

Save Beeliar Wetlands and the Roe 8 Protest 2015-2017

The Beeliar wetlands, named after the Beeliar clan of the Whadjuk Nyungar people, were at the centre of one of the most significant environmental protests seen in Western Australia.

The Barnett Liberal government came to power in 2008 with a proposal to build a six-lane highway called Roe 8 through the Beeliar Wetlands (the Roe Highway stage 8 was part of a larger Main Roads project, the Perth Freight Link). They formed an organisation called SouthMetroConnect to lead the project.

Opposition to the plan had been there from the early 2000's, building on from Farrington Rd protests (1984), and this proposal was met with staunch opposition from community groups affected in nearby suburbs of Fremantle and Cockburn, and other environmentally aware people from across the metropolitan area, who valued the wetlands immensely.

The most important of these was *Save Beeliar Wetlands* (SBW) a community advocacy group that formed in 2008 and led the fight. They rallied thousands of people to participate in protests, which culminated in an intense 4-month conflict period from commencement of clearing in December 2016 until the Labor party won the State election in March 2017.

As the bulldozers neared, campaigning against the road intensified. When clearing began it escalated into one of the most high-profile environmental conflicts in Western Australian history.¹

Ultimately, the people won, and the project was halted, but not before hectares of irreplaceable bushland were bulldozed.²

Save Beeliar Wetlands' early efforts concentrated on informing the local community but they soon 'powered up' to organise mass rallies, and festivals, create alliances with other organisations, maintain a media profile, and initiate various groups (such as the Wetlands Watch group) to act across a broad front. They also took a leading role in challenging the Government in the courts, and in late 2015 sought a review of the state EPA Roe 8 approvals in the WA Supreme Court. This held up work for a year until the action was overturned on appeal in 2016.³

¹ Andrea Gaynor, Peter Newman and Philip Jennings (eds.), *Never Again - Reflections on Environmental Responsibility after Roe 8*. UWA Publishing, 2017, p. 4.

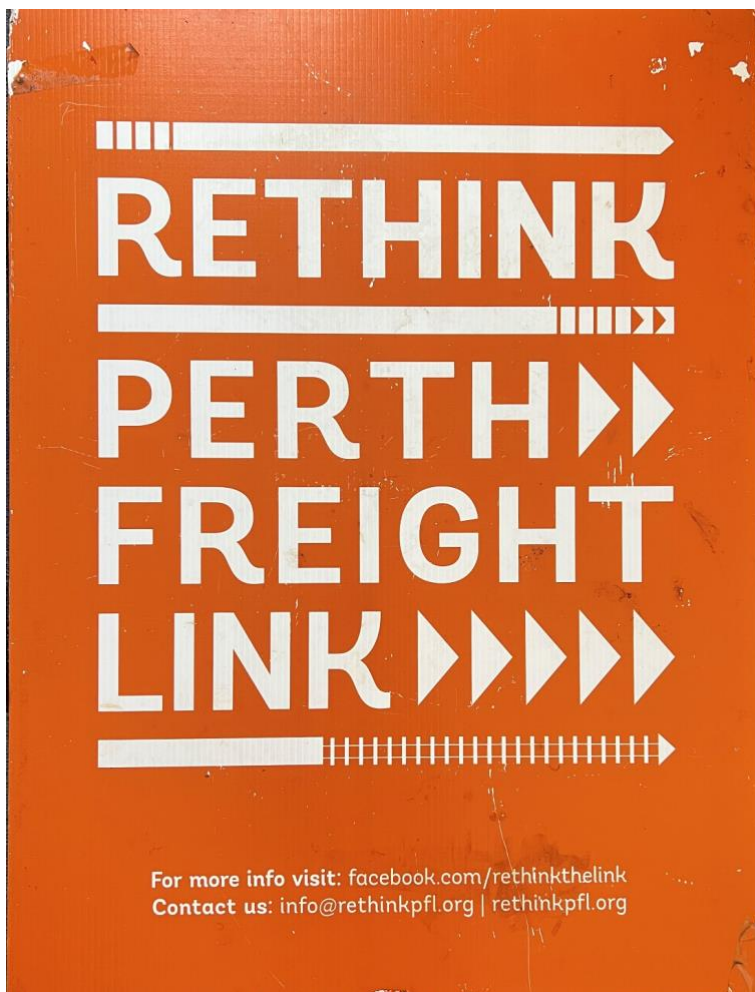
² Danielle Brady, "Space, Place, and Agency in the Roe 8 Highway Protest, Western Australia," *Contention*, 7(1), 2019, pp. 29-48.

³ Toby Nisbet and Geoffrey Syme, "No Way to Build a Highway: Law, Social Justice Research and the Beeliar Wetlands," *Environmental and Planning Law Journal* 34 (2), 2017, pp. 162–175.

