



NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service

Lake Innes Nature Reserve, Innes Ruins Historic Site and Lake Innes State Conservation Area

Draft plan of management



Acknowledgement of Country

The areas now known as Lake Innes Nature Reserve, Innes Ruins Historic Site and Lake Innes State Conservation Area and the surrounding lands and watercourses have traditionally been under the care of the Birpai Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people have a deep spiritual and cultural connection to this Country. Their ancestors have lived here for thousands of years and, in doing so, form part of this living landscape.

Connections to Country and the significance of this park to Aboriginal peoples – past, present and future – are acknowledged and respected. NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) seeks to ensure that the management of these parks reflects, embraces and celebrates the culture and heritage of Birpai People and their connection to this Country.

NPWS acknowledges Aboriginal peoples as the traditional custodians of Country and supports the role of Aboriginal people in identifying traditional connections and custodians for this place.



Paperbark forest, Lake Innes Nature Reserve. John Spencer/DCCEEW

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Have your say

Submissions must be lodged before 5 pm on 18 February 2026.

Your submission will assist in the preparation of a new plan of management for Lake Innes Nature Reserve, Innes Ruins Historic Site and Lake Innes State Conservation Area.

Submissions must be in written form and lodged via either of the following:



the online submission form at www.environment.nsw.gov.au/get-involved/have-your-say



email to npws.parkplanning@environment.nsw.gov.au



post to Manager, Planning and Assessment, NPWS, Locked Bag 5022, Parramatta NSW 2124.

Your submission may be provided to the statutory bodies that have an advisory role under the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974* in the preparation of each plan of management. These bodies include the Karst Management Advisory Committee, regional advisory committees and the National Parks and Wildlife Advisory Council.

The Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water complies with the *NSW Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act 1998*, which regulates the collection, storage, quality, use and disclosure of personal information.

Summary

This draft plan of management sets out the strategic direction for the protection and sustainable use of Lake Innes Nature Reserve, Innes Ruins Historic Site and Lake Innes State Conservation Area. Located on the traditional lands of the Birpai People, these parks conserve important natural ecosystems, cultural heritage and community values on the NSW Mid North Coast.

The parks are home to important Aboriginal cultural heritage and archaeological resources, with camp sites and middens in the parks and along the nearby coastline. Historical records show Aboriginal interaction with the Innes family, who established Lake Innes House on the shores of Lake Innes, formerly known as Lake Burrawan. The draft plan proposes promoting the parks' history and identity as part of an Aboriginal cultural landscape.

The Innes Ruins Historic Site preserves the remains of Lake Innes House and its associated structures. Major Archibald Innes established the homestead in 1830 using convict labour, following the opening of the Port Macquarie area to 'free settlement'. Despite Major Innes' early success, the Depression in the 1840s and several failed agricultural ventures led to financial ruin. The Innes family abandoned the estate, and by the end of the 1800s, the buildings were derelict. Today, the historic site offers a rare opportunity for park visitors to be immersed in European settlement history. The draft plan proposes expanding public access to the historic site while protecting its natural and cultural heritage values.

To promote enjoyable and sustainable visitor experiences, the draft plan also proposes changes to some other popular visitor sites. This includes extending the Googik Heritage walking track to offer greater opportunities for visitors to explore the parks and connect to adjoining districts. The draft plan also outlines new approaches to managing day use at the Perch Hole picnic area to better protect the environment and offer visitors a more peaceful, nature-based experience.

These parks are home to native ecosystems that support a wide diversity of flora and fauna, including many threatened species. The parks include critical koala habitat, and the draft plan supports the health and long-term sustainability of the koala population. The area's ecological history is complex and has been shaped by human activities, most notably the opening of freshwater Lake Innes to the brackish Lake Cathie estuarine system in 1933. This has had a lasting effect on the parks' aquatic ecosystems, and the draft plan supports investigating the feasibility of closing Lake Innes and reverting it to a freshwater system.

The parks provide important ecological corridors as well as unique recreational opportunities for local and regional communities. The draft plan addresses key challenges and outlines collaborative approaches to be undertaken with local communities, other land managers and stakeholders to ensure the long-term resilience and relevance of the parks.

Vision

Lake Innes Nature Reserve, Innes Ruins Historic Site and Lake Innes State Conservation Area will be protected and celebrated as a connected landscape of historical, cultural and ecological significance.

These parks will be places where native species and ecosystems flourish through targeted conservation, fire and feral animal management, and the protection of aquatic habitats.

The history of the Innes Ruins and surrounds will be preserved and interpreted, allowing visitors to connect with stories of early settlement and the enduring presence of Aboriginal people and their stories. The cultural values of the Birpai People will be recognised and respected, with Aboriginal communities engaged in caring for Country and sharing knowledge.

The parks' waterways will be healthy and resilient, supported by collaborative efforts to improve water quality and explore reverting Lake Innes to a freshwater system.

Visitors will be inspired and informed through low-impact recreation, education and nature appreciation that does not compromise the protection of park values. The parks will be managed as a unified landscape, fostering ecological connectivity, cultural continuity and community stewardship for generations to come.

Developing this plan

This draft plan was prepared to communicate the management framework for Lake Innes Nature Reserve, Innes Ruins Historic Site and Lake Innes State Conservation Area, and to propose objectives, strategies and policies for the management of the parks.

Lake Innes Nature Reserve, Innes Ruins Historic Site and Lake Innes State Conservation Area are protected in perpetuity through their reservation under the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974*. The parks are managed to achieve the objects of this Act, which are centred on conserving the natural and cultural values of the parks, as well as fostering public appreciation, understanding and enjoyment of these values (see Appendix A).

This draft plan of management has been prepared to provide members of the public with an opportunity to contribute to the preparation of a plan that would replace the *Lake Innes Nature Reserve plan of management* (adopted in 1999) (NPWS 1999) and provide a plan of management for the Innes Ruins Historic Site and the Lake Innes State Conservation Area.

As required under the National Parks and Wildlife Act, this draft plan of management was prepared following consideration of the matters listed under section 72AA of the Act, including the management principles for nature reserves, historic sites and state conservation areas (see Appendix B).

At the completion of the public exhibition period, this draft plan, together with all submissions received, will be considered by relevant statutory advisory bodies which may provide advice to the Minister for the Environment. Once adopted by the Minister, the plan of management will provide strategic direction for management of the parks. All operations undertaken in the parks must be consistent with the adopted plan of management.

This plan refers to Lake Innes Nature Reserve, Innes Ruins Historic Site and Lake Innes State Conservation Area collectively as ‘the parks’. Individually they are referred to as ‘the nature reserve’, ‘the historic site’ and ‘the SCA’, respectively.



Eastern great egret, Lake Innes Nature Reserve. Rob Smith/DCCEEW

Plan purpose and role in park management

Parks reserved under the National Parks and Wildlife Act are managed through a statutory management framework comprising the National Parks and Wildlife Act, the National Parks and Wildlife Regulation 2019 and plans of management.

The National Parks and Wildlife Regulation provides the legal basis for the establishment and management of parks. The Regulation sets out the rules that apply to all parks, and plans of management set out how each individual park will be managed. Plans of management describe each park's significant values, articulate a vision, and set the long-term objectives, strategies and policies that will be implemented to achieve the objects of the National Parks and Wildlife Act (Appendix A) consistent with the management principles relevant to the park category (Appendix B).

Plans of management also provide the basis for management decisions and describe the activities that may and may not be authorised in the future. All activities undertaken in each park must be consistent with the relevant plan of management, including policies, objectives and strategies set out in the plan.

Plans of management take a strategic view for each park and are expected to remain relevant for at least 10 years. They are not intended to outline all management activities in detail. However, they do provide the context and strategic direction for operational plans and strategies, which are prepared by the NPWS as necessary. This approach provides the flexibility necessary to respond to future park management challenges and opportunities as they arise.

NPWS operates within a program management framework in which it routinely prepares operational plans and strategies for statewide programs, including for threatened species conservation, fire management, weed control, feral animal control, asset maintenance, and state-of-the-parks monitoring. Other programs and projects are run as required, such as for historic heritage conservation, Aboriginal site protection, visitor facilities development, and other site-specific and ad hoc activities. The performance of these strategies, plans and programs are evaluated for their management effectiveness within this framework.

The accuracy of information in plans of management and the status and relevance of their policies are periodically reviewed. Plans may be amended or replaced as necessary.

Lake Innes Nature Reserve, Innes Ruins Historic Site and Lake Innes State Conservation Area draft plan of management

1. Planning area

Lake Innes Nature Reserve, Innes Ruins Historic Site and Lake Innes State Conservation Area are adjoining parks located to the south of Port Macquarie on the Mid North Coast of New South Wales (see Figure 1). These coastal parks are bounded by the urban development of Port Macquarie to the north and the village of Lake Cathie to the south. They sit within the Port Macquarie–Hastings Local Government Area and the NSW North Coast bioregion.

While each park has its own unique features, their proximity means they are often managed as a single unit. Their integration into the same plan of management provides an opportunity to adopt a more strategic approach to planning that considers the values, threats and opportunities within each park at a larger scale.

The parks are on the traditional lands of the Birpai People and within the boundaries of the Birpai Local Aboriginal Land Council. The parks conserve an important part of this natural and cultural landscape. The region around Lake Innes has been used by Aboriginal people for thousands of years and continues to hold importance for the local Aboriginal community. Historically, the diversity and abundance of natural resources available to Aboriginal people resulted in a high density of Aboriginal occupation in the North Coast bioregion (NPWS 2003). There are numerous camp sites and middens along the nearby coastline and in the parks, and the area continues to be important to the local Birpai People for cultural fishing and gathering activities.

Early settlers arrived in the region soon after it was first explored by John Oxley in 1818, and the Lake Innes House estate was established by Major Archibald Innes in 1830. The historic site contains the Lake Innes House ruins and environs, which is listed on the NSW State Heritage Register. The ruins are a major historical monument to the pre-1850 period of settlement in Australia and offer excellent opportunities for visitor engagement and education. This plan refers to the general site comprising the Lake Innes House ruins, their gardens and environs, as ‘the Innes Ruins’.

The parks form an important corridor for the movement of species along the coast, linking habitats around Port Macquarie to a large area of state forest to the west, and ultimately to the Great Dividing Range. The parks provide habitat for many threatened animal and plant species (Appendix C and D). The importance of the parks as habitat for the koala (*Phascolarctos cinereus*) has been recognised in their declaration as an asset of intergenerational significance under the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974*.

Fire is an important consideration in park management, and a variety of fire regimes are needed to maintain the biodiversity of the parks while protecting cultural assets and adjoining urban areas. Protecting water quality and aquatic systems is also a key role for the parks. This will contribute to landscape resilience and protection against climate change.

The nature reserve and the historic site present significant opportunities for visitor enjoyment and appreciation. These opportunities are discussed in section 3.6.

