

Site Specific History: Jingili Water Gardens / Rapid Creek Catchment

Site Description

The Jingili Water Gardens are situated 11.3 Kilometres north of the Darwin CBD. Rapid Creek arises in the Marrara Swamp south of McMillan's road on Department of Defence land following the boundary along the eastern end of Darwin Airport to flow 9.8 Kilometres to its mouth at the southern end of the Casuarina Coastal Reserve. Its catchment drains approximately twenty-eight square kilometres. From McMillan's Road to the coast Rapid Creek runs within a corridor of public land. To its west are the suburbs of Millner and Rapid Creek and to the east Jingili, Alawa, Nakara and Charles Darwin University.

The Larrakia name for the shape of Rapid Creek near its mouth is *Gurrumbay* which is said to be the elbow of *Dariba Nungalinya* (Old Man Rock). The mouth of Rapid Creek has always been a popular camping place for Larrakia people. The upper sections of the creek provide fresh water and shaded swimming holes while the mangrove forest near the creek's mouth is a rich source of foods including crab, long bum, periwinkles, fish and turtle.

Historical Narrative

Rapid Creek was named during Goyder's survey in 1869. Throughout Darwin's history it has been an important recreation area and natural haven for its residents. In the colonial era of European settlement, 1869 to 1911, Rapid Creek was considered a 'pleasure resort' and an ideal location for picnics or fishing and hunting expeditions even though it was a day trip from town.

The first permanent settlement in the vicinity of the Jingili Water Gardens was a Jesuit mission between 1882 and 1891. By the 1890s some agricultural leases were established along the freshwater section of Rapid Creek, but the lack of permanent water and easily arable land made farming difficult. Nevertheless, contemporary newspapers reported crops of passionfruit, citrus fruits, melons, cucumbers, mangoes, olives, rice and maize produced in the area, in addition to pastures for cattle and a herd of dairy cows.

The introduction of motor vehicles in the early 20th Century greatly improved access to Rapid Creek. The Yellow Motor Bus Service built a road to Casuarina Beach via a bridge over Rapid Creek in 1926. Picnics and hunting expeditions to the area remained popular but the northern beaches remained relatively undeveloped until World War II.

Development of the Rapid Creek area accelerated prior to World War II. Numerous military installations and coastal defence sites were constructed along the Nightcliff foreshore and, Casuarina and Lee Point beaches. The RAAF base, now Darwin Airport, was constructed between 1938 and June 1940 resulting in numerous military units being based in the area, including McMillan's Camp. McMillan's road is named after the McMillan family who leased land along Rapid Creek before World War II. During this period there was at least one bridge over Rapid Creek near the location of today's Kimmorley Bridge. With so many military personnel stationed near Rapid Creek it was a popular swimming / recreation area.

The recreational value of Rapid Creek was recognised in the 1940 Commonwealth town plan for Darwin that recommended that land be reserved for a public picnic area while it was still possible. Post War Darwin suffered an extreme housing shortage that meant people had to find housing wherever they could find it. In the Rapid Creek area many people occupied former military sites in Nightcliff and along McMillan's Road. By the early 1960s the suburb of Nightcliff was well established and development of the suburb of Rapid Creek was well underway.

The reputation of Nightcliff and Rapid Creek as Darwin's beachside 'resorts' was quickly re-established after World War II. In Nightcliff former military buildings on the foreshore evolved from the *Darwin Tourist Hostel* in 1947 to *The Seabreeze Hotel* in the 1950s. MacRobertson Miller Airways and Tuit's Bus Tours also established hostels in Rapid Creek. Rapid Creek remained a favourite Darwin picnic and recreation destination. The Chung Wah Society held regular community picnics catering for hundreds of people as did many of Darwin's sporting and social clubs. Generations of children growing up in Darwin's developing suburbs near Rapid Creek remember swimming in its water holes or floating down its rapids on a tyre tube after Wet Season rains.

By the late 1960s the suburbs of Nightcliff, Rapid Creek and Millner were full with no available land on the west side of Rapid Creek. Development on the eastern side of Rapid Creek began in the late 1960s when the suburbs of Alawa and Jingili were established. Commonwealth plans for the area again included the provision of a strip of land on either side of Rapid Creek as a 'green belt' for community use. The new northern suburbs also necessitated the upgrade of the Trower Road Bridge over Rapid Creek. In 1974 the Brinkin Lakes housing development commenced with plans to dam Rapid Creek to flood the mangroves upstream to create an ornamental lake. Consequently, during 1974 the mangroves north of Trower Road were cleared. The development was stopped in its tracks when Cyclone Tracy struck on Christmas Eve 1974.

Cyclone Tracy hit the suburbs near Rapid Creek particularly hard. Many houses were destroyed, and most were damaged. In the Government's emergency response to reconstruct Darwin the Brinkin Lakes development was abandoned. In 1979 the Northern Territory Government *Rapid Creek Recreational Project Plan* proposed the creation of the Jingili Water Gardens. Completed in the early 1980s the Water Gardens are built around a series of lily ponds and fountains with extensive paths and gardens. A playground, skate park and barbecue facilities were also built. A pedestrian bridge was built across Trower Road and another near the mouth of Rapid Creek to enhance the connectivity of the areas. In 1996 a community garden was established adjacent to the Water Gardens. In April 2013 a community orchard was established to demonstrate the suitability of fruit trees for Darwin conditions. In July 2018 a garden of reflection was added to the Water Gardens to commemorate a tragic local event by providing a place for personal respite and reflection.

The development of the Marrara sports complex from the mid 1980s and new airport terminal buildings on the northern side of Darwin Airport from the 1990s placed growing pressure on the Rapid Creek catchment. In response, the 1998 *Rapid Creek Management Plan* acknowledged the importance of preserving Rapid Creek as an intact creek system as a significant community environmental and recreational asset. The impact of continued development in the Rapid Creek catchment area was seen in 2011 when rains from Cyclone Carlos resulted in the flooding of many houses along the lower areas of Rapid Creek Road. As a result the Northern Territory Government constructed a storm water retention basin on the upper reaches of the creek near Darwin Airport to mitigate against flooding. It was completed in July 2019.

Darwin continues to grow along the coast with suburban development closing in on Lee Point. The Rapid Creek foreshore, the Jingili Water Gardens and the Rapid Creek nature corridor are amongst Darwin's most popular public spaces. Finding a balance between history and the environment, while providing public access essential recreation spaces is an ongoing challenge to ensure future generations can enjoy a picnic, have a dip and have some fun along Rapid Creek.