

# **Holocene Geomorphology of the Macdonald and Tuross Rivers**

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A thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy at  
The Australian National University

November 2003

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Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own original work.

Paul Rustomji

18 November 2003



To Ely ...

*Go E ... Go!*



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# Acknowledgements

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In producing this thesis I am indebted to many folk who have kindly helped along the way. My supervisors John Chappell and Ian Prosser were both generous with their ideas and patience. Ian was a consistent source of encouragement and support through the inevitable ups and downs of PhD research. John Chappell greatly assisted in coalescing what seemed like a swirling confusion of observations into a thesis and was ever ready with a salient geomorphic example from some exotic location to correct twisted thinking.

Jon Olley deserves a special mention of thanks. Without his generous offer to provide luminescence dates, as well as his continuing encouragement, this thesis would never have been completed. Chris Leslie, Jacqui Olley and Ken MacMillan are also thanked for contributing to the luminescence dating.

Damien Kelleher is truly a man worth his weight in gold. Always good company in the field, his expertise in sediment core drilling is unsurpassed and my sincerest thanks are extended to him for his efforts. Damien, along with Abaz Alimanovic, also performed the radiocarbon dating in thesis.

Those who assisted in the fieldwork and put up with droughts, bushfires, snakes, stinking hot weather all on top of any trouble I might have caused included Martin Weisse, Chuck Magee, Paul Treble, Toshi Fujioka, Thomas Schambron, Martin Smith and Simon Mockler. Thanks chaps.

My Mum, Leigh made a sterling effort in the final days of preparing this thesis at proof reading. Thanks Mum.

Last but not least, to Pauline, it was a long road for both of us, but we made it. Thanks.





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# Abstract

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The floodplains that grade to the estuaries along the New South Wales coast primarily record a history of valley aggradation induced by post-glacial sea level rise. However, post-glacial sea level along this coast has both risen, then fallen, relative to the land during the Holocene due to isostatic compensation to loading of the ocean basins. Geomorphological and stratigraphic data from the Macdonald and Tuross valleys, which drain to this coast, are combined with radiocarbon and optically stimulated luminescence dating to examine how the floodplains of these coastal rivers have responded to such base level changes and also to the variable Holocene climate.

From 9000 to 6000 years BP, as sea level was rising to its Holocene maximum, aggradation occurred in the alluvial reaches of both the Tuross and Macdonald rivers but at very different rates. In the Macdonald valley, aggradation occurred at 5.6mm per year, which greatly exceeded the 0.5 to 0.9mm per year rate of the Tuross valley. This difference reflects the shoreline transgression into the Tuross valley by rising sea level, whilst the Macdonald River, on account of its confined valley which was more conducive to sediment entrapment, was prograding.

When sea level stabilised 6500 years ago, progradation of the Tuross River was initiated, but continued to occur in the Macdonald valley. The aggradation that formed the highest and most extensive alluvial surfaces along the two valleys occurred between 6000 and 2000 years ago. The floodplain sediments of this period are comprised of slightly coarser sand with less silt and clay than the underlying early Holocene deposits, and show weak pedogenesis. Aggradation in this interval occurred at 1.2 to 1.9mm per year in the Tuross Valley which was comparable with the 2 to 4mm per year rate of the Macdonald valley. The fluvial landforms such as the land-tied bars,

levees and floodbasins built at this time are the dominant landforms of the present day valley floors. Aggradation of the alluvial reaches of both rivers was synchronous with progradation into their estuaries and demonstrates the link between these two processes.

The alluvial surfaces constructed by each river during the 6000 to 2000 year period were abandoned as active floodplains about 2000 years ago. This represented an important change in floodplain evolution and was accompanied by the construction of a mid-level bench inset below the abandoned floodplains. The relationship of the mid-level bench to this abandoned floodplain surface in each case is consistent with a climate change involving a shift to smaller floods occurring 2000 years ago. Consequently, it is concluded that this was the main reason these high floodplain surfaces were abandoned. However, subsequent abandonment of the Macdonald River's mid-level bench between 600 and 800 years ago, and the formation of a modern floodplain surface below it, are consistent with a stronger influence of post-highstand base level fall upon floodplain formation and evolution along this river.

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# Contents

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<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>Abstract</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Study Sites and Methods . . . . .	4
1.2 Thesis Outline . . . . .	5
<b>2 Literature Review</b>	<b>7</b>
2.1 Regional Geology of South Eastern Australia . . . . .	9
2.1.1 Implications for Topographic Evolution . . . . .	9
2.2 The Late Quaternary Environmental Context . . . . .	12
2.2.1 Glacial-Interglacial Cycling . . . . .	12
2.2.1.1 Sea Level Changes through the Last Glacial Cycle .	13
2.2.1.2 Holocene Sea Level Variation along the New South Wales Coast . . . . .	14
2.2.2 Holocene Estuarine Evolution in Eastern Australia . . . . .	18
2.2.2.1 Estuarine Infilling and Valley Aggradation . . . . .	20
2.2.3 Late Quaternary Environments of Australia . . . . .	25
2.2.3.1 Pre-Last Glacial Maximum Conditions . . . . .	25
2.2.3.2 The Last Glacial Maximum . . . . .	27