Lake Innes Nature Reserve, Innes Ruins Historic Site and Lake Innes State Conservation Area draft plan of management

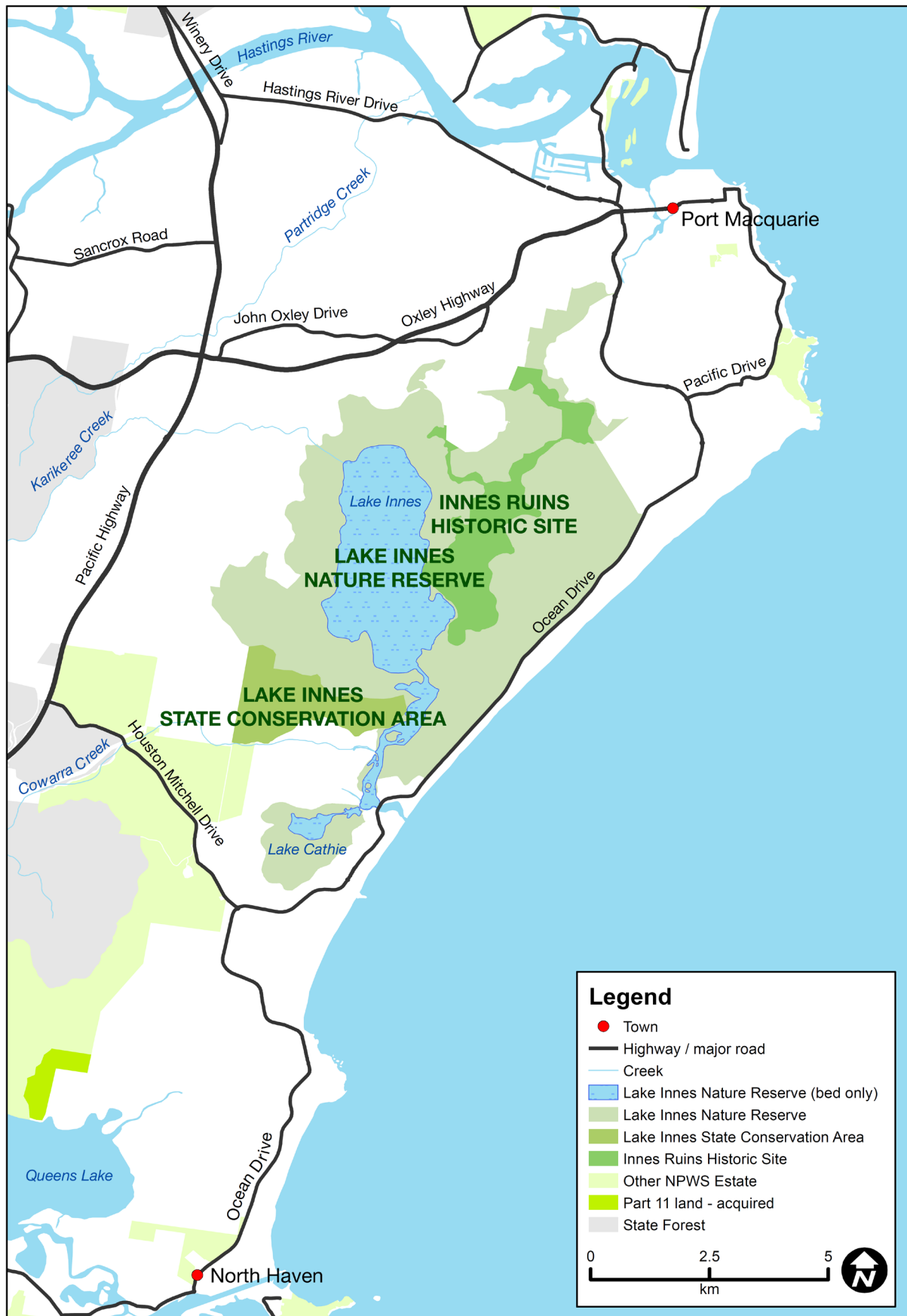


Figure 1 Location of the planning area

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1.1 Lake Innes Nature Reserve

Lake Innes Nature Reserve is bounded by Port Macquarie to the north, the village of Lake Cathie to the south and Lake Cathie Road to the east. The nature reserve covers approximately 3,710 hectares and includes the beds of Lake Innes and Lake Cathie and the bed of Cathie Creek on the western side of the Ocean Drive bridge (see Figure 2). The reserve encompasses Innes Swamp, which is a large area of freshwater swamp between Bells Firetrail and the historic site.

The area around Lake Innes was originally part of a land grant to Major Archibald Innes in 1830. It later became a game reserve, and in 1984, Lake Innes Nature Reserve was dedicated over an area of 2,900 hectares. The aim of the reservation was to protect the significant biological communities and cultural resources present, and to help protect the water quality of these coastal lakes and wetlands. In 1985, 610 hectares in Christmas Bell Plains and Kooloonbung Creek were added to the reserve to protect the area of coastal heath and its well-known display of Christmas bells (*Blandfordia grandiflora*). In 2023, the NSW Government and Koala Conservation Australia acquired 194 hectares of adjoining land, which was added to the nature reserve for the purpose of koala conservation in the Port Macquarie region. The Boundary Trail used to mark the northern limit of the parks until this 2023 land acquisition extended the nature reserve.

Lake Innes Nature Reserve's unique values are as follows:

- The nature reserve supports a variety of significant coastal vegetation types, including freshwater wetlands and swamp forests, wet and dry heath, saltmarshes, and wet and dry sclerophyll forests. Threatened native plants such as the dwarf heath casuarina (*Allocasuarina defungens*) have been recorded in the nature reserve (Appendix D).
- The terrestrial habitats support a wide range of species from most major faunal groups. Within the nature reserve, 289 native fauna species have been recorded, 32 of which are listed as threatened under NSW legislation (Appendix C). Threatened species include the green and golden bell frog (*Litoria aurea*), the black-necked stork (*Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus*) and the eastern chestnut mouse (*Pseudomys gracilicaudatus*). Pockets of rainforest provide a seasonal food supply for migratory and resident fruit-eating birds and threatened flying-foxes.
- Lake Innes and Lake Cathie are joined by Cathie Creek, forming an estuarine system which enters the sea at the village of Lake Cathie, however, this has not always been the case. Originally, Lake Innes was not part of the Lake Cathie estuarine system but a separate freshwater lake. In 1933, a small 'drain' was dug between Lake Innes and Cathie Creek in an attempt to drain Lake Innes and create farmland. Over time, the drain widened, and seawater ingress transformed the freshwater lake into an estuarine system. This has resulted in significant changes to the biology of Lake Innes. The loss of the threatened freshwater habitats like those of Lake Innes is regionally critical, and continuing investigations into the proposal to close the lake and revert it to freshwater are supported by this plan (see section 3.4).
- Fire is an important factor influencing vegetation type and structure. The nature reserve contains mesic vegetation types, which generally require long intervals between burning events. Parts of the nature reserve have burned too frequently in the past, and a variety of fire management regimes are needed to restore and maintain natural diversity. The protection of the park's koala population and its habitat is a significant consideration in the management of fire in the park. Careful planning is required for fire on the urban interface and along the boundary of the nature reserve, where the protection of life and property needs to be prioritised.
- The nature reserve provides a good opportunity for environmental education because of its significant biodiversity, variety of issues, and proximity to urban population centres. The Googik Heritage walking track and Bells Firetrail on the Christmas Bell Plains

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attract walkers and cyclists for recreation, photography and nature appreciation. The waterways are popular for recreation, including boating on Cathie Creek and swimming at the Perch Hole picnic area.

- The nature reserve provides opportunities for visitors to experience and learn about the reserve and its values through the available recreational activities, including walking, photography, picnicking, swimming, fishing, watercraft use and cycling.
- Commercial activities undertaken in the nature reserve have included guided tours, watercraft use, canoe safaris and small-scale commercial fishing. Such operations may be subject to NPWS licences and agreements.

The management principles for nature reserves from the National Parks and Wildlife Act are outlined in Appendix B.

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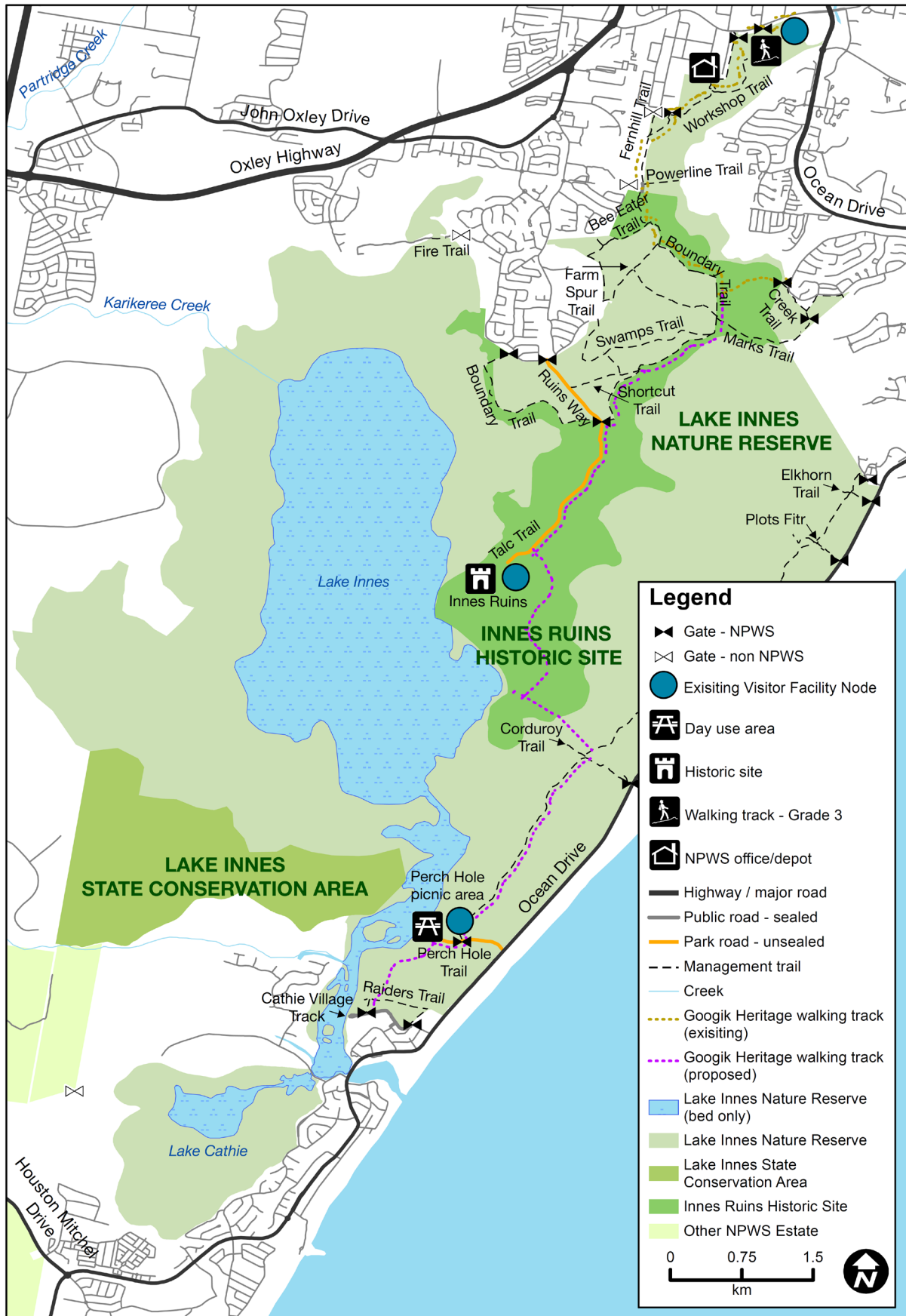


Figure 2 Lake Innes Nature Reserve

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1.2 Innes Ruins Historic Site

Innes Ruins Historic Site, containing the Lake Innes House ruins and environs, was gazetted in 2003. The historic site covers approximately 422 hectares. As shown in Figure 3, it adjoins the nature reserve along most of its boundary, stretching from the urban development of Port Macquarie to the north to the Innes Peninsula in the south. This peninsula forms a north–south ridge of higher ground between Innes Swamp to the east and Lake Innes to the west. An arm of the historic site stretches to the north-west along Boundary Trail.