Kate Kelly, convenor of SBW on hearing this result, replied:

It appears that there is nobody who can hold the government to account for meeting its own conditions, other than the community, and that is what we will do.⁴

In early 2015, SBW with thirty-five other local organisations including the Greens, formed an umbrella group *Rethink the Link Alliance*. Kate Kelly and Kim Dravnieks were elected as co-convenors. Five WA local governments also joined including City of Fremantle, under Mayor Brad Pettitt, and City of Cockburn under Mayor Logan Howlett, both strong supporters of the Beeliar Wetlands. Distinctive orange *Rethink the Perth Freight Link* signs appeared in front yards all over the metropolitan area. More than 2,000 people from the Alliance marched together in the November 2015 Fremantle Festival parade, the largest group in its 116-year history.



Caption: Rethink Perth Freight Link sign, 2016, courtesy Kim Dravnieks

In opposition, the City of Melville set up a group called *Save our Suburbs* which supported Roe 8 and the Fremantle Eastern Bypass and became a major lobbyist for building Roe 8.

⁴ Tim Beatley, "Black Cockatoo Rising: The Struggle to Save the Bushland in the City," *The Nature of Cities*, <https://www.thenatureofcities.com/2017/08/09/black-cockatoo-rising-struggle-save-bushland-city/Charlottesville>, 9 August 2017.



Caption: Build Roe 8 sign, 2016, photo Jo Darbyshire

As early as 2013 SBW auspiced non-violent direct-action training programmes to introduce new protesters to peaceful ways of civil disobedience. This was with activists like Jess Beckerling, Nicola Paris, and others with histories going back to the Franklin Dam and Farrington Road campaigns, Tactics included delaying clearing with lock-ons to machines and trees, organised trespass events, and tree-sits for weeks at key sites. Large-scale police mobilisation against protestors was intense and frequent throughout the campaign. Kate Davis from the Greens organised a large number of lawyers to support people through the court process and \$30,000 was raised to pay the fines of the 213 people who were arrested.⁵

⁵ Brady, "Space, Place, and Agency in the Roe 8 Highway Protest, Western Australia," pp. 29-48.



Caption: Jan Rodda locked on to machinery, 12 January 2017, photo Jo Darbyshire

Other mass protests aimed to galvanize media attention. The first, 'Enough is Enough' on 12 January 2017, was a callout for mass action, which brought around 2,000 people to a clearing site at Malvolio Road. The largest collective display of civil disobedience the state had ever seen took place when those gathered at the site collectively pushed over fences, breached the area under clearance, supported two protesters who had locked on to machinery, evaded police on horseback and demanded the government stop all works until after the 11 March election.



Caption: Roe 8 protest walk on Malvolio Road, Coolbellup, photo Gideon Digby

The 'Silence Speaks' event, held on Saturday 29 January 2017, saw hundreds of protestors stand in silence for an hour in Forrest Place, the civic heart of Perth. Their aim was to increase the scale of awareness in the general population. By taking the protest about a distant urban bushland to the city centre, they claimed the issue as one of state importance.⁶

Aboriginal people had a strong presence at the Beeliar site and within the protest. As early as 2000, Noongar elder Patrick Hume, who had lived in Fremantle from the 1930's, joined with other Aboriginal people to lodge a native title claim over what were traditional spring and summer camping grounds, but he feared it would be too late to save the wetlands from Roe 8. Federal Fremantle MP Carmen Lawrence acknowledged at the time the well-documented significance of the area and said, "breaching Aboriginal Heritage sites would certainly stop the road".⁷

However, in 2015 the Liberal state government, in their determination to develop Roe 8 by any means, removed the Heritage registration of Aboriginal sites located in the road reserve, including sacred women's sites in the Beeliar Wetlands. The injustice of this political action outraged both Nyungar and non-Aboriginal people.

In March 2016 Nyungar custodian and long-time Coolbellup resident Corina Abraham, with pro bono support from Eddie Mabo's former lawyer, Greg McIntyre, appealed in the court.

⁶ Brady, "Space, Place, and Agency in the Roe 8 Highway Protest, Western Australia," pp. 9.

⁷ Jenny D'Anger, "No Highway of Memories," *Cockburn Herald*, 26 August 2000, p. 4.

This was against overturning the 2013 recommendation against Roe 8 on Aboriginal heritage grounds. Though well fought, this case was unsuccessful.

