

Stories from the Flood of 10 Feb 2020

This document contains the narrative (stories) from residents, holiday home and caravan owners, and visitors at Lake Conjola of their experiences before, during, and after the flood of 10 February 2020 – i.e. how they felt and coped, what they did, how they feel about Conjola after the second major disaster to impact Conjola within 6 weeks.

A common theme in the stories and in speaking with people is the flood could have been avoided.

Arguably, an interpretation of several Council documents and policies would indicate that Council are required to undertake an investigation into the flood - refer to the 2013 Flood Study (section 5.2), and the Shoalhaven Local Environment Plan 2009 (Section 7.3), as well as Entrance and Estuary Management Policies. By undertaking an investigation Council will learn and minimise risks and impacts from future flood events. The community can assist by providing input to the investigation. The investigation will also provide useful input to the Lake Conjola Coastal Management Program.

Further, the Mayor has posted on her “Personal Opinion” Facebook Page “No inquiry should be behind closed doors - people need the opportunity for truth telling and healing and writing a letter is just not an option for many as they are so traumatised that’s the last thing they want to do” (refer 6 Feb posting).

With this in mind we need to capture the Conjola Community’s experiences before, during, and after the flood of 10 Feb 2020 for input into the investigation/enquiry that the community should rightly expect from Council.

We need to capture and record the personal impact of the flood. This is especially important given that this is the 10th flood at Lake Conjola since 2011, coupled with the trauma many residents experienced from both the bushfires on New Year’s Eve and from Dec18-Jun19 during the period of prolonged very high-water level, and threat from flooding, especially during the summer of 2018/19.

On every one of those 10 floods, Council have never implemented a planned opening; every intervention has been an emergency opening. The only non-intervention was the flood of 25 Aug 2015 when the lake opened naturally at 1.2m (and it resulted in the water level eventually reaching 2.14m).

If you would like your experience captured, feel free to email the CCA at conjola.community@lakeconjola.org or send a personal Facebook message to the CCA.

All personal information will be redacted from the document unless individuals state otherwise.

Some Snippets

1. Residents of Garrad Way were walking around the street at 3am on Monday morning, 10 Feb, in knee deep water (water level was 1.4m) knocking on neighbours doors alerting them to the flood, and telling them to move their cars to higher ground. Others were driving around blowing their car horn to alert people to the danger that the Lake was flooding.

2. The bushfires on New Year's Eve destroyed the Yatte Yattah Nursery, the home, the café and business of the owners for 28 years. They were left only with only the clothes they were wearing. The Conjola Community and others rallied to support them with accommodation, furniture, clothing, and even a car. But disaster struck again for them on 10 Feb. Their temporary accommodation in Edwin St was flooded, up to waste high, and again they lost everything. How they cope we do not know. They are now living in the house with a very generous resident.
3. I was speaking to the owner of an onsite van at the Waterfront Caravan Park at the Council Meeting on Tues 11 Feb who told me she had taken a week off work in Sydney to go down to Conjola to help others to clean-up after the flood. That is typical of the spirit of Conjola people, and why it is loved so much by residents, holiday home owners, and visitors.
4. Some Statistics: According to BOM the flood waters peaked at 2.0m at 11am on 10 Feb. At 11:30pm on 9 Feb, (11.5 hrs earlier) the water level was 1.0m, which under the failed Interim Entrance Mgt Policy is the trigger level for a planned opening. To be confirmed by Council survey, but I understand the height of the sand berm at the lakes entrance was over 2.0m, so it was always going to flood up to at least 2.0m unless the entrance was opened, especially with over 33,000 cubic metres of water flowing in from the catchment. Did Council calculate how much water would flow into the lake based on the expected rainfall? It should be simple math for the hydrologists and professionals employed by Council to calculate whether or not the Lake will flood.
5. **A media Release on Council website dated 10 Feb 2020 related to the flood states that the emergency level is 1.31m.** In fact, the Interim Entrance Mgt Policy 2013 states the emergency level is 1.20m. This is an indication of how "out of touch" Council is with managing the Lake and relevant policies.
6. All of the cabins in Deepwater Resort were flooded, some with water up to 1.0m deep. Whilst the cabins are designed to handle floods, an enormous amount of property was lost.
7. Story from a resident – our neighbor, an elderly lady, fell into the canal whilst trying to retrieve garden furniture as the floodwaters rose. She was fully clothed at the time. She is in her late 70s and her husband has a disability. He is not capable of saving her and he could have found himself in difficulties if he had tried to. There was very real potential for two elderly residents to drown.

