

10 July 2012

Parks and Waterways  
Sutherland Shire Council  
Locked Bag 17  
Sutherland NSW 1499

Dear Sutherland Shire Council

### **Comments on Draft Masterplan for Joseph Banks Native Plants Reserve**

In early 2009, Sutherland Group of the Australian Plants Society wrote to all Sutherland Shire Councillors expressing our concern about the neglected state of Joseph Banks Native Plants Reserve. In follow-up meetings with the Mayor, General Manager and senior staff, we raised the importance of a masterplan to guide the future direction of the Reserve. Thus we welcome the opportunity to comment on the draft Masterplan.

While we value improvements, the draft Masterplan is a missed opportunity which does not respect the existing planting and does not provide sufficient benefit for the allocated funds and the disruption required. It will create considerable unnecessary damage to established gardens while ignoring other areas more in need of improvement. Sutherland Group volunteers were recognised by Sutherland Council in June 2011 receiving the Volunteer of the Month award, but much of this hard work will be damaged, demoralising our volunteers.

While the principle of an all-ability access loop path is supported, the cumulative impact of the draft Masterplan will be to reduce and restrict the community's ability to enjoy and appreciate native plants throughout the Reserve.

Our concerns with the draft Masterplan are summarised below, and explained in detail in the following pages. We hope these concerns can be addressed in the final Masterplan.

#### **1. Paths**

- Keep more paths open to provide access to enjoy and appreciate native plants
- Provide new paths to open up access to new areas of the Reserve
- Redesign the all-ability path to minimise impact on Sutherland Group volunteer garden
- Fix or replace the steep path in the Rainforest area

#### **2. Entry area and car park**

- Redesign the orientation and entry gathering area (and all-ability path) to increase size of area and reduce impact on well-established Sutherland Group garden
- Relocate stormwater pond away from Sutherland Group garden
- Redesign the car park to increase parking capacity (not reduce it)
- Provide bicycle parking facilities in the car park

#### **3. Features and facilities**

- Retain existing water features near Information kiosk and in the Fern garden
- Relocate picnic tables from the Celebration terrace to keep the area open
- Retain picnic areas (tables/BBQs) in existing locations
- Relocate the escarpment viewing deck further to the west
- Retain bridge over water feature near Information kiosk

#### **4. Plantings**

- Improve the vegetation communities plan
- Maintain diversity of existing plantings in new plantings
- Protect plants during construction and monitor to minimise damage

## 5. Other

- Upgrade information display facilities including in the Information kiosk
- Retain access to water and electricity at the new entry/gathering area
- Provide storage for plant name labels in the new work compound (or alternative site)
- Provide email and internet access for staff in the new work compound

## 6. Implementation issues

- Identify priorities and stages of work including planting design detail
- Keep the Reserve open to the public during construction

We understand Council has allocated \$420,000 for Stage 1 works in 2012/13 and thus difficult decisions have to be made on priorities.

Our priorities for Stage 1 works are:

- Relocate the compound and build the new entry/gathering area (redesigned as suggested)
- Build the all-ability loop in the north of the Reserve (redesigned as suggested), but consider deferring the loop in the Sunny garden area in the south
- Build the deck off the Information kiosk
- Create the pedestrian entry off Bates Drive which only requires replacing the existing vehicle gate in the fence with a pedestrian gate (the proposed stairs are not required)
- Rejuvenate areas with new plantings
- Update picnic tables throughout the Reserve
- Update information and interpretative signage
- Don't waste money on car park changes which will reduce the size of the car park
- Don't waste money removing existing paths and picnic table areas (except as required for the all-ability path)
- Don't waste money removing ponds systems.

The two-page consultation flyer was not adequate for the purpose of fully informing the community of the nature of the proposed changes. On the map on the A4 size flyer, it was very difficult for our members to see the changes such as paths, ponds and picnic areas to be removed. Much important detail was simply not provided publicly such as the staging and cost of the works, the improved planting design, and surfaces. The Key Objectives note an 'improved planting design focussed on defined plant community areas' but these were not explained in the draft Masterplan.

