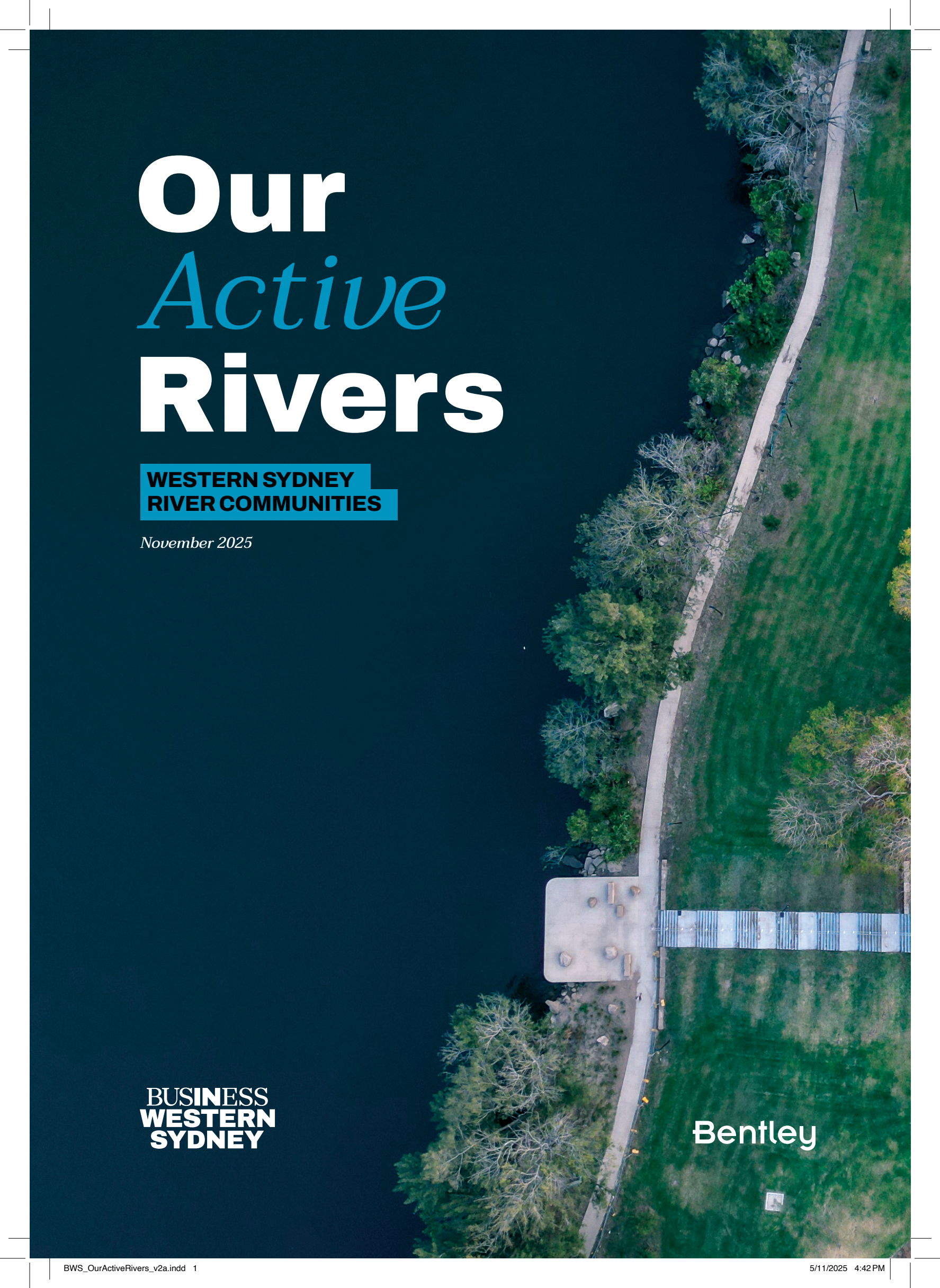


An aerial photograph of a river flowing through a parkland area. The river is dark and occupies the left side of the frame. To the right of the river is a paved path, followed by a grassy area with scattered trees and shrubs. A small concrete structure, possibly a bridge or a viewing platform, is visible in the lower right. The overall scene is lush and green, suggesting a well-maintained natural area.

Our *Active* Rivers

**WESTERN SYDNEY
RIVER COMMUNITIES**

November 2025

**BUSINESS
WESTERN
SYDNEY**

Bentley



THE RIVERS TASKFORCE



In October 2023, Business Western Sydney brought together like-minded partners to explore the role our urban waterways play in Western Sydney - and the challenges and opportunities in protecting and revitalising them.

That initial meeting laid the foundation for the Western Sydney Rivers Taskforce. It also sparked a shared commitment to advocate for better outcomes for our waterways, strengthening the social, environmental and economic wellbeing of our fast growing region.

All members of the Rivers Taskforce share the goal of creating stronger connections between Western Sydney communities and their waterways. However, they may not necessarily endorse every idea or activation proposed in this publication. Our aim is to challenge, inspire and start conversations, not to prescribe a single vision.





1920's - Georges River, Milperra



1917 - Nepean River, Camden



1880's - Parramatta River, Little Coogee

HISTORY

Reconnecting with Our Rivers

For tens of thousands of years, Western Sydney's rivers sustained the Dharug, Dharawal and Gandangara peoples. They were places to fish, gather and travel, shaping Country and community. These same waterways later shaped the city that grew upon them. For generations of new migrants to Australia, they were central to daily life and local identity. Yet today, we've grown so detached from our rivers that many of us forget they're even there.

