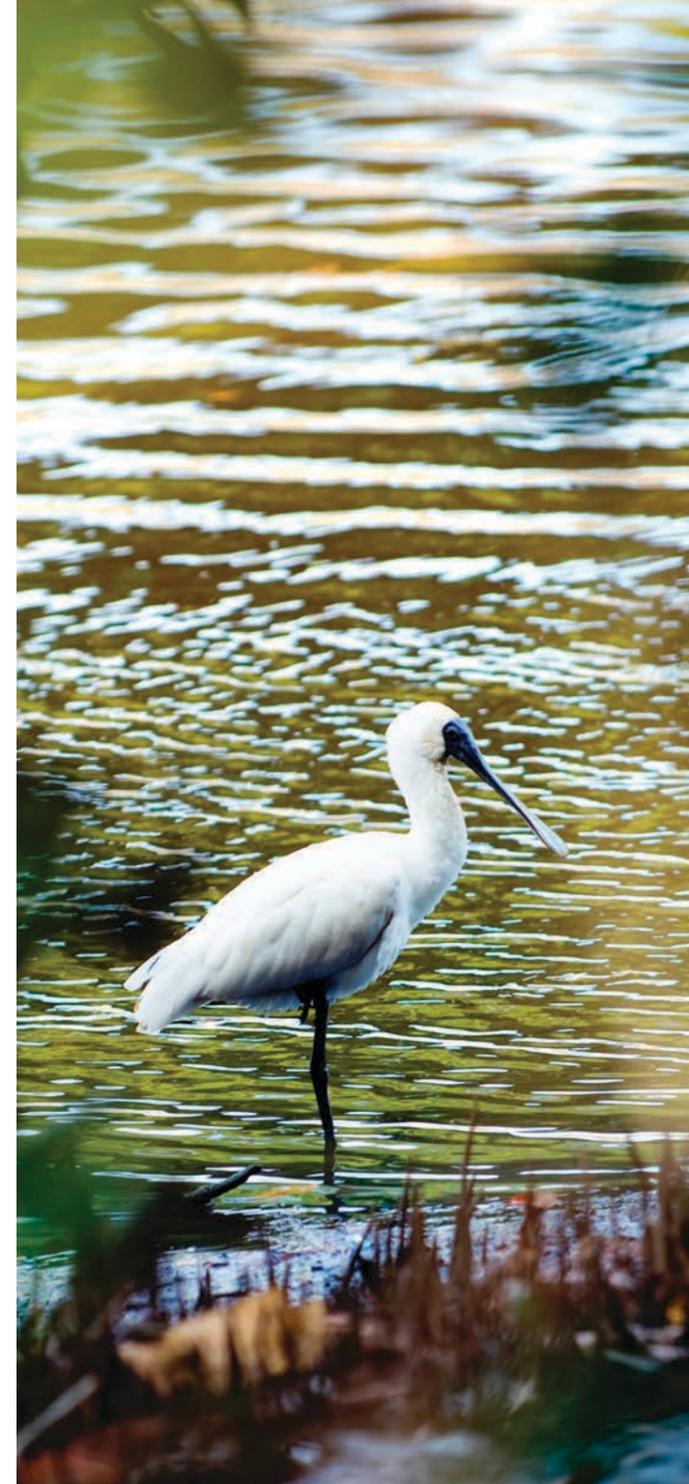
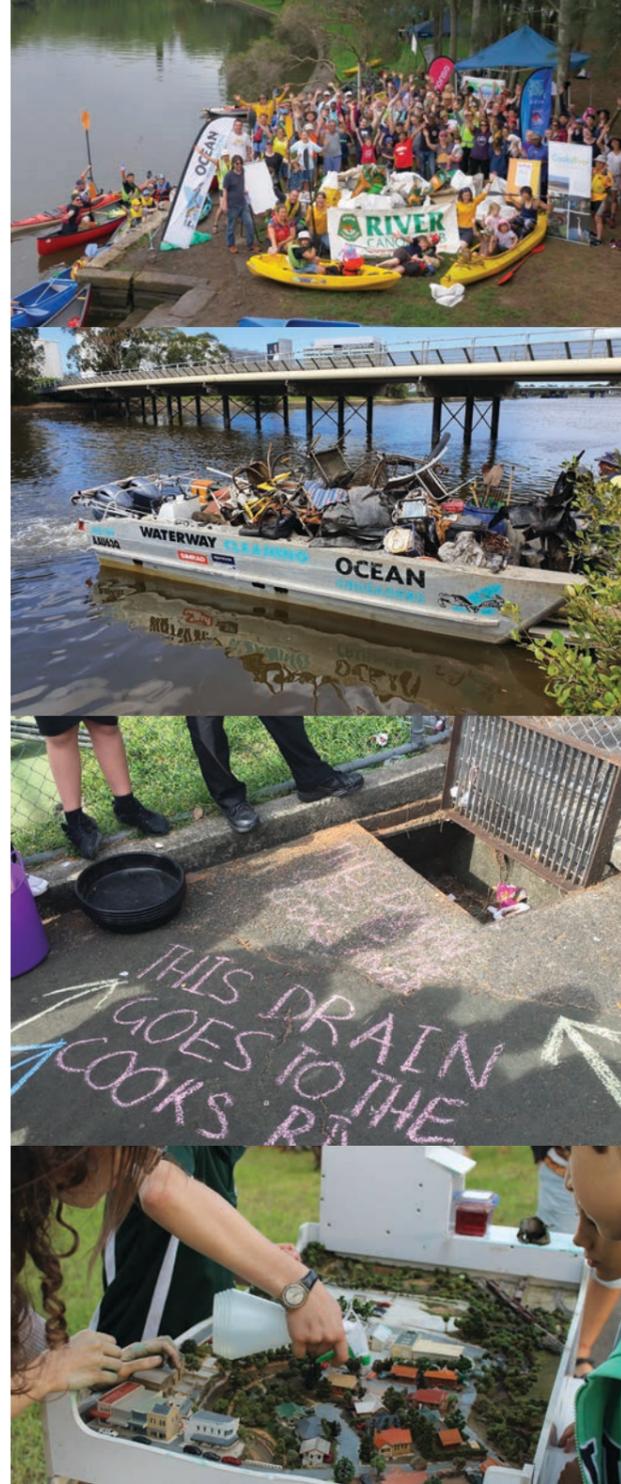
**\$161,000** NSW Government grant for an Aboriginal Landcare Coordinator