John and Sue Newby

We have a cabin at the Deepwater Resort. We live in Sydney and were in Sydney when the floods happened. We were worried as it was evident the lake should have been opened when it was forecast that a huge rain event was going to happen. We have been through many floods over our time at Lake Conjola (my husband has been going to the same area for approximately 60 years). We were not surprised with the flood but were surprised as to the depth and extent of the flood. This seemed to be the deepest.

This was an unnecessary flood as it could have been avoided with the right decision to open the lake at that time, or earlier, and the lack of action over many years. We have been trying for years to have a permanent opening of the lake so these floods do not happen. Also, when the lake is not opened, the water quality deteriorates such that it becomes no longer an asset to be enjoyed but something to be avoided. The water quality results in death of surrounding vegetation, odours and it becomes toxic. This was exacerbated with the ash and debris from the fires.

As for our story about the floods.

1. As soon as we heard about the floods our nephew who lives nearby, went to see what could be saved. The road at that time was closed. He walked in but it was too late and his safety was the most important.
2. We were fairly lucky and lost a sofa, part of a bathroom vanity, and many, miscellaneous smaller electrical items which had to be discarded. We are not sure about the refrigerator yet as we are hoping it will dry out.
3. Then the clean-up started —two of us went down to clean the mud and discard many of the items 2 days after the flood. It was a mess, lots of mud, ruined walls and paint etc. and mould had already started to grow. We also cleaned another cabin where the family has a sick member and could not go to Conjola. You can imagine that was a stress they did not need.
4. We returned a week later to do more cleaning, mould removal and discard more things... So about 70 hours of cleaning activities which should not have been needed if the lake had not flooded.
5. This does destroy our sense of security and we continue to worry about flood. A plan has been submitted for a permanent opening but we have not heard at the time of writing that this had been approved. We feel there were selfish influences in Council that resulted in the tardiness in opening the Lake.
6. We still love Lake Conjola and will continue to go there but are aware we need the permanent solution to the problem.
7. We expect the State Government to help solve this problem by having a permanent opening to the lake and the Council should be supportive and should be positively involved. There has also been a major loss of income to local businesses and many other expenses to residents and holidaymakers that was totally avoidable. It should not have happened and came directly after the devastation of the fires. So many people have been affected twice. It is important to recognise that as well as the financial implications, the flood has definitely affected the mental well-being of all involved.

Resident

I had a terrible time while the water was rising trying to get furniture up and carry stuff upstairs all the time My husband who is very ill was trying to help. I heard someone on the main road honking their horn about 3am (turns out it was a neighbour warning the neighbour that the lake was flooding) I thought as it was a Sunday night it was some idiot going home!

I woke again at 4am and thought I would just check on the lake as it had been raining pretty hard Talk about wake in fright! The lake had broken its bank and water was starting to surround the house and coming up fast

First thing to get the cars to higher ground, running back down the hill in the rain and dark with the pump out sewer systems alarming it was not pleasant. I guess I was functioning on adrenalin lifting furniture up and emptying cupboards.

Having gone through floods before and experienced the slow to react efforts of the Council to protect us and hearing the weather predictions I had lifted most things in the garage a few days before. My sister on hearing this said to me I was crazy as the lake level was so low!!

We flooded in 2015 so I knew what had to go up and we had raised a few white goods off the ground on plinths. This flood was higher and was just centimetres off reaching the raised white goods. If the council

had waited till the low tide in the afternoon to open the lake we would have lost the lot! Shorty should be given a medal for putting his life on the line and opening the Lake on a high tide! He has been asked to do this too many times and it has to stop, before a tragedy occurs!

We knew we were in a flood zone when we built our house. I have been coming down here since I was sixteen and am now seventy-two so I know all about the floods! We would have built the lower floor much higher but the council regulations would not allow it.

