

# ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

ACCORDING TO AN  
ABORIGINAL PROVERB:

“We are all visitors  
to this time, this  
place. We are just  
passing through.  
Our purpose here is  
to observe, to learn,  
to grow, to love...  
and then we return  
home.”<sup>1</sup>



## OVERVIEW

People of the Monaro and Yuin nations are the original inhabitants and custodians of the land and waterways of southern New South Wales from Cape Howe to the Shoalhaven River. The groups of Yuin communities living in coastal areas are known as the Katungul, from the word ‘Katung’ which means the sea.<sup>2</sup>

The area we now know as the Bega (Biggah) Valley Shire is the traditional country of a number of Aboriginal communities with distinct cultures and language groups including, the Bidawal, the Thaua, Ngarigo and the Djiringanj.

*“Sites throughout the Shire demonstrate occupation by these rich cultures to be in excess of 6,000 years. These people nurtured an organised and active culture many thousands of years older than the creators of the great pyramids of Giza did or the medieval monuments of Stonehenge did. Some of the oldest physical records of human occupation*



*and activity to be found anywhere in the world are located beneath our noses here in the Bega Valley Shire.”<sup>3</sup>*

Aboriginal people see their culture and heritage as an important part of their modern day life in having that connection to the land and its people. Culture and heritage provides a tangible link and evidence for Aboriginal people’s existence in today’s modern society. Being able to sustain the existing Aboriginal culture and heritage keeps Aboriginal history alive and in existence for future generations.

## A TROUBLED PAST

It is important to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the Bega Valley Shire. Furthermore, it is also necessary to remember that the policies of colonisation during the last two centuries included the forced removal of many Aboriginal people from their lands and families onto missions or stations.

The largest Aboriginal Protection Board Station on the far south coast was located at Wallaga Lake to the north of the Bega Valley Shire. Many Aboriginal families were forcibly removed to the reserve at Wallaga Lake from other areas. Other families moved to the area because of the availability of work. This means that many Aboriginal people from the Monaro, other parts of Southern New South Wales, Victoria and beyond, now call the Bega Valley Shire home.

The impact of colonisation and the disruption this caused to Aboriginal culture and communities still affect the lives of Aboriginal people today. There has been a troubled relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities in the Shire since white settlement. Segregation and racism has long been a feature of the treatment of local Aboriginal people:

*“Many Aboriginal children excluded from schools on the Far South Coast simply went without schooling. Segregation in schooling was complemented by segregation in*



*housing and entertainment. No Aborigines lived within the township of Bega and those who were not at Wallaga Lake or on farm properties camped on the river bank. Aborigines were not allowed inside hotels. At the picture show, they sat in a cordoned off section of the front stalls...*"<sup>4</sup>

However we also know that Aboriginal people played an essential role in the establishment of early industries such as whaling and fishing in Eden. In Bega the agriculture industry grew from the labour of Aboriginal people in the bean fields planted along river flats surrounding the town. Employment for Aboriginal people, however, was always in jobs white people did not want. It was predominantly seasonal, poorly paid and difficult manual labour.

Many Aboriginal families in the Shire have also been affected by the forced removal of children. Now known as the 'Stolen Generations', the State endorsed removal of Aboriginal children from their families into institutions and orphanages or fostered out into non-Aboriginal families has caused further dislocation of Aboriginal culture and enormous distress and sorrow for Aboriginal communities. The dispossession experienced by Aboriginal people is clearly evident in the disadvantage and poverty they still face, the social problems present within communities and the poor living conditions many Aboriginal families still endure.

On 13 February 2008 the Federal Government gave the Apology to Australia's Indigenous peoples and said sorry for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country.<sup>5</sup>

## IN THE BEGA VALLEY

On Census night, 9 August 2011, Bega Valley Shire's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population was counted as 905 people, of whom 874 were Aboriginal and 17 were Torres Strait Islanders, 14 identified as both. Bega Valley's Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander population made up 2.8 per cent of its residents. Across NSW Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people made up 2.5 per cent of the population.<sup>6</sup>

Closing the Gap is a Federal Government strategy aimed at reducing Indigenous disadvantage in a range of areas, including life expectancy, child mortality, access to early childhood education, educational achievement and employment outcomes.<sup>7</sup>

The Census conducted in 2011 also highlights some of the inequities that still exist between local Aboriginal people and the non-Aboriginal people in the Shire.