Aboriginal people used to camp in the Beelie wetlands right up to the 1970s: my grandparents used to travel through there when they were young, and one of my great-grandfathers used to hunt and camp there too. One of my aunts was actually born in the wetlands, and that would have been in the fifties or sixties. I decided to challenge Minister Peter Collier's Aboriginal heritage approval for Roe 8 because this place means a lot to me, it's who I am, it's where I come from... It's a place of significance, and we grew up learning from our grandparents and parents about this place.⁸

Corina Abraham



Caption: Corina Abraham 24 November 2015, photo Jo Darbyshire

⁸ Gaynor, Newman and Jennings, *Never Again - Reflections on Environmental Responsibility after Roe 8*, p. 48 and see chapters 6 and 12.

In February 2017 a less public 'Women in Song for Country' was organised in collaboration with local Nyungar women to create a space of shared cultural meaning, sorely needed at the height of the conflict. Women participants were led inside the Beeliar Wetlands and stood barefoot on the dry ground of the swamp, where they sang a Nyungar language song *Dabakarn*, especially composed for the event by Della Rae Morrison. Gail Beck, a Nyungar woman and organiser of the event stated:

The decision to sing in the language of the land was made out of respect for the traditional custodians and their sacred sites, and with a desire for all women of all cultures to connect with the land they are working so hard to protect.⁹

Reverend Sealin Garlett, a Nyungar Elder and traditional custodian welcomed people to country at numerous events including thousands of protesters to Kings Square, Fremantle, on 26 February for the 'We Deserve Better' rally.

This place here goes deeper than just being a birthing place... This place here, in a sense, brings the deep identity that we Aboriginal people have with this land. And there we continue to believe, and we continue to walk, and to tell those stories. Tell of the early beginnings, tell of the deep importance that families are cared for, children are loved, children are meaningful, and children have a destiny.¹⁰

Sealin Garlett

In another tiny but significant act of protest Mary Dixon, a Fremantle resident and Save Leighton campaigner, created thousands of tiny 'Beeliar blue' badges from carefully cut up scraps of blue cloth, and gave these away at every event. This ingenious, grass-roots, low-tech act of protest became ubiquitous, with campaigners, politicians and supporters wearing them daily. They were a tiny flag of courage against the massive state machinery of destruction.

Throughout the campaign community leaders played important roles in sustaining the community in the face of despair. These included Kate Kelly, Kim Dravnieks, Phoebe Corke, Shona Hunter, Piers Verstegen, and Sam Wainwright (Road to Rail) group; along with prominent politicians Scott Ludlam, Lynn MacLaren (the Greens); and Melissa Parkes, Josh Wilson and Simone McGurk (ALP). The campaign was an example of the many creative tools and strategies available for peaceful protest, including humour. Musicians who inspired included Ewan Buckley, John Butler and Donna Simpson. Artists made banners, posters, tee-shirts, signs and other interactive art projects such as 'Hearts on the

⁹ Breeda McKibben, "Roe 8: Hundreds of Women Gather in Protest," *The Rhythm Keepers*, unpublished media release, 2017, quoted in Brady, "Space, Place, and Agency in the Roe 8 Highway Protest, Western Australia," pp. 11 and 12.

¹⁰ Video statement by Rev. Sealin Garlett, released by SWALSC in August 2016, and transcribed by Emily Harper in Gaynor, Newman and Jennings, *Never Again - Reflections on Environmental Responsibility after Roe 8*, p. 45.

wire.¹¹ Performers dressed up in black cockatoo costumes; and poets, writers,¹² academics, photographers, video makers and many others documented the protest and spread the word on social media. Children were noticeably present and active in many of the protest activities.

Protesters were jubilant when the McGowan Labor party won the State election in March 2017. The ALP strongly opposed the project and promised to use Roe 8 and Perth Freight Link government funds to build MetroNet rail projects instead.

[Rehabilitating Roe 8](#) is the project to restore habitat cleared in the summer of 2016/17. It runs from 2018-2028 and is implemented by the City of Cockburn, with assistance from the community.

Amendments to the Metropolitan Region Scheme to reclassify Roe 8 land from being Regional Road Reserves were finally enacted on 29 November 2024.¹³

While more than 80 per cent of the original wetlands on the Swan Coastal Plain have been destroyed, the Beeliar Wetlands, the 'jewel in the crown' of the south-western suburbs of Perth, were saved.

¹¹ Andrea Gaynor, "How Can Paper Hearts Save Wetlands," *Hearts on the Wire*, National Museum of Australia. <https://everydayfutures.nma.gov.au/project/hearts-on-the-wire/> and artist Susie Waller, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10154780129117436>

¹² Tony Hughes-d'Aeth, "**Can Poetry Stop a Highway? Wielding Words in the Battle over Roe 8**", *The Conversation*, January 11, 2017. <https://theconversation.com/can-poetry-stop-a-highway-wielding-words-in-the-battle-over-ro-8-71005>

¹³ WA Government, Metropolitan Region Scheme Amendment 1404/41, Roe 8 Remainder and Roe 9 (Removal of Primary Regional Roads Reservation) Feb 2024.