In addition, the consultation period was less than 4 weeks as the document was not available on the Council website when advertised in The Leader on 12 June, not in the Council foyer until 19 June and not on display at the Reserve until 22 June. We made a request by email (on 20 June and 5 July) for an official extension of the closing date due to these delays, but have not received a reply on an official extension.

We are happy to meet with Council staff and consultants on site to discuss our concerns and proposed changes further. We look forward to working with Council to revise the draft Masterplan and implement improvements to Joseph Banks Reserve that will improve the community's ability to enjoy and appreciate native plants throughout the Reserve and justify Council expenditure.

Yours sincerely

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*These comments on the Draft Masterplan have been phrased as actions as changes to the draft Masterplan, grouped into several areas.*

## 1. PATHS

### **Keep more paths open to provide access to enjoy and appreciate native plants**

We are disappointed at how many paths throughout the Reserve are proposed to be removed. These paths are not redundant. A variety of paths is important to provide access and provide different viewpoints of the Reserve. Closing so many paths is not consistent with the idea of the Masterplan to improve access to the Reserve. Paths allow access to see plants. A variety of paths provides an incentive to return to the Reserve, rather than making a one-off visit having seen it all. Closing paths and path options reduces the mystery and sense of adventure, particularly important for children exploring the natural environment. Paths are also important for maintenance and help keep areas weed free by increasing access and visibility. We do not understand the value in spending scarce resources to remove existing paths.

Paths may be confusing to some users because there are currently no markings to indicate primary and secondary paths. Existing paths can be kept and marked with simple indicators such as painted dots on the path. We suggest that a hierarchy of paths is considered and displayed in signage.

Paths which should remain open include:

- Paths in the Mixed Proteaceae “Sunny garden” area. This area contains the most floriferous, colourful plants in the Reserve and is a popular part of the Reserve. Paths create small beds which allow plants, particularly smaller shrubs and groundcovers, to be viewed from different angles. The proposed single all-ability loop path creates a very large, deep central garden bed which will be difficult to view and access.
- Paths in the Mixed Shade garden area at the bottom of the Reserve
- Path and stairs between the Natural area and the Fern garden
- Paths in the Rainforest area in the north-east of the Reserve
- Paths in the Sutherland Group volunteer garden
- Path along the bottom of the Reserve along Bates Drive.

In addition the proposal to remove the path alongside the water feature near the Information kiosk would remove the most direct route between the car park and the new work compound. This will make it more difficult for staff to access the top area with wheelbarrows. This path is steep but could be redesigned.

### **Provide new paths to open up access to new areas of the Reserve**

The Masterplan is an opportunity to provide more paths to increase access to currently inaccessible areas and provide new experiences at the Reserve. Some of the new paths could be provided in a different material such as mulch/gravel/timber boards (not a hard surface) to highlight they are secondary paths.

Potential new paths include:

- Path from the Silver foliage garden into the centre of the Natural area to view remnant vegetation
- Path through remnant vegetation in the Mixed Proteaceae/Sunny garden area, connecting two existing dead-end paths at the southern end of the Reserve
- Path or walkway to replace the timber boardwalk around the cliff face below the Sunny garden area, to provide a view of the cliff-face and tree canopy
- Path and stairs from the Fern garden to the car park area under the cliff-line (already in place but often blocked).

**Redesign the all-ability path to minimise impact on the Sutherland Group volunteer garden**

The all-ability access path should be designed to reduce impact on the Sutherland Group volunteer garden. The new path could leave the new entry area to the east and swing further to the east into a less densely planted area, rather than directly through the Sutherland Group garden. Or the new path could leave the entry area to the west (not the east) and then join the existing east-west paved path in the Sutherland Group volunteer garden (instead of closing this path).

**Fix or replace the steep path in the Rainforest area**

The path from the Warm Rainforest area which provides access down to the Palm garden, the Silver foliage area and the lower areas of the Reserve, is one of the steepest in the Reserve, yet only the very upper portion is proposed to be fixed. Tree roots have disrupted the surface. This path should be fixed. The steep bitumen path could be replaced with a raised metal footpath (as seen in high use areas of National Parks) that would cross back and forth across the creek until it met the path again near the Silver foliage themed area. This would keep the steepness manageable. The path could be identified in the Masterplan as a later stage project, which would assist in applying for funding grants from external agencies.

