

YARNUPINGS

ABORIGINAL HERITAGE OFFICE NEWSLETTER ISSUE #3 DECEMBER 2025



Lane Cove
Council



northern
beaches
council





YARNUPINGS

ABORIGINAL HERITAGE OFFICE NEWSLETTER
ISSUE #3 December 2025

Welcome to the final issue of Yarnupings for 2025.

In this issue we continue to celebrate 25 years of the AHO with great photos from the AHO 25th Anniversary celebration.

We also look at the beautiful shedding of bark that occurs at this time of year.

Karen makes a special announcement as well as writing about joyous summer foods.

And we celebrate our Volunteers at the annual Christmas party.

Most Christmas editions we use the beautiful Warlukurlangu Artists decorations. Warlukurlangu Artists Aboriginal Corporation is a non-for profit organisation that is 100% Aboriginal –owned by its artists from the remote communities of Yuendumu and Nyirripi in Central Australia.

Please enjoy another bumper edition of Yarnupings for 2025.

The AHO Team— Brent, Phil, Karen, Kyle, Susan

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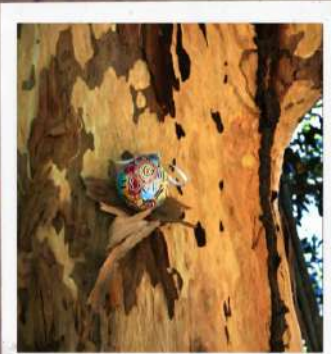


Couldn't



Choose

Yarnupings Cover



So



We've



Added



Them



All!

The Great Shedding

By Phil Hunt

Have you been taking note of the season's smooth bark shedding? Like snakes and lizards, the smooth bark trees love to shake off last year's skin. Is it to prepare for summer fires, or some insect resistant suit mending? There must be reasons, but our ability to converse the details with our tall friends has been limited.

Here at the AHO we've been celebrating this seasonal spectacular but can't quite think of a good way to describe it all. Sydney's Smooth Bark Decortication Seasonal Sightings sounds accurate but, well...

We suggested the Great Shedding, however, some said it sounded like we were being mean to dogs.

What's a good term? The Great Sydney Shedding? The Big Bark Shed? Festival of Flaking Bark?

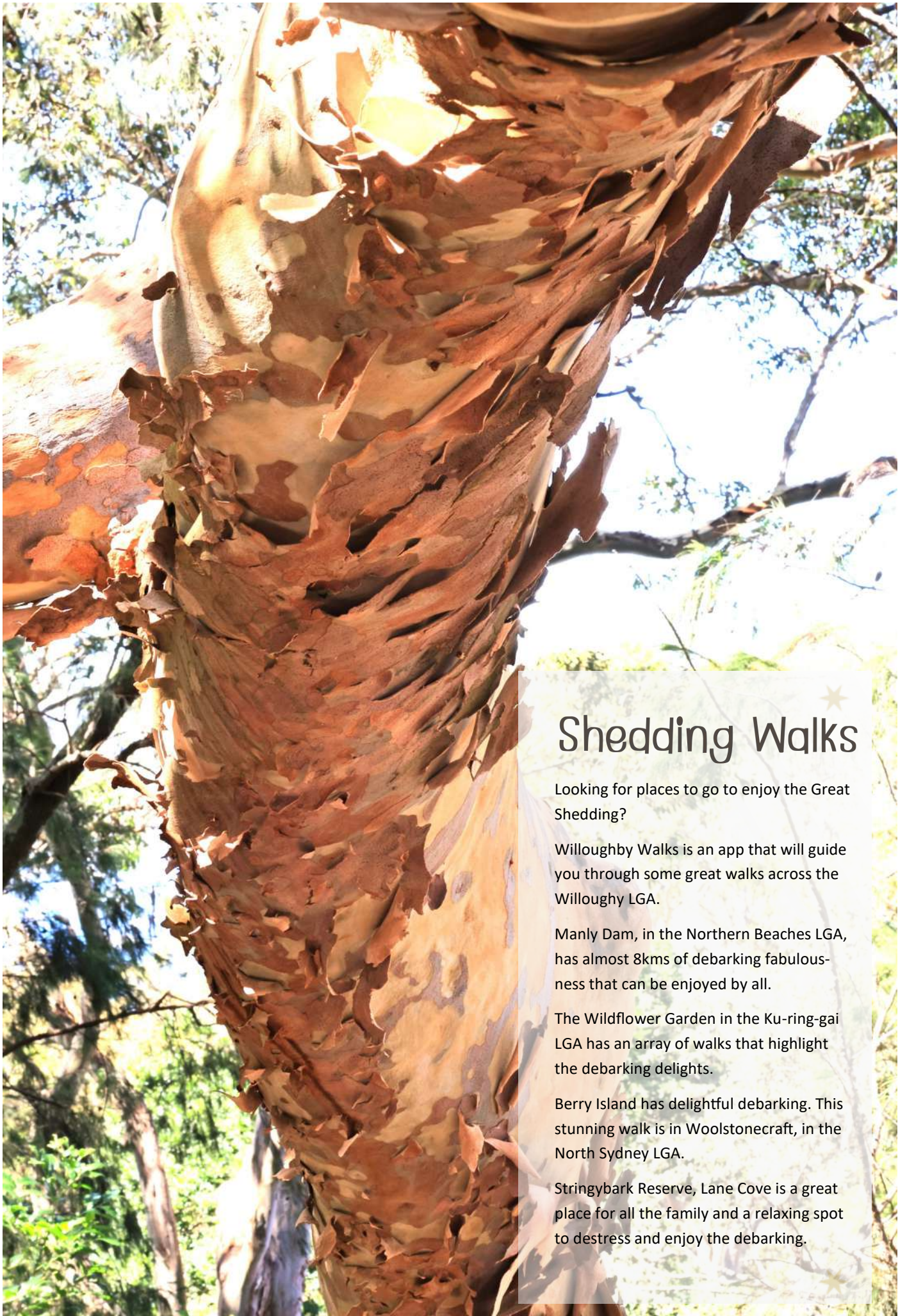
Perhaps we need to promote the benefits of trees first. Some people complain that leaves fall on their nice concrete driveways. Humans also bemoan a lack of exercise, reduced agility, and more uncomfortably hot glaring days, all of which could be assisted with more trees and doing a spot of sweeping and picking up things now and then.