The Parramatta, Nepean–Hawkesbury and Georges Rivers once teemed with swimmers and families escaping the summer heat – safe from surf rips, gathered around sandy beaches and jetties.

There was Little Coogee in Parramatta, Vale of Ah Beach in Bankstown and community carnivals along the Nepean in Camden. River swimming was simple, social and deeply tied to place.

But as Sydney industrialised, that connection broke down. The same rivers that sustained us were channelled, mined and fenced off. Sand extraction scarred the Nepean and Georges; tanneries and abattoirs polluted the Parramatta. Urban runoff made the water unsafe. Gradually our rivers were industrialised or privatised – and people were told to stay away.

The rivers that once defined us became the forgotten edges of the city. Now is the time to reclaim them – to re-embrace and re-imagine our connection to these waterways, and to learn once again to live with, on and in our rivers.



FOREWORD

Sydney is often celebrated as a harbour city, but in truth, it is a river city. The Nepean–Hawkesbury, Georges, Cooks and Parramatta Rivers, along with our great catchment lakes such as Prospect Reservoir, define Sydney’s western landscape. Yet for too long, they have remained largely an afterthought.

As Western Sydney’s population surges past three million and temperatures continue to rise, access to clean, safe and active waterways has never been more vital. While Sydney helped inspire the global Swimmable Cities movement, cities like Paris, Seoul and Chicago are now boldly reclaiming their waterways for swimming and recreation.

In October 2023, Business Western Sydney assembled like-minded partners to form the Western Sydney Rivers Taskforce – a coalition determined to bring that same ambition home. In September 2024, we published our landmark *Our Rivers* report.

Since then, concepts like “Pondi” in Penrith – the west’s unpretentious answer to Bondi – have captured the imagination of families. From Parramatta to Prospect, Macarthur and the

Hawkesbury, there is enormous potential to do even more. We believe every Western Sydney resident should be within a 20-minute drive of a clean, safe and natural swimming spot, complemented by nearby cafés, community spaces and facilities that make these areas vibrant places to cool off and connect.

Equity lies at the heart of this agenda. The late Mayor of Blacktown Tony Bleasdale was right to point out that inner-city Sydney enjoys world-class beaches and an abundance of swimming pools, while families in Western Sydney often face fewer options. In a culturally diverse region like ours, it is equally vital that water safety and swimming programs support Australians of all backgrounds, ensuring everyone can enjoy these spaces safely and confidently.

To its enormous credit, the NSW Government has embraced this vision, recognising the health, social and economic benefits that flow from cleaner, more accessible waterways. As our region gears up for another hot summer, this is an agenda whose time has come, one that every level of government and every community, should get behind.



David Borger

*Executive Director,
Business Western Sydney*



Nick Ryan

*Senior Policy Manager,
Business Western Sydney*

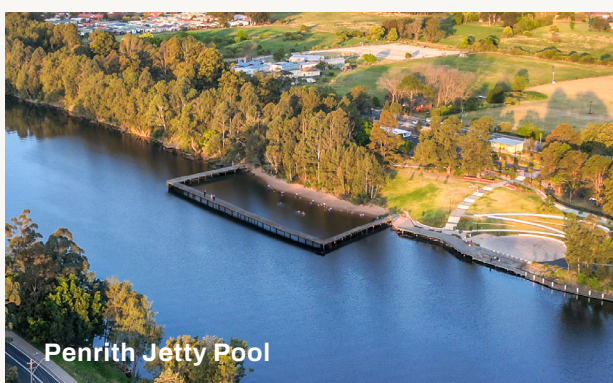


Matt Gijsselman

*Director - Infrastructure Policy
Advancement (APAC),
Bentley Systems*



THE SITES





RECOMMENDATIONS

1

For all levels of government to declare river health and water activation in Western Sydney a clear priority, recognising the enormous social, health and economic benefits that come from reconnecting communities with their local waterways.

A healthy river system is not just an environmental asset - it is vital community and recreation infrastructure for a fast-growing region.

4

Continue and expand funding for the Urban Plunge and Places to Swim programs.

These initiatives are opening new opportunities for safe, accessible swimming and play in urban environments, helping change the way people experience their local rivers.

2

Establish an Urban Rivers Leadership Group bringing together senior leaders from key departments and agencies to coordinate delivery and help accelerate the NSW Water Quality Governance Roadmap.

Western Sydney needs clear leadership and accountability to turn good plans into visible on-ground results.

5

Empower Sydney Water with greater responsibility for catchment coordination and management, similar to the role played by Melbourne Water.

A single agency with clear oversight can drive better collaboration, investment and accountability across multiple jurisdictions.

3

Introduce compulsory float and water safety lessons in all NSW primary and high schools.

As more of our urban rivers become safe and accessible for recreation, it's essential that every child has the confidence and basic skills to enjoy the water safely.

6

Recognise 'blue infrastructure' as eligible for State and Federal community grant programs, which often focus only on 'green infrastructure' such as parks.

Rivers, lakes and waterways deserve the same recognition and support as the open spaces that connect our communities.

GLOBAL EXAMPLES

Global Best Practice: The Swimmable Cities Movement

Even the world's most established cities are re-embracing their rivers. London, for example, has committed to making the River Thames swimmable by the mid-2030s – a bold, whole-of-city effort that signals how seriously major capitals now take water access, health and liveability. Sydney can't afford to fall behind.

Across the world, cities are transforming polluted or neglected waterways into clean, accessible and flood-resilient places for people to swim, paddle, walk and gather. This "Swimmable Cities" movement is driven by better design, smarter infrastructure and new digital tools that make managing urban water safe and transparent.