**2. ENTRY AREA AND CAR PARK****Redesign the orientation and entry gathering area (and all-ability path) to increase size of area and reduce impact on well-established Sutherland Group volunteer garden**

We support the relocation of the work compound from the entrance and replacement with a new gathering/entry area. However, we are concerned that the shape and size of the area means it will not be useful for events, and also that it will encroach on well-established gardens maintained by APS Sutherland Group. This area, being most visible from the car park, will be the preferred location for events such as the annual Spring Walks day which includes plant sales, information displays and light refreshments. The area should be relocated further south more within the compound footprint to provide a larger space and more useful shape while minimising disruption to the existing garden. As it will be difficult to establish shrubs under the mature tree in the compound without affecting its root zone, this area could be retained as gravel, with seating under the shade of the tree.

The proposed all-ability access path should be designed to reduce impact on the Sutherland Group garden. The path could leave the entry area to the east and swing further to the east into a less densely planted area, rather than directly through the Sutherland Group garden. Or the path could leave the entry area to the west (not the east) and then join the existing east-west paved path in the Sutherland Group garden. There is much potential to redesign the entry area and path to minimise impact on the existing garden.

The entry area would be more usable if a lightweight cover such as shade sails was also provided over part of the area. This would protect groups, such as seniors waiting for their transport, from both sun and rain.

There is currently water and power available at this site due to the location of the work compound. It is important that this remains available as it is essential for using the space for educational and promotional activities. There is an existing 'bubbler'/ water fountain near the compound – one of only two available on the site. Will it be retained and/or relocated?

The location of the existing electricity pole relative to the new area is not clear from the draft Masterplan.

**Relocate stormwater pond away from Sutherland Group established garden area**

A new stormwater pond is proposed to be located in the garden maintained by APS Sutherland Group volunteers in the vicinity of a large tree and existing garden containing a native bee hive

purchased by Sutherland Group. The stormwater pond could be relocated further to the west, over the existing drainage channel, to retain the existing mature tree and established garden.

The proposed stormwater pond, together with the new gathering area and path removal and re-alignment, means the APS Sutherland Group garden, one of the most densely planted and labelled areas of the Reserve and carefully maintained by volunteers over many years, will be significantly damaged.

### **Redesign the car park to increase parking capacity (not reduce it)**

The redesign of the car park appears to reduce the size and capacity of the car park from its current status. The car park should retain at least its current capacity and allow for long vehicles. The car park currently has capacity for at least 12-14 vehicles, while the draft Masterplan shows 10 vehicle spaces and a disabled parking space. There is no provision for coach or minibus parking in the Masterplan. A bus bay could be considered outside the fence in Manooka Place.

The purpose of the small vegetation island in the car park is not clear, and it is likely to be difficult to maintain it in a healthy condition due to its small size.

The car park changes are not a high priority and should be deferred to focus on higher priorities.

### **Provide bicycle parking facilities in the car park**

The car park should include a designated area for parking bicycles and bicycle racks. There is currently no designated bicycle parking area. The Reserve is located close to the new Kirrawee-Sutherland-Menai cross-regional cycleway and is likely to increase in popularity as a cycling destination.

## **3. FEATURES AND FACILITIES**

### **Retain existing water features near Information kiosk and in the Fern garden**

It is disappointing that three and a half of the four existing water features in the Reserve are proposed to be removed/filled in – the feature near the Information kiosk, the feature near the Fern garden, and the lower feature in the Rainforest area. The Masterplan describes the ponds as dilapidated – this is only due to poor maintenance by Council. Council appears able to maintain reticulated water features at the Camellia Gardens. On a steep slope, there are natural water flows, and the water features and ponds are an important feature of Joseph Banks Reserve, particularly for water-dependent plant communities such as ferns and rainforest. They provide an opportunity to show water-dependent plants, and educate the community on the role of water in the landscape, aquatic ecosystems, and the relationship between flora and fauna. If the use of potable water to top up ponds is a concern, the provision of rainwater tanks could be investigated.

