

TALK TO WGHS STUDENTS – WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY – 9 June 2023

- Hi, I'm John Moratelli, a Councillor on Willoughby City Council and President of the Willoughby Environmental Protection Association (WEPA). I've lived in Castlecrag for over 25 years. Acknowledgment.
- I'd like to talk to you today about WEPA and some things you can do for our environment.
- WEPA is a volunteer community group with an interest in protecting the local, State and national environment – the air, the bushland, green spaces and trees. While our primary interest is bushland in the City of Willoughby our members are also involved in environmental campaigns at state and national levels.
- WEPA started in the early 1980s. One of its first big campaigns – in the late 1980s - was to stop the use of Flat Rock Gully – the bush gully between Naremburn and Northbridge on the eastern side of Flat Rock Drive – as a regional tip.
- Many you will know the numerous netball courts near the Willoughby Leisure Centre. What you may not know is that these are built on top of decades of unregulated waste dumped into a bushland valley which used to have a 30 metre waterfall dropping to sea level and flowing to the bay where Tunks Park now is. The waterfall was near where Willoughby Road now is. After the Walter Burley Griffin designed incinerator, now a café and exhibition space, closed in the 1960s, regional waste was just dumped into the valley until it reached its current edge east of Flat Rock Drive.
- Unfortunately, Willoughby Council wanted to continue to dump rubbish into the valley, so groups like WEPA and local progress associations organised to stop further loss of bushland. In face of this opposition WCC abandoned its plans in the late 1980s and spent over \$1m in regenerating the bushland, particularly to the east of Flat Rock Drive, with the help of local volunteers.
- The Flat Rock Gully Reserve is now designated as a 'Wildlife Protection Area' by Willoughby Council as it provides significant habitat for a wide range of birds – from Grey Goshawks to endangered Powerful Owls, and from tiny wrens to seed-eating finches as well as the many colourful and noisy parrots we hear in Willoughby. It also provides habitat for endangered amphibians such as the red crowned toadlet.

- While 88% of Australians live in urbanised areas, Sydney is unique among Australian capital cities in having urban bushland so close to the city centre. Our local bushland gullies, such as Flat Rock Gully, hold hundreds of mature native trees (and mangroves) which:
 - Provide habitat for urban wildlife – with hollows for birds and animal and wildlife corridors for animals to move along safely
 - cool the air and reduce the ‘urban heat island effect’
 - improve air quality
 - sequester carbon
 - provide contact with nature, which has been shown to have beneficial health impacts.

The importance of these green spaces to communities under stress were highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic as the numbers using them threatened to overwhelm existing community parks, national parks and local bushwalking tracks.

- Places like Flat Rock Gully form part of a ‘wildlife corridor’ – a series of bushland patches which stretches from the Hawkesbury River – and can result in the occasional swamp wallaby hopping across the Harbour Bridge.
- Linked bushland areas are critical for wildlife survival. These corridors provide shelter, food and protection from predators and allow the movement of birds, animals and insects and the continuation of viable wildlife populations. Many threatened and endangered native species owe their survival to these wildlife corridors.
- It is gratifying to see that the protection of these corridors and better control of feral animals such as foxes has seen the return of wildlife not seen in this area since the 1950s – including swamp wallabies, echidnas, brush turkeys and lyre birds.
- Any pollution which enters Flat Rock Gully inevitably ends up in Middle Harbour and its foreshores. These waterways have also improved in health over the last twenty or so years as environment protection laws came into effect to stop polluters of all types from sending material into the waters of the harbour. Apart from large shoals of small and large fishes, Middle Harbour also sees visits from whales, seals and Little Penguins. The harbour is healthier than it has been for a long time and we were keen to ensure that contaminated sediment was not dug up for the Beaches Link Tunnel.

- The price of retaining Sydney's bushland is, however, eternal vigilance. In 2018 WEPA found itself again on the battlelines at Flat Rock Gully when we became aware that the NSW State Government wanted to remove hundreds of trees and dig through the old tip to the east of Flat Rock Drive to build a six lane car tunnel known as the Beaches Link. The tunnel was to proceed underneath the Northbridge peninsula and then through a trench dug through Middle Harbour to Seaforth and Balgowlah.
- WEPA quickly concluded that the Beaches Link Tunnel posed serious threats to our marine and terrestrial environments and called for public transport alternatives – which we all know is a far more environmentally sound way to move people around – to be considered.
- So, for much of the last five years, WEPA and a range of other individuals and organisations have researched, written, circulated petitions, spoke to local MPs, sent submissions to Parliament and appeared before inquiries, to get the government to consider public transport alternatives to the Beaches Link Tunnel.
- We like to think that all this hard work has resulted in the situation today – where the new State Government only last week announced that the Beaches Link tunnel will not proceed.
- The environment in which we live – the streets, parks, playing fields, bushland, wetlands, rivers and bays, the form of our commercial centres and residential areas – play an important part in our everyday lives. The quality of the surrounding environment influences the way we live, the enjoyment we get from our neighbourhood, our well- being and that of our community. Willoughby has a very rich environment with resources worth protecting.
- Anthropocene – meaning of.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Anybody with an interest in the environment and the future of Willoughby is welcome to become a member of the group. WEPA organises speaker meetings and (at least before the pandemic) was showing documentaries on a range of topics, we lobby Local, State and Federal Politicians, comment on plans and proposals before Local Government, has representatives on Council committees and has stalls at local green events through the year.

- Willoughby Council has volunteer advisory committees about a range of environmental issues – Sustainability; Bushland and Natural Heritage, Bicentennial Reserve and Flat Rock Gully – as well as issues like Access and Inclusion, Built Heritage and the Arts. Contact us if you want more details – there are often working groups which need young people like yourselves to provide your views.
- Learn about native plants. A bushwalk is much more interesting when you can recognise the plants. One easy way to learn more is to join a bushcare group run by council as these are attended by council staff who have a wealth of knowledge about native plants and animals.
- Help on local campaigns, or those run by state or national groups such as the National Parks Association, The Wilderness Society, the Australian Conservation Foundation, the Australian Marine Conservation Society, even if it is only signing petitions, it all helps.
- Encourage your parents to join WEPA or a local Progress Association. They can lobby for environmental improvements and are listened to by the Council.
- Join some of Willoughby Council's activities such as bushwalking, bird watching or talks. Google Live Well in Willoughby to sign up for council's e-newsletter to be notified about upcoming events.
- If you have a burning issue, you can form a delegation and visit your local state and federal members of parliament and let them know of your concerns. You might want to ask them to lower the voting age to 16 for instance.
- If there's an upcoming election and you might be voting in future you can attend one of WEPA's MTC meetings to ask questions and see where the candidates stand on environmental issues.
- In conclusion, it's worth becoming aware that change doesn't come about through only Government planning and the law; it can also be a result of people pressure and the political process. So, above all, get informed, be involved. It's your future.