Modern water activation is supported by technology such as digital twins, sensor networks and real-time water-quality monitoring that track bacteria and nutrient levels, predict storm impacts and issue safe-swimming alerts. In Paris, for instance, daily sensors now determine when sections of the Seine are open for bathing. These systems are making what once seemed impossible, urban swimming in living waterways, both achievable and safe.

For Western Sydney, these global precedents show that:

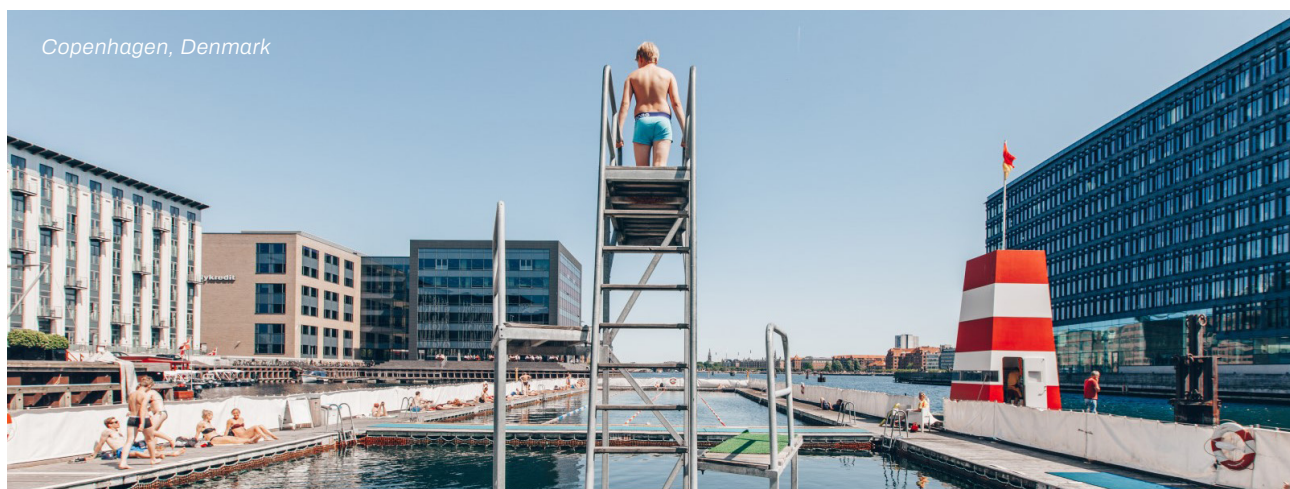
- ▶ Cleaning degraded sites is possible (as in Paris and Chicago).
- ▶ Building flood-resilient, inclusive infrastructure is possible (as in Copenhagen and Seoul).
- ▶ Swimming in potable reservoirs is possible (as in Scotland's Gladhouse and Colorado).

Together, they prove that restoring and re-activating rivers and lakes is not just about recreation, but about public health, urban cooling and community life. With the same ambition and smart digital infrastructure, Western Sydney can do the same, creating a future where its rivers and lakes are clean, safe and central to everyday living.



"Urban swimming brings together nature-first thinking and the idea of the right to swim."

- Chris Romer-Lee (Swimmable Cities)





PARIS
River Seine

Cleaned sections invite locals to dive in and rediscover the city's waterways.



CHICAGO
Chicago River

Revitalised riverfront provides safe, vibrant water activities beneath the skyline.



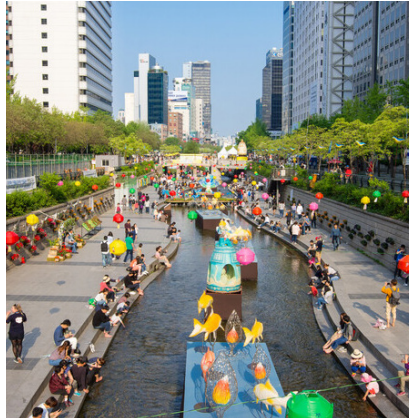
AUSTIN
Barton Springs Pool

Fresh spring-fed waters create a natural urban oasis.



COPENHAGEN
Harbour Baths

Transformed harbour invites accessible aquatic fun for all.



SEOUL
Cheonggyecheon Stream

Restored stream brings residents closer to nature and water-based play.



BRISBANE
South Bank Parklands

An artificial lagoon offers riverside leisure in the heart of the city.



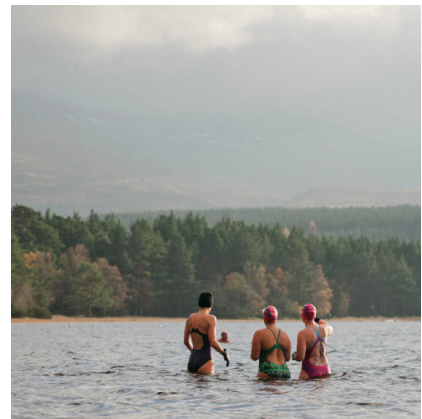
WAGGA WAGGA
Wagga Beach

River beach provides a relaxed, safe spot to enjoy the water.



COLORADO
Boulder Reservoir

Expansive reservoir supports swimming, boating and outdoor fun.



SCOTLAND
Gladhouse Reservoir

Serene paddling, wild swimming, and breathtaking natural views.

STRONGER COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL ECONOMIES

Economic and Social Benefits of Urban River Activation

Revitalising and activating urban waterways, including the rivers of Western Sydney, offers significant economic and social opportunities. Both Australian and international examples show that well-activated riverfronts can drive vibrant local economies, attract tourism, and support healthier, more connected communities.

