

Call to save Koori caves from vandals

A descendant of the Port's original Aborigines has called for an end to vandalism at what he claims are four significant caves sites at Salamander Bay.

Mr Lionel Ridgeway, who was born and lived at Soldiers Point until the mid-1970s, says the caves were meeting places for the males from the Worimi tribe.

They are located below Wanda Headland and at least two have been splattered with paint by graffiti artists.

"We haven't spoken out about them before because they were special places," he told the *Examiner* this week.

"But things are different now.

"Maybe if people know they are there and what they mean they'll respect them."

Mr Ridgeway, 46, who now lives at Clarendon, said as a child he had been told about the caves.

"They were a meeting place for adults," he said.

"When you see how sheltered they are from the westerlies you can see why they would have been useful."

He said the caves should be regarded as



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■ Lionel Ridgeway and his son Kyle in one of the caves.

significant to all Port residents.

"I've walked over most of the area and the northern side as well I don't know of any other caves like them," he said.

Mr Ridgeway has

been in contact with the National Parks and Wildlife Service and has been told the caves significance will be assessed.

In the meantime he has appealed to vandals to keep away.

PORT STEPHENS *Review '95*

Aim to raise Aboriginal awareness

Little is known about the Aboriginal heritage in Port Stephens — but that is going to change if Carol Ridgeway-Bissett has her way.

Ms Bissett, a member of one of four Aboriginal families which lived at Soldiers Point, is pushing a strategy she hopes will allow her people to share their heritage, and use their skills to become self-sufficient in business.

"We want jobs for our own people," she said.

Carol sees opportunities for her people to be involved in ecotourism, and would also like a museum established to ensure the Aboriginal heritage is recognised and preserved.

But she says that will need a change of attitude among her own people, and a willingness to learn a lot of things, least of all their own heritage. "My culture, my religion, my spirituality is the environment, that's what our culture is. It's sad that a lot of Aboriginal people don't even know that," she said.

Already younger people are being taught the ways of their ancestors, and Carol hopes to strengthen this with culture camps. She's even talking of a local dance group.

There's also going to be a change of direction with the Woromi Lands Council, which holds its annual meeting this month.

"We're going to start making decisions as community — the way it was in traditional society," she explained.

A member of EcoNetwork, Carol is strongly concerned with the state of the local environment.

"I've grown up in this area and I've seen it gone from bush to planning that's been disastrous. There's a chain (in nature)...if you break one part of it, you'll see the reaction in every other link," she said.

Green crusader wants to preserve our Koori heritage



■ Carol Ridgeway Bissett on the caravan park site at Soldiers Point.

One move in ensuring that the environment was protected was to become more political and learning to how to use the system to present the views and needs.

Carol has already proved her skills in the political field.

PROTESTS

Her name's been synonymous with protests against many developments, such as the planned 77-lot housing estate off Wanda Avenue at Salamander Bay.

Carol and others have been fighting the

plans for almost five years, trying to protect the sacred women's birthing and initiation site they say would be affected by the development.

The area is also considered to have significant flora and fauna which needs preserving.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service is assessing whether to recommend the area as an Aboriginal Women's place, and the future of the development will be known when the decision is announced in March.

Aboriginal heritage is also at the centre of the redevelopment of the Soldiers Point

Caravan Park, where the National Parks has identified several Aboriginal graves.

It's believed the graves of convicts are along the beach near the caravan park.

"We've always known when we were kids that there were burial sites there," Carol said.

She hopes that as more becomes known about the Aboriginal heritage in this area — and as her own people learn more about their past and work towards their future — Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people will develop an understanding of, and respect, for each other.



Picture by WAIDE MAGUIRE

From left, residents Kerry Williams, Tony Dean, Robert Campbell, Jeff Cordwell, Carol Ridgeway-Bissett and Bill Croft near the sacred site they believe is under threat.

Proposed rezoning 'threatens' Aboriginal site

By JENNIFER MELOCCO
Port Stephens Reporter

A SACRED site for Aboriginal women and thriving wetlands in the Salamander Mambo Creek area could be turned over for housing under proposed changes to land designation by Port Stephens Council, according to concerned residents and Aboriginal representatives.

The council's development arm, Salamander Projects, has requested permission for lots off Sandy Point Rd, in Salamander Bay, to be designated residential. They are now identified as business tourist, which allows buildings related to tourism, such as hotels.

Strong protests by the Hunter Wetlands Trust and NSW Fisheries have also been lodged against a proposed change to the designation of an area of the

Salamander Mambo Wetlands from business tourist to residential.

NSW Fisheries identified the Mambo Creek wetland as having high ecological significance and being an important resource for the Port Stephens oyster industry.

But the greatest concern lies with a 17.3ha area known as Lot 4, which contains Aboriginal sacred sites.

Members of the Worimi group and an associate lecturer in Aboriginal Studies at Newcastle University, Ms Carol Ridgeway-Bissett, said there were two middens in the Mambo Creek area that were important to Aboriginal women.

'In the Koori community there were women in one part of the area and men in another,' Ms Ridgeway-Bissett said.