You can check out the benefits of trees through your local Councils' informative websites. And what new tree to grow!

In the meantime, have a look at [Willoughby's fabulous campaign](#) to remind people of the benefits of our giant floral fellow residents.

Say hello, wave, give a nod, or, go on, you know you want to, give a tree a hug! Happy shedding!

<https://www.willoughby.nsw.gov.au/Campaigns/Love-Your-Trees>



Shedding Walks

Looking for places to go to enjoy the Great Shedding?

Willoughby Walks is an app that will guide you through some great walks across the Willoughby LGA.

Manly Dam, in the Northern Beaches LGA, has almost 8kms of debarking fabulousness that can be enjoyed by all.

The Wildflower Garden in the Ku-ring-gai LGA has an array of walks that highlight the debarking delights.

Berry Island has delightful debarking. This stunning walk is in Woolstonecraft, in the North Sydney LGA.

Stringybark Reserve, Lane Cove is a great place for all the family and a relaxing spot to destress and enjoy the debarking.

The AHO Turns 25!

One of the many life lessons that is worth remembering; is to take time to pause and celebrate success.

On the 25th of September 2025 the Aboriginal Heritage Office did just that. We stopped work for the day and celebrated 25 years of outstanding service and contribution in our community. The celebration was held at the North Sydney Coal Loader Centre for Sustainability. More than 80 people joined the AHO team to commemorate the occasion including; mayors and councilors from the five partner councils, council CEO's and staff, local MP's, AHO volunteers and other long-term friends and supporters of the Aboriginal Heritage Office.

Weather on the day was perfect and everyone in attendance could attest to the infectious vibe of positivity, enthusiasm and pride in the AHO reaching this quarter century milestone.

Official festivities started outside on one of the grass areas at the Coal Loader with a smoking ceremony and introduction from Bush to Bowl's Adam Byrne, followed by a wonderful Acknowledgement of Country by long-time AHO Education Officer, Karen Smith.

The official party and attendees then shifted (and squeezed) inside the Genia McCaffery Centre to hear from North Sydney Mayor, Zoe Baker providing a Mayor's Welcome and acknowledging the importance and the long running relationship between North Sydney and the AHO. For those that may be unaware, North Sydney Council was the first council to provide official support and collaboration with the AHO.