The army did come around and I am grateful for their offer of help but my brother in law was already on the pressure cleaner. We do not have carpet or lino downstairs just polished concrete. Like I said we built knowing we could flood..... but every few years?!!!

This time the water was much dirtier with lots of little bits of what looked like burnt material. It has taken me over a week to clean cupboards and walls. I feel so sorry for my neighbour's holiday home completely flooded 2015 and now again in 2020

If this keeps up none of us will be able to afford flood insurance!

Yes, we also had a scare with the fires. Trees in front of our house were alight and only water bombing from a helicopter put them out as my son could not reach the flames with the garden hose. My husband and grandchildren evacuated to the beach on jet skis. So many people helped that day.

So, Fire and flood as much as I love the place! I know I will sometime in the future be on my own. I think I am a little depressed at the thought of having to cope with this all again and the constant threat of floods.

I will only have confidence in living here if the grant from the state government is awarded and the council is able to manage the planned entrance opening. Thus, relieving the residents, holiday home owners, caravan owners and visitors from the constant threat of floods during heavy rain events in combination with a closed Lake

Geoff Phillips

The flood we should not have had.

At about 04.50 am I received a call from the RFS Shoalhaven Duty Officer and as you can appreciate considering what we have just been through a call from the Duty Officer at that hour of the morning was a bit of a concern.

Still half asleep the, Duty Officer advised me that I was on standby as Lake Conjola was flooded and he would page the local Brigade plus Milton Brigade to assist with the SES. You can imagine my dismay and distress following the devastating destruction of the fires on New Year's Eve.

I left home in Marshall Ave about 05.10 to carry out an inspection of the local spots that normally flood in this situation.

First stop was the bridge over the creek near Milham Street, at that stage the water level was about 800mm under the roadway rising quickly and flowing into Pattimores Lagoon, rather strange I thought as the water was flowing in the wrong direction.

Moving west along The Entrance Road I found a river of water flowing along Milham Street again flowing out of the lake towards Pattimores Lagoon, this was also rising rapidly.

Turning into Milham Street and then proceeding down Garrad Way towards Deep Water Caravan Park the flooding had reached the entrance to the park and would soon be under water.

Returning to The Entrance Road I meet up with the SES and following discussions it was decided that due to the water level there was no point in trying to sand bag as all low-lying structures were inundated with flood water and our efforts would be better used around Carol Avenue.

It was not long before the flood water had covered the Entrance Road between the bridge and Aney St which was also under water.

By this time the water flowing down Milham St had become a fast-flowing torrent and unsafe for all but 4-wheel drives and trucks to drive through eventually we closed the road to all.

About 11.00 had a call from my wife suggesting that I should come home as flood water was waist deep around Darrel's shop and had surrounded our house and was rising quickly, fortunately I had a number of RFS personnel at the station and they all came around and we moved and lifted everything we could up off the floor and onto tables etc.

With water still rising all we could do was wait, with the water level about 100mm under the floor level it stopped rising and slowly started to recede, then as if by magic disappeared.

After the water had receded back to the lake, we carried out an inspection of the Holiday Haven Caravan Park and cottages along the water front, all low-lying cottages and most vans in the park had been inundated with between 600-800mm of water.

The community are very angry with council as we all knew there was an east coast low and how many time have we experienced it with the flooding rains but council seemed to think that nothing would eventuate and again ignored all the warning signs and as we have seen so many times ignored the residents of Lake Conjola.

The community owes a gratitude of thanks to Shorty Wheatly who I believe took his life in his hands to get his machine onto the beach and open the lake,

without Shorty a lot more homes would have been inundated including our own and imagine the insurance bill.

To me this event proves that keeping the lake open even with big seas and king tides it prevents all but low-level nuisance flooding.

We understand that council has approval and funding to maintain the opening but still they do nothing at great expense and inconvenience to the residents and the end result is we all pay more for insurance or have companies refuse to insure our properties.

Holiday Home Owner

I would be more than happy to give our account of the impact of the recent floods at Lake Conjola as we feel that council had an obligation as per the management polices to open the lake the day prior to the morning after flooding.