The water feature near the Information kiosk should be the focal point of the new deck extension off the Information kiosk, and should be fixed, not removed.

We support the removal of the small water feature in the Sunny garden area, but it should be replaced with an alternative feature or focal point, perhaps a Banksia garden to commemorate Sir Joseph Banks, or a memorial artwork/sculpture.

It is a priority that the water features should be fixed, not removed.

### **Relocate picnic tables from the Celebration terrace to keep the area open**

The proposal to increase the size of the flat terraces is supported. However, the ability for large groups to use the terraces for events will be significantly reduced if picnic tables are positioned on the terraces. Picnic tables should be located in smaller areas, not on a large paved area which

should be kept free for other purposes. The existing table could be retained in the existing area to the east of the Celebration terrace. Seating could be provided around the edge of the terrace, similar to now.

The terrace is already the best area for gatherings in the Reserve. The extensive work required to remove the existing pavers, dig out levels and resurface the whole area means this should be deferred to focus on higher priorities in areas more in need of improvement.

#### **Retain picnic areas (tables/BBQs) in existing locations**

The draft Masterplan proposes to reduce the number of picnic tables and BBQs in the Reserve by removing the ones in the Sunny garden, near the Cycad garden, and at the top of the stairs near the Fern garden, and concentrating tables in one area. Existing picnic areas throughout the Reserve should be maintained and replaced with new tables. Tables in multiple areas allow several different groups to enjoy the Reserve. If all tables are concentrated in one area, it reduces the number of groups who can enjoy the Reserve at the same time.

#### **Relocate the escarpment viewing deck further to the west**

The small viewing deck on top of the escarpment may be better located slightly to the west (about 5-10 m) of the proposed location. The corridor under the electricity wires will always remain clear for power supply reasons and may provide a better view corridor. It also allows a shorter, straighter access path off the main path.

The deck off the Information kiosk is a higher priority than the escarpment deck, as northern water views are already available from several locations in the Reserve.

#### **Retain bridge over water feature near the Information kiosk**

The wooden bridge provides level access between two major garden areas, and is a feature from which to admire the water feature we would like to see retained. We are concerned about the notation on the Masterplan to “investigate bridge removal and path re-alignment”. The bridge may need repair but should not be removed. We are concerned that many of the interesting features at the Reserve are proposed to be removed, and not replaced with anything of interest.

## **4. PLANTINGS**

### **Improve the vegetation communities plan**

The vegetation communities plan (existing and proposed) was not publicly available, but was provided to APS Sutherland Group on request. The map of existing vegetation communities does not show all the important plantings at the Reserve.

Existing plantings:

- The map does not identify the Palm area which currently has an interpretative sign.
- The existing area identified as “Western Australian” does not focus on WA plantings and in fact includes many trees around the water feature which prevent WA species.
- The identification of two separate areas as Flowering and Proteaceae/Myrtaceae in the south of the Reserve is an artificial distinction.

Proposed vegetation communities:

- WA plantings: Many trees would have to be removed from the water feature near the Information kiosk in order to create a sunny environment suitable for WA species. WA species do best on a north-west aspect, not an east aspect as the proposed area is.
- The warm rainforest in the north-west of the Reserve is not marked on the proposed map. Does this mean it is intended to remove all rainforest trees in this area and replant with indigenous species?

- Why is the cool rainforest (near the Fern garden) shaded in different colours on the existing and proposed maps?
- The proposed area identified for cycads does not include the current cycad garden. Is it intended to relocate all the existing cycads from their current location?
- The edible plants area would be better named as “Useful plants” to allow a wide range of plants to reflect indigenous use of plants.

The proposed vegetation plan does not identify a memorial garden for the Reserve’s namesake Sir Joseph Banks. This could take several forms such as:

- plantings of species Banks collected at Botany Bay in 1770, or
- plantings of Banksia genus species, or
- plantings of species named after Banks.