These figures reflect the situation in other areas of Australia. Aboriginal people in the Bega Valley Shire are more likely to be unemployed, less likely to live in their own homes, will not live as long and will have less access to education.

## THE SOCIAL ISSUES

### Health

The health of Aboriginal people in the Bega Valley Shire continues to reflect disturbing national trends. When comparing the ages of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the Shire it is clear that life expectancy for Aboriginal people is much lower than for non-Aboriginal people. Only 4.8% of the Shire's Aboriginal population are aged over 65 years, while 21.7% of non-Aboriginal people are aged over 65 years.<sup>8</sup>

Such a small proportion of the Aboriginal population aged over 65 years is an indication of continuing earlier death rates for Aboriginal people due to poorer health outcomes and lifelong disadvantage.

Smoking is the primary cause of chronic disease among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In 2003 smoking was responsible for one-fifth of deaths and accounted for 12 per cent of the total burden of disease among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.<sup>9</sup>

## Supporting Aboriginal Families

The impacts of family breakdown and welfare dependency disproportionately affect Aboriginal families in the Bega Valley Shire and Aboriginal family support remains an area of unmet need. There is a growing need for more services to work actively and efficiently with Aboriginal families. The introduction of a number of early intervention services in the Shire have been a positive move and have made some inroads into the issues. However, feedback from these services suggests that more resources are required to make lasting improvements.

The NSW Government has recently introduced the Keep Them Safe initiative. One of the aims of this project is to reduce the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and young people in the child protection and juvenile justice systems.<sup>10</sup> Local initiatives include the Brighter Futures Program and Family Case Management.



## Housing

Housing related stress is a significant issue for Aboriginal communities. This stress is caused by discrimination, inappropriate housing stock, poverty, over-crowding, and poor housing infrastructure and amenity. Many Aboriginal families experience over-crowding due to the mismatch in housing allocation to the needs of families and their responsibilities to extended family.

In relation to housing, the biggest difference between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous households in the Bega Valley is that approximately 36% more Indigenous households were rented and 27% fewer were fully owned, while nine per cent fewer Indigenous households were being purchased. Overall, approximately 29% of Aboriginal households in the Bega Valley lived in social housing, compared with only 3.4% of the broader community living in social housing.

There is a need to expand the amount of social housing stock for Aboriginal communities. This housing could be provided through a range of management arrangements such as community housing, public housing and Aboriginal controlled housing. Public and community housing providers need to work closely with Aboriginal communities to ensure appropriate housing and management is provided. Aboriginal communities need to be sufficiently resourced to enable them to appropriately manage and maintain their own housing.

## Drug and Alcohol/Gambling

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience a disproportionate amount of harm from alcohol, tobacco and other drug use. Drug-related problems play a significant role in disparities in health and life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

The results of the 2004 National Drug Strategy Household Survey highlight the disproportionate rates of substance use

and harm among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across the country.

More than one in five Aboriginal people drank at levels that put them at high risk of alcohol-related harm in the long term. Two in five drank at levels that put them at high risk of alcohol-related harm in the short term. Illicit drug use among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is also significantly higher than for other Australians.<sup>11</sup>

Drug and alcohol abuse remains a significant problem for Aboriginal people in the Bega Valley, consultation with local services suggest the national experience is reflected in the local area. Substance misuse causes serious harm to physical health, and it can be argued, possibly even more harm to the social health of individuals and the fabric of communities.<sup>12</sup>

Problem gambling was also raised during consultation as an issue for the local community. Research indicates that high rates of economic disadvantage, unemployment, lack of alternative recreational activities and high levels of drug or alcohol problems within the communities are all predictive of social gambling having the potential to become problematic gambling.<sup>13</sup> These conditions all exist for the local Aboriginal community.

In addressing issues of drug and alcohol abuse and gambling it is imperative that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are centrally involved in planning, development and implementation of strategies.

### Employment, Education & Training

On average, Indigenous people tend to leave school earlier and consequently, fewer gain tertiary qualifications. Two indicators of educational inequity are the average number of years of schooling, and the proportion with tertiary qualifications.

In 2011, 19.4% of Bega Valley's Indigenous residents aged 15 or over

had completed Year 12, compared with 37.8% of non-Indigenous residents.<sup>14</sup> This represents an increase from the previous census however it is still well below the figures for the broader community.