- ▶ **Brisbane's Northshore Impact:** Brisbane's Northshore development is projected to contribute over \$14 billion to the Queensland economy, highlighting the scale of economic uplift a well-planned waterfront can deliver.
- ▶ **Barangaroo's Ongoing Success:** Sydney's Barangaroo, once an underused waterfront, is now a thriving precinct. It generated \$2.26 billion during construction and continues to deliver \$134 million annually, demonstrating the lasting economic benefits of urban water activation.

River Activation and Economic Growth

The economic health of communities can be greatly enhanced by embracing our rivers. By making them active and accessible, we open the door to new business opportunities, tourism, and a stronger local economy.

According to the 2025 report *Measuring the Australian Night-Time Economy*, Penrith's night-time economy has seen the fastest revenue growth of any Australian city, with a 13% increase in turnover between 2023 and 2024. This growth is likely driven by a mix of factors, but strategic

investment and activation along the Nepean River has been central. The new Yandhai Nepean Crossing, upgraded lighting and footpaths, new dining venues such as East Bank, the rebuilt Log Cabin and renovated Emu Hall, alongside major events like the Real Festival, have transformed the riverfront into a vibrant precinct.

While Western Sydney's night-time economy remains smaller than the more established city, its rapid growth demonstrates that river activation can deliver real, tangible economic benefits.

“Penrith’s success is a glimpse of what’s possible for every river city in Western Sydney. The strongest night-time performers across Australia are cities that meaningfully engage their waterfronts as places to gather, not just to view.”



- Dr Anna Edwards
Founding Director, Ingenium Research

The Economic Opportunity Lost: A Case Study of Time and Money

While the economic benefits of activating Western Sydney's rivers are clear, it's equally important to consider what's lost by not having these opportunities locally. Take a family from Blacktown, Campbelltown or Penrith. Right now, a day at the beach means driving to eastern coastal suburbs at least an hour each way. That adds up to lost time, fuel, tolls and parking, while much of their spending on food and activities flows outside their own community.

Now imagine the alternative: activated local riverfronts at places like Prospect Reservoir or a developed Penrith Beach. That same family could enjoy a day out locally, save time, reduce travel costs and keep their spending within their own area, supporting cafes, restaurants, shops and jobs.

Every undeveloped local riverfront is an opportunity lost, not just for convenience, but in real economic terms. By bringing these amenities closer to home, Western Sydney can ensure residents invest their time and money locally, strengthening communities and building a more resilient economy.

Building Community

Revitalised riverfronts don't just boost business, they spark new social and community life. Activated waterways create opportunities for entirely new local organisations to form, such as life saving, sailing, running and paddle clubs, fostering connection, wellbeing and local pride. They also open the door to events like farmers markets, art trails and seasonal festivals, transforming the water's edge into a gathering place for culture, creativity, not just commerce.

“Penrith has shown that a well-designed river precinct isn't a luxury, it's an economic engine. Investment in our waterways delivers double dividends: stronger communities and stronger local economies.”

- Ivan Power, Entrepreneur



SAFETY

Water Safety: A Western Sydney Emergency

Western Sydney faces a swim safety crisis – one that’s now a public health emergency. Residents from South Asian, Pasifika and Middle Eastern backgrounds are tragically over-represented in drowning statistics, making up the majority of drownings at both inland and coastal sites. The reasons are clear: the high cost of lessons, too few places to practise swimming and cultural barriers that keep families away from the water.

We need greater investment in school-based swim programs and community water safety initiatives – especially across Western Sydney. As Olympic champion and researcher Dr Shane Gould has shown, many Australians, particularly those from culturally diverse backgrounds, lack true water confidence and survival skills, even after taking formal lessons.

In her doctoral research *Swimming in Australia: A Cultural Study* (Victoria University, 2019), Dr Gould argues we must rethink what it means to be “swim-safe”. Instead of focusing on elite technique, she says we should teach people how to float, tread water and stay calm when they can’t touch the bottom. By helping people feel at ease in the water – before they learn to race – we can build a safer, more confident and more connected water culture.



“If we are ever going to reduce drownings, people must understand the importance of floating. Knowing why you must float and how to float is vital as it gives you the best chance of survival in deep water.”

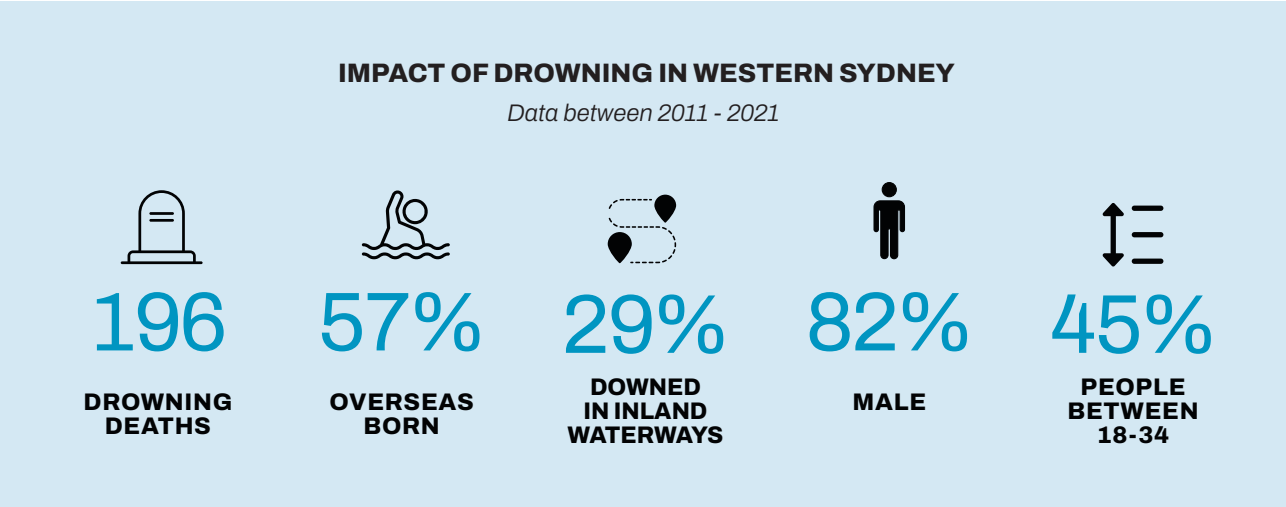
- Dr Shane Gould
former Olympic swimming champion



Angelica Ojinnaka-Psillakis is a Western Sydney writer and advocate whose reflections on learning to swim as the daughter of Nigerian immigrants highlights the importance of getting water safety and inclusion right for culturally diverse communities.