Following the mayor, the audience heard from AHO Aboriginal Heritage Officer, Kyle Nettleton. Kyle shared sev-





The AHO Turns 25!

eral key moments from his time in the role over the past few years. First, he described his and Phil's recent attendance at the World Archaeology Forum in Darwin where they represented the AHO in front of a global audience. Kyle followed up with an entertaining encounter, describing a "difficult" museum visitor, who over time and multiple visits to the AHO museum, changed from a negative opinion about Aboriginal culture in general into becoming an advocate for Aboriginal knowledge in his own community.

We then heard from two of the AHO Volunteers, Ed and Janine Coates. They regaled everyone with a few anecdotes from their time working with the AHO as volunteers over the past 18 years. They served as a great reminder to everyone, not only the importance of volunteering but also exemplify the close community that has grown through this kind of support at the AHO.

Jacob Sife, the Chairman of the AHO Steering Committee, from Ku-ring-gai Council, spoke briefly of the importance of the AHO and the service it provides to the community through education, on topics such as; environmental impact, sites awareness, ecological sustainability and traditional practice.

The final speech was given by the recently appointed AHO Manager, Brent Emmons. Brent spoke of the importance of the continued relationship between the Aboriginal Heritage Office and the five partner councils. He reminded the audience of the significant changes over the past 25 years in the many aspects regarding the acceptance and inclusion of Aboriginal culture throughout Australia. He concluded with sharing a few of the future

ambitions of the AHO in regard to implementing new technology and the willingness to bring in new partners and collaborators to increase support for the organisation.

Throughout all of the speeches there were more than 400 photos projected onto a screen in the background. These images showcased many of the activities and people involved with the AHO over the past 25 years. These photographs were carefully curated by Phil Hunt and Karen Smith to be shared on the day. The pictures shared brought back a lot of memories and provided an endless opportunity to reminisce.

Finally, after all was said and done, the party spread across the venue to enjoy the food, drinks, and cake provided, and to meet and greet one another in celebration of the occasion. For those that were unable to attend on the day, you were missed. For those that were able to attend, thank you for joining us.

We at the AHO look forward to the next 25 years with a renewed sense of energy and purpose.

Brent Emmons







I am writing to tell all our readers that I am retiring. After 15 years with the AHO as their Education Officer and meeting our Councils, Community and Schools, I will be retiring at the end of July 2026. The time has flown past and I will miss everyone.

Do not worry, the Councils and the AHO will make sure they find a replacement for me. Of course, my replacement will be different. But will bring their own skills and knowledge to the AHO and its Councils, Schools and Communities.

I am so pleased I was here for the 25-year Anniversary of the AHO. This is an extra-ordinary achievement by the AHO and our Councils.

There have been so many highlights in my time at the

Karen Smith—

Aboriginal Education Officer

office. Too many to mention.

I was carefully trained with no holding back, by David Watts. After 3 years David and I felt I had reached a good understanding and position level that I was capable in the Bush and with Community and Schools and in the Office.

