

3. A declared Aboriginal Place

3.1 A continuing connection to Country

For Traditional Owners, The Gully represents a significant and abundant place that has nurtured and nourished countless strong and healthy generations since the creation time.

The Gully is part of Country and takes in everything within the physical, cultural and spiritual landscape, living as a connected whole, present across time and space. Traditional Owners through respectful and complex relationships, have custodial responsibilities to care for their Country, ensuring it continues in proper order and provides physical sustenance and spiritual nourishment. The continued connection to Country by Traditional Owners is a crucial part of maintaining these deep and significant relationships, maintaining the health of both Country and communities. (Adapted from Council's Connecting to Country Program 2015) (1)



NAIDOC in The Gully 2019

Some aspects of Country are invisible and intangible, while others physically demonstrate the culture that it has nurtured for millennia. The tangible, physical aspects of Country visible today are but a small remnant of the material culture of the Traditional Owners, made of materials that have withstood the ravages of time, such as stone and trees. Other material, such as shell, clay, leather, wood, twine and rope, paint, bone, fur and feathers may not now be so apparent.

Tangible aspects of Country in The Gully, still observable include:

- Living places, such as traditional open camps as well as places used by The Gully community following colonisation, often with the presence of new materials culturally utilised, such as metals, glass and ceramics, which too survived massive disruption to Country.
- Places of economy, livelihood and community activity, such as quarries, stone tool and ochre working, grinding grooves in rock platforms and wells.

Studies by Val Attenbrow 1993 – 'Investigation into Pre-European and post-contact Aboriginal Sites' and by Alan Lance 2005 – 'A Heritage Study of The Gully Aboriginal Place Katoomba NSW' contribute to the knowledge of recorded Aboriginal Cultural Heritage in The Gully. These records, enhanced by the intricate cultural knowledge held by Traditional Owners of the tangible and in-tangible aspects within The Gully, assist in guiding respectful management practices.

3.2 Impacts of colonisation

The European crossing of the Blue Mountains in 1813, the subsequent colonial settlement in the Blue Mountains and the expanding colonisation of the plains to the west greatly impacted on all Traditional Owners throughout this region. The colonial encroachment in the Burratorang, then Jamison and Megalong Valleys rapidly led to the dispossession of Gundungurra Traditional Owners from their Country, eventually forcing them to live on Government controlled reserves or colonial properties. This dispossession brought about massive devastation to the Gundungurra population, through introduced disease, open hostilities, growing numbers of European settlers, along with government sanctioned removal practices, contributing to severely diminishing the numbers of surviving Gundungurra people.

Parallel to this, the colonising of Gundungurra Country severely disrupted the seasonal and ceremonial movement of the Traditional Owners throughout their homelands while adversely impacting the availability of resources and traditional economies that sustained their community. This impacted on the surviving Gundungurra community in profound ways, separating them from their important places in Country, long held cultural relationships, economic independence, spiritual nourishment, and critically their extended families and kinship bonds.

As increasing areas of Country came under colonial control, Gundungurra families sought refuge in well-known camping places, either still outside of this control, or on Country controlled by sympathetic or apathetic land holders. With resources and access to Country rapidly diminishing, the remaining Gundungurra Traditional Owners were also compelled to replace the loss of their traditional economies, through government controlled measures, but also by working for colonial business ventures. Ironically, these ventures often exploited areas in Country that were significant to the Traditional Owners. As some of these ventures exhausted the resources in Country and came to a close, the Gundungurra communities surviving from this economy, again sought refuge in Country where they could remain independent from government control. By the end of the 19th century and start of the 20th, many Gundungurra families from the Burratorang, Megalong, Kanimbla and Hartley Valleys had found refuge in a safe and well-resourced part of Country known to most as The Gully.

Similarly the surviving Darug Traditional Owners from Country on the plains further east, had experienced generations of massive upheaval and devastating impacts from the continuing European



The Gully, 7 February 1933

colonisation which commenced from the late 18th century. For the Darug families that had endured the brutal colonial encounter, their ability to continue the traditional life practiced by their ancestors, was seriously and rapidly diminishing. For a time, many surviving Darug families gathered and worked on pastoral properties and in some rare instances on land that they had formally been granted or unofficially reclaimed to support themselves and their extended families.