“Australia likes to believe it’s a nation of swimmers... But the reality is, many of us don’t have easy access to a beach or a pool. And even if we do, we don’t always feel safe or welcome in these places. Learning to swim was something I’d always avoided, but as the temperatures climbed each summer, I realised it wasn’t just about learning a new skill, it was about survival.”

- Angelica Ojinnaka-Psillakis
Writer and advocate



HEALTH

Health and Wellbeing: Why Activated Waterways Matter for Western Sydney

Sydney's health outcomes follow a clear east-west divide. The further from the coast and high-amenity waterfront you live, the higher the rates of chronic disease, heat stress and inactivity. Published in 2025, the *Sydney Morning Herald's* investigation "Where Are Sydney's Sickest Suburbs?" found Western Sydney residents face greater exposure to air pollution, higher summer temperatures, and lower access to green and blue spaces. Other reports highlight life-expectancy gaps of up to two decades between some in the west and those by the harbour.

Extensive evidence shows that proximity to water improves both mental and physical health. Simply viewing or spending time near rivers, lakes or beaches can reduce stress, improve mood and increase physical activity.

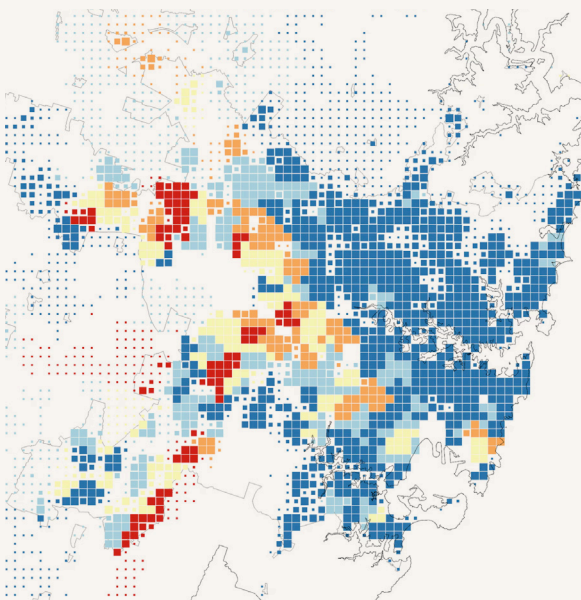
Activating Western Sydney's rivers and lakes would directly support better health by:

- ▶ **Encouraging active lifestyles** — swimming, paddling, cycling and walking all lower rates of heart disease, diabetes and obesity.
- ▶ **Strengthening mental wellbeing** — calm, natural water settings lower stress and anxiety and build community connection.
- ▶ **Reducing health costs** — healthier, more active communities mean less strain on hospitals and public health systems.
- ▶ **Improving heat resilience** — Giving people in Western Sydney somewhere to cool down on hot days is vital as average temperatures continue to increase.

Better access to rivers and lakes isn't just recreation, it's prevention. Closing the waterfront amenity gap can reduce health costs, narrow life-expectancy disparities and dramatically improve quality of life across Western Sydney.