### **Maintain diversity of existing plantings in new plantings**

Currently one-third of the over 550 labelled plant species in the Reserve are from the Sydney region while two-thirds are from other areas in Australia (the list of plants is available at <http://sutherland.austplants.com.au> ). This allows the community to see a wide range of native plants which can grow well in Sutherland Shire conditions. We hope the diversity of existing plantings is maintained in new plantings. While local indigenous plants can be easily sourced from the Council Nursery, this will not ensure new plantings represent the diversity of Australian native plants such as new hybrids available for Grevillea species.

### **Protect plants during construction and monitor to minimise damage**

We are concerned about the very high risk of damage to established trees and plants in the Reserve during the construction phase, particularly as most of the construction work will occur in the most densely planted and well-established parts of the Reserve.

The changes in surface levels required to implement the all-ability path are also a high risk to both established and new plantings, as new paths will be sunken below the level of the surrounding garden beds or raised above the garden beds with sloping slides. It may be difficult to re-establish plants in these disturbed areas alongside the all-ability path as natural water flows and soil levels will be disrupted.

## **5. OTHER ISSUES**

### **Upgrade information displays including in the Information kiosk**

The existing information display facilities in the Information Kiosk should be updated. The existing display cabinets are old, outdated, dirty and difficult to access safely. The draft Masterplan refers to an extension of the roof and viewing deck at the kiosk but there are no other details.

The proposed location for an information sign in the entry gathering area seems remote from the car park. The main information and map should be located closer to the entrance of the orientation/gathering area, so it is more visible.

### **Retain access to water and electricity at the new welcome/entry area**

There is currently water and power available at this site due to the location of the work compound. It is important that this remains available as it is essential for using the space for educational and promotional activities. There is an existing ‘bubbler’/ water fountain near the compound – one of only two available on the site. Will it be retained and/or relocated?

### **Provide storage for plant name labels in new work compound (or alternative site)**

Currently unused metallic plant name labels, which are maintained and managed by APS Sutherland Group, are stored on a special table and rack in the existing work compound. A new site

for storing labels is required, either in the new Work Compound or preferably at the top of the Reserve, perhaps in the Information kiosk.

### **Provide email and internet access for staff in the new work compound**

It is important that Council staff at the Reserve have access to email and the internet for efficient work practices and to get information about native plants. This is particularly important if staff without a knowledge base in native plants are allocated to the Reserve. The new work compound should include an internet connection to provide access to the internet for staff.

## **6. IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES**

### **Identify priorities and stages of work including planting design detail**

The draft Masterplan flyer refers to Stage 1, Stage 2 and Stage 3 of works. However these are not identified on the draft Masterplan. The final Masterplan should identify which proposals are for Stage 1 and which are for later stages. Our priorities for Stage 1 are:

- Relocate the compound and build the new entry/gathering area (redesigned as suggested)
- Build the all-ability loop in the north of the Reserve (redesigned as suggested), but consider deferring the loop in the Sunny garden area in the south to a later stage
- Build the deck off the Information kiosk
- Create the pedestrian entry off Bates Drive – this only requires replacing the existing vehicle gate in the fence with a pedestrian gate. The proposed stairs are not required for access as there is an existing path from the fence.
- Rejuvenate areas with new plantings
- Update picnic tables and seating throughout the Reserve
- Update information and interpretative signage.

Removing existing paths and reducing the size of the car park is not necessary.

The Masterplan should identify future improvements and projects which are not currently funded. There are few new features or focal points proposed to increase the attractions at the Reserve. It is easier for both Council and the Australian Plants Society to seek funding from external sources for projects which have already been identified in a strategic plan.

The Key Objectives note an 'improved planting design focussed on defined plant community areas' but these are not explained publicly in the one page Masterplan. Even with the vegetation communities map, it is not clear how much new planting will be implemented in tandem with the landscaping work, and what proportion of the budget is allocated to plants. The vegetation communities map was not publicly available, but our comments on plantings are made above. Australian plants should be the focus of Joseph Banks Native Plants Reserve.

### **Keep the Reserve open to the public during construction**

We believe it is important to keep the Reserve open to the public throughout the construction phase, even if some areas of the Reserve are not accessible at some times for safety issues. Closing the Reserve will disrupt ongoing efforts by Council and APS Sutherland Group to increase promotion and awareness of the Reserve.