**150+** people listened to Aboriginal oral histories through **2** public exhibitions



**1** new sign at Yana Badu Wetlands

**7** new river activities added to **2nd** year of Wurridjal Festival



### Valuing Aboriginal ways of thinking

This year the Alliance received funding from the NSW Government to employ an Aboriginal Landcare Coordinator. This position will work to connect Aboriginal people and organisations to the river in mutually beneficial ways.

The Wurridjal Festival marked its second on the river in 2020 reminding us that for thousands of years the

river was healthy and a source of food. COVID-19 saw the festival move online half way through the month of March, but not before sold-out events including Aboriginal Astronomy Full Moon Walk by the River led by Wiradjuri astrophysicist Kirsten Banks and hosted by the Cooks River Changemakers.

### How can we all help the river?

Various types of pollution impact the Cooks River including plastic litter, soil, fallen leaves, and chemicals. In a catchment of 500,000+ people, everyone can do something to reduce pollution entering the waterway. The Alliance has secured a \$45,000 grant to develop stormwater action plans across 44 schools that positively impact the Cooks

River. Working in partnership with the Georges River Environmental Education Centre, the program will see students lead changes within their school that reduce the volume of rainwater and pollution leaving the school grounds site via the drain. The program is made possible through funding from the Federal Government Communities Environment Program.

Highlight Project

# Cooks River Changemakers Course

## The impact of Changemakers

1 community engagement program launched

9-week course



300+ people engaged in new activities

20 Cooks River Changemakers

## 5 new community river activities

Cooks River Community Picnics



Frontyard Blitz

Increasing green space in the catchment



Full Moon Walks by the River



#mycooksriver Scavenger Hunts



The Mullets Litter picking while paddling



## Tapping into the creativity of our river community

The Cooks River has a long and rich history of community-led activity. Continuing this spirit is key to achieving the 2030 community vision of every community accessing and enjoying the river.

Using their existing skills, knowledge and passions, a diverse group of Changemakers worked together to develop and pilot new ways to draw in a wider section of the community to enjoy, learn about and care for the river. Their activities have collectively drawn in some 300+ community members to the river to date. A Changemakers network formed following the course supports the continuation of projects and new emerging ideas.

The course is also part of a Queensland University of Technology study examining social capital within community urban waterway stewardship programs.

To learn more visit [www.cooksriver.org.au/changemakers](http://www.cooksriver.org.au/changemakers)

*"The course has changed my way of thinking and (made me) be more observant of surroundings."*

*"Getting to know and work with others very passionate and committed gives me the extra permission to really go for it."*

*"I often walk along the Cooks river (end to end) which I must have done with my eyes closed. Lots of things happening within the mini eco environments of each location we visited. The past history and political wrangling that has taken place and those few dedicated people that flew the flag to keep these spaces for the citizens gets me motivated."*

- Changemakers Participants

## Who are we?

The Cooks River Alliance is a partnership between councils in the Cooks River Catchment – Bayside Council, City of Canterbury Bankstown, Inner West Council and Strathfield Council.

Each member council of the Alliance has signed a Memorandum of Understanding and makes a financial contribution to support the day-to-day running of the Alliance.

The Alliance uses the combined resources, experience, knowledge and skills within the councils and the community to address the complex environmental problems of the Cooks River.

The Alliance operates at five levels: Management Committee, Executive Management, Catchment Congress and Theme Teams supported by the Alliance Secretariat. These groups work together to deliver on The Cooks People's Plan:

A strategic plan for united action on the Cooks River and its catchment 2018-2021.



### United action for a healthy Cooks River and catchment

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Thank you to our member council staff and Councillors who have supported and guided the work of the Alliance throughout the year.



### We also thank the many groups and organisations we've worked with this year.

AUSMAP  
Boomerang Alliance  
Botany Bay and Catchment Alliance  
Burwood Council  
Canterbury Earlwood Caring Community Centre  
City of Sydney  
Cooks River Croquet Club  
Cooks River Valley Association  
Cooperative Research Centre for Water Sensitive Cities  
Crab Walkers  
Georges River Environmental Education Centre  
GreenWay Birdos  
Landcare NSW  
Queensland University of Technology  
Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council  
Mudcrabs  
NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment  
NSW Ports  
Pacific National  
Port Authority of NSW  
River Canoe Club  
Strathfield Golf Course  
Sydney Airport  
Sydney Water  
The Flock  
University of Maryland