

# FROM DROUGHT RESPONSE TO WATER RESILIENCE: A JOURNEY OF MINDSET SHIFT

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### ABSTRACT

The 2019/2020 drought was the worst on record for MidCoast Council. Our primary water supply scheme, the Manning Scheme supplying drinking water to a population of 80,000, was at risk of running out of water. The Barrington River stopped running, and we did water carting from Tea Gardens to Gloucester for 29 days during December 2019 and January 2020. The Council fast-tracked expansion of the Nabiac borefield and several alternative water sources to supplement the Manning Scheme. A Drought Response Team managed drought response activities, including communication updates, streamflow, water quality and water consumption reports and critical project status reports. This team often met daily at the peak of the drought. This paper highlights the ongoing journey of this team from a reactive, climate event response system into a proactive, innovative, sustainable collaborative space to address water resilience within the Mid Coast area.

The team reflected on and analysed the lessons learnt from the drought and the severe bushfire season. These learnings were foundational to MidCoast Council's mindset transition from drought response to water resilience, and we rebranded the team as Water Resilience Team. Since then, cross-divisional staff that historically came together only during a crisis (drought, fire, flood) have regularly met to action water resilience initiatives. We also have external departments in the team to fast track the flow of information and cross-institutional collaboration.

As a regional council, our community's water aspirations are diverse. End users range from domestic, business, fishery, tourism, aged care, dairy and beef farming. In practice, our water resilience approach is to integrate resilience into the water aspirations of this wide range within our regional community and align it with our water planning. We facilitate this by enabling a community of practice both internally and externally for champions of resilience to meet, collaborate and promote change. In the long term, this will be a community-led space to encourage innovative thinking about water security through shocks and disruptions, including circular economy and water reuse.

To achieve this, internally, the Water Resilience team strives to create and maintain a safe,

collaborative space. There has been intentional investment to nurture cross-divisional relationships and strengthen water literacy across Council. Our staff has been sharing their personal water story to foster trust and promote mindset change.

Externally, we have been listening to community members to understand how different stakeholders in our community connect to water. We have by now listened to a wide range of community stakeholders, some of whom have openly shared their water story with the Water Resilience Team. The team has begun the journey of reconciliation with our indigenous community, the traditional custodians of our water.

In summary, water resilience for us is linking infrastructural preparedness to the water aspirations of our community. This paper attempts to capture how these attempts bring conceptual changes in resilience thinking within the Council team and our community. We attempt to demonstrate our resilience journey both internally and externally by highlighting the tangible and qualitative changes in our approach to water planning. We will do this by the narrative analysis of interviews both with the team and the community members.

### SHORT PRESENTER BIOGRAPHY

*Adam Turville is a water professional with 13 years of water industry experience. He has developed a range of skills through a diverse range of roles both within and outside the water sector, including water quality and treatment, maintenance and water planning. He is a professional mechanical engineer and currently holds the position of Asset Planning Coordinator in the Water Business unit of MidCoast Council.*

*Nirmal Joy is a cultural researcher and community organiser by training. He has 16 years of experience working in several stakeholder engagement settings, including farming, youth, migrant and Indigenous communities, advocacy groups and Government. Before joining MidCoast Council as the Water Resilience Officer, he worked among the migrant communities in Sydney, engaging them in affordable and clean energy conversations. He has a Master of Research degree in Cultural Studies and a Masters degree in Horticulture*