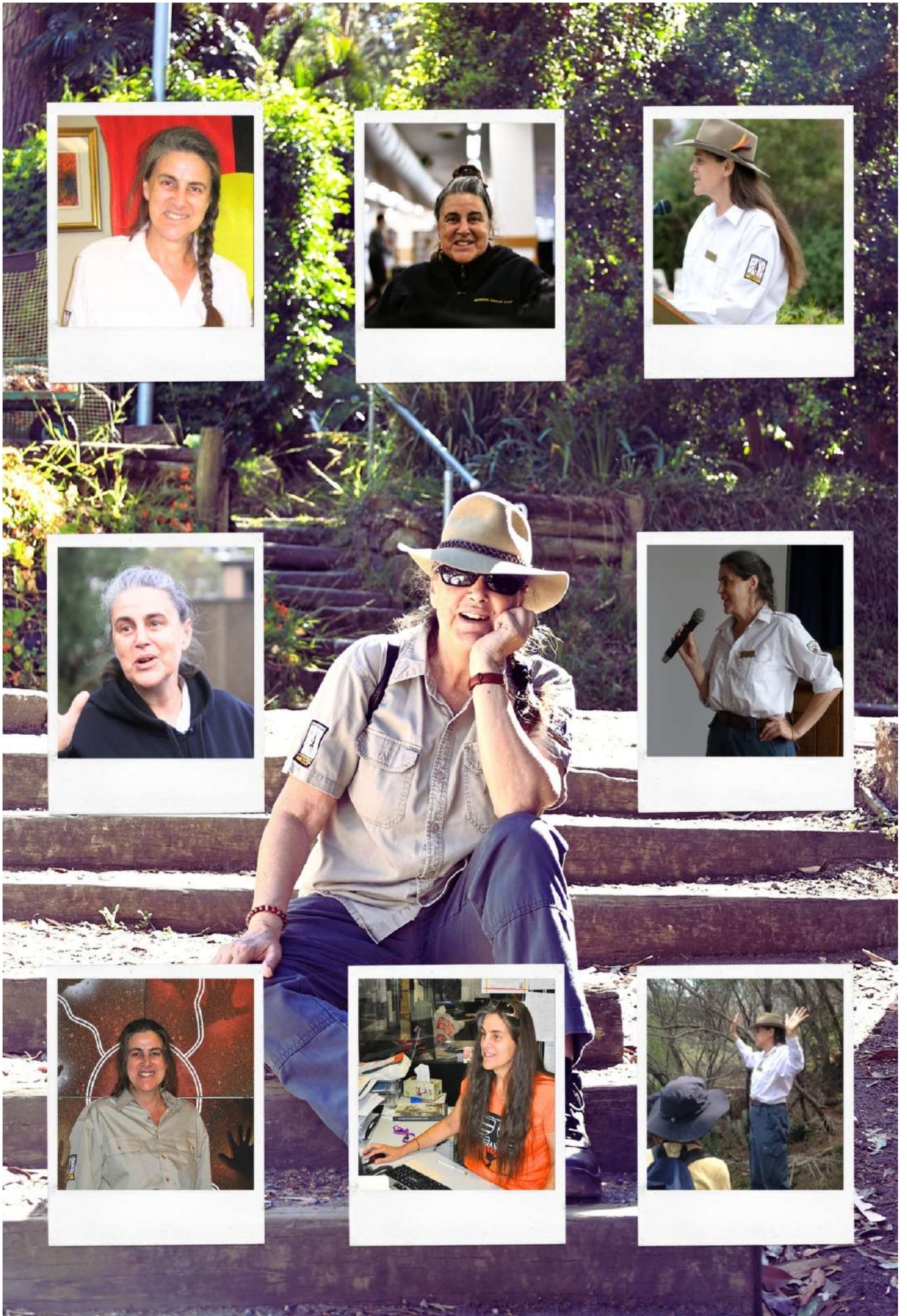
After a career as a singer and events, workshop producer, workshop and choir teacher I was pleased that the AHO was willing to take me on.

I had retrained myself at Tranby Aboriginal College receiving diplomas in Office Management and Aboriginal Studies. Both these diplomas, I believed helped me secure my role at the AHO. For this, I thank Tranby Aboriginal College.

I will be travelling around the Country after my retirement as I have no home, and I will be enjoying being close to Country and all the flora and fauna I love.

If you live around the different parts of Australia, let me know, if you like, and I will pay you a visit. Perhaps you would not mind me and my mobile home on your land for a short while.

Stay tuned for
2026 Yarn Up
With Karen!





The Whale Season

Words by Susan Whitby

Whale Image by Jen Williams Ocean Photos

The 2025 humpback whale migration season was one of the best in years. Over 50,000 humpbacks made their way up and down the East coast of Australia, delighting everyone who saw them. The slow, steady migration north in May as the mummies head towards warmed waters to give birth and then the oh-so delightful migration south in September/ October with mummies and their playful calves. It is pure joy to watch the calves learn how to slap the water or see them play and torpedo out of the water. It's a really

special time and so often someone at a beach or a headland along the coast will yell out, 'whale' and everyone will stop and crane their necks hoping to see a splash or a spray.

Whales have always been special in this part of the world. We see the legacy of that connection in the engravings that we see around the harbour and along the coast.

The sandstone country that we are lucky enough to work in, is a perfect canvas for engraving. A series of holes would have been punched into the rock, then these holes would have been joined together by rubbing a sharp object between the punch marks.

There are 14 known whale engraving sites within the AHO partner council LGAs. Some have been destroyed, some are in good condition. Some still look towards the water, while others are now deeply embedded in suburbia. The biggest engraving is over 6m long. ★

It is difficult to date the rock engravings, but they are likely to be up to a few thousand years old. That's pretty amazing and definitely worth protecting.