The Innes Ruins are the remnants of a large estate established by Major Archibald Innes in 1830. Major Innes was an ex-army major, Sydney magistrate, and commandant of the Port Macquarie penal colony. Using his connections, he was one of the first to take up land in the Port Macquarie area when it opened to ‘free settlement’. He was then able to access up to 90 convicts for his personal use on the property, many who had highly sought-after skills.

The estate included a large residence, Lake Innes House, that boasted 22 rooms with adjacent stables, picturesque gardens, and service buildings for the estate workers and working convicts. Other elements included a nearby Home Farm cottage site, brick press and flagstaff hill. Despite his early success, Major Innes’ gamble that the area would become a major commercial centre did not pay off and the Depression of the 1840s also took its toll. After building the homestead, establishing a number of agricultural enterprises, and living an extravagant lifestyle, in 1852 Major Innes left the property in debt to take up paid employment.

The homestead and the surrounding property were subsequently managed by tenants, and later owners, who struggled to maintain the estate. The estate slowly deteriorated and by the end of the 1800s it had become desolate. In 1896, a fire swept through almost destroying the house complex, which has since existed only as a ruin.

Lake Innes House ruins and environs was listed on the NSW State Heritage Register in 1999 (Place ID 00997). A conservation management plan for the historic site outlines the significance of the site and how site management will respond over time to ensure its heritage values are protected (Praevius Heritage 2025).



Lake Innes House ruins. Jay Black/DCCEEW

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The unique values of the Innes Ruins Historic Site are as follows:

- The historic site contains the ruins of Lake Innes House, which dates from the 1830s and is a major monument to early European settlement. While the estate ultimately failed, its scale and significance for a short while meant it played a key role in the development of the region. It consists of a complex of elements which are scattered across the Innes Peninsula, including a house, garden and stables complex, a worker's village, a brick-making area and a corduroy road. This unique road, built by the estate's convicts, traverses Innes Swamp and Christmas Bell Plains by way of a carefully constructed log corduroy. Parts of the road and its logs have deteriorated over time and suffered fire damage.
- The Innes Ruins contain extensive archaeological resources important in the study of colonial architecture, gardens and farming techniques. Despite past fire, looting and deterioration, the archaeological value of the ruins remains high.
- The Innes Peninsula has attracted many prospectors and has a history of mining activity. This is due to several faults running through the peninsula which have acted like traps for mineralisation. The former talc mine and manganese mine have featured on guided tours of the Innes Ruins.
- Expansive views from Lake Innes House to Lake Innes, known as the view 'runway', were a feature of homestead. While large clearings remain, much of the original runway extent has revegetated over time. A less extensive sightline to and from Lake Innes and the ruins has been maintained.
- The native vegetation of the adjoining nature reserve extends on to the site (see section 3.2). Two flora species listed as vulnerable under NSW legislation have been recorded in the historic site, the herb *Maundia triglochoides* and the small orchid, red-flowered king of the fairies (*Oberonia titania*).
- The habitat within the historic site supports at least 182 native fauna species, of which 19 are listed as threatened under NSW legislation (see Appendix C). Listed threatened species include the Australasian bittern (*Botaurus poiciloptilus*), the swift parrot (*Lathamus discolor*) and the varied sittella (*Daphoenositta chrysoptera*).
- Fire management is critical to protecting important cultural and natural values. Fire management in the historic site will recognise the need for protection of cultural heritage from wildfire, control burning and related activities.
- Guided tours have been a popular visitor opportunity at the Innes Ruins. The 2023 expansion of the nature reserve saw a renewed community interest for additional access and recreational activities at the site. Safety and the protection of cultural values remain priorities for NPWS in providing public access to the site.

The management principles for historic sites are outlined in Appendix B.

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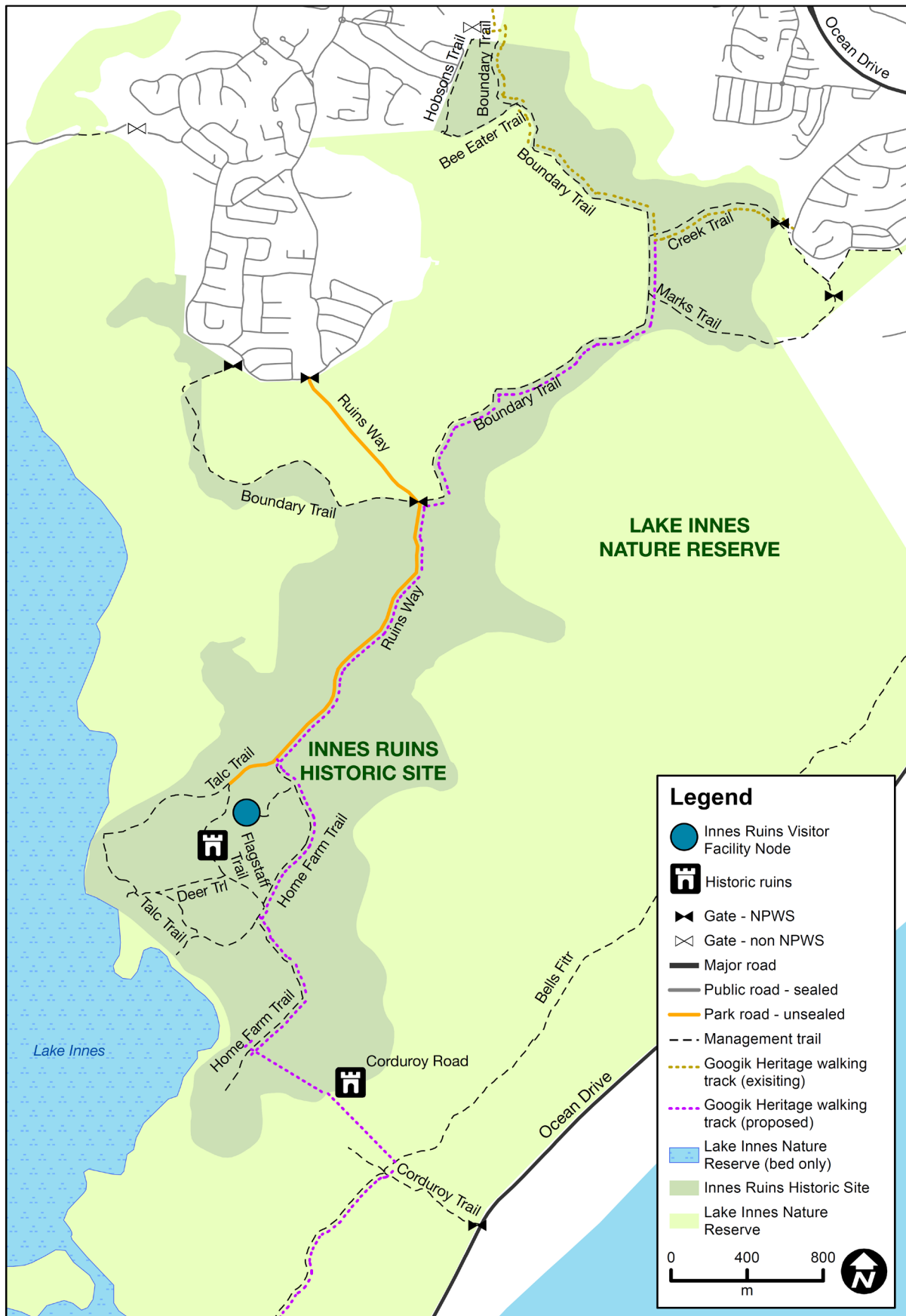


Figure 3 Innes Ruins Historic Site

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1.3 Lake Innes State Conservation Area

Lake Innes State Conservation Area sits at the southern end of Lake Innes, adjoining the nature reserve to the north and connecting with Queens Lake State Conservation Area to the south (see Figure 4). The SCA covers 321 hectares and sits on the western bank of Cathie Creek and is otherwise surrounded by wetland and some rural-residential properties. Formerly part of Queens Lake State Forest, the SCA was reserved in 2003 as a result of the Comprehensive Regional Assessment process undertaken for the North East NSW Regional Forest Agreement.

This plan of management replaces the statement of management intent for the SCA (NPWS 2014). The management principles for state conservation areas are outlined in Appendix B.

The characteristics and features of the Lake Innes SCA are as follows.

- The SCA consists predominantly of wet sclerophyll forest, characteristic of the Lake Innes area. It forms an important wildlife corridor for species movement along the NSW Mid North Coast, linking Lake Innes Nature Reserve and Queens Lake State Conservation Area.
- The SCA supports a range of terrestrial species, with 73 native fauna species recorded, of which 8 are listed as threatened under NSW legislation (Appendix C). Listed threatened species include the swift parrot and the yellow-bellied glider (*Petaurus australis*). Feral animals such as deer (various species), foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*) and pigs (*Sus scrofa*) are known to occur in the SCA.
- No visitor infrastructure is provided in the SCA. A small number of visitors are known to use its network of tracks for 4-wheel driving and to access fishing locations on Cathie Creek.
- Unauthorised activities known to occur in the SCA include riding of unregistered trail bikes, occasional deer hunting and dog walking.
- Development of adjoining residential housing estates is expected to increase pressure for additional access points to the SCA, as well as raise community expectations regarding fire hazard reduction, including the creation and maintenance of asset protection zones.
- A variety of fire management approaches are often needed to maintain diversity in natural areas, especially around waterbodies where the transition from wetter to drier ecosystems results in a range of different vegetation types. The SCA contains mostly mesic (wet) vegetation types which generally require long intervals between burning events to protect their natural values.
- The state conservation area park category is used when the presence of minerals precludes reservation under another category. The National Parks and Wildlife Act requires a review of the classification of state conservation areas every 5 years in consultation with the Minister administering the *Mining Act 1992*.

