

COLLINGWOOD BEACH PRESERVATION GROUP FORESHORE MANAGEMENT PLAN POSITION PAPER



COLLINGWOOD BEACH PRESERVATION GROUP

The Collingwood Beach Preservation Group (CBPG) was established to ensure that Collingwood Beach is preserved and enhanced through the application of sound scientific principles to ecologically sustainable development. Ecologically sustainable development includes taking into consideration, in an integrated way, the wider social, economic and environmental implications of decisions and actions without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

THE LOCATION

The rock-bordered mouth of Moona Moona Creek marks the northern boundary of a 3 km wide, L-shaped, northeast-facing bay, bordered in the south by Plantation Point and containing three beaches in between. Collingwood Beach occupies the western shore of the bay and curves south of Moona Moona Creek mouth for 2.2 km to a rocky eastward inflection in the shore.

The beach faces due east towards the entrance to Jervis Bay and receives low refracted swell averaging less than 0.5 m, which usually maintains a moderately steep cusped reflective beach. The beach is part of a 300 m wide regressive barrier backed by a swamp drained by Moona Moona Creek.

A road and narrow reserve backs the northern end of the beach, with a large park adjacent to the creek mouth. The remainder is backed by a low foredune then narrow, continuous foreshore reserve, which includes a walkway, then beachfront houses and the main Elizabeth Drive.

BACKGROUND

From time to time Collingwood Beach experiences storm surges and consequentially wave run-up that affects the beach. In 1974 strong storms severely eroded Collingwood Beach, damaging foredune vegetation. In 1978 Shoalhaven City Council (SCC) and the Soil Conservation Service commenced a dune restoration project along the beach.

An information bulletin titled 'Are You Aware of the Importance of Sand Dunes?' was prepared by the Collingwood Beach Dunecare Group, Vincentia Residents and Ratepayers Association Inc. and the Department of Conservation and Land Management Nowra (now part of the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage). The bulletin was issued to gain public support for the dune restoration programme. The bulletin expressly states in part:

'The shrubs now being planted on the dunes and adjoining areas are low growing varieties which will not obstruct people's views.'

It is not known who directed that this commitment to the community of low growth shrubs be abandoned. The trees planted along the beach walkway were high growth banksias that over the years have grown to block residents' views.

The remainder of the foredunes have been planted with low growth vegetation which is performing well. There is also no discernible difference between areas where banksias have been planted and areas where banksias have failed to grow or have been removed.

In the past the selection of plant species for development of the foredunes has been dictated by SCC without consideration of the impact on the beachfront community. This has resulted in conflict and the degradation of sections of the foredunes. The CBPG wants SCC to empower the community to take action that will provide an ecologically sustainable and mutually acceptable foredune at Collingwood Beach for present and future generations.

SHOALHAVEN CITY COUNCIL POSITION

SCC has consistently refused to consider pruning the height of the banksias to allow residents to regain the views that they had in years gone by and to have the views that they were promised would not be obstructed by the planting of trees on the foredunes.

As a consequence of SCC failing to engage with the community to establish an ecologically sustainable alternative to high growth trees degradation has occurred resulting in sections of the beachfront looking desolate and unattractive. In response SCC has erected signage that the trees have been vandalised which is stating the obvious. SCC has also put up notices advising of substantial penalties. This reactive response has done nothing to rectify the situation yet SCC is oblivious to this fact and continues to erect more signage. The signage is only a testament to SCC's failure to manage the situation and work collaboratively with the community.

From past dealings with SCC senior environmental managers it is apparent that maintaining the high growth banksias is a personnel preference rather than a reasoned approach to foredune protection. Reasons given in the past for not allowing trimming of the banksias have included advice that this would be a major shift in management practices and that the banksias were not suitable for hedging (despite advice to the contrary by the SCC Bushcare Co-ordinator).

