

Connected Environments and Changing Landscapes of the ACT and Surrounding Region - Interacting with the Ngunawal Perspective



Ngunawal territory is an open space of pathways, a local network of mountain ranges and river corridors linking, at one level, the frontiers of adjoining headwaters, food bowls, ancient lake catchments and swamplands, sources of material for tool-making, and places significant in the life and death events of family relationships. On another level, a greater national network of inter-group trade and other social and cultural relations underscores that interaction. The meeting places of southern Aboriginal socio-cultural groups are linked by the ancient Murrumbidgee and Shoalhaven (and Lachlan) River systems.

Time Line

- The Canberra -Queanbeyan region is generally two catchment basins drained by the Molonglo and Yass Rivers and their tributaries.
- Geological uplift as part of the formation of Molonglo Gorge - 15 million years ago.
- The ancient Murrumbidgee lake system drained the region from about 2 million to 10,000 years ago. The Molonglo, Queanbeyan and Yass Rivers forming the original headwaters of that system.
- Vegetation of colonialisation appeared about 350,000 years ago.
- 100,000 years ago the climate is becoming warmer bringing an increase of fires (particularly after people arrived), encouraging expansion of more open forests of eucalypt and wattle communities.
- Earliest dated evidence of an Aboriginal presence in the landscape is about 21,000 years ago.
- The climate went through wild swings between warm and cool, and wet and dry from the peak of the last glacial period (17,000-19,000 years ago) to about 6,000 years ago.
- At about 12,000 years ago the region entered another dry time with higher temperatures encouraging a change from woodland to forest with grasses remaining the dominant understorey. In the neighbouring drier western parts and the coastal areas Casuarina type forests and woodlands generally replaced the grasslands.
- Present-day features of the environment were in place by 6,000 years ago. However, the entire region was experiencing higher temperatures and rainfall than the present day producing a high incidence of rainforests and wet sclerophyll forests, and increased casuarinas and eucalypt. There was also a marked variation in moisture levels between the coastal and western areas.
- Change, particularly in the last 3,000-4,000 years, is largely due to lower rainfall and includes a reduction in the amount of tree cover, slower river flows and subsequently lower lake levels or even the drying up of lakes and peat lands.
- Dateable evidence of intensive permanent occupation of the region by Aboriginal people begins 4,000-5,000 years before the present day. However, sites have been dated at 10,500-11,000 and 19,000 years ago at Pidgeon House Mountain near Braidwood, 10-12,000 years ago near Goulburn, 3,600 and 4,000 years ago at Nursery Swamp.

- Dates of Aboriginal occupation tend to correlate with the forming and reforming of the major swamplands of the well-watered floodplains of the Shoalhaven and Murrumbidgee Rivers. Seasonal swamplands formed and reformed 8,000 and 3.5-2,000 years ago in the west and over the past 12,000 years in the east.
- The original forests containing Manna Gum trees (*E. Viminalis*), which occur right across the region, supported large numbers of koalas, sugar gliders, possums etc.
- Major Aboriginal camps around the junction of Molonglo and Queanbeyan Rivers (Kowen Forest dated up to 1,000 years ago).
- Colonial exploration of Queanbeyan-Canberra region surrounding the junction of Molonglo and Queanbeyan Rivers begins 193 years ago in 1820.
- 1823 Capt. Mark Curray passes through present-day Oaks Estate heading south looking for grasslands.
- First squatter in Oaks Estate area shortly after 1823 (Timothy Beard) built huts on the banks of the Molonglo River, Robert Campbell's eastern boundary of *Duntroon*.
- Robert Campbell built the first substantial stone building in district, in 1836, later called *The Oaks*, on an extension of *Duntroon*, at a key river crossing.
- Last recorded corroboree 1861 (opposite *The Oaks*).
- Landmark floods (doubled carrying capacity of Queanbeyan River) early 1870s – washed away Oaks crossing. Highest flood was in 1925.