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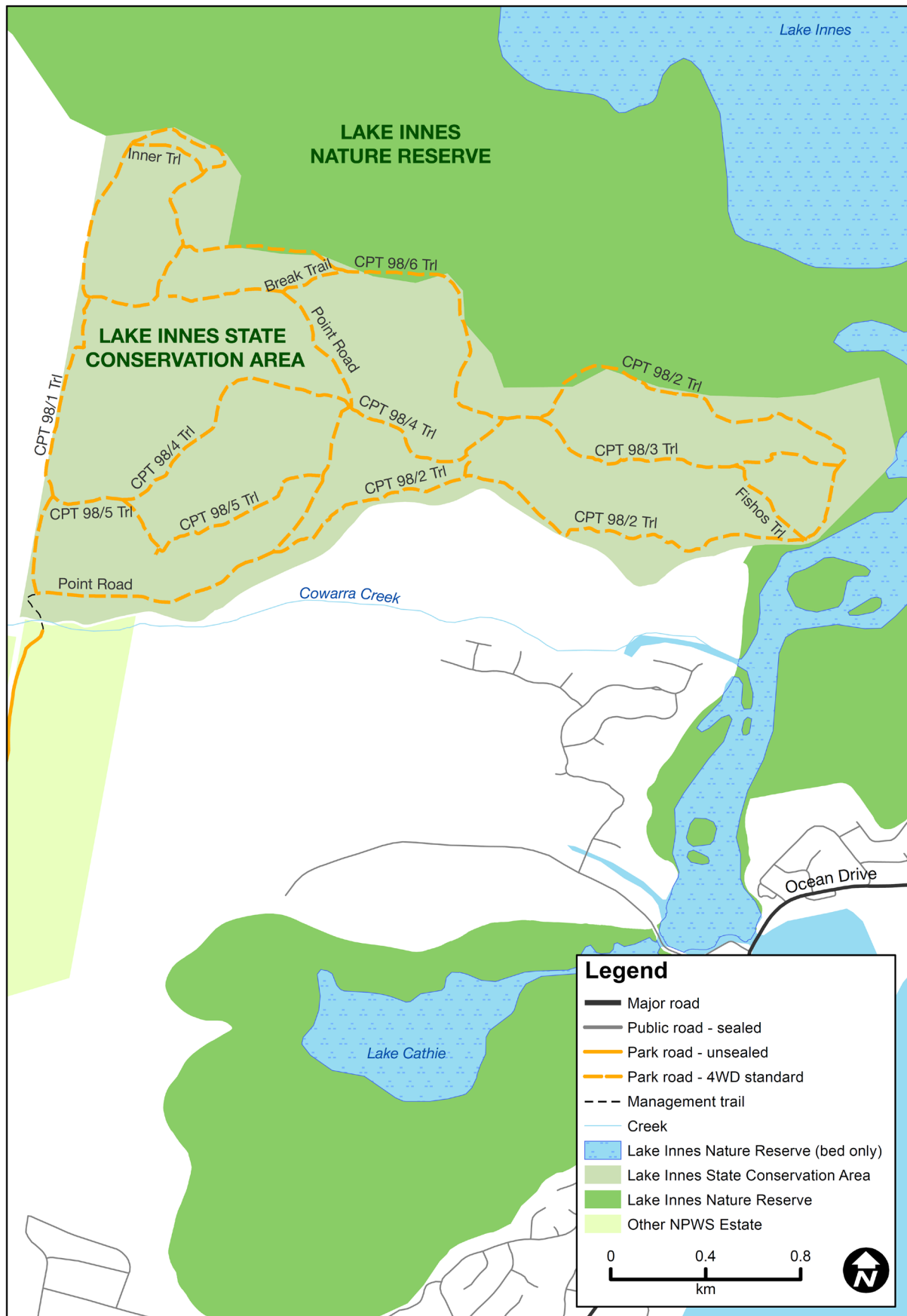


Figure 4 Lake Innes State Conservation Area

2. Challenges for conservation in the NSW North Coast bioregion

Bioregions capture the large-scale geophysical patterns across Australia and reflect animal and plant groupings and processes at the ecosystem scale. NPWS adopts a bioregional approach to planning and managing national park estate.

The parks addressed by this plan are located within the NSW North Coast bioregion. The bioregion runs up the east coast from north of Newcastle to just south of Grafton. It then continues inland, north to the Queensland border. Given its size and geography, the bioregion has a wide variety of soils, vegetation, climate and topography. The mild climate and coastal outlook make it a popular place to live, and hundreds of towns line the coast and eastern inland.

The NSW coastal landscape is an environment of deep significance to many Aboriginal people. Despite enduring hardships in the defence of their homelands during European settlement, they retain strong links with the land.

For coastal Aboriginal people, there is no distinction between land and sea. 'Country' extends offshore to include the sea and its resources. Sea Country can be a place for hunting, collecting, meeting, camping, teaching and spirituality. The 'footprints' of this cultural life are evident across the coastal landscape in the form of shell middens and the remains of camp sites (OEH 2012).

Approximately 26% of the North Coast bioregion consists of conservation-oriented land uses. The vast majority of these are publicly reserved lands, but a small amount of privately protected land occurs within the bioregion.

Challenges for conservation in the bioregion include:

- habitat fragmentation and edge effects
- invasion of weeds and changes to plant community structure
- land clearing from rural, agricultural and urban development and associated activities
- changes in catchment hydrology from land-use intensification and point discharges
- altered fire regimes
- climate change, resulting in increased incidence and severity of weather extremes, such as droughts and floods.

The bioregion has 8 significant wetlands, including the Ramsar-listed Myall Lakes, that provide habitat to many waterbirds and threatened mammals. Threats to the wetlands in this bioregion are numerous, including changed drainage patterns from the construction of roads, drains and channels, especially in expanding urban areas (NPWS 2003).

Water quality in the bioregion is affected by urban and agricultural runoff. Minor impacts result from recreational activities such as camping and bushwalking, with some more serious impacts resulting from recreational and commercial uses of the estuaries. Other impacts result from the presence of feral animals and weeds, disturbance of acid sulfate soils, accelerated erosion and sedimentation, and grazing pressure (NPWS 2003).

3. Management themes

3.1 Supporting connection to Country

The parks are in the Country of the Birpai People who have lived here for thousands of years; and their culture, stories and values are an integral part of the natural landscape. Water and waterways are the lifeline of Birpai culture and Country and there are several Aboriginal sites recorded within a 5-kilometre radius of Lake Innes. These include middens, open camp sites, isolated finds and a culturally modified tree (NPWS 2000). Larger occupation sites appear to have been located close to good water sources with smaller 'satellite' camps occurring along ridges and creek lines. Historical records, including journals from Annabella Boswell who was the niece of Major Innes, also document the presence of Aboriginal people in the area. This includes reports of Aboriginal people carrying out burns along the western side of Lake Innes in the reeds and grasslands. Boswell wrote in 1843 that the local Aboriginal people occasionally joined in the festivities of the house, and that well-known individuals would occasionally bring game to the house.

NPWS is committed to recognising and realising the roles and responsibilities of Aboriginal people as custodians and managers of their Country and culture. While the European history of the historic site is prevalent, the parks more broadly provide an opportunity for Aboriginal people to connect with Country in the Port Macquarie region and progress their ambitions for engaging with and caring for Country. The area remains an important location for cultural fishing activity for local Birpai People, which is described and addressed in a *Cultural fishing local management plan* (DPIRD 2022).

NPWS will also work with local Aboriginal communities to understand and support their goals in building connections with Country, looking after Country, and sharing their knowledge of culture and the parks.

The parks provide opportunities for visitors to gain an appreciation of Aboriginal culture, history and Country. There is potential for the parks to be recognised as an Aboriginal cultural landscape using Aboriginal art, language, names and interpretive materials.

The NSW Government has legal responsibility for the protection of Aboriginal sites and places, and NPWS acknowledges the rights of Aboriginal people to make decisions about their own heritage. Local Aboriginal people will be supported to engage in site and other park management activities and NPWS will cooperate with local Aboriginal people and organisations to develop strategies to research, document and communicate their cultural heritage.

Objectives

- Recognise, understand and facilitate Aboriginal cultural obligations, and Aboriginal people's desire to access and care for Country and practice culture.
- Support Aboriginal engagement and participation in land management and healing Country.
- Enhance the wider understanding of Aboriginal culture and connection to Country in the parks.
- Encourage visitors to develop an understanding and respect for Aboriginal culture, heritage and connection to Country within the parks.

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Strategies

- Collaborate with the Birpai Local Aboriginal Land Council and local Aboriginal communities to provide opportunities for them to influence park management, integrate Aboriginal knowledge about caring for Country, and practice culture on park.
- Collaborate with the Birpai Local Aboriginal Land Council and local Aboriginal communities to identify and support appropriate opportunities to share Aboriginal culture, history and understanding of Country, including to activate cultural tourism and other businesses.
- Actively encourage Aboriginal archaeological surveys and assessments of Aboriginal cultural values and history within the parks, by or in cooperation with Aboriginal people. Continue to evolve the interpretation of the parks as new information and technologies become available.
- Involve Birpai People in the protection and management of Aboriginal sites and places.
- Enhance the identity of the parks as part of an Aboriginal cultural landscape through Aboriginal artwork and language in signage, interpretive materials and the naming of places and features. This may include supporting opportunities for the renaming or dual-naming of one or more of the parks in local Aboriginal language through the relevant NPWS processes.

3.2 Conserving historic heritage

The Lake Innes House ruins and environs is listed on the NSW State Heritage Register (see section 7 More information). The listing curtilage encompasses the entire area of the historic site and extends into the nature reserve at its southern end as far as Ocean Drive. The Innes Ruins are a major historical monument to the pre-1850 period of settlement in Australia and offer excellent opportunities for visitor engagement and education. Public access to the site was first established in the 1970s (NPWS 2000).



Lake Innes House ruins, Innes Ruins Historic Site. John Spencer/DCCEEW

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The State Heritage Inventory recommends management actions for the Lake Innes House ruins and environs, including to 'carry out interpretation, promotion and/or education'. Proposals to increase opportunities for visitor use, interpretation and enjoyment of the site are discussed further in section 3.6 of this plan.

The main elements of the Innes Ruins are scattered over the Innes Peninsula, and these important historic values need to be considered during fire management. Fire has been one cause of the degradation of these historically significant resources, and future fires and fire control methods have the potential to further damage the main house complex, Home Farm site and other outlying structures. Of particular concern is the convict-built corduroy road which traverses Innes Swamp, extending from the historic site into the nature reserve. Fire has severely damaged the corduroy's structure, which is embedded in peat soils and remains prone to future fires. Further information on fire management is included in section 3.3.

The conservation management plan (Praevius Heritage 2025) outlines comprehensive information on the historic site and conservation policies for the estate. Management and conservation of the site will continue in accordance with the conservation management plan and in recognition of the estate's significance.

No features of historic heritage have been identified in the SCA.

Objectives

- Recognise the heritage significance of the Innes Ruins and protect and manage the site in accordance with this significance.
- Expand the understanding of the parks' historic heritage values.

Strategies

- Stabilise the fabric of the Innes House complex and manage the buildings as a ruin, consistent with the historic site's conservation management plan. Ensure no new work or activities near the Innes Ruins obscure any of the historic significance of the site or the site's layout, for example, by maintaining a clear view of the lake from the house complex.
- Support further learning and research into the archaeological significance of the parks' historic features. Collaborate with experts, researchers and students to improve the understanding of the pre-1850 period of settlement in the region.
- Continue to evolve the interpretation of the Innes Ruins site as new information and technologies become available.

3.3 Protecting native species and ecosystems

Protecting and restoring native species and conserving ecosystems are primary objectives of this plan. Achieving these objectives requires the effective management and consideration of a range of factors that influence the integrity of the parks' natural values. These factors include feral animals and weeds, maintenance of ecosystem function, fire regimes, recreational use and a range of impacts associated with climate change.

In New South Wales, the key legislation that guides NPWS action on the recovery of threatened species, populations and ecological communities are the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016* and the National Parks and Wildlife Act. Under the National Parks and Wildlife Act, areas within the national park estate can be designated as 'assets of intergenerational significance', which are landscapes of exceptional natural or cultural value that warrant special protection and dedicated management measures. The parks'

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importance as koala habitat has led to their designation as part of an asset of intergenerational significance, which encompasses various parks. Conservation action plans are prepared for each asset, detailing management and monitoring requirements. The parks are part of a broader conservation action plan encompassing several sites on the NSW North Coast (NPWS 2023). Management of this asset will continue in line with that plan. Koalas and the key risks affecting their population within the parks are discussed later in this section.

The NPWS Threatened Species Framework for zero extinctions (NPWS 2021) is the primary framework for threatened species conservation on the national park estate. It outlines initiatives to secure and restore the threatened species populations that are most at risk of being lost to the national park estate, including:

- declaration of important areas as assets of intergenerational significance, attracting special legislative protection
- reintroduction of locally extinct species into a network of feral predator-free areas
- strengthening of the integration of threatened species objectives in NPWS landscape-scale programs such as feral animal control and fire management
- delivery of a world-class Ecological Health Monitoring Framework
- effective collaboration and integration with off-park threatened species conservation measures.