It is of significance to note that the Land and Environment Court recognises residents' rights to views. There is ample case law in this matter under the *Trees (Disputes Between Neighbours) Act 2006* to sustain a principle that SCC trim or remove rows of trees that obstruct views. For example, in 2012 Commissioner Judy Flake found that a hedge of cypress trees ranging in height from 6 metres to 11 metres blocking a view at Bellevue Hill in Sydney had to be removed as they could not be pruned. The decision was based on the principle that water views are critical to a property's amenity and value.

Councils are however not bound by the *Trees (Disputes Between Neighbours) Act 2006* and therefore continue to exercise personal preference rather than relying on the principles set out by the Land and Environment Court. SCC needs to follow the principles of law set out by the court rather than blindly follow the personal preference of SCC senior environmental managers.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Recently SCC has conducted a Community Forum and established a Dune Care Reference Group (DCRG) to consider issues associated with foredune vegetation. The outcome of the deliberations of the DCRG is not known at this stage and SCC has not briefed the community on progress even though this was a specific request at the forum. However, SCC has stated that it does not consider itself bound by anything that the DCRG decides. This being the case the question needs to be asked as to what purpose the DCRG actually serves. If there is no commitment to adopt any recommendations then the whole exercise is just for public show so that there is a perception of community consultation.

Unfortunately, SCC has not moved past the information stage of public involvement. SCC still deems this good practice. SCC needs to actively listen to the ideas of the community and facilitate community members to participate in the change process. SCC needs to move on through the consultation, involvement and collaboration stages to ultimately reach the empowerment stage of community involvement.

The token community consultation implemented by SCC to date has only resulted in public distrust and cynicism. Community members now have a much greater understanding of environmental issues and professionals within the community apply their skills to issues affecting their community as is the case within the CBPG. This has generated a movement towards more active involvement in environmental matters which SCC fails to appreciate. Increased levels of public participation are widely recognised as representing best practice in governance.

FOREDUNE VEGETATION

There are many excellent publications that provide guidance on foredune vegetation, for example Kristine French from the University of Wollongong has produced a framework guide to ecological restoration of coastal foredune scrub on the NSW South Coast.

Expert publications need to be referenced so that best practice is adopted for foredune protection. Expert opinion is that a layered vegetation profile needs to be established starting with grasses on the foredune and shrubs to a height of two to two and a half metres up to the primary dune for effective sand entrapment. This is essentially what the community was told would be the planting regime when rehabilitation was first undertaken. Personal preferences are of no relevance when not supported by expert opinion.

The foredune management plan must also include provision for managing existing banksias to reinstate views previously available to residents. The loss of views has resulted in property values dropping dramatically. The current policy of leaving banksias intact punishes residents that have let the trees flourish and rewards the residents that have removed the trees. The natural propagation of banksias must also be controlled.

SUMMARY

High growth trees such as banksias along the edge of the foredunes are a personal preference of senior environmental managers within SCC. There is no environmental reason why rows of such trees need to be planted at this location. There are suitable alternative species and if for some reason banksias are deemed essential then they are suited to pruning as acknowledged by arborists and as is evidenced along the beachfront walkway.

The 'Are You Aware of the Importance of Sand Dunes?' bulletin tried to gain public support for the protection of foredunes all those years ago but promises of low growth shrubs evaporated and so did the confidence of the community in SCC. To this day SCC through its authoritarian approach to the community has failed to gain the confidence of the community.

SCC needs to engage with the community to come up with a suitable natural plant species and planting pattern. The community would be willing to work with SCC if SCC took into consideration the communities views rather than dictating to the community what it must accept.

Working collaboratively Collingwood Beach can be reinstated to its former beauty with new vegetation planted and eyesores such as dead trees and metal sign posts removed. This will boost tourism and the economy of the area.

FORESHORE MANAGEMENT POLICY

The Collingwood Beach Preservation Group supports working collaboratively with Shoalhaven City Council to develop and implement a native planting regime suitable for the foredunes at Collingwood Beach utilising low growth plant varieties and development of a maintenance regime that involves resident participation.