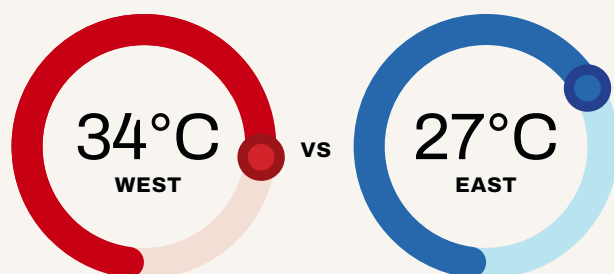
HEAT-HEALTH RISK INDEX

Map of Sydney, source: Australian Climate Service



SUMMER MAXIMUM AVERAGE TEMPERATURE

34 °C in the west versus 27 °C on the east

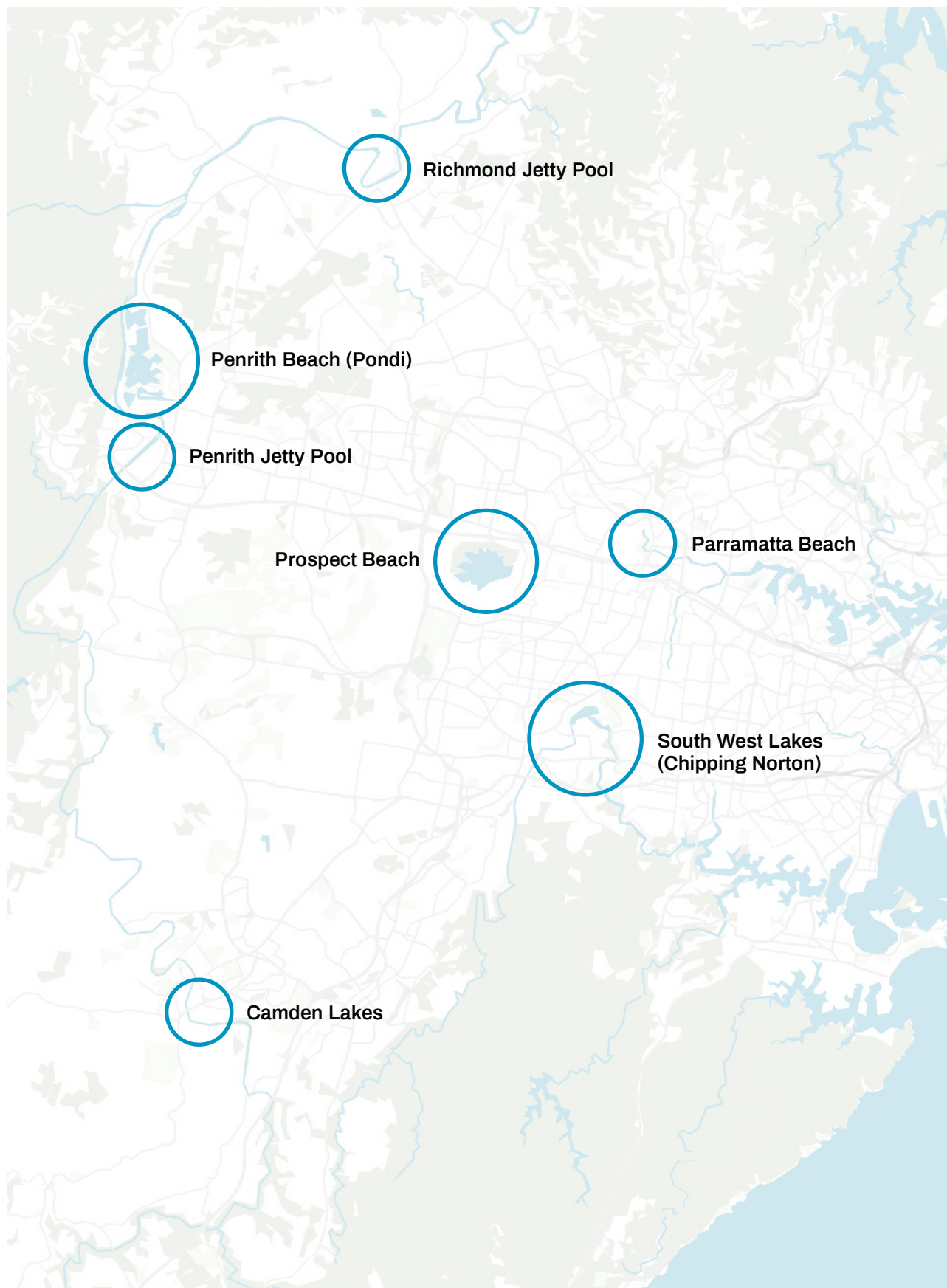


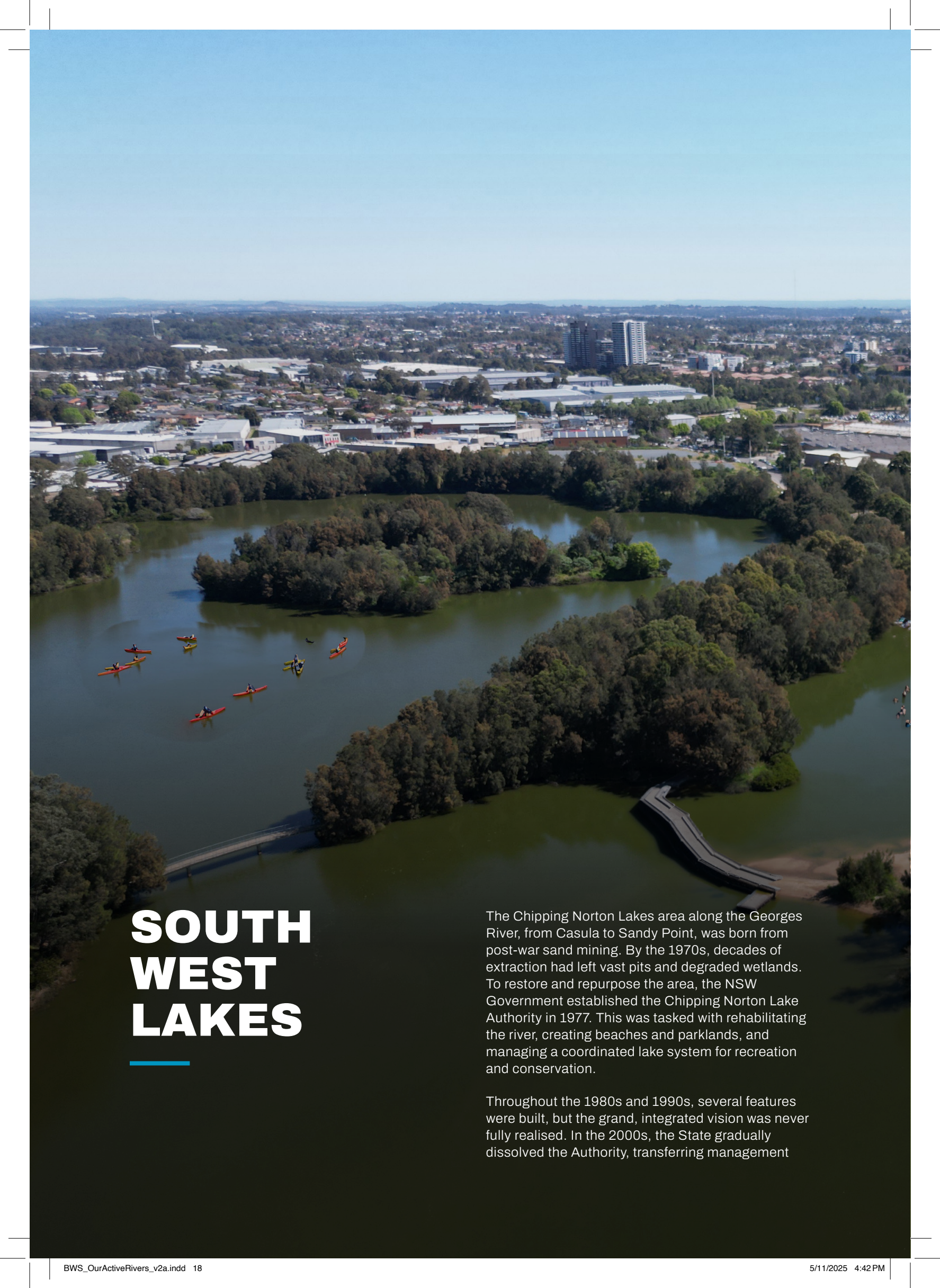
Source: The Bureau of Meteorology



Queanbeyan, NSW

MAP OF SITES





SOUTH WEST LAKES

The Chipping Norton Lakes area along the Georges River, from Casula to Sandy Point, was born from post-war sand mining. By the 1970s, decades of extraction had left vast pits and degraded wetlands. To restore and repurpose the area, the NSW Government established the Chipping Norton Lake Authority in 1977. This was tasked with rehabilitating the river, creating beaches and parklands, and managing a coordinated lake system for recreation and conservation.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, several features were built, but the grand, integrated vision was never fully realised. In the 2000s, the State gradually dissolved the Authority, transferring management

An aerial photograph of a wide river flowing through a city. On the left bank, there is a large, sandy beach crowded with people and colorful umbrellas. The river is filled with people swimming and wading. The right bank is lined with lush green trees. In the background, a city skyline with several tall buildings is visible under a clear blue sky.