Other Acts also inform the protection of natural values in our national parks. For example, some elements of the *Rural Fires Act 1997* and *Biosecurity Act 2015* form part of the legal basis for protection and recovery of threatened native species. Also, NSW has a bilateral agreement with the Australian Government guiding how species protected by the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* are assessed and protected under NSW environmental impact assessment laws.

A variety of threatened species and ecological communities are protected by the environmental refuge of Lake Innes and its surrounds, particularly in the saline wetlands and swamp habitats (Appendix C and D). The freshwater wetlands found in the parks are also significant, as such communities are depleted across New South Wales. These wetland habitats include the nature reserve's freshwater Innes Swamp, and adjoining areas of open water.

Prior to the excavation of a drain connecting Lake Innes to the Lake Cathie estuarine system, freshwater vegetation occurred around most of Lake Innes, extending inland for approximately 1.5 kilometres. Sedges and rushes such as *Cladium procerum*, *Eleocharis equisetina*, *Baumea articulata* and *Typha* species were dominant. Two species tolerant to saline conditions, the sedge *Baumea juncea* and the rush *Juncus kraussii*, presently dominate large areas of this former freshwater wetland. Typical freshwater sedgeland and rushland communities are now restricted to the northern end of Lake Innes. These freshwater wetlands provide high-value waterfowl habitat.

The lower elevations surrounding the lakes and swamp currently support brackish wetland vegetation such as sedges, rushes, reeds, saltmarshes, and swamp forests dominated by casuarina and melaleuca (*Melaleuca quinquenervia*). There are also areas of open water, sand shoals, shallow mudflats and exposed sand/mud flats.

The higher ground of the Innes Peninsula is covered by dry sclerophyll forest. Blackbutt (*Eucalyptus pilularis*) is dominant with associated species including tallowwood (*Eucalyptus microcorys*), red mahogany (*Eucalyptus resinifera*), pink bloodwood (*Eucalyptus intermedia*) and forest oak (*Allocasuarina torulosa*). The lower slopes and gullies display patches of wet sclerophyll forest dominated by flooded gum (*Eucalyptus grandis*), with blackbutt, brush box (*Tristania conferta*) and turpentine (*Syncarpia glomulifera*).

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The Christmas Bell Plains contain a mosaic of coastal heath, and heath/swamp associations. The dry/wet heath complex includes displays of Christmas bells, which was a primary reason for the area's addition to the nature reserve.



Christmas Bell Plains. Tanya Bishop/DCCEEW

The diversity of habitats, their distribution and species composition make the parks a valuable refuge for native fauna. Many native animals found in the parks are listed as threatened under NSW legislation (Appendix C). Threatened native animals in the parks include frog species such as wallum froglet (*Crinia tinnula*), as well as numerous bat species, including the little bent-winged bat (*Miniopterus australis*), grey-headed flying-fox (*Pteropus poliocephalus*) and greater broad-nosed bat (*Scoteanax rueppellii*).

The nature reserve is important for many species of wading birds, such as egrets, ducks and the critically endangered eastern curlew (*Numenius madagascariensis*), which use the shoals in Cathie Creek as well as Lake Innes and Lake Cathie. Salt-tolerant and saltwater waterbird species use Lake Innes, however, breeding is extremely difficult as the water fluctuates from fresh to saline.

In their current estuarine state, Lake Innes, Lake Cathie and Cathie Creek are viewed by NSW Fisheries as an important breeding area for juvenile fish and prawns. They may also offer calm waters for fish sheltering from rough sea conditions when the entrance is open.

The parks support a large population of healthy koalas. The parks form an important koala corridor between Port Macquarie and large areas of state forest to the south, and to the escarpment in the west. An additional 194 hectares of koala habitat were added to the nature reserve in 2023, following the joint acquisition of an adjacent block by the NSW Government and Koala Conservation Australia. The nature reserve continues to be used as a long-term release site for koalas by Koala Conservation Australia, which rescues, treats and rehabilitates sick and injured koalas at the Port Macquarie Koala Hospital.

Key risks to koalas that have been identified across the broader asset of intergenerational significance site include:

- inappropriate fire regimes that alter vegetation composition and structure, leading to a reduction in suitable habitat and food availability for koalas
- feral predators, including predation of koalas by dogs
- pathogens, diseases and microorganisms, including infection by *Chlamydia pecorum*

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- anthropogenic climate change, resulting in a combination of increased maximum temperatures and decreased rainfall that may lead to heat stress and increased mortality in koalas
- unintended harm, including vehicle strike.

With the rise in urban development surrounding the parks, risks to koalas – such as vehicle strikes, daytime disturbance and dog attacks – are likely to become more common. NPWS is an important community leader in participating in and leading mitigation efforts for these risks.



Koala (*Phascolarctos cinereus*). Jacob McCarten/DCCEEW

Feral animals, weeds and pathogens are key drivers in the decline of many native species. Feral animal species such as deer, foxes and cats are known to occur across the parks. The Lake Innes House gardens are the origin of some weeds still found in the parks and broader surrounds, such as mysore thorn, also known as thorny poinciana (*Caesalpinia decapetala*), and lantana (*Lantana camara*).

Within NPWS estate, feral animal and weed management planning is generally undertaken at a regional scale and supplemented by park-specific programs. This approach ensures that management programs reflect regional and statewide priorities and are responsive to changing circumstances, such as the emergence of new feral animals and weeds.

On a local scale, increasing urban development along park boundaries is likely to increase the risk of feral animals and weeds encroaching on the parks. Similarly, the incursion of aquatic weeds from stormwater drains into the parks' wetlands is an ongoing issue.

Fire is an important natural process that the parks' ecosystems have evolved with, and appropriate fire management is critical to protecting native species and ecosystems. The primary objectives for fire management in NSW national parks are to:

- protect life and property both within parks and on immediately adjacent land

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- protect and conserve natural, cultural, scenic and recreational features
- cooperate with other organisations to plan and implement fire management.

The parks' location within an increasingly urbanised landscape means unplanned fires pose a significant threat to life and property. Fire management in the parks must comply with the requirements of the *Rural Fires Act 1997*, its regulations, and relevant plans, such as fire access and fire trail plans. As urban development continues on park boundaries, pressure is expected to grow for hazard reduction activity and the creation and management of asset protection zones.

Fire in the parks must be managed to support the health of vegetation communities and native animal species, through appropriate fire frequency and intensity. High-frequency fire is listed as a key threatening process under the Biodiversity Conservation Act and poses a significant threat to the health of park ecosystems. Inappropriate fire regimes have also been identified as a key risk to koalas, as they can reduce suitable habitat and food availability. Fire management will aim to develop a mosaic of burn histories across the parks to increase ecosystem complexity and minimise the likelihood of unplanned, broadscale fires that could result in simplified habitats.

NPWS data from 2025 indicates that parts of the parks have experienced high fire frequency. Approximately 19% of the nature reserve and 33% of the historic site are shown to have been burnt too frequently based on thresholds established to conserve biodiversity. Over 40% of the remaining areas of these parks are categorised as vulnerable to frequent fire. This means much of the historic site and nature reserve require protection from fire as far as possible. Similarly, about 95% of the SCA is categorised as being vulnerable to frequent fire and requires protection from fire as far as possible.

NPWS will undertake contemporary risk-based bushfire planning to guide and identify adaptive actions for protecting life, property (including neighbouring properties), biodiversity conservation, and other park values. Bushfire planning will also support the application of Aboriginal cultural practices in the park. NPWS implements fire management strategies and bushfire risk management treatments consistent with strategic fire management planning and relevant legislation.

Protecting native species and ecosystems will focus on minimising threats to park values and improving their condition through ecosystem restoration. NPWS will implement fire, weed and feral animal management programs and priority operations for the recovery of threatened species, threatened communities and assets of intergenerational significance.

Objectives

- Improve the condition of the parks' natural values.
- Expand knowledge of the parks' natural values and response to threats and conservation activities.
- Maintain a healthy population of koalas in the parks and manage the parks with recognition of their importance as koala habitat.
- Enhance the wider community's understanding of the parks' natural values and garner support from the community for NPWS conservation efforts.
- Implement effective, coordinated fire management strategies and bushfire risk management in the parks, with regard to the complex natural, cultural and historic values, and life, property and assets.

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Strategies

- Implement feral animal and weed management programs in accordance with legislative obligations and local and regional priorities, with an initial focus on removing lantana, eliminating mysore thorn, and controlling emerging aquatic weeds.
- Undertake or support actions to promote the protection and recovery of the parks' native species and ecosystems, particularly threatened species, populations, ecological communities, and assets of intergenerational significance.
- Undertake or support research and monitoring of the parks' natural values, including the condition and responses of park values (particularly koalas), to threats, conservation programs, climate change and fire management.
- Assess disturbed areas for their regeneration potential and, where possible, restore koala habitat.
- Work with adjoining landholders, Port Macquarie-Hastings Council and other stakeholders to protect park values, for example, by maintaining wildlife corridors and preventing the creation of unauthorised access trails.
- Implement a coordinated approach to fire management and bushfire risk management with local bushfire brigades, government agencies and neighbours, ensuring consistency with NPWS plans, strategies and relevant legislation.

3.4 Managing hydrology and water quality

Lake Innes was once the largest freshwater lake on the NSW coast and was an important coastal freshwater habitat. The lake provided safe nesting habitat for a variety of birds, with permanent islands, floating vegetation and complex margins of melaleuca forest and reeds. In 1933, a channel was excavated to join Lake Innes to the nearby Lake Cathie estuarine system. While the intention was to drain Lake Innes and create farmland, this channel led to saltwater ingress into the lake. This modification of Lake Innes' water and soil chemistry substantially changed local biodiversity and reduced the lake's recreational potential.

The combined estuarine system of Lake Innes, Lake Cathie and Cathie Creek covers 920 hectares. The waters of these lakes do not form part of the NPWS estate, but the lake beds and much of their vegetated fringes are within the nature reserve. NPWS is interested in achieving the most natural aquatic ecosystem possible, which should improve native habitats and provide recreational opportunities for park visitors on or accessing park areas.

The total catchment for the system is around 100 square kilometres, and water quality is threatened by changes in land use. Although much of the wetland and forest immediately surrounding Lake Innes is within the nature reserve, a large portion of the catchment has been cleared for agriculture and increasingly for urban development. Changing land use is increasing the likelihood of stormwater runoff, as well as the entry of gross pollutants, nutrients, bacteria and particulate matter into the parks, degrading water quality and habitats.

Importantly, the water quality and hydrology of Lake Innes and the broader estuarine system is impacted by the artificial opening of Cathie Creek to the ocean, which happens once a year on average (PMHC 2021). This opening of the system is a flood mitigation measure managed by Port Macquarie-Hastings Council (the local council). Although the ocean entrance is outside the nature reserve's boundaries, its opening can have many impacts within the reserve. This includes changes to water levels and lake chemistry, and impacts on wetland environments, including waterfowl breeding areas. Local council procedures guide opening of the entrance but it remains a contentious issue in the community.

A serious threat to the aquatic ecosystems is the unstable acid sulfate soils in the bed of Lake Innes. These can be mobilised by changes in water level and further exacerbated by

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sulfates entering the system with the tides, leading to acidification and ecological harm. Significant impacts to water quality from such natural and human-induced factors were observed in the estuarine system from 2018 to 2020. During this time, Lake Innes was subject to drought, flooding, altered water chemistry, and a rapid drawdown of the water following the artificial opening of the system to the ocean. This resulted in the exposure of acid sulfate soils and a mass release of acid and iron into the waterways. This affected the entire estuarine system with impacts including fish kills, 'iron floc' coating of lake and creek beds, poor water quality and reduced public amenity.