Volunteer Christmas Party 2025





THREADS

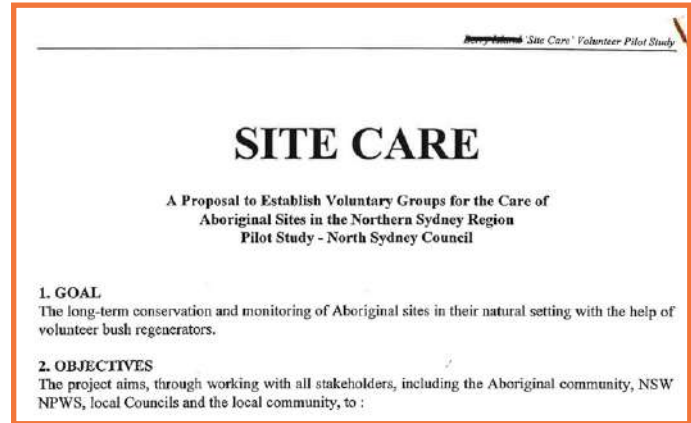
By Phil Hunt

This is the last 25th anniversary dip into nostalgia. For this edition it might be interesting to see if we can tease out what factors help to make a project successful. Having revealed some surprising things in our last abseil into the filing cabinet ([Yarnupings March 2025](#)), the volunteer site monitor program might be a good case study to trace the different threads that run through a successful AHO activity.

Success can have different meanings. Income generation, bums on seats, post clicks, interested faces, fabulous feedback. Most AHO activities are hard to track statistically but the general feeling is they are well appreciated. The volunteer site monitoring program is currently humming along and has been expanding. That hasn't always been the case.

Where, when and how did it start? Back into the filing cabinet and flaky memory. Its genesis was before the AHO, in the collaborative work being done between state government (National Parks and Wildlife Service), the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council and North Sydney Council. That sounds like a quite sensible and to be expected arrangement, but unfortunately the different and competing demands on each means it is not that easy!

The idea arose because former MLALC Sites Officer and AHO founder David Watts and I (back then with NPWS) were spending more time with NSC bush regen staff and taking out groups for walks and talks. We figured that if there were people prepared to weed and nurture the bush, why wouldn't some volunteer to go out

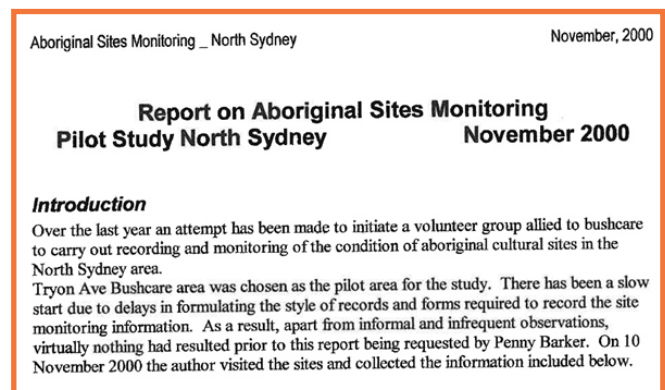


Draft of the proposal

and visit an Aboriginal site?

I put together a long (and quite boring) pilot study proposal. We set up a steering committee (MLALC, NSC, NPWS and an independent bush regen trainer). Council found some volunteers from among their bush care volunteers. We trained them and ran the pilot. We had meetings, we put in some effort. Yet despite the good intentions, it wasn't taking root.

There were some obvious issues that worked against us. Changes in staff and positions for one. The second was that everyone was really busy. The third, the selected volunteers were more interested in weeding and less keen on revisiting places that didn't seem to



THREADS

By Phil Hunt

change much. Even after David started with Council in the new Aboriginal Heritage position that would grow into the AHO, it failed to thrive.

You couldn't doubt the sincere motivations and credentials of those involved, but it wasn't working out. If we're looking for threads of success, they aren't obvious here!

Let's go back a bit further. I first met Dave in 1996 at a shell midden that had been damaged by council workers. It was in Pittwater and it made the front page of the Manly Daily. A big embarrassment for Council and a tragedy all round. If only the Council had better Aboriginal heritage assessment processes in place! Dave was already spruiking the importance of Aboriginal sites awareness training.