of individual sections to Liverpool, Fairfield and Bankstown councils. Without unified governance or funding, the parklands fragmented into a patchwork of reserves, each maintained to different standards and priorities.

Poor water quality and environmental constraints have limited swimming and economic activation, while complex multi-council governance has stymied cohesive planning. Policy priorities shifted over time from recreation and tourism toward passive open space and environmental protection.

Today, the lakes remain a green lung for the South West but fall short of their potential as a signature

riverine destination. Reinstating a unified, state-led parklands authority modelled on the Western Sydney Parklands Trust would reconnect these landscapes, deliver coordinated environmental management and enable long-term activation. **The combined parklands would be approximately 500 hectares, two and half times bigger than Centennial Parklands.**

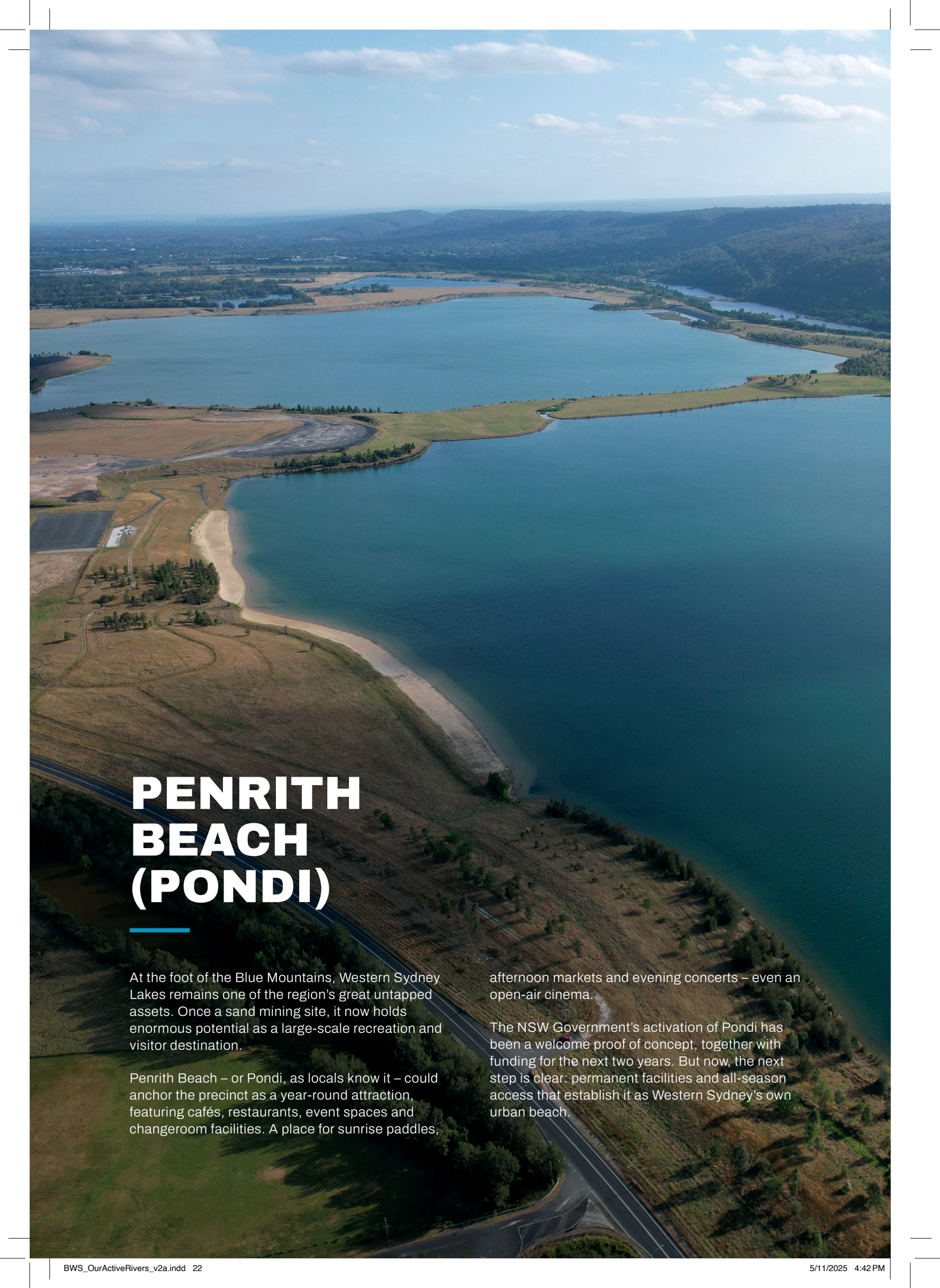
South West Sydney deserves parklands that truly serve its community. Better paths, new bridges, sandy beaches and the chance to build cafes and restaurants along the river would bring vibrancy and greatly enhance local amenity.

