

PLATYPUS DREAMING

MY OBJECTION TO THE PROPOSED BERRIMA GAOL REDEVELOPMENT



I wish to speak for those who cannot speak; for the silky, shy platypus, the raffish Rakali, the snuffling wombats and all the other native creatures who have occupied the sandy Wingecaribbee riverbank since time immemorial and who now inhabit my Dreaming, the depths of my consciousness as a concerned human being. Those same innocent animals may soon be driven out of the cool, dim caverns of their traditional ancestral homes. If they are, they will almost certainly face a bewildering existential threat. It's a fate which will, I trust, be averted by your timely intervention.

I am an award-winning writer and historian with a particular personal and professional interest in Australia's environment. I have had the privilege of living much of my long life amid the wild beauty of the Southern Highlands. I love the eucalypt-scented tranquillity of the Highland bush and all the creatures that share its ancient grandeur. The ill-conceived idea of turning the grim heritage-listed Victorian-era Berrima Gaol into an up-market boutique hotel is in my opinion a grotesque absurdity which will be utterly out of character sitting in the middle of Berrima's charming rustic hip-roofed white cottages. It will overwhelm and mock the historic significance of the site. If it goes ahead (and I sincerely hope it does not) that will sound the death knell for charming Old Berrima, the Highland village that people know and love for its peace and quiet and the simple elegance of its Georgian architecture. It is one of the very few early colonial townscapes which remains more or less intact. But now, the ugly face of modernity is about to intrude in a form that most, if not all the people of the village find

abhorrent. The commercial concept upon which the redevelopment is based flies in the face of reality. The Southern Highlands is currently awash with boutique accommodation, very few of which are making money. Those intimately familiar with the multi-million dollar costs of building and running hotels, restaurants and (heaven help us) Wellness Centres are incredulous at the idea of turning a profit in a venture as doubtful as that proposed for the old Berrima Gaol. Who in their right mind would want to be pay top dollar to stay in a place where men were once incarcerated for years in miserable cells ? Surely there are better and more sensitive uses for an historic building than this ridiculous confection.

My emphatic opposition to the proposed Berrima Gaol Re-Development is based upon much more serious considerations. I am deeply concerned, not for the people who are risking their money in this doubtful venture, but for the animals and the serious consequences they will face if this proposal becomes a reality. How will they endure months of continuous loud excavation and construction noise and vibration? The survival of Berrima's threatened platypus population depends upon the continuity of the undisturbed tranquillity of their habitat and the unpolluted quality of the Wingecarribee River.

The lovely, sinuous tree-lined river at Berrima has long been recognised as a breeding "hot spot" for the iconic platypus (*Ornithorhynchus anatinus*) which burrow into the riverbank to lay one or two small, leathery eggs, if and when their health and suitable environmental conditions allow. Here, for millennia, these unique mammals have incubated their eggs and suckled their squirming nestlings in the dark, cool and silent security of their grass-lined underground nests.

My concern is that the relentless pounding of large-scale pneumatic jack-hammers which would be used in the extensive sandstone excavation of the hotel's two storey underground car park and the driving of the hotel's foundation piling will inevitably produce intolerable decibel levels which will result in pain and suffering for the highly sensitive shy platypus and their dependant young. There is a serious risk that during the excavation and construction phase the ongoing cacophony and jarring pound-pound-pounding of the pneumatic hammers and drills may well induce the platypus mothers to abandon their riverside nests altogether. The acutely sensitive platypus ear is located in a muscular groove which normally pinches shut to enclose and protect the ears underwater. Platypus hearing is most sensitive to sound frequencies around 4 kilohertz but can detect frequencies as high as 15 kilohertz. The relentless pneumatic pounding during the excavation of the proposed underground carpark would therefore very likely prove intolerable for platypus trying to rest in their riverside burrows.

Platypus are active nocturnal hunters, scouring the riverbed in their nightly search for food. Although platypus close their eyes to protect their vision while they swim underwater, they very much rely on vision to detect predators when they are swimming

or resting on the water surface. If the hotel is to be built beside the Wingecarribee it will no doubt be lit up like a proverbial Christmas tree at night. The unblinking glare of hundreds of bright white lights will undoubtedly prove intolerable to sensitive platypus eyes. Blinded by the lights, they will no doubt provide easy game for nocturnal predators like foxes and feral cats. Thus, intense sound and noise generated by the proposed hotel could prove catastrophic for these highly vulnerable and uniquely Australian native creatures.

The danger of such a disastrous outcome is not without precedent in the Southern Highlands. Scientists at the Garvin Institute in Moss Vale recently blamed construction noise and vibration for a 25% abortion rate in the laboratory mice being bred for human vaccine testing. Human interventions have already sent platypus numbers spiralling toward extinction throughout Australia. Their conservation status has been officially upgraded to “Near Threatened” and according to the authoritative Australian Platypus Conservancy, the decline in the platypus population could potentially approach 30 per cent of the total population over the next 21 years if current threats like nutrient runoff, litter, stormwater drainage and light pollution are not adequately addressed. I therefore strongly suggest that we must not wilfully ignore the dangers that this proposed development clearly poses to the Berrima platypus population and to our other precious native wildlife.

Platypus are not the only threatened native species which will be affected by the din of the hotel construction at Berrima. The Rakali (Australia’s distinctive black and white native water rat) also lives and breeds in riverside burrows at Berrima while wombats excavate their extensive underground shelters close to the river. Although the Wingecarribee is prone to severe flooding after continuous heavy rains, the river is generally slow-flowing and is susceptible to silting as it meanders through Berrima. My fear is that excavation and construction debris may well end up polluting the river, impacting water quality and increasing the risks to the native inhabitants. And of course, if the hotel is allowed to be built, the noise and habitat disruption it generates will continue indefinitely. Since 1788, 34 Australian mammal species have officially become extinct through habitat loss. I therefore ask that serious consideration be given to refusing permission for this contentious project to proceed.

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