We reside in the beautiful Blue Mountains but also own a holiday house in the heart of Lake Conjola.

We left on the Sunday to return home before the floods on Monday but were very apprehensive as the forecast was for very heavy rain over a short period of time. We had over 400mms of rain where we live at Yellow Rock and knew that all the weather forecasts for this severe rain cell had been correct so far.

I told my partner, Alan who is a self-employed electrician that if I woke in the middle of the night that I would check the BOM for the lake levels. I woke around 3.30am and looked at the level of the lake. It was at around 1.35.

The emergency level for the opening at 1.2 but a quick look on Facebook made me realise that the lake had not been opened and flooding was imminent.

I woke Alan and told him to pack a bag & food and leave straight away for Lake Conjola. It took him 4 ½ hours to get there due to localised flooding at Albion Park and had to back track through Kangaroo Valley.

As I mentioned he is self-employed and he ended up spending 3 days getting ready for flooding, helping neighbours with securing their belongings and cleaning up & helping some of our neighbours with power issues afterwards.

He had to cancel customers jobs booked in for that period. We lost income!!

We do not have flood insurance and had a bore pump die and several other things damaged to the flood.

This should have NEVER been allowed to happen and this flood could have been averted if our council had stepped in sooner.

To add to all this was the bushfires prior, my mum passed away on the morning of these fires (we were already on fire watch since late October in our area and under a great deal of stress on every hot windy day set to severe or catastrophic fire rating & watching these fires moving ever closer on every side of where we live. I could not find out if we had also lost our holiday place as well until 1 day later. We had guests staying in the house at the time and they ended up having to cut short their nightmare of a holiday and leave on the Friday. I refunded half of their money due to what they had to endure.

I am so very disappointed in Shoalhaven City Council and several of their members for their lack of empathy and total disregard for what some many of the local residents have been through.

They need to take a leaf out of our mayor Mark Greenhill's book (Blue Mountains Mayor). He was amazing, compassionate and caring and was on Facebook every few hours with updates on the fires to put our minds at rest with correct & informative messages.

Holiday Home Owner

On 10 Feb 2020 our place flooded for the 10th time since we built in 2010, and this time we had 900mm of muddy, ash water in the lower level of our place. It took us a day to clean it out and dispose of all the rubbish – the 10th time in 10 years!! Frankly I am sick of it and sick of Council mismanagement of what was once a beautiful waterway.

But this flood could have been avoided if Council executed the response plan as per the Interim Management Policy. We have lost faith in the ability of Council to protect us from natural disasters. It would seem that Council staff do not know how to operationally manage a disaster. Would be a joke if it wasn't real.

A current RFS/Government advertising campaign states “You wouldn’t drive into a bushfire, so why would you drive into a flooded roadway?”

Similarly, you would prepare for a fire with manpower and equipment and alerts if a Catastrophic Fire Condition day is forecast, so why wouldn’t Council do likewise if a severe Weather Warning/ECL is forecast. Why didn’t Council ensure the sand berm at the entrance was at least lowered to a level that would prevent flooding.

I feel that our place is not safe with this Council in charge of managing the Lake.

Some Facts:-

- BOM issued a weather alert around Wednesday 5 Feb 2020 that a severe weather system would be moving down the east coast of NSW
- From rainfall recorded in the north coast of NSW it was clear a severe Low Pressure System was moving south down the NSW coast, so why didn’t Council enact an operational plan to open or at least lower the berm at the entrance, and BOM continued to issue alerts
- On 7 Feb Council issued a flood alert – ie they knew it was coming, and that is confirmed by the rainfall along the NSW coast to the north of Conjola
- BOM Rainfall data
 - Pt Macquarie – up to 9am Sun 9 Feb 2020 = 227m
 - Pt Stephens – up to 9am Sun 9 Feb 2020 = 120mm
 - Central Coast – up to 9am Mon 10 Feb 2020 = 295mm
- The Lake Conjola Catchment is 139sqkms, the Lake has a volume of 27,000 MLitres and has a surface area of approx. 6.7sqkms. Bendalong Rainfall in Feb was approx. 239mm. 239mm in the catchment is equal to 33,700 cubic metres of water – any wonder the lake flooded
- The notion that the lake floods regardless of entrance status is a nonsense. Rainfall in Mar 2017 was over 400mm, the lake was open at the water level did not reach 0.8m. Since 1999 the lake has not flooded from catchment rainfall if the entrance is open. Refer to BOM and MHL data, and the analysis of the data by CCA.

