Returning Swimming to Lake Parramatta – a 72 year journey
Project location – Sydney, Australia
Aerial view of Lake Parramatta

- Dam wall
- Swimming enclosure

600 metres
Lake Parramatta Swimming – 1930’s and 1940’s
Official notice ending swimming

- Elsewhere dozens of official and unofficial swimming locations scattered along the Parramatta River and within its catchment
- But in November 1942 Lake officially closed to swimming due to pollution / drowning concerns
What happened next - 1950’s to 1990’s

• The catchment supplying the Lake became increasingly urbanised resulting in worsening pollution
• However, a centralised sewerage system was built in the 1960’s and 1970’s which improved water quality
• Also catchment and streambank remediation works installed in the 1980’s and 1990’s which again improved water quality
2000’s onwards

• The Lake (from a water quality perspective) was probably swimmable from the 2000’s onwards
• No particular tradition of swimming in outdoor, natural areas across most of Western Sydney
• Most people would drive to one of the Eastern Sydney beaches
• So, not much community pressure to open the Lake to swimming
What changed and when?

• In 2014 The Parramatta River Catchment Group (PRCG) started a mission “to make Parramatta River swimmable again by 2025”
What changed and when?

• In response City of Parramatta Council reviewed all possible swimming locations in its area of operations – Lake Parramatta was identified as the most promising location for returning swimming
Why was Lake Parramatta selected?

- Scientific work in the mid-2000’s had shown that water quality was now very good

- Surrounding natural area / park around the Lake with:
  - Walking tracks
  - Toilets
  - Barbeques / shelters
  - Playground
  - Café
  - Car park
What did we do to prepare for swimming?

Water quality testing

Installation of buoys and ropes
What did we do to prepare for swimming?

Divers checking Lake floor

New signage
Lifeguards during the summer
What else did we do to prepare for swimming?

- Advice from other Councils with natural areas swimming
- Royal Lifesaving Australia conducted safety audit
- Legal / insurance advice
- Total cost to create new swimming area = about AU$40,000
- A tiny fraction of the cost of setting up a constructed swimming pool, plus a tiny fraction of the running costs
So, what happened next?

- Lake formally opened to swimming on 24th January 2015, after a 72 year break
What do people think about swimming at Lake Parramatta?

• Lake Parramatta is rated the number 1 attraction in the Parramatta area on the TripAdvisor website (June 2017)

• 93% of visitors report swimming at Lake Parramatta is “good” or “very good”

• Visitor numbers increased by 400% between 2015 and 2017
Other benefits of swimming facility

• Exposes people to the natural environment and reinforces the benefits of natural areas
• No financial cost to use the facility
• Encourages other healthy activities such as bushwalking (trailwalking) around Lake and use of rowboats / kayaks / pedal boats (a hire service)
• Provides a cool refuge during heatwaves
• Allows people to try natural area swimming in a relatively safe environment (compared with ocean swimming with its currents, waves, tides, dangerous animals)
Conclusions

• There is a strong latent community desire to be able to swim in a natural environment

• Based on the success of introducing swimming at Lake Parramatta multiple other locations around the catchment and beyond are actively being considered for returning swimming

• Encouraging people to recreate in the natural environment is likely to increase their interest / positivity about the natural environment