However in the later part of the 19th century the colonial government through institutions like the Aboriginal Protection Board increased the intensity in managing all aspects of Aboriginal people's lives in NSW. Many of the surviving Darug families, even with some partially independent, were not immune to the reaches of the Aboriginal Protection Board and government control, with again great disruption adversely impacting on these families. Many families sought refuge from this control, particularly the growing forced removal of children. Through their age old intermarriage and kinship bonds with Gundungurra families, many of whom had escaped to The Gully, members of the Darug community also settled in The Gully, being a safe place during that turbulent period to avoid this increasing and damaging colonial control.

'The Gully provided a refuge for Aboriginal Traditional Owners from continuing colonial authority and control'

3.3 Life in The Gully

Within the first decade of the 20th century The Gully Aboriginal settlement, consisting of mainly Gundungurra and Darug families, had become a close-knit community. Over time, this community was joined by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families and individuals seeking shelter and refuge during difficult times. Over the coming decades this community continued to band together, surviving, but also thriving despite ongoing challenges, significant loss and adversity.

Throughout subsequent generations these Gully families continued to grow into a supportive community of extended interconnected families and friends often strengthened through the bonds of intermarriage, continuing the age old kinship patterns and associated responsibilities. These families and friends as neighbours worked together to meet their collective needs, improvising to make do with what they had but also communally sharing burdens and opportunities. The Gully people also supported each other in enduring the challenging living conditions, much harsher than most in the Katoomba Township as well as in facing social prejudices and systemic racism, overtly and subtly conveyed by the wider community.

For the most part The Gully people made do with what resources they had, their modest and much-loved homes made from flattened kerosene tins and other materials, lined with newspaper, pipeclay and occasionally mixed with other products were kept meticulously clean. The Gully community had no access to electricity or gas, so resources were collected from within and around the area for cooking and heating, particularly in the difficult winters and colder times.

The community did not have access to the town water supply, and they relied on the water from the spring fed creeks that flow through The Gully for drinking and washing, collecting this water in a way similar to that of their ancestors. In fact the natural springs and reliable 'sweet cool' water in The Gully is critical to what made the place such a sanctuary for Traditional Owners and caring for this water was intensely impressed on the children of The Gully, with many Gully Elders to this day fondly remembering and continuing to uphold this significant cultural value.

Like their ancestors in Country, the community living in The Gully continued to utilise the food and material resources from that area and surrounds to sustain their subsistence, where possible continuing traditional economies that had been obtained over millennia. The Gully people utilised natural resources



The Gully Mission Church

from the area for material cultural use, in similar ways to their forebears, though also reflecting adaptive approaches such as maintaining their homes with tea tree brooms. The inclusion of new resources in Country, albeit often introducing invasive species, notably rabbits and blackberries, were also utilised to support the provisions of the community. Adding to this The Gully community were well reputed as hard working and reliable in employment, engaging in a range of different work and services, as well as other income supplementing activities such as collecting native flowers and ferns for shop displays, a task often undertaken by The Gully women.

Surrounding The Gully on the slopes of the valley and streets above, homes of non-Aboriginal families as well as transient people were constructed. This wider community provided resources that assisted to The Gully community, such as additional fuel for heating and cooking used in the homes of Gully people. The wider Gully community, later consisting of families both within and outside of The Gully, also contributed to supporting The Gully community, through a dairy, grazing paddocks and market garden. While these things helped Gully families, it also further colonised this part of Country. At times other family and friends of Aboriginal Gully residents joined The Gully community, while other visitors came to The Gully periodically included travellers, itinerant workers, Chinese market gardeners and people needing shelter. The Gully provided a refuge and a vibrant place where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people lived together, supporting each other through challenging times.

However as much as The Gully appeared as a refuge from the ravages of policies and practices affecting Aboriginal people in other parts of the state, sadly Gully Aboriginal families were still not entirely outside the reaches of government authorities. Over a number of generations of Gully Aboriginal families government authorities frequently intervened in their family and cultural lives, and this intensified in the later years of The Gully community. Government practices of the forced removal of Aboriginal children from Gully families had a devastating impact on the lives of Gully people also generating a sadness and continuing fear of further child removals.

