



Dharug Strategic Management Group Ltd

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Draft Greater Sydney Water Strategy 2021

Submission from Dharug Strategic Management Group Ltd

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Who is making this submission?

Dharug Strategic Management Group Ltd (DSMG) is a not-for-profit company and registered charity that operates as an organisation for Dharug people, managed by Dharug people. DSMG was established in early-2018 after more than seven years of community consultation and negotiation about management of the site of the Blacktown Native Institution in Oakhurst in Western Sydney. The BNI site has cultural and historical significance for Dharug people and its return to Dharug ownership in 2018 was the first return of Nura to Dharug care since colonial times.

DSMG is immensely proud to accept the role of caring for the BNI site and developing a range of activities that will commemorate the site's colonial history, recognise and celebrate its much longer Dharug history and foster its ongoing place in Dharug futures.

Why are we making this submission?

DSMG's vision is that Dharug Nura must be at the heart of successful truth telling, healing and learning to belong together with Dharug Nura across the Greater Sydney Basin. Dharug people continue to value badu (water) as foundational to just, equitable and sustainable use of Nura and sharing Dharug Nura with our diverse human and non-human communities. Management of our lands and waters is important not only for Dharug yura (people) but also those wider communities with whom we belong together. Water connects across Country. It connects us to Sky Country. It connects us to our deep past and our hopeful futures. DSMG fosters engagement and understanding across all Dharug Nura. We aim to deliver and support programs and activities that foster cultural, artistic, educational and economic success with high levels of Dharug participation and wider community and organizational engagement with Indigenous issues.

What do we want to say?

DSMG recognizes that since the colonial occupation of Dharug Nura began in 1788, profound misunderstanding and mismanagement of water, and its connections to people places and the processes of creation and survival has caused lasting damage to Nura, yura and the wider environment we share. We recognize that building a coherent strategy for managing current and future water supplies for Greater Sydney is very important. But Sydney Water and the NSW Government must understand that such a strategy must be built on deep and lasting connection to Country. It cannot be based on colonial "possession" of Country. It cannot be imposed by a colonial will to "improve" Country. Your strategy must begin, end and be accountable to Country.



The *Draft Greater Sydney Water Strategy* opens with an “Acknowledgement of Country” (p3). Despite claiming to acknowledge the Dharug First Nation and our neighbours as “Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands and waters” and the centrality of “Traditional Owner [and we note and reject the failure to include Custodians in this phrasing] knowledge, values and uses in water planning”, this Acknowledgement of Country is nothing more than a patronizing, empty and perfunctory platitude which is disconnected from the rest of the strategy. It is offensive to open with such an acknowledgement and then present a strategy that relegates Aboriginal interests to the last listed issue (p11) and fails to demonstrate any understanding that Connecting to Country, Responding to Country, Listening to Country is so much more than simply acknowledging and then maintaining ignorance.

We note with concern, for example, that even the perfunctory acknowledgement provided in the text commits the department – but not Sydney Water – to relationships and partnerships with a generically referenced “Aboriginal people” but omits commitment to custodians and knowledge holders. And it identifies an ill-defined ambition to support “Aboriginal rights, interests and access” (p11) but proposes to work with “Aboriginal people in Greater Sydney” – with no commitment to Traditional Owners and Custodians. The associated consultation processes have prioritized the statutory organizations created by state government legislation as somehow representative rather than vested interests. In Greater Sydney, those organizations have themselves refused to acknowledge and respect Traditional Owners and Custodians and have joined colonizing interests in privatizing Dharug Nura, becoming developers and beneficiaries of the destruction and sale of Dharug Nura.

We note with further concern, that in the summary of the Strategy’s priorities (p14), there is absolutely no reference to First Nation rights, interests, values, knowledge, uses and access. There is no strategic commitment to recognition of Custodians. Again – please recognize how offensive it is to be “acknowledged” and then swept aside. We thank you for the opportunity to be heard – but your integrity will be demonstrated by your capacity to listen, to change track when your continued misunderstanding and commitment to mismanaging this precious resource that supports us all is acknowledged.

We want to say quite strongly that DSMG is offended by the contempt that the *Draft Greater Sydney Water Strategy* shows for First Nations, and its continuing commitment to technology rather than relationships as the basis for fostering resilient water futures for Nura and yura. We also recognize, however, that the NSW Government Architect Office has already opened a very different way forward. The GAO *Connecting With Country* framework suggests that major policy frameworks such as the Greater Sydney Water Strategy should start with Country and should prioritize and clarify strategies for connecting with Country and implementation of those strategies. The current Draft Strategy simply fails on all those elements and should be rejected as starting in the wrong place and heading in the wrong direction. We note with alarm, for example, that in the summary contextual diagram on p23, there is neither acknowledgement of First Nations nor anticipation that *Connecting With Country* fits with the government “Vision for NSW”!

DSMG appreciates that in some basins, there has been deeper engagement with Custodians regarding water – but our experience in the Greater Sydney Basin has not reflected that at all. Instead, Dharug Custodians and knowledge holders are treated as if we do not exist – or do not matter. The *Draft Greater Sydney Water Strategy* reflects the colonial mindset, that sets “city” against “Country”. In early attempts to legislate recognition of “land rights”, Australian lawmakers refused to consider the



possibility that First Nations property within cities could be subject to claim. That colonial mindset similarly asserted that the violence and extremes of colonial dispossession in urban places precluded the possibility of “continuity” and therefore any existence of Native title. And the same mindset insisted that water simply belonged to the colonial power by grace of various legal mythologies and the narratives of possession and colonization. Our experience understands things differently. Across Dharug Nura we see continuing connection, continuing responsibility, continuing knowledge. We see survival. We see renewal. We see resilience. We also see trauma, and loss and sadness. We celebrate, we commemorate, and we continue.

So, for us, the Draft Strategy reads like yet another patronizing colonial process insisting that technology without connection to Nura and yura is viable and reasonable because someone else knows what is best.

The one page of text referring to “Improving water management outcomes for Aboriginal people” (p38) falls a long way short of what is needed. It devotes half its text to talking about the Premier’s priority (which is presented as “Greening Greater Sydney” rather than anything to do with recognizing and protecting (let alone restituting) First Nation rights, interests and access to water. In the Greater Sydney Basin, that would involve listening to, building relationships with and supporting the Dharug First Nation and our neighbours. The complete absence of any discussion that anticipates the necessity of the Strategy to start from this and the challenge of connecting to rather than harnessing and dominating Dharug Nura renders the *Draft Greater Sydney Water Strategy* document a disappointing failure that needs complete revision.



Julie Jones
(Chair)



Michelle Locke
(Secretary)