'Koori people did not believe

in land ownership but had a strong spiritual connection to the area.'

The middens, one of which had been disturbed by mining, were still littered with shells where the women once gathered to eat. They were also used for initiation ceremonies.

Even today, Aboriginal men have to seek permission to enter the site.

Ms Ridgeway-Bissett said the disturbance of the area by mining had been an insult to the Worimi people but she hoped the area could be preserved as part of an environmental and Aboriginal education reserve instead of being turned over for housing.

The secretary of the Corlette Salamander Number 4 Precinct, Mr Jeff Cordwell, said that this year, being the Year of Indigenous People, provided an ideal

opportunity to develop an Aboriginal and environmental sanctuary on the site.

'We must respect the people who were here long ago,' Mr Cordwell said.

He said a study of the area by the Royal Australian Ornithological Union had identified 4 species of birds in Lot 4, including a grey teal, a species which had not been seen on the Tamar mallee Peninsula for 10 years.

'This place has a rich animal and bird life and it would be an ideal area to preserve and establish an education centre,' Mr Cordwell said.

He said support for the idea had also come from Nelson Bay High School, which used the Mambo Creek Wetland as an educational resource.

The matter will go to Port Stephens Council tomorrow night.

Greens to fight poll



■ At the Wanda Avenue site are (from left) Ms Burgess, Worimi Aborigine Ms Carol Ridgeway-Bissett, Mr Cohen and number two upper house Greens candidate Ms Leeza Doobie.

The NSW Greens party is to stand a candidate in Port Stephens at the March 25 State election and is looking for recruits to contest next September's local council poll.

The party announced on Monday that 33-year-old Mayfield nurse Ms Cathy Burgess would stand for Port Stephens which is held by Labor's Mr Bob Martin.

Ms Burgess said growth pressures on the environment were becoming too great in Port Stephens for the party not to be represented here.

Issues such as the development around Mambo Creek and Wanda Avenue at Salamander and the push for a national park in Newcastle Bight required a local Greens party.

She said Green support was growing in line with dissatisfaction with the mainstream Liberal and Labor parties.

More than 30 Greens candidates have been selected for Lower House seats in NSW.

Candidate chosen for NSW election

In the Upper House the Greens number one candidate, Mr Ian Cohen, has a good chance of being elected.

"If so he could hold the balance of power," Ms Burgess said.

On Monday Ms Burgess and Mr Cohen were in Port Stephens on a

campaign visit.

She wants to hear from residents interested in standing at the September local government elections.

She called for:

— a different route for the proposed new road to Fingal, arguing it would cut into the national park and affect wildlife

- a stop to the proposed subdivision at Wanda Avenue which she said would degrade an Aboriginal women's sacred waterhole

- both major parties to declare support for a Newcastle Bight national park.

Oysters worth \$2,000 stolen off racks

About \$2,000 worth of oysters have been stolen from oyster racks at Soldiers Point over a period of five days.

Between January 5 and 10 1050 three-year-old oyster sticks were

taken from One Tree Island and Rocks Awash.

According to police, the sticks yielded about 10 bags of oysters valued at \$200 each.

Call to buy back developments

By TINA SORENSON
Environment Reporter

A MEETING of more than 180 people at Port Stephens yesterday called on the State Government to buy out two proposed Boat Harbour residential developments and add one to the nearby Tomaree National park.

A rally was also held on Saturday by residents and environmentalists at Salamander Bay to protest the level of development in the area and prevent land at Wanda Avenue, earmarked for a 75-lot housing development, from being developed.

The vice-president of the Boat Harbour Residents and Ratepayers Association, Mr Warrick Strang, said residents were concerned about the effects of three major developments on the environment and the aesthetic amenity of Boat Harbour, a small fishing and holiday village near Anna Bay.

These were: McCloy's proposed 14-lot beachfront development, a 69-lot Seaview Gardens subdivision proposed for Tank Hill, and a proposed 70-lot Landcom subdivision near Tank Hill.

The group fought unsuccessfully last year against a new 70-lot Wimpey Australia subdivision opposite the Seaview Gardens site.

Port Stephens Council deferred last week the Seaview Gardens subdivision to allow time to discuss controversial aspects of the proposal with the developer, a move described by residents as 'pathetic'.

Councillors are expected to debate the issue again at the next council meeting.

Mr Strang said the Seaview Gardens estate would interfere with an important koala corridor and that



Protest: Ms Carol Ridgeway-Bisset at the Wanda Ave, Salamander Bay, meeting on Saturday.
— Picture by KYLIE DAWSON

the Department of Land and Water Conservation had expressed concern about possible landslip and erosion on the steeply sloping development site.

The Landcom subdivision would drain into Boat Harbour, Mr Strang said.

'Fisheries have said they are concerned about the beach which is a recognised fish haulage ground,' he said.

'The Easter mullet catch could be

affected by stormwater pollution.'

Those who attended yesterday's meeting agreed to reactivate a petition that called for the Government to buy back the Seaview Gardens and McCloy's development land and include the Landcom site as national park.