Holiday Home Owner

As the floods hit, I had just had an eye operation so I was unable to drive so as to see what was required to be removed/ repaired thus causing me some anxiety

I am 70 years old, and I've had to rely on friends/ family to assist me as I'm a double below knee amputee which made me feel ashamed that I could not do it myself

At the moment I feel very irate against the council as to their lack of action and the way they treat the community of Conjola

This incident was totally avoidable as was the one before this. This is getting the people of the area and visitors starting to have second thoughts about staying in the area if this inaction is going to continue in the future

PS I've been coming to Conjola for over 43 years and I'm starting to have a real thought about going

Holiday Home Owner

My personal flood story is that:

It became obvious that the Lake would flood late Sunday.

I drove down to the lake on Monday morning arriving at about 10am

At that time water had flooded the garage but none had entered the ground floor of the house.

While there was no more rain water level continued to rise and about noon entered the ground floor of our house.

I managed to move or jack up most items that could be damaged.

It was incredibly frustrating knowing that the flooding was the result of the lake being closed and that, in spite of the warnings that bad weather was imminent, the council had obviously done nothing to reduce the height of the entrance berm.

Flood water level in the house was 3-4 cm. Lake level was apparently in excess of 2 metres.

Not long after, I received a message that the lake had been opened – and it soon became apparent that the water level was receding.

Flood water got under the loose laid lino on our ground floor.

Later in the afternoon time wife and two sons arrived to help with removing the water and lifting and cleaning the lino.

A group of 5 soldiers arrived and helped us move things about. We were very grateful for their assistance. The recent fire and flood have diminished my perception of Conjola as a safe haven.

Lake Conjola Resident

We were at home during the flood. Our day started at 4am when we were asked to move our cars to higher ground by the SES. Our house is 2 storey and we had moved as much stuff to higher places as we could the day before. We spent the morning securing our 3 kayaks, canoe and bins and watching the water rise until it was 5 bricks deep inside the house, approximately 400mls. We had been warned to expect more than 200mls of rain. By midmorning we lost power and internet, leaving us with only a transistor radio. We heard through neighbours that the lake was opened around midday and the water dropped. We watched it gush in white water past the reserve at our back boundary. By 5pm the house was drained and our clean up began.

Our neighbours helped with the clean-up, taking sodden furniture to the tip after the Army had moved heavier objects on to the verge. There was no follow up pick up by SCC. How is a 70 year old ratepayer is expected to move sodden lounge, mattresses and cupboards alone? After having been through the fires of 31/12 together our community is good at helping out each other.

After the fires, the flood felt doubly traumatic, most of it caused by the feeling of being abandoned by SCC to our fate, which was to flood. There was ample warning of the amount of rain we were to receive. The previous week we had been invited by the SES to learn how to sandbag. They knew it was coming. SCC had ample time and the clear authority from the Premier to open the lake yet still they did not act to prevent the flooding of the village of Lake Conjola until it was too late.

We bought this house in 2017. We researched SCC's management plan which said they council would open the lake when it reached the declared level to relieve the risk of flood. We put our faith in SCC and we have been severely disappointed. The history of the management of Lake Conjola is poor reading. The management plan has been interim for more than a decade and does not do what it says. Local residents feel less important than shorebirds and a single shark when it comes to the management of the lake. There

is a sign at Lake Tabourie that says “*SCC opens the lake entrance at much lower levels than would naturally occur*” to prevent flooding to low lying houses. Why can we not have the same commitment? There was an intervention point at which the lake was opened last year and no flooding occurred. Why didn't this happen recently when forecasts predicted very high rainfall? Not even preparatory work was done.

