

Warragamba Dam Raising Project

Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Assessment

Fact Sheet



Raised dam arrangement shown is based on current concept design.

Background

The study area for the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Assessment (ACHA) spans the traditional country of the Tharawal (Dharawal), Darug and Gundungurra Aboriginal peoples. Aboriginal people have lived in the Blue Mountains and the study area for at least 26,000 years. Within the region of the study area, the extensive and continued occupation of the Sydney Basin has left a vast amount of accumulated archaeological material.

Around the Warragamba Dam wall, the notable land use history is the building of the dam itself which was completed in 1960. The immediate area around the dam wall, though not all of it, has been heavily impacted by the construction activities and the broad footprint required to construct the wall, spillways and ancillary infrastructure. In the mid twentieth century the valleys were cleared entirely of timber and flooded by the waters of Lake Burragorang behind the Warragamba Dam. Local Aboriginal people formed a larger part of the labour force and were especially involved in the felling of all trees below the high water mark (Smith, 2016).

Since the construction of the Warragamba Dam land-use of the study area and surrounds has been dedicated as Special Area and seen little further impact other than roads and linear infrastructure. Upstream areas around Lake Burragorang are currently temporarily inundated above the full supply level (FSL) when Warragamba Dam fills and spills. The proposed raising of the dam for flood mitigation would temporarily increase the extent and duration of the upstream inundation when the flood mitigation zone is used to temporarily store inflows above the existing FSL.

A detailed Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) has been prepared for the proposed Warragamba Dam Raising Project (the Project). The proposal is being assessed under both NSW and Australian government environmental planning legislation. A key area of assessment is the potential impact of the Project on Aboriginal cultural heritage.



Consultation with Aboriginal stakeholders

The consultation process undertaken to seek active involvement from relevant Aboriginal people followed the current NSW framework, namely, the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Consultation Requirements for Proponents (DECW, 2010) and Clause 80C of the *National Parks and Wildlife Regulation 2019*.

As a result, 22 individuals and organisations were recorded as Registered Aboriginal Parties (RAPs) for the Project.

To date, the RAPs have provided advice and input on:

- the nature of the proposed methodology
- Aboriginal objects or places of cultural value within the study area
- the significance of Aboriginal places and objects
- the cultural values of the landscape
- restrictions or protocols for sharing and reporting on culturally sensitive information
- the draft Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Assessment Report

Consultation with the RAPs is ongoing during the public exhibition period.

Aboriginal archaeology

The purpose of the Aboriginal cultural heritage survey was to satisfy the goals stated in the agreed methodology developed for the Cultural Heritage Assessment. Each of the field survey teams comprised two archaeologists and between one and three RAPs. An Aboriginal heritage consultant with links to the Gundungurra and specialised knowledge of Aboriginal heritage in the Blue Mountains also took part in the field surveys.

Cultural heritage field surveys were undertaken over 76 days covering a total area of 2,655 hectares (including 464 hectares of the impact area) within the study area and adjoining lands. The coverage is a representative sample of the landscape, and a predictive model was used to extrapolate the findings across the approximately 1,400-hectare upstream impact area.

The archaeological assessment found 334 cultural heritage sites within the study area and adjoining land. Using the predictive model, it was estimated that there would be a total of 174 archaeological sites within the upstream impact area.



An example of the lower lake level enabling survey below FSL

Of the 334 archaeological sites identified by the survey:

- 43 sites are within the Project upstream impact area
- 108 sites are above the impact area (including 63 sites above the study area)
- 183 sites within the area currently inundated by the dam (including 64 below the FSL)

Many of the sites were outside the area potentially impacted by the proposal but were recorded and assessed at the request of the RAPs to provide broader cultural context. Surveying below the FSL of Lake Burrangorang was possible due to the low water storage levels at the time. Other areas surveyed were above the height of the worst possible flood and not potentially impacted.

Aboriginal cultural values assessment

In addition to the archaeological assessment, a study was undertaken to assess the potential impacts of the Project on the six strands of cultural values that contribute to the cultural landscape which the Project is situated within. There were 32 cultural value places identified in the study area, 29 of which are already either fully or partially inundated from existing operations with the remaining three above the upstream impact area. Eleven of those already inundated would be subject to a further partial inundation from the Project.

The assessment report

The study area sits within a cultural landscape that is rare in eastern Australia for its preservation of detailed Dreaming stories and a combination of associated sites and places. This includes sites of archaeological and historical value, existing in a visually striking “natural” environment that imbues a strong sense of place.

No sites or places of Aboriginal cultural heritage value were identified around the previously impacted construction footprint of the Warragamba Dam and its immediate surrounds. As such, the impacts from the Project are associated with the upstream temporary inundation of the sites and places of the cultural landscape that are within the upstream impact area. Impacts from the proposal include:

- harm to the cultural landscape through the temporary inundation of a predicted 174 archaeological sites (including the 43 known archaeological sites) and further partial inundation of 11 cultural places already partially inundated by the existing dam operations
- cumulative harm to the intangible values of the cultural landscape through extension of previously unmitigated impact on cultural values from the construction of Warragamba Dam and flooding of the Burratorang Valley and its tributary valleys

A total of 17 combined recommendations have been made in relation to Aboriginal cultural heritage values within the study area. The recommendations are all indirect mitigation measures. If the Project proceeds the limitations of the proposed activities mean that there is no capacity for directly applied management measures for the avoidance or minimisation of harm.

The recommendations relate to consultation, management, access to Country, site recording, cultural values recording and education. These recommendations were shaped by feedback received from the RAPs during the consultation process.

The Project is understood by the RAPs as a continuance of the dispossession and loss of cultural heritage initiated by the original development of Warragamba Dam in the 1950s.



An example of erosional soil landscape from the survey

Ask a Question

Visit the project portal and virtual engagement room: www.waternsw.com.au/wdr

Free call: 1800 932 066

Email: wdr@waternsw.com.au



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