The next time we met, not long after, was related to a proposal by North Sydney to do a track realignment to detour pedestrians from two rock shelters. It was a great idea however there was a risk that it might impact an adjacent shell midden. MLALC wanted to do some archaeological test excavation to make sure it was OK. Dave had found a fairly recently graduated archaeologist to apply for the excavation permit. It wasn't a good application, and I said it needed more. He was persuasive. It was the Aboriginal Land Council that had requested it and really just to be on the safe side. He also made the point to my manager that why should the same 'vigorous' NPWS approach be taken for council reserve work as for a profit-making development? The permit was issued amazingly fast. It was a Friday afternoon and he rang to thank me. He invited me for a drink on my way home. It was a big night and we shared our aspirations and frustrations at the cur-



rent system where so much attention was given to development and so little to conservation and education.

Here you can see some AHO threads. Trying to do the best for Aboriginal heritage, working out ways to be careful yet streamlined, giving relatively inexperienced people an opportunity to get involved in a safe way, and using human connections to build trust. Dave was highly motivated in using education and training as tools. He reasoned the best way to protect sites is to educate those who are damaging them, intentionally or otherwise. A successful strategy?

In 2003 after 2 years overseas Dave offered me some work, I hesitated. When I finally agreed and looked at the projects I was amazed. Site monitoring, site protection, education, training. One project was developing a new schools program. Community engagement. All the things archaeologists, governments, Indigenous officers had been recommending for decades. And still are! At the World Archaeological Congress (Yarnupings, Aug 2025) we could see that in Ecuador, Chile, India, Africa, Europe, and all through Australia, that need is still there. Those in the cultural

THREADS

By Phil Hunt

heritage space are still making recommendations for similar things to better protect heritage. The AHO is still doing them. There's no doubting that most of the AHO's projects were successful from the start.

So how is it that we have so many volunteers today? How did this spindly project become such a successful program? To bake a cake you need more than just good intentions and good ingredients. Even the best oven won't be enough if you don't set the temperature correctly. What are the right supportive conditions for an AHO program? For the site monitor experiment we started to see that in around 2006-2007 when we received funding to reboot 'site care'. Viki Gordon was a new archaeological graduate in a change of career. Dave gave her a chance, like he has with many people. She built a new volunteer base. The program grew, won awards. Then the funding ran out. Those of us who remained couldn't keep up the support to the volunteers.

In 2013 we had more funding. This time it was Gareth Birch. Dave sacked him from his volunteer role and employed him as a bit of everything (the first volunteer he sacked was Aileen Forbes when he found out she was a web designer, and she too was soon on the payroll). Gareth built up the administrative side, tackled all the new WHS documentation, and enthused the die-hard hangers on and the many new volunteers. Now we had the museum and could expand the Yarn Up program as well. Dave started this very newsletter, Yarnupings,



Each volunteer has one site to monitor, while some more enthusiastic and more capable volunteers have been given an extra site where there is one close by and can easily be accommodated.

Stage 5: Project Completion and Acquittance

The project has been reviewed and found to be an unqualified success. The level of interest and participation has been exceptional, to the point where potential volunteers had to be turned away. Volunteers have been sending in photographs, monitoring forms and even some site sketches and plans. The interest raised has raised awareness with other Council staff and Councillors, as well as local schools.

3.0 Conclusions

The interest that has been shown far exceeded expectations. The AHO has for some time known that there is a great interest in the community in Aboriginal heritage but the level of interest to actually participate in a voluntary

Site Care Aboriginal Heritage Protection Report

4

Aboriginal Heritage Office, Northern Region

program was underestimated. As a result the AHO had to draw a limit on numbers (roughly 10 per Council, although this has been exceeded in some areas). Every week more people are asking about the project. It is hoped that the program can be expanded next year.



First Newsletter, 2013



Gareth and Geoff moving a ...??!!

THREADS

By Phil Hunt

as a vehicle to keep in touch. More awards, more positive feedback. And then the funding ran out.

For a while it was just Dave, Karen and myself, and the occasional intern to help keep up our morale. Around 2017 the partner Councils increased contributions by 40% when it was clear other grants had dried up. This increase allowed Dave to finally put on another permanent officer, primarily to focus on the volunteers. Susan Whitby. No longer subject to temporary funding, and with Susan's considerable talents and energy the program continues from strength to strength (see any of our recent [Yarnupings](#)).