This incursion of authorities into the lives of The Gully community also impacted the ongoing transmission of traditional languages and cultural practice from one generation to the next, largely

impacting Gundungurra and Darug languages which were still spoken by the generation of Elders and adults in The Gully born before the 20th century. Authorities instructed Aboriginal residents in The Gully to keep their doors open so that agents like the police could check to ensure that they weren't speaking in their traditional languages, particularly to their children. This oppressive practice in combination with the removal of children contributed to hastily bringing traditional languages, surviving in rare sanctuaries like The Gully, to the point of extinction in their spoken form.

Despite all the adverse measures that impacted the social and cultural existence of The Gully people, this community persisted and continued to bond together to overcome these challenges. In fact, many former residents and descendants, though holding sad memories of events in The Gully, also hold fond memories of life in The Gully, remembering it as a great place to live and grow up. Former residents, descendants and friends of The Gully people commonly recall that life was good, but living wasn't easy for this community that, despite the hard times, retained a strong sense of togetherness.

Sadly this was forever and irreparably changed with the development of the race track in the late 1950s.

'For current generations of The Gully community, The Gully continues to hold a deep connection and reverence as the home of family and friends'

3.4 A second dispossession

In the early days of the colonial township of Katoomba the area known as The Gully had, like the greater Sydney area, been divided up in various sized land tenure parcels, purchased by people primarily of European Australian descent, who under the colonial system owned this land. This 'ownership', in some instances facilitated the exploitation of natural resources such as shale oil and coal extracted from Country below the southern escarpment in Katoomba, with supporting infrastructure like the 'skip-line' erected in The Gully.

The remnants of this infrastructure still leave their mark on The Gully Aboriginal Place to this day. Despite the mining related structures and tenure of the land in The Gully, it seems for the most part the presence of The Gully Aboriginal community throughout this period was accepted without major interference.

During the mid-1940s ownership again changed and with it developments which too made a lasting physical impact on The Gully and The Gully community, bringing visiting tourists to the area, while simultaneously creating an identity to The Gully which unfortunately persists to this day.

These changes arose from the belief that Katoomba needed new attractions to bring in business, therefore this part of Country was again colonised with the creation of the artificial lake damming part of the Kedumba Creek, the installation in the lake of a Catalina PBY-5 aircraft, and a range of other carnival or amusement park style attractions.

Over the brief number of years that these attractions operated and despite the large increase of visitors to this part of The Gully, it appears that overall impact on The Gully community though disruptive, was not overtly damaging. However by the start of the 1950s the 'tourist park' attraction declined, becoming unpopular and run-down and although the lake, with the plane removed, served at that time as Katoomba's swimming pool, by 1952 this land was sold to the Council, which held a view of turning the area into a public park and treated water swimming pool.

By 1957 The Gully community that had called The Gully home for generations, was devastated when a motor vehicle race track was built through The Gully. This catastrophic and enormously sad event in the lives of The Gully community was brought about by local businesses supported by the Council, deciding without regard for The Gully people to create the Catalina Road Racing Circuit. The Gully



Catalina Road Racing Circuit in the 1960s.

residents were forced to leave their much loved homes in a part of Country which had met many of their needs, but also held such a special place in their family, social and spiritual lives. By the late 1950s and early 60s the last of The Gully residents left The Gully when their homes were destroyed. Many of The Gully community compelled to relocate found accommodation in Katoomba or surrounding areas, though others left the area and some never returned.

This act by the then Council and local businesses permanently changed the lives of The Gully people, not only by physically colonising the Country in The Gully for a relatively short lived, ill-conceived race track, but also by fracturing the close-knit bond of The Gully community which has held equally far reaching implications.

A number of other changes occurred in The Gully following the race track such as the development of the swimming pool in the early 1970s then decades later the additions of the indoor sports and aquatic area. However the lasting impact of the racing circuit irreversibly destroyed the refuge of The Gully and with this the social fabric of The Gully community, with former residents and their descents feeling the pain, sadness and loss incited by this second dispossession throughout the remainder of their lives.

'The sorrow, pain and hurt felt by The Gully Community brought about by the racetrack remains to this day, symbolising the impacts on family, culture and Country.'

