The Narran Lakes area has been occupied by Aboriginal people for thousands of years. This is evident from the many Aboriginal sites, which include shell middens, hearth sites with clay ovens, quarries, rock wells, scarred trees and burial sites. The Aboriginal people of the Narran area are known as the Yuwalaraay or Euahlayi. Their traditional lands extend from Angledool in the north, to Walgett in the south, to the Birree and Bohkara rivers in the west.

The Narran Lakes provided the Yuwalaraay with an abundance of food, with their diet typically consisting of fish, mussels and crayfish. They also hunted ducks and other waterbirds as well as emus, echidna, goanna, possums, paddymelons and kangaroos. Emu and goanna eggs were particularly sought after and grasshoppers, which are high in nutritional value, were another important food. Seeds from the water plant Nardoo (Marsilea drummondii) and other grasses were ground into flour for baking. As stewards of the land, the Yuwalaraay were careful not to deplete the natural resources of the area. After harvesting a certain resource, they would move on and switch to another source of food; also, animals were not eaten during their breeding season. Such was the abundance of food and other resources, that it is likely - despite being located in a dry inland area of Australia - that the Narran area supported a semi-permanent Aboriginal population. The Narran area was a meeting place for people of the Ngemba, Euahlayi and Muawari tribes. Gatherings, varying from a few families to thousands of people, were held to discuss important issues as well as to undertake initiation and marriage ceremonies and other rites of passage.

Narran Lake has mythological importance as a site where several Aboriginal dreaming pathways converge. One of these pathways extends from Dirranbandi in Queensland’s south to Narran Lake. Springs, waterholes and bends threading throughout the Narran River are part of the dreaming path of Baayami, a creation being, who created the landscape’s natural features as well as setting down the laws and customs of the Yuwalaraay tribe.

European settlement

By the early 1830s, Europeans, in search of pasture for sheep and cattle, began settling river regions of NSW, dispossessing many Aboriginal tribes of their lands. Many tribes fiercely resisted the European encroachment onto their lands, and some such as the Gamillaraay of the Namoi and Gwydir gained a reputation as war-like and hostile for their efforts. Early explorers such as Thomas Mitchell actively sought the aid of Aboriginal guides to help navigate them through the region, gaining information about the river systems and names of local features. Aboriginal reserves were first created in 1850 by Governor Fitzroy. However, increasing demand for pastoral country after 1860 heightened the pressure on Aboriginal lands. The NSW Aborigines Protection Board, which was set up in the 1880s, responded by creating 85 reserves. Many of these were revoked after WWI when soldiers’ settlement blocks were created for returned servicemen.
Today, part of the northern section of the Narran Lakes ecosystem has been retained as the Narran Lake Nature Reserve. This area has been designated under the Ramsar convention as a Wetland of International Importance.

The Convention on Wetlands was adopted in Ramsar, Iran, in 1971. The first Ramsar Wetland of International Importance (in the world), was the Cobourg Peninsula, N.T., Australia (220 700 ha), designated on 8th May 1974.

The Narran Lakes Nature Reserve was listed as a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance in June 1999, eleven years after being gazetted as a Nature Reserve by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service. The Narran Lakes Nature Reserve is also listed on the Register of National Estate as a natural heritage site. The listing of the Narran Lakes Nature Reserve as a Ramsar site was in recognition of it being an excellent example of a relatively undisturbed terminal lake system for NSW. It is a significant site for waterbirds, both nationally and internationally, and it provides habitat for some species that are recognised as being of conservation concern, regionally, at the State-level or nationally.

Together these attributes reflect the underlying ‘ecological character’ (incorporating the physical, chemical and biological attributes of an ecosystem and including the ideals of health and integrity) of the site, which the Ramsar Convention obliges Australia to protect. Similarly, national legislation (Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act) is committed to protection of such sites from threats. In addition, the site offers important habitat for several species listed under Australia’s bilateral agreements with the Governments of Japan (JAMBA) and China (CAMBA) for the conservation of migratory birds.

Landuse today

Today cropping and grazing are the dominant land-use activities in the region. Crops are planted on the lake beds, and include sorghum and wheat, which are planted after floodwaters have receded. This leaves a wet soil profile capable of sustaining a crop throughout its growth. Some lakes along the Narran River have had areas of lignum cleared to maximise the cropping area, though Narran Lake (which is not part of the Narran Nature Reserve) was predominantly clear and is cropped when possible. When cropping is not possible, the lakes and adjacent areas are left for cattle to graze. Feral goats, foxes, pigs and rabbits are common in the area, as are kangaroos.

For further information contact:
Martin.Thoms@canberra.edu.au
or visit http://hds.canberra.edu.au/narran/