LANSVALE RESERVE, FAIRFIELD



SOUTH WEST LAKES MAP





PENRITH BEACH (PONDI)

At the foot of the Blue Mountains, Western Sydney Lakes remains one of the region's great untapped assets. Once a sand mining site, it now holds enormous potential as a large-scale recreation and visitor destination.

Penrith Beach – or Pondi, as locals know it – could anchor the precinct as a year-round attraction, featuring cafés, restaurants, event spaces and changeroom facilities. A place for sunrise paddles,

afternoon markets and evening concerts – even an open-air cinema.

The NSW Government's activation of Pondi has been a welcome proof of concept, together with funding for the next two years. But now, the next step is clear: permanent facilities and all-season access that establish it as Western Sydney's own urban beach.



Current State



Proposed Vision

PROSPECT BEACH

For decades, locals have called for public access to swim, walk and picnic at Prospect Reservoir. Governments have committed to opening what is effectively Sydney's biggest swimming pool, but progress has been slow.

Our proposal would create a 750-metre sandy beach with a sailing jetty, spaces for outdoor markets and festivals, and the adaptive reuse of disused buildings into a café, restaurant and bar. Ringed by parkland, Prospect Beach would sit

within a 25-minute drive of 1.6 million people – the population of South Australia – and at the true geographic centre of metropolitan Sydney.

Of course, there are complexities in opening a potable water source to the public, but many countries including Scotland and the United States successfully manage swimming access to drinking water reservoirs. If they can do it safely, so can we.



Proposed Vision



PARRAMATTA BEACH

Since the 1880s, “Little Coogee” on the banks of the Parramatta River was a beloved summer escape, a place where locals swam, picnicked and gathered beneath the gums. Our proposal for Parramatta Beach brings that spirit back, re-establishing a beach on the western bank while creating a larger public swimming area to the east.

Positioned beside CommBank Stadium, the light rail and soon-redeveloped Riverside Theatres, this site offers unmatched accessibility in the heart of Australia’s fastest-growing CBD. When the stadium

isn’t hosting major events, its car park could be repurposed for beachgoers, creating an urban swimming destination that’s easy to reach and designed for everyone.

The vision is simple but powerful: a shaded, lifeguarded river beach supported by change rooms and public facilities, where families can cool off by day and the riverfront comes alive by night. Parramatta was home to some of Sydney’s first public baths. This project revives the city’s proud heritage in a bold new way for the next generation.



Proposed Vision



Proposed Vision

CAMDEN LAKES

Spring Farm has a long history of sand mining, and while the area still needs remediation, it also presents a rare opportunity to create something remarkable. Just as Penrith Lakes and Chipping Norton have been transformed from extraction sites into valued community assets, Camden deserves its own riverfront destination – a project that restores the landscape and gives back to the community after decades of impact.

Located in the heart of the fast-growing Macarthur region, Camden Lakes has the potential to

become a regional landmark, attracting visitors while enhancing lifestyle and recreation for local residents.

The concept includes a Wagga Beach-style river beach, a circular swimming lagoon, and an extension of the Macarthur Bike Track linking Camden Airport, Menangle and Wilton. Together, these elements would turn a post-mining site into a natural playground where environmental renewal, recreation and tourism come together to leave a lasting legacy for the Camden community.





RICHMOND JETTY POOL



Set along the scenic Hawkesbury River close to Sydney's north-west suburbs, Richmond Jetty Pool would offer a safe, accessible riverside escape for local families and visitors alike.

Located within North Richmond Heritage Park, the design combines natural beauty with practical infrastructure: a secure swimming

enclosure with a protective net, providing a safe place to swim while accommodating the river's natural flow and flood events.

With sandy edges for relaxing, shaded spots for fishing and shallow areas where kids can play, Richmond Jetty Pool would bring life back to the river – a welcoming space for the whole community.

PENRITH JETTY POOL



Set on the western bank of the Nepean River beside Tench Reserve and the existing boat ramp, the Penrith Jetty Pool will create a safe, accessible and exciting new way for the community to connect with their river. Already a popular gathering spot on hot days, this project formalises what locals are already doing – making it safer, more inclusive and more enjoyable for everyone.

The design includes a walkable jetty platform where people can stroll, fish, relax or jump safely into the

water. It's about accessibility and recreation, giving people the chance to be on the river without being far from shore.

The Jetty Pool complements the natural beauty of Tench Reserve and supports Penrith's vision for a lively, inclusive and sustainable riverfront – a place where locals and visitors can truly embrace life by the water.



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