

Bass Point Indigenous Cultural Walk

Understanding Aboriginal heritage through ancient sites

Aboriginal history is embedded in the landscape. The land is the written history of Aboriginal heritage. For 40,000 years the land provided all the needs of the Australian Aboriginal people – not just physical things like food, clothing and shelter but spiritual needs. This strong attachment to the land remains.

Occupation sites enable us to gain an insight into the lifestyle and traditions as well as the distribution of native animals and plants. These may be middens, deposits in rock shelters, open camp fires, quarries, art or religious sites. All sites hold special meaning and should be respected.



The NSW Government, through a grant from the Area Assistance Scheme, supports this project. This project was initiated by Shellharbour City Council.



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Living in harmony with the land

Aboriginal people lived in harmony with the environment. They carefully planned patterns of movement through the land. They ensured that natural food resources were never depleted to a level they could not regenerate. The land is the source of stories that educated generations to care for the land. Aboriginal people usually covered vast areas of land which allowed for a spread of natural resource use.

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Connection to Bass Point

Traditional occupation of Bass Point by Aboriginal people dates back 17,000 years before present (BP). At this time Bass Point was 14 km inland because of lower sea levels. Bass Point is one of the oldest known occupation sites along the entire Australian eastern seaboard. Evidence of occupation of Bass Point mostly dates back to 6,000 years BP which is the time sea levels rose to their current position.

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Living off the land

The rich ecology of headlands such as Bass Point became the focus of semi-permanent camps for coastal Aboriginal people. Foods came from marine, near-shore, rocky platform, sandy beach, freshwater wetlands mangrove estuary, sclerophyll forest and temperate forest in the hinterland range. Vegetation such as tea-tree, banksia and eucalypts sheltered the camps from sun and wind.



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Diet

Aboriginal people were well organised with the collection and distribution of food. Food was shared within the clan and subsequently everyone had something to eat, irrespective of age or physical condition. Women collected fruits, berries, seeds, nuts, vegetable leaves, edible root tubers (made into a flour), honeys and nectars (sometimes used for a sweet drink called bool), shellfish and caught over 17 species of fish with net as well as hook and line.

Men hunted by spearing sea and land animals, reptiles, amphibians, birds and fish. Weirs were built to catch fish. If fresh water was scarce, wells were dug to obtain water. Medicines were also gathered.

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Tools and weapons

Weapons included clubs, wooden swords and shields, parrying sticks and shields. Fighting spears were longer than hunting spears, barbed and pointed in hard wood or the shaft of the flower stalk of the grass tree (*Xanthorrhoea*). One prong hunting spears had a barb with a stone, oyster shell or wood. Fishing line was made from bark, palm fibre, or the native fig with bird talons or shells ground into a hook “C” shape. Stone sinkers weighed down the line. Cutting was done by stone axes attached to a handle with native resin and bound securely with sinews. Chisels and knives were similarly made with heavy wedge shape choppers and mallets were used to shape canoes and shields.

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Movement tracks into the escarpment

Trade and exchange networks operated from the rich resources of the coast into the hinterland and beyond. Tracks became the main lines of communication between clans and language nations. Many of the major road routes today are derived from Aboriginal tracks, the most notable being Macquarie Pass which ascends the Illawarra escarpment to the west. Tracks were sometimes seasonal or ceremonial. The annual migration of bogong moths resulted in many tribes to move south to the Snowy Mountains each summer to attend ceremonial gatherings, the bogong being a great delicacy. Cake-like food was made from the scorched or pounded insects.

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An important place with a rich history

Bass Point is extremely important to Aboriginal people. It was both a camping and meeting place as well as a place for collecting and sharing food. Journals from 26 April 1770 record Captain James Cook observing "smoke on the shore before dark" at a location what is believed to be Bass Point. This is most likely a reference to Aboriginal camp fires at or in the vicinity of Bass Point and could be the first witnessing by Europeans of Aboriginal occupation of Bass Point.



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Other significant values

Bass Point also has rich botanical history comprising rare complex coastal rainforest, diverse plant communities and habitat to many fauna of which there are several rare and threatened species. Bushrangers Bay is a declared Aquatic Reserve and is known throughout Australia for its diverse aquatic life which attracts scuba/snorkelling enthusiasts. Bass Point has been the site of 8 shipwrecks, the most known being the wreck of the Cities Services Boston in 1943 where 4 people lost their lives rescuing people onboard the ship. This event is recognised by a permanent memorial near the wreck site.

These values add to the indigenous history of the site to make Bass Point important for all.

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