The volunteer program showcases so many of the AHO key strengths. Local residents being encouraged to connect with their local area and its Aboriginal story. Different organisations and individuals collaborating for shared positive goals. It is based on the irreplaceable archaeology but the philosophy is more like caring for country than academic information gathering. We want people to feel connected to their area and to Aboriginal heritage, and to put some positive energy into places that are too often neglected parts of the landscape.

At the 25th anniversary celebration (page 6) it was clear to see many threads and connections that have helped make not just the AHO but the wider partnership and local region a better, more aware place. Dave Watts' magic glitter was obviously also still being scattered. Even the brush turkeys reminded us that we're all in this together. It is the work of many, the right resources and the correct assembly of supportive conditions. Australia is littered with the ruins of well-intentioned but failed projects. How wonderful to see the opposite in action.

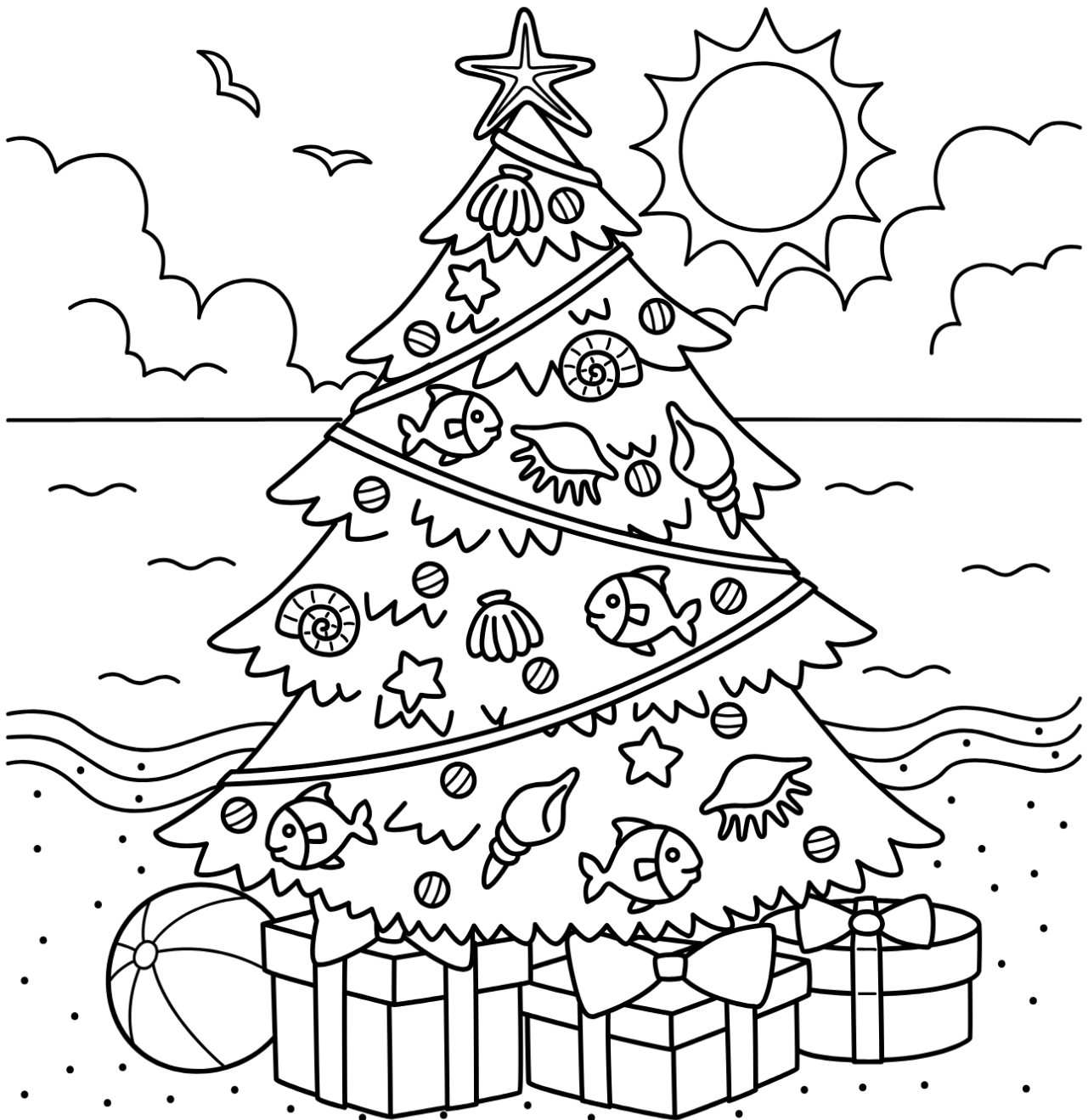
This year it has been nice to sip on some nostalgia. But perhaps it's like the mirror in Harry Potter that shows you what you want to see but not what will move you forward? The past is a place that no passport can give you a returned experience. That's not to say there's no benefit from revisiting through memory, story and the dusty evidence of history. If you are weaving a tapestry the threads of the past are what lead to the patterns of the present. The future? Well, those stories are being woven now. It's not luck that makes a good cake, nor chance that brings a tapestry pattern to delight. Nature teaches that we're all interwoven and interdependent. That's as good a reason as any to keep weaving the magic!