Mr Strang said there was a lack of communication between the council, the developers and local residents.

Weekend rally to protest Salamander housing plan

ENVIRONMENTALISTS are planning a public rally this Saturday as part of a campaign to stop Port Stephens Council from developing housing lots in the area of Wanda Ave, Salamander.

The council has proposed 77 housing lots in the area but mem-

bers last night that the meeting was attended by about 22 people representing groups as diverse as the National Parks Association, Newcastle Aboriginal Support Group, Eco Network, Port Stephens Community Radio, the Wilderness Society and Newcastle Greens.

She had concerns about the



Protester: Aboriginal spokeswoman
Ms Carol Ridgeway-Bissett.

Dawn protest bid to save tribal women's sacred site

By **KIRSTEN STOOP**
Staff Reporter

MORE than 30 protesters were prepared to risk their lives in front of bulldozers to stop the destruction of a sacred Aboriginal waterhole at Salamander Bay this morning.

The waterhole is a traditional women's birthing, initiation and fertility site which has officially not been used for many years.

But it is believed that Aboriginal women from the Hunter Valley's Worimi tribe have secretly immersed themselves in the sacred waters over the years in the belief that doing so would aid fertility.

A group of more than 30 Aboriginal women and supporters planned a dawn protest aimed at stopping the development of 77 homes.

A spokeswoman, Ms Carol Ridgeway-Bissett, said last night she was fearful that the site, its flora and fauna, bush foods and medicines, would be lost.

The area was also the home of the women's tribal totem, a white-throated tree creeper, she said.

The significance and Dreamtime legends of the site had been passed down through many generations.

'Many of the birthing and initiation sites in this area have been kept secret,' Ms Ridgeway-Bissett said.

'This is one of the few birthing places left after our birthing caves were destroyed when Peppers was built at Corlette.'

Ms Ridgeway-Bissett said she was angry that the Port Stephens Council did not tell the 'traditional owners' that the development was set to begin this morning.

The group has pleaded with the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Mr Tickner, to invoke an emergency restraining power under Section 9 of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act.

Ms Ridgeway-Bissett said the Worimi people had battled to save the site for three years and that the council had given approval for the housing development without a proper assessment of the site's significance.

The group did not want a violent demonstration but was prepared to block the path of bulldozers if necessary, she said.

Too much emphasis had been placed on men's sites and cultures.

'Women's sites, culture and traditions have suffered,' she said.

'We want women's sacred sites and cultures preserved and are prepared to fight for them.'



■ Koori storyteller Francis Firebrace, of Palm Beach, with Mrs Ridgeway Bissett at Saturday's rally.

Port Stephens Council's controversial Wanda Avenue subdivision at Salamander may not return a profit, Federal MP Mr Bob Horne claimed at public rally at Nelson Bay.

"At best it's line-ball," he said.

He was speaking at a rally called by Aborigines and environmentalists to oppose council plans for Wanda Avenue and other adjacent to the Mambo Creek Islands.

Mr Horne cast doubts on the need for the Wanda estate "when you look at all the vacant homes on Salamander".

Local Aborigines claim both sites are sacred or significant to Kooris and should be preserved.

They reject recent anthropological

Subdivision unlikely to show profit: MP

reports which could find no conclusive evidence to back their claims.

Speakers at the rally called on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents in the Port to unite to oppose the subdivisions.

KOORIS

They also urged a committee be formed to advise the council on matters relevant to Kooris.

University lecturer and Worimi member

Mrs Carol Ridgeway-Bissett said she would be approaching the Federal Government over the issue.

Other at the rally called for the use of adoption of Koori names for local landmarks and the development of a register to identify significant sites that were claimed to be under threat from development.

Tickner clears council land

Protection of Koori waterhole adequate

The Federal Government has rejected a call to intervene to block a proposed Port Stephens Council housing subdivision at Salamander.

The Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Mr Tickner, in a letter released this week referred to claims that land near Wanda Avenue at Salamander Bay should be preserved because it contained a waterhole sacred to Aboriginal women.

Mr Tickner had been asked by a local Worimi and university lecturer, Mrs Carol Ridgeway-Bissett, to place an interim heritage protection order over the site.

For two years the council has been trying to turn the area over to a 70-plus housing estate.

SIGNIFICANCE

Mr Tickner said that before he could intervene he had to be satisfied the area was of significance and concerned to Aborigines and would be threatened by the proposed development.

Studies since commissioned by Port Stephens Council suggested it was impossible to say with any certainty that the Wanda Avenue wetlands had once included a sacred women's waterhole.

The same studies sug-



■ A report on the matter from the *Examiner* of August 17 last year.

gested a buffer be placed around the waterhole which the council had agreed to do and this had apparently satisfied the local Aboriginal land council.

He said Ms Ridgeway-Bissett seemed sincere but other Aboriginal people interviewed on the matter either knew nothing or denied the waterhole was sacred. In a related matter he said middens had been destroyed by sandmining on land proposed for housing near the Mambo Creek wetlands. The council had no objections to its development.

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