3.5 Recognition – an Aboriginal Place

Following the gradual disuse of the race track, from its peak in the 1960s to its virtual abandonment by the 1980s, the natural vegetation of The Gully eventually began to return, though scattered within the remains from the racing period and with unmanaged invasive species. The original swimming pool and a few isolated remnants of the fun park also persisted, though the pool became more of a refuge for ducks, with these remnants and the race track serving as reminders to The Gully community of what had been lost.

As the bush returned, a growing interest from surrounding residents, particularly in the 1980s and 90s, often with some or limited knowledge of the history of The Gully community, sought to help manage the returning plant communities. These emerging Bushcare groups took on a sense of responsibility to care for The Gully and through this they too developed a respect through their work with Country in The Gully. With the support of Bushcare management staff of the Council these groups undertook projects which commenced restoration and management of bushland in The Gully. During this time a number of the groups also formed connections with former Gully residents and their descendants, learning first-hand about the story of The Gully families, and coming to understand the pain and hurt still experienced by the events of the 1950s and 60s and the unresolved business of the devastation of The Gully community.

As the growth in interest in restoring The Gully gained momentum, so too did the broader awareness in the story of The Gully community, their deep relationship with this part of Country and the events that led to the destruction and second dispossession of the people decades earlier. Coinciding with this in the late 1980s and early 1990s increasing attention to the history and colonial impacts on Aboriginal communities began to emerge nationally, resulting from community driven and political events intensified between the 1960s to mid-80s.

It seems that in this period, interest by researchers in obtaining the stories of survival of Aboriginal former residents of The Gully in Katoomba, alongside the stories of the related communities in La Perouse, 'Blacktown' and Sackville deepened. This time also corresponded with a rising acknowledgement often instigated by Gundungurra and Darug communities of the story of their survival and the remaining connection that they held to their Country, including important places like The Gully.

In 2001 Gundungurra Elder Aunty Dawn Colless nominated 'The Gully' also known as the Upper Katoomba Falls Creek Valley, for consideration as an Aboriginal Place as defined in the *NSW National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974*. In supporting the nomination, a detailed documentation of the survival of The Gully community, underpinned by the ongoing relationship held by the Traditional Owners with The Gully was developed.

A year later, in May 2002, after significant work and collaboration with the Gundungurra and Darug Gully community, the broader Aboriginal community, National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Council, The Gully was declared an Aboriginal Place.

This recognition by the NSW Government through the Hon. Bob Debus, then Local Member for the Blue Mountains and Minister for the Environment, declaring that The Gully was 'a place of special significance to Aboriginal culture formally acknowledging the history and story of The Gully community.' Also at this time on behalf of the Blue Mountains community, the then Blue Mountains Mayor, Councillor Jim Angel, gave a formal apology to former residents of The Gully and their descendants, for the destruction of The Gully community which commenced from 1957 supported by the Council.

The Gully, its physical, cultural and family history, and spiritual values were protected by NSW legislation, and of equal importance was the formal acknowledgement of the truth of what happened to The Gully community.



'The Gully Aboriginal Place recognises and protects the ongoing connections, historical and cultural values held by The Gully community to this important part of Country.'

Following the declaration of The Gully Aboriginal Place the Council in liaison with the Aboriginal community turned their attention to the establishment of a governance structure to help guide the future management of The Gully, jointly comprised of the Aboriginal community and relevant Council staff. It was also considered that Aboriginal community members with social and cultural ties to The Gully would be best placed in leading the future of how respectful management of The Gully should occur.

After consultation with former Gully residents and the descendants of Gully residents in August 2008 the Council resolved to adopt The Gully Cooperative Management Agreement. This agreement established a formal relationship between the Council and an autonomous body, GTOI, made up of Gully Aboriginal community members, to jointly manage all activities undertaken in The Gully Aboriginal Place as equal entities.

Through this model The Gully community is represented by a body that is self-determining, not as a committee of the Council which has been recognised over time by the NSW Government as a best practice and award receiving approach.

Although not all Gully families are represented by the GTOI, on matters of high consequence, all efforts are made to ensure that Gully community members have involvement in and feedback on the outcomes of these initiatives, inclusive of but not limited to this Plan.