"...people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."
- Maya Angelou



Holiday Fun
for the Jarjums





Education —By Karen Smith

Country—A joyous time of Summer Food

The joy of this season where the East Australian Current (EAC) comes down bringing our seafood. The EAC runs north to south from the top end of the Great Barrier Reef to the southern reaches of Tasmania.

100 kilometres wide and running over 500 metres into the dark depths of the ocean, the EAC covers the spans the length of the east coast of Australia measuring around 4,000 kilometres. It is like a massive underwater conveyer belt transporting 30 million cubic metres of water per second with speeds that reach up to seven kilometres per hour.

Every summer, thousands of fish are swept by the EAC from the Great Barrier Reef to Sydney Harbour and further south. Coming on this journey are the many forms of sea life that we know and love. Large eddies of whirlpools bring nutrients to the surface.

Tropical species

Tuna: Juvenile tuna are carried by the current from their spawning grounds, and as they grow, they may ride the current further south.

Turtles: Some species are carried along by the current, sometimes further south than they would naturally go.

Larvae and other tropical species: The EAC acts as a conveyer belt for many tropical species, including the larvae of various fish and other marine organisms, some of which can end up stranded in colder waters.

Temperate species affected by the current

Australian Salmon: The EAC's influence on warmer waters has changed the diet of Australian salmon, which now eat more warm-water baitfish and can be found further south than in previous decades.

Lobster: The current plays a role in the life cycle of rock lobster by transporting larvae, and the strength of the current affects catches.

Crabs and Prawns: The EAC can affect the distribution of other marine life, such as crabs and prawns, by influencing water temperature and providing a source of food and nutrients.

Coral: The EAC helps transport coral and other species to new areas along the coast.



Image by Susan Whitby

Education—By Karen Smith

Country—A joyous time of Summer Food

As it sweeps past Sydney, it forms a number of ever-changing eddies, or giant whirlpools, that influence the marine life that finds its way into the Harbour. Some years, recruitment is dominated by tropical species such as the striated frogfish, while other years, temperate species such as silver drummer and crimson-banded wrasses call the harbour home.

The heathland begins early in the warm season. This is also a time of plenty. Fruits, Flowers, Seeds Nuts, Grains, Nectar. Material for medicine and weaving or making fishing lines. Native bees making honey. The men would go to new canoe trees early in the season to gather Bark for the new canoes for warm weather fishing. We could watch the clouds in the sky and the flowering plants or movement of fauna and reptiles and insects to determine the weather, the best fishing time, the right time to harvest or even the coming of the EAC.

Remember the EAC and its importance to the mari-en eco-system. So many species benefit from this phenomenon, even the sharks that are also travelling with and feeding from this current.

Enjoy your Christmas and your time of plenty with joyous Summer food!

References:

Sheree Marris - *An Underwater Superhighway—The EAC* - www.ogsociety.org



Images by Susan Whitby



Macadamias

By Susan Whitby

Raw, roasted, salted, dipped in chocolate, added to a salad or on their own, macadamias are perfect for the festive season.

These delicious nuts are native to northern New South Wales and central and south eastern Queensland.

A member of the flowering Proteaceae family
The saltbush from the AHO bush tucker garden is a delicious pairing with macadamias. I like to grab a bunch of salt bush, leave them to dry, grind them up, then add them to the macadamias.

Per 100g they have 9 grams of protein. I'm not sure what the nutritional value is once they are coated in chocolate, but I'll be indulging in the odd one over the holidays!



Whatever your preference is, macadamias are definitely worth adding to your Christmas or party season menu!

Enjoy!