The lake system is now considered 'sensitised' and more vulnerable to future droughts and opening events. Given the predicted changes in temperature, sea level rise, and weather extremes driven by climate change, the risk of acidification remains extremely high (Soil Conservation Service 2023).



Lake Innes fringing vegetation. John Spencer/DCCEEW

There is a local proposal to infill the artificial channel between Lake Innes and Cathie Creek, thereby decoupling Lake Cathie from Lake Innes and reverting Lake Innes to a freshwater system. The proposal is complex and would have implications for fisheries, saltmarsh communities, flood and tidal hydrodynamics, water quality, biology and lake opening/closing frequencies. Consultations about the proposal are ongoing and it is being considered collaboratively with stakeholders, including local council, NPWS, government authorities, the local community, and the broader scientific community. It is identified as an issue under local council's coastal management program (PMHC 2021), which includes strategies for the long-term management of the coastal zone under the *Coastal Management Act 2016*.

Closing Lake Innes is expected to deliver a range of positive outcomes for the parks and the surrounding environment, such as:

- reducing the risk of acid sulfate soil impacts throughout the system
- providing secure permanent breeding habitat for many species of waterbird, both freshwater and salt-tolerant species
- providing drought refuge for those species restricted to freshwater
- increasing the available open freshwater on the Mid North Coast from approximately 40 hectares to more than 700 hectares

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- supporting a higher biomass of aquatic vegetation and a more complex lake margin, leading to greater species diversity (including frogs and turtles) and an expansion of the food supply for microbats and birds
- improving swimming and recreation conditions on the lake's edge for park visitors.

NPWS will continue to liaise with stakeholders to explore the ecological, social, economic and engineering impacts of the proposal and will participate in the project if and when it commences.

Objectives

- Protect the water quality and biodiversity of the parks' wetlands and lakes by effectively managing the catchment area and its resources.
- Increase understanding of the feasibility and potential impacts of reverting Lake Innes to a freshwater system.

Strategies

- Cooperate and consult with adjoining landholders, Port Macquarie-Hastings Council and other stakeholders to protect the parks' aquatic ecosystems, for example, by preventing contaminated runoff entering the parks.
- Protect, enhance and restore vegetation along waterways to prevent erosion and improve the quality of runoff.
- Work with local council and other stakeholders to review the strategy and procedures for the artificial opening of Lake Cathie to the sea, with particular attention on minimising environmental impacts on the parks, especially while Lake Innes remains connected to the estuarine system.
- Cooperate with relevant stakeholders to investigate the feasibility of closing Lake Innes and reverting it to a freshwater system, and participate in the project if it commences.

3.5 Conserving nature in a changing climate

Climate change presents a risk to the natural and cultural values in the parks through coastal inundation, increased storms and flooding, extreme temperature days, and associated wildfires during dry periods. These disturbances can remove soil and substrate and increase the abundance of weed species. They can adversely impact on koala habitat by reducing the numbers of preferred feed and habitat trees and the nutritional value of food resources. This could potentially lead to a decline in the koala population. Risks to koalas are addressed in the koala conservation action plan (NPWS 2023).

Ongoing protection and restoration of the parks' habitats will improve their capacity to adapt to climate change and support koalas and other native species living in the parks. This includes implementing strategies for feral animal and weed management, fire management, regulating visitor use, and reducing impacts from adjacent developments and land uses.

As discussed, work continues on the feasibility of reverting Lake Innes to freshwater. This is expected to result in positive outcomes for the parks, including a secure breeding habitat for waterbirds, a drought refuge for freshwater species, and improved water quality for recreation. It would also result in higher biomass of aquatic vegetation and a more diverse, natural lake margin. Increased diversity would improve species' resilience to the impacts of climate change.

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Objectives

- Support the parks' ecosystems to build diversity and resilience, and to adapt to climate change, in the broader regional context.

Strategies

- Actively review park management programs and policies in response to new climate change information and other changing environmental and social circumstances, both within park boundaries and in the broader region.

3.6 Providing unique visitor experiences

Providing opportunities for visitors to use and enjoy the parks helps visitors to develop an understanding and appreciation of natural and cultural values. It is important, however, that park use is compatible with the protection of these values and any operational requirements.

Opportunities for visitor use and enjoyment in these parks include low-impact activities such as picnicking, birdwatching, nature and culture appreciation, bushwalking, and cycling on authorised tracks. Camping is not permitted in the parks, however, there are numerous other camping locations in the surrounding region.

Water sports are undertaken on the lakes, with the parks providing access for canoeing, kayaking and other unpowered watercraft. There are currently no restrictions on size and type of powered watercraft that can access these waterways. Lake Innes is shallow (less than 2-metres deep) and unsuitable for boats with large horsepower motors or jet skis, which can churn up sediments. The lake is better suited to non-powered craft or small electric-powered boats that do not significantly disturb the environment or other users. The suitability of the lake for watercraft recreation will continue to be assessed by marine authorities, including whether or not Lake Innes is reverted to freshwater.



Photo 1 Kayakers in Lake Innes Nature Reserve. John Spencer/DCCEEW

There are 3 visitor facility nodes identified within the parks that would benefit from new, improved or modified infrastructure, along with ongoing management to ensure the experiences they offer are enjoyable and sustainable. These nodes are the Innes Ruins, the Googik Heritage walking track and the Perch Hole picnic area. Their locations are shown on Figure 2, and their purpose and examples of the types of activities and developments which

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may occur in these nodes are summarised in Table 1 and discussed further in the following sections.

Innes Ruins visitor facility node

The Innes Ruins offer an excellent opportunity for visitors to learn about the history of European settlement in Australia prior to 1850, and to engage with the park's historical values. The site has been an important destination for entertainment and picnics for over a century, and the cleared areas, lake views and surrounding native vegetation continue to make it an ideal site for picnicking, day use and enjoying nature.

While the Innes Ruins has been functioning as a visitor destination, site conditions and bushfire damage meant access needed to be limited, with the site closed to the public for extended periods after 2019. While the ruins have undergone stabilisation works, further works are required to protect the buildings' fabric from further deterioration and to maintain public safety.

Since the closure of the ruins in 2019, unauthorised access has resulted in trespass, vandalism and the theft of artefacts. This issue will be addressed by greater attention to access control consistent with the historic site's conservation management plan (Praevius Heritage 2025).

Visitor facilities at the Innes Ruins include boardwalks, interpretive signs, picnic tables, a car park and toilet facilities (see Figure 5). These facilities support people visiting for recreation, education and research. Occasional guided tours with NPWS Discovery Rangers have been popular in the past, however, access had to be arranged in advance with a private landholder on each occasion. Since this issue has now been resolved by acquisition of a private land parcel, tour frequencies are expected to increase and plans to further activate visitation to the site can be realised.



Picnic tables at the Innes Ruins Historic Site. John Spencer/DCCEEW

The historic site is available for passive recreation, including picnicking, nature enjoyment and exploring the ruins. Increasing visitor opportunities and facilities (Table 1) is expected to attract more visitors, in tour groups and as individuals.

Visitor opportunities at the Innes Ruins and its surrounds will be enhanced as opportunities allow. These enhancements will be consistent with the area's intended purpose and may be adapted in response to evolving public needs or changing circumstances. Proposals will ensure the nature of the historic site and its ruins, including open spaces, natural vistas and its conservation focus, are maintained. New elements will be carefully scaled to respond to

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the character of the heritage place and meet with its conservation management plan. Visitors will be able to interpret the ruins and enjoy the site, while appreciating the lake shore and adjoining native forest.

As per the conservation management plan, the cleared and modified areas around the Innes Ruins will be a focus for the careful design and location of any additional visitor facilities (see Table 1), in a way which protects and optimises sight lines, vistas and landforms. No terracing or significant modifications of existing contours will be undertaken. The reopening of the view 'runway' through selective vegetation removal may be undertaken if this can be achieved without significant impacts on the values of the historic site.

Public access to the Innes Ruins through the nature reserve and the historic site may be provided on Ruins Way from the Point Drive – Ruins Way intersection. If in the future Lake Innes is reverted to freshwater, the lake and its edges are expected to become more appealing for recreation, which in turn is expected to increase visitation. Any future development at the historic site will be undertaken in accordance with this plan of management, the historic site's conservation management plan, and all relevant environmental, planning and heritage legislation.

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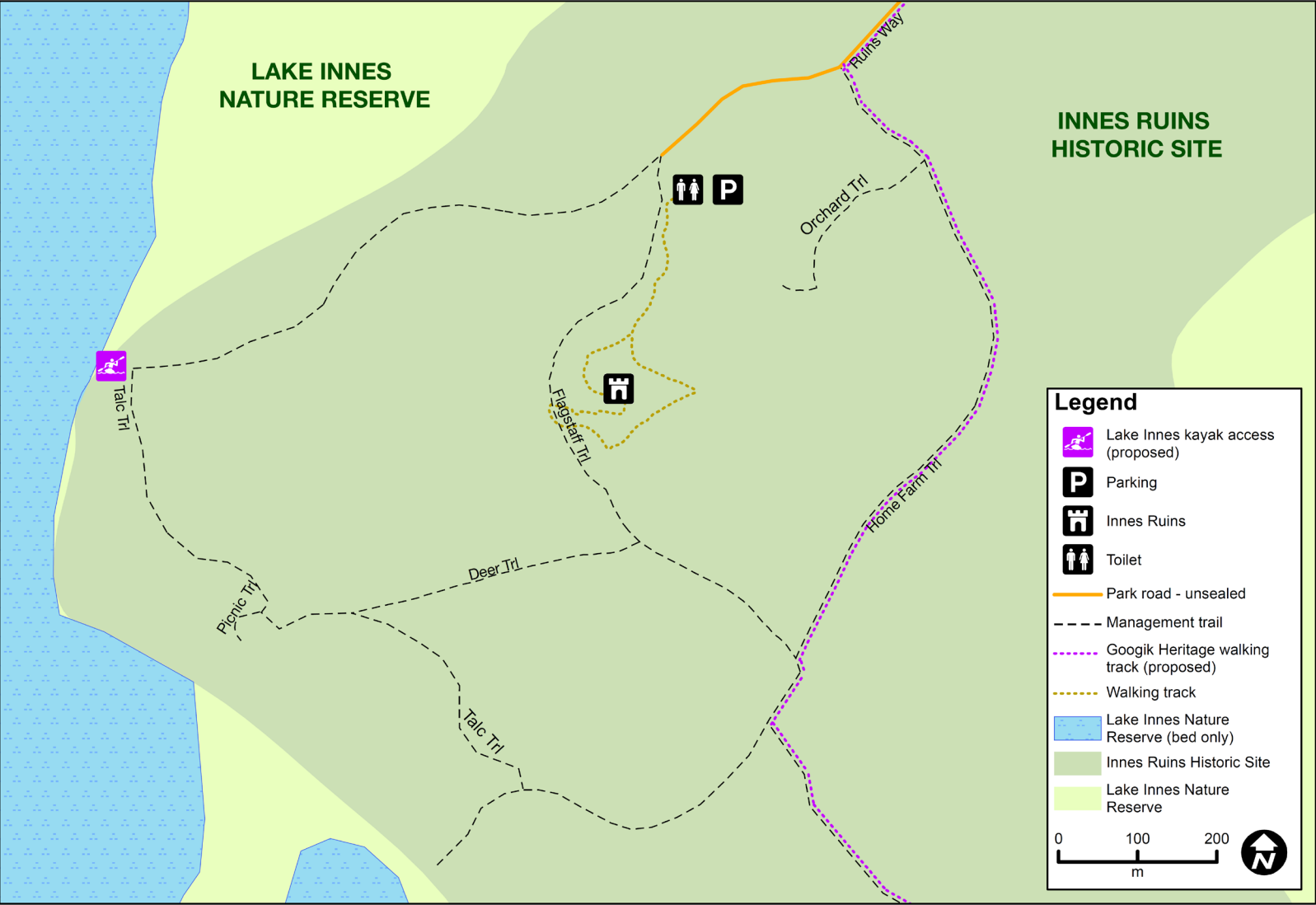


Figure 5 Innes Ruins visitor facility node

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Googik Heritage walking track visitor facility node

The Googik Heritage walking track is popular among park visitors for walking, hiking and increasingly cycling. Despite its name suggesting it is for walking only, it currently functions as a multi-use track. A long-standing proposal to extend the Googik Heritage walking track to the south is supported by the community, local council, NPWS and other interests. The existing track alignment is shown on Figure 2.