The facts for us are clear: the flood was predicted in time for the lake to be opened and the risk of flood reduced for us low-lying residents and campers. SCC managed to arrange the opening of the lake at the height of the flood, so why couldn't it have been done in the days before when it would have been so much safer and of use to our community? Instead of being cautious with our flood safety we feel SCC has been reckless.

We have lost furniture, appliances and personal stuff. We are still waiting for an insurance assessor. Our restoration of our downstairs will be huge, expensive and will take some time.

We chose to live here because we like it but our faith in SCC to take our flood risk seriously and act in a timely fashion has been shaken. This is a residential area and it is SCC's responsibility to take care of us as per an effective management plan that works to prevent exactly what happened on 10/2. Thanks to the efforts of our community, Patricia White and Shelley Hancock we may have a solution.

Lake Conjola Resident - No Leadership and Mismanagement

My Christmas at Lake Conjola that my family and I love, and have loved for 45 years

It started with the lake closed the water not as it has been in the past i.e. clean water flowing in and out.

Yes, lakes close from time to time when sand moves up the east coast from south to north, sand in, sand out. However, having observed many things that have changed the lake – not natural events – first 30 odd years ago an oyster farm was put in the lake opposite the liquor shop. I saw the channel move & move many tonnes of sand to the entrance (I can give you many issues of this cause. i.e. Council spent many taxpayer's dollars preventing the shoreline from eroding any further).

Then came 12 years ago and the councils mismanagement opened the lake in the wrong place - many thousands of tons of sand fell into the entrance including the council board walk to our beach (not good use of my rates) so now we must dredge this non – natural sand in our entrance (we must help nature).

Back to my Xmas holiday – my friends and family saw the bush fire of west Conjola spread rapidly down the lake. My family members with neighbours rescued people off the shores of west Conjola, with them moved to the beach - we saw people helping people, helicopters were water bombing saving Conjola homes, caravan parks etc (never we'll forget.) Then the next 3 days – no power, no phones, roads closed and couldn't evacuate. If the entrance was open, we could have gotten out by sea. I have gone through the entrance many, many times and although my family and friends were all lucky enough to be safe (the most important thing) others and their homes were not.

We were fortunate to have accommodation at Conjola and gave it to a couple who lost their home in the fire. Then due to a lack of leadership, inaction, terns, and common sense prior to the rain event warning to the Shoalhaven council Conjola flooded (at 3AM that morning they were woken up, stepping out of beds in knee high water). This flood was caused by councils' mismanagement and leadership has cost their rate payers at Conjola hundreds of thousands of dollars.

So here we are. I attended a council meeting 5 weeks after the fire at Conjola's council GM Councillors had not found a place for the rubbish of the burnt homes (does the council think it will just go away? A councillor had concerns trucks coming with contaminated waste to asbestos tip may impact on residents BS). Not sure if today we have a solution 4/3/20. When or if the clean-up starts It was stated by Darren Hubscher from Lang O'Rourke - the clean-up contractor, first private homes and last business. How good is that for people who get their income from that employment (no work for a year or 2?).

The council GM Mr. Steven Deinshea made a fine gesture – no DA or CC fees to be charged.

But how long to process these applications. 1 week, 1 month? If like the Wollomai Boat ramp - a growing industry in mussel farming, 4 years in council with no final plan (leadership can make it happen). Simply put all parties in a room, compromise and leave the room with a solution.

I could go on but these are extraordinary events and needs extraordinary actions and leadership.

Let me tell you about my experience with leadership on the October long weekend 1989 and I was at Conjola when news reached me that my business was on fire, we rushed home to Wollongong and watched my fathers and family's business burn to the ground. At 11pm the Lord mayor of Wollongong was there for support and ask us to call him the next day and see what he and council could do to help. I rang him and said I want to rebuild straight away. On Tuesday I met with the Lord mayor, GM department heads of relevant departments and told the meeting that I wanted to rebuild immediately, to complete contracts and keep employees employed. We were lucky and unlucky as we were uninsured. There and then the council showed leadership & gave me approval to start Building. Site was cleaned, concreted floors poured & factory erected in 3 weeks. This leadership from council saved our business, now into 4th generation. No employee lost their job. All contracts were complete and since 1989 we have added to the economy of Wollongong.

Shoalhaven council we need this leadership.