Higher labour force participation means more income earners, so this is an important indicator of well-being and supports the broader local economy. Of the local Indigenous labour force, approximately 35% were unemployed, giving an unemployment rate of 17%. This rate was much higher than the 7% rate among non-Indigenous residents.

New initiatives such as the Community Training Partnerships (CTP) are developing pathways for young people to access education, training and employment in the local area. There is a strong focus in the Aboriginal community on this program.

There are also a number of land based projects developing employment opportunities for Aboriginal people across the Bega Valley Shire. One of these projects is the Bundian Way, a traditional walking track once used by Aboriginal people, connecting the Snowy Mountains to the ocean around Eden. In time this will create employment opportunities in the area of cultural tourism for the Aboriginal community.

### STRENGTHS IN THE BEGA VALLEY

There are strong and vibrant Aboriginal communities across the Bega Valley. There are a significant amount of respected Elders across the Shire who are strong leaders for their communities. More and more young Aboriginal people are completing year 12 and demonstrating that the future is positive.

Merrimans, Bega and Eden are the three Local Aboriginal Lands Councils covering the Shire. NSW Aboriginal Lands Councils aim to protect the interests and ensure a better future for the Aboriginal community.<sup>15</sup>

The Monaroo Bobberrer Gudu Keeping Place (Jigamy Farm) is a cultural centre



located outside Eden. It is situated on over 150 acres and offers group cultural experiences with outdoor recreation facilities, learning spaces and a walking trail.<sup>16</sup> The Aboriginal community is also developing a youth camp at Jigamy Farm.

Located just to the north of the Bega Valley Shire is the Umbarra cultural centre near Wallaga Lake. While this is not currently operating as a cultural centre it presents a great opportunity for the Aboriginal community into the future.

The Aunty Jean's program is a successful health model for many Aboriginal elders in the Bega Valley. It was built around the consideration that better results would be seen if the community could work together for better health outcomes, with the Elders leading the way.

The Healthy for Life program is another strength in the Bega Valley, which incorporates Aboriginal health workers and nurses working with local GPs and other primary care practitioners to improve the health of Aboriginal people, the focus is on child and maternal health as well as prevention and management of chronic disease.

There are also a growing number of Aboriginal specific services operating in the Bega Valley Shire addressing such issues as health and wellbeing, drug and alcohol and other programs targeting children and families. Katungul Aboriginal Community Corporation and Medical Centre and Wandarma Aboriginal Drug and Alcohol Service are two Aboriginal specific services operating in the Shire.

Along with Aboriginal specific services there are a large number of Aboriginal specific positions and skilled workers throughout the community sector. The Koori Interagency Network (KIN) is an interagency for workers across the Shire that is working with members of the Aboriginal community. The Network provides a forum for the sharing of information and ideas and supports the individual Aboriginal workers in their roles.

## THE CONSTRAINTS

The Aboriginal community still faces significant disadvantage compared to the broader community. This suggests that there are still systemic issues preventing Aboriginal people from accessing basic human rights such as health, housing, education and employment.

Aboriginal people are still subject to racism and prejudice in many areas including housing and employment. There are a number of innovative programs operating in the Bega Valley Shire to address this level of inequality. However, it is critical that all levels of Government work harder to address the inequities between the Aboriginal people and the broader community.

## THE OPPORTUNITIES

There are a number of key areas, based on consultation with the Aboriginal community, which would begin to address the social inequality that exists in the Bega Valley Shire.

Greater opportunities for economic development growth around projects managed and delivered by Aboriginal people and organisations can deliver positive outcomes for employment and self esteem amongst the community. There is also potential to foster partnerships, with government and non-government agencies, that support the Aboriginal community to develop lands that they own (eg. Bundian Way).

There is a need to further develop employment and training pathways for young Aboriginal people to keep them engaged with their community. This is particularly significant in the retail and tourism industries where employment of Aboriginal people is relatively low.



## WALKING TOGETHER WITH ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY

Aboriginal culture, heritage and having a connection to the land and its people are essential for Aboriginal people.

Amongst the community there is a growing recognition of the importance of Aboriginal culture to the whole community.

It is evident that there are an increasing number of organisations incorporating cultural awareness into their corporate training calendars. Furthermore, numerous organisations are now also including a Welcome to Country at important events and openings.

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### SOCIAL ISSUES PAPERS

This document is part of a broader Social Issues Paper produced by the Bega Valley Shire Council. To read the document in its' entirety go to [www.begavalley.nsw.gov.au](http://www.begavalley.nsw.gov.au)

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