Googik Heritage walking track. Tanya Bishop/DCCEEW

The proposal to extend the track has evolved to incorporate access into the Innes Ruins. It also includes connecting the trail to Bells Firetrail at Christmas Bell Plains, Perch Hole picnic area, the nearby coastline, and ultimately the village of Lake Cathie. This would allow visitors using the track to enjoy many of the parks' attractions, including the heath flowers at Christmas Bell Plains, the forested koala habitat, and the convict-built corduroy road and other historic features associated with the Innes Ruins. Given the track would link Lake Cathie and Port Macquarie, visitors would also be provided with the opportunity to enjoy the parks as part of a trip between these 2 centres.

Proposals adding to the Googik Heritage walking track are outlined in Table 1. An indicative alignment for the main track extension is shown on Figure 2, Figure 3 and Figure 5.

The proposal to extend the Googik Heritage walking track to the Innes Ruins would need to demonstrate consistency with the historic site's conservation management plan. Only pedestrian traffic would be permitted to access the Innes Ruins boardwalks, with cyclists encouraged to dismount and leave bikes on racks adjacent to the site.

Overall, the aim of extending the Googik Heritage walking track is to provide a scenic route from which visitors can enjoy a wide variety of attractions in the parks. Extending the track is expected to lead to an increase in visitors using the track, accessing the historic site, and visiting the nature reserve more widely. Additional infrastructure, facilities and signage will support the safe and sustainable use of the track by multiple user groups (e.g. walkers, cyclists, birdwatchers), while maintaining a focus on the protection of park values.

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Perch Hole picnic area visitor facility node

The Perch Hole picnic area is an increasingly popular visitor facility node in Lake Innes Nature Reserve (see Figure 2). The picnic area is accessed off Ocean Drive via the unsealed Perch Hole Trail, which also intersects with the southern end of the Bells Firetrail.

The picnic area provides opportunities for the public to access, understand and enjoy the nature reserve. The site is popular with families and attracts visitors for swimming, fishing and kayaking. The picnic area also provides for birdwatching, with a wide variety of birdlife occupying the lake environs.

No visitor facilities are currently provided at the picnic area. The park road that loops through the picnic area is unsealed, with poorly defined parking spaces and turning areas. Loss of vegetation and erosion of the bank have resulted from uncontrolled vehicle access to the water's edge. The site has been subject to ongoing damage and vandalism, with unauthorised activities such as camping, fires, vandalism, litter and bringing domestic dogs into the nature reserve presenting risks to park values. The popular picnic area is vulnerable to overuse and would benefit from improved facilities to regulate and manage access and site use as well as improve visitor amenity.



Water's edge at Perch Hole picnic area. DCCEEW/John Spencer

The Perch Hole picnic area will be maintained in a largely natural state, providing a peaceful and scenic day use location, with shady picnic spots and pedestrian-only access to the water's edge. Low-key facilities may be developed to enhance this visitor experience and better manage the impacts of visitation (see Table 1).

Vehicles will be prohibited from accessing the water at the Perch Hole picnic area, including those locations previously used to launch boats. This will reduce erosion and scouring at the water's edge, and improve water quality, visitor safety, visual amenity and the waterplay experience. Active rehabilitation may be required to re-establish native vegetation in the most degraded areas.

For visitors wanting to launch boats into Cathie Creek, a purpose-built boat ramp is available at the nearby Jabiru Reserve, managed by the local council. Fishing access by foot, and the launching of non-powered vessels such as kayaks will be encouraged from the Perch Hole picnic area.

Examples of activities that may occur in each visitor facility node are outlined in Table 1.

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Table 1 Proposals at visitor facility nodes

Visitor facility node	Purpose	Examples of proposals that may occur
Innes Ruins – day use area	Accommodate the demand for increased visitation while maintaining the opportunity for passive recreation, learning and reflection on park natural and cultural heritage values.	• Sealing of the Ruins Way to provide an all-weather access. • Scheduled opening of the gate on the Ruins Way to allow public vehicle access. • Supervision of the Innes Ruins site by NPWS staff or volunteers during open hours. • Signage and infrastructure to constrain vehicle movements and car parking. • More numbers and types of prearranged tours and events. • New educational and interpretation materials. • New or improved day use facilities, such as toilets, shelters, water tanks, picnic tables, play areas, seating. • New or improved walking tracks and associated infrastructure. • Bike racks and regulatory signs to control bicycle access to the Innes Ruins boardwalks and other sensitive locations. • Compliance such as surveillance and patrols to prevent unauthorised activities, particularly vandalism. • Gates or access restrictions installed at other entry points to the Innes Ruins, such as from the Googik Heritage walking track.
Googik Heritage walking track – multi-use track	Maintain the multi-use track as an opportunity for visitors to be immersed in the parks and appreciate their natural and cultural values.	• Extension of the Googik Heritage walking track, connecting to the Innes Ruins, Bells Firetrail, Perch Hole picnic area, the nearby coastline, and the village of Lake Cathie. • Improved education and interpretive displays, such as visual displays, sculptures and web information links. • New or improved low-key facilities to support track users, such as seating, shelters and picnic tables. • Renaming of the Googik Heritage walking track to reflect its function as a multi-use track.
Perch Hole picnic area – day use area	Provide a natural, quiet setting for picnics, swimming, water play, birdwatching and other passive recreation.	• New day use facilities such as shelters, water tanks, picnic tables, seating, play areas and toilets. • Road furniture, regulatory signs and closures of unauthorised tracks to constrain vehicle movements. • Access control such as bollards to prevent vehicles accessing the water's edge. • Prohibit boat launching by vehicles and provide information on the location of nearby boat ramps. • Compliance actions such as surveillance and patrols to prevent unauthorised activities, particularly fires, vandalism, unauthorised access, rubbish dumping and domestic pets. • New educational and interpretation materials.

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Objectives

- Enhance visitor use and enjoyment of the parks, providing opportunities that are enjoyable, sustainable and appropriate to the natural and cultural setting and the protection of park values.

Strategies

- Implement strategies at the designated visitor facility nodes, as described in Table 1.
- Monitor demand for visitor access across the parks, adapting park management and facilities to support visitor enjoyment while minimising impacts on park values. This includes monitoring recreation on waterways (where access is provided from parks) and managing visitor behaviour in cooperation with relevant government authorities and the community.

3.7 Managing access and infrastructure in the parks

A reserve access strategy applies to these parks. It establishes existing and proposed park access points via easements, public roads and trails, management trails and other tracks. These need to provide legitimate access for visitors and park managers for such activities as fire management, feral animal and weed control, neighbour liaison and emergencies.

Park roads provide public access for visitors in registered vehicles. Management trails are not accessible to the public in vehicles. Unauthorised vehicle access occurring on park management trails and tracks can have detrimental impacts on natural, cultural and heritage values and other park users.

With changing demands over time, NPWS may adjust the park access system via upgrades, new constructions and closures. These works would be undertaken to support the intent, the objectives and the strategies of this plan.

The Port Macquarie NPWS depot and office is situated within the boundaries of the nature reserve, at the end of Blackbutt Road. The 2-hectare compound is bounded by an industrial estate to the north, a canal to the south-west and a wetland to the east.

There are also several utility easements through the nature reserve including water mains, powerlines and sewerage. These easements are concentrated in the northern end of the nature reserve.

Lake Innes and Cathie Creek are used for recreational fishing and small-scale commercial fishing operations, with the level of activity varying with the season and entrance conditions. Access to the lakes from NPWS estate for commercial fishing is licensed. Commercial activities consist mainly of laying crab pots and prawning with nets. Other activities include mesh netting for bream, mullet, flathead, whiting and tailor and eel trapping.

Objectives

- Appropriate and sustainable infrastructure is provided for park management operations, while minimising negative impacts on park values.
- A secure and consolidated park access network supports effective park management and visitation, while conserving park values.

Strategies

- Implement the reserve access strategy and maintain the road, trail and track network in accordance with the plan of management.

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- Monitor all park tracks and trails and implement upgrades, restrictions or closures as appropriate.
- Maintain the NPWS compound within its existing footprint.
- Work with external stakeholders to avoid or minimise impacts on park estate from non-NPWS services.
- Formalise existing easements, with no other utility easements considered for the parks unless they have a direct benefit to park management.
- Identify and rectify park boundary errors, boundary encroachments and proposed boundary adjustments in accordance with the National Parks and Wildlife Act, as opportunity allows.
- Work with NSW Fisheries, commercial operators and the community to ensure fishing activities are consistent with the management objectives of the parks and any changing conditions. This includes the possible reversion of Lake Innes to a freshwater system.

4. Park-specific management policies

All operations undertaken in the parks must be consistent with this plan, including the park-specific policies summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 Park-specific management policies

Operations	Park-specific management policy
Visitor activities	
Access for wheelchairs, prams and walking	Access for wheelchairs, prams and walking is allowed on designated walking tracks and management trails. Access may be closed on a temporary or seasonal basis.
Camping	Not allowed.
Cycling	Cycling is allowed on park roads, signposted management trails, and authorised multi-use tracks only. Cycling is not permitted on the Innes Ruins boardwalks, designated walking tracks, off-track or sensitive areas as signed. Access may be closed on a temporary or seasonal basis.
Dogs and visiting with pets	Visitors to NSW national parks cannot be accompanied by pets. A person may be accompanied by their trained assistance animal provided they meet the requirements of proof and other conditions set out in the NPWS <i>Pets in parks policy</i> .
Drones and model aeroplanes	Drones may be used for park management and emergency or law enforcement purposes. The use of drones for activities that support park management objectives (e.g. education) may be authorised through a consent (conditions, exclusion areas and civil aviation regulations apply). Recreational use of drones and model aeroplanes is not permitted.
Fires	Not allowed. Fuel stoves permitted.
Fossicking	Not allowed.
Horse riding	Not allowed.
Motorised watercraft, including speed boats and jet skis	Launching of motorised watercraft is not permitted from the parks. Lake Innes is shallow and unsuitable for boats with large horsepower motors.
Non-commercial events, functions and group gatherings	Consent is required for non-commercial group events, functions and gatherings of greater than 40 people. Consent for non-commercial events, functions and gatherings that are not centred on the appreciation of natural or cultural values or visitor education will be limited to visitor facility nodes. Access may be closed on a temporary or seasonal basis.
Swimming and non-motorised aquatic activities	Access for swimming and non-motorised aquatic activities is allowed from the parks. Patrolled swimming areas are not provided.
Vehicle access (including motorbikes, 4WD)	Registered vehicles are allowed on park roads and otherwise as directed. Vehicle access may be closed on a temporary or seasonal basis.
Commercial activities	
Filming and photography	Commercial filming and photography may be allowed subject to approval.
Fisheries	Commercial fishing is managed and approved by NSW Fisheries. Access onto management trails for commercial fishing requires NPWS approval.

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Operations	Park-specific management policy
Commercial tours, events and functions	Commercial tours, events and functions may be approved through a consent. Consent for commercial tours, events and functions that are not centred on the appreciation of natural or cultural values or visitor education will be limited to the visitor facility nodes.
Research and monitoring	
Research and monitoring	NPWS may undertake research and monitoring. Other appropriate research may be undertaken by qualified individuals and organisations approved through a consent. Additional permissions may also be required under other legislation.
Management of public utilities infrastructure	
Development of public utility infrastructure	The development of utility infrastructure that is in the public interest may be considered and authorised in accordance with the National Parks and Wildlife Act. Approval will be subject to necessary assessments and confirmation that alternative locations outside the parks are not feasible.
Maintenance of public utility infrastructure	The maintenance of utility infrastructure will be subject to NPWS authorisation and conditions to minimise impacts on park values.

5. Appendices

Appendix A: Objects of the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974*

The objects of the National Parks and Wildlife Act, set out in section 2A of the Act are:

- a. The conservation of nature, including, but not limited to, the conservation of—
 - i. habitat, ecosystems and ecosystem processes, and
 - ii. biological diversity at the community, species and genetic levels, and
 - iii. landforms of significance, including geological features and processes, and
 - iv. landscapes and natural features of significance including wilderness and wild rivers,
- b. the conservation of objects, places or features (including biological diversity) of cultural value within the landscape, including, but not limited to—
 - i. places, objects and features of significance to Aboriginal people, and
 - ii. places of social value to the people of New South Wales, and
 - iii. places of historic, architectural or scientific significance,
- c. fostering public appreciation, understanding and enjoyment of nature and cultural heritage and their conservation,
- d. providing for the management of land reserved under this Act in accordance with the management principles applicable for each type of reservation.

Appendix B: Management principles for reserves

Nature reserves

The management principles for nature reserves, as set out in section 30E of the National Parks and Wildlife Act are:

- (a) the conservation of biodiversity, the maintenance of ecosystem function, the protection of geological and geomorphological features and natural phenomena,
- (b) the conservation of places, objects, features and landscapes of cultural value,
- (c) the promotion of public appreciation, enjoyment and understanding of the nature reserve's natural and cultural values,
- (d) provision for appropriate research and monitoring,
- (e) provision for the carrying out of development in any part of a special area (within the meaning of the *Hunter Water Act 1991*) in the nature reserve that is permitted under section 185A having regard to the conservation of the nature reserve's natural and cultural values.

Historic sites

The management principles for historic sites, as set out in section 30E of the National Parks and Wildlife Act are:

- (a) the conservation of places, objects, features and landscapes of cultural value,
- (b) the conservation of natural values,
- (c) provision for sustainable visitor or tourist use and enjoyment that is compatible with the conservation of the historic site's natural and cultural values,
- (d) provision for the sustainable use (including adaptive reuse) of any buildings or structures or modified natural areas having regard to the conservation of the historic site's natural and cultural values,
- (da) provision for the carrying out of development in any part of a special area (within the meaning of the *Hunter Water Act 1991*) in the historic site that is permitted under section 185A having regard to the conservation of the historic site's natural and cultural values,
- (e) the promotion of public appreciation and understanding of the historic site's natural and cultural values,
- (f) provision for appropriate research and monitoring.

State conservation areas

The management principles for state conservation areas, as set out in section 30E of the National Parks and Wildlife Act are:

- (a) the conservation of biodiversity, the maintenance of ecosystem function, the protection of natural phenomena and the maintenance of natural landscapes,
- (b) the conservation of places, objects and features of cultural value,
- (c) provision for the undertaking of uses permitted under other provisions of this Act in such areas (including uses permitted under section 47J) having regard to the conservation of the natural and cultural values of the state conservation area,

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- (ca) provision for the carrying out of development in any part of a special area (within the meaning of the *Hunter Water Act 1991*) in the state conservation area that is permitted under section 185A having regard to the conservation of the natural and cultural values of the state conservation area,
- (d) provision for sustainable visitor or tourist use and enjoyment that is compatible with the conservation of the state conservation area's natural and cultural values and with uses permitted under other provisions of this Act in such areas,
- (e) provision for the sustainable use (including adaptive reuse) of any buildings or structures or modified natural areas having regard to the conservation of the state conservation area's natural and cultural values and with uses permitted under other provisions of this Act in such areas,
- (f) provision for appropriate research and monitoring.

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Appendix C: Threatened animals recorded in the parks

Table 3 Threatened animals recorded in the parks

Common name	BC Act status	Commonwealth status	Lake Innes Nature Reserve	Innes Ruins Historic Site	Lake Innes State Conservation Area
Frogs					
Green and golden bell frog	E1	V	Yes	–	–
Wallum froglet	V	–	Yes	Yes	Yes
Birds					
Australasian bittern	E1	E	Yes	Yes	–
Bar-tailed godwit	–	C,J,K	Yes	–	–
Black-necked stork	E1	–	Yes	Yes	–
Caspian tern	–	J	Yes	–	–
Common greenshank	–	C,J,K	Yes	–	–
Common sandpiper	–	C,J,K	Yes	–	–
Curlew sandpiper	E1	CE,C,J,K	Yes	–	–
Dusky woodswallow	V	–	Yes	Yes	–
Eastern curlew	–	CE,C,J,K	Yes	–	–
Eastern grass owl	V,3	–	Yes	Yes	–
Eastern osprey	V,3	–	Yes	Yes	–
Fork-tailed swift	–	C,J,K	Yes	–	–
Latham's snipe	–	J,K	Yes	–	–
Little lorikeet	V	–	Yes	Yes	–
Little tern	E1	C,J,K	–	Yes	–
Pacific golden plover	–	C,J,K	Yes	–	–
Pied oystercatcher	E1	–	Yes	–	–
Great knot	V	V,C,J,K	Yes	–	–
Grey plover	–	C,J,K	Yes	–	–
Masked owl	V,3	–	–	Yes	Yes
Powerful owl	V,3	–	Yes	Yes	–
Red knot	–	E,C,J,K	Yes	–	–
Regent honeyeater	E4A,2	CE	Yes	–	–
Ruddy turnstone	–	C,J,K	Yes	–	–
Scarlet robin	V	–	Yes	–	–
Sharp-tailed sandpiper	–	C,J,K	Yes	–	–

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Common name	BC Act status	Commonwealth status	Lake Innes Nature Reserve	Innes Ruins Historic Site	Lake Innes State Conservation Area
Short-tailed shearwater	–	C,J,K	–	Yes	–
Sooty shearwater	–	J	Yes	–	–
South-eastern glossy black-cockatoo	V,2	V	Yes	–	–
Square-tailed kite	V,3	–	Yes	–	–
Swift parrot	E1	CE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Varied sittella	V	–	Yes	Yes	–
Wedge-tailed shearwater	–	J	Yes	–	–
Wompoo fruit-dove	V	–	Yes	–	Yes
Whimbrel	–	C,J,K	Yes	–	–
White-bellied sea-eagle	V	–	Yes	Yes	Yes
White-throated needletail	–	V,C,J,K	Yes	Yes	–
Mammals					
Common blossom-bat	V	–	–	Yes	–
Common planigale	V	–	–	Yes	–
Eastern chestnut mouse	V	–	Yes	–	–
Eastern pygmy-possum	V	–	Yes	–	–
Greater broad-nosed bat	V	–	–	Yes	–
Grey-headed flying-fox	V	V	Yes	–	Yes
Koala	E1	E	Yes	Yes	Yes
Large bent-winged bat	V	–	Yes	–	–
Little bent-winged bat	V	–	Yes	Yes	–
Rufous bettong	V	–	–	Yes	–
Southern myotis	V	–	Yes	–	–
Spotted-tailed quoll	V	E	Yes	–	–
Squirrel glider	V	–	Yes	–	–
Yellow-bellied glider	V	V	Yes	–	Yes
Yellow-bellied sheath-tail-bat	V	–	Yes	–	–
Crested tern	–	J	Yes	Yes	–

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Source: species and status codes sourced from NSW BioNet, accessed March 2024.

Notes:

BC Act = *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*; Commonwealth Status = *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*; CE = critically endangered; E = endangered; E1 = endangered; E4A = critically endangered; V = vulnerable; 2 = Data Sensitivity Class 2; 3 = Data Sensitivity Class 3

C = China Australia Migratory Bird Agreement; J = Japan Australia Migratory Bird Agreement; K = Republic of Korea Australia Migratory Bird Agreement.

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Appendix D: Threatened plants and ecological communities recorded in the parks

Table 4 Threatened plants recorded in the parks

Common name	BC Act status	Commonwealth status	Lake Innes Nature Reserve	Innes Ruins Historic Site	Lake Innes State Conservation Area
Dwarf heath casuarina	E1	E	Yes	–	–
<i>Maundia triglochinos</i>	V	–	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Biconvex paperbark</i>	V	V	Yes	–	–
Native guava	E4A	CE	Yes	–	–
Byron bay diuris	E1		Yes	–	–
Southern swamp orchid	E1	E	Yes	–	–
Red-flowered king of the fairies	V	–	–	Yes	–

Source: species and status codes sourced from NSW BioNet, accessed September 2025.

Notes:

BC Act = *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*; Commonwealth Status = *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*; CE = critically endangered; E = endangered; E1 = endangered; E4A = critically endangered; V = vulnerable

Table 5 Threatened ecological communities recorded in the parks

Common name	BC Act status	Commonwealth status
Coastal Saltmarsh in the New South Wales North Coast, Sydney Basin and South East Corner Bioregions	E3	–
Coastal Swamp Oak (<i>Casuarina glauca</i>) Forest of New South Wales and South East Queensland ecological community	–	E
Coastal Swamp Sclerophyll Forest of New South Wales and South East Queensland	–	E
Freshwater Wetlands on Coastal Floodplains of the New South Wales North Coast, Sydney Basin and South East Corner Bioregions	E3	–
Littoral Rainforest in the New South Wales North Coast, Sydney Basin and South East Corner Bioregions	E3	–
Lowland Rainforest in the NSW North Coast and Sydney Basin Bioregions	E3	–
Lowland Rainforest of Subtropical Australia	–	CE
Lowland Rainforest on Floodplain in the New South Wales North Coast Bioregion	E3	–
Subtropical and Temperate Coastal Saltmarsh	–	V

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Common name	BC Act status	Commonwealth status
Subtropical Coastal Floodplain Forest of the New South Wales North Coast Bioregion	E3	—
Subtropical eucalypt floodplain forest and woodland of the New South Wales North Coast and South East Queensland bioregions	—	E
Swamp Oak Floodplain Forest of the New South Wales North Coast, Sydney Basin and South East Corner Bioregions	E3	—
Swamp Sclerophyll Forest on Coastal Floodplains of the New South Wales North Coast, Sydney Basin and South East Corner Bioregions	E3	—
Themeda grassland on seacliffs and coastal headlands in the NSW North Coast, Sydney Basin and South East Corner Bioregions	E3	—

Source: NSW BioNet, accessed September 2025.

Notes:

BC Act = *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*; Commonwealth Status = *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*; CE = critically endangered; E = endangered; E3 = endangered ecological community; V = vulnerable.

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7. More information

- Assets of intergenerational significance
- Assets of intergenerational significance: conservation action plans
- NPWS park policies
- State Heritage Inventory
- Zero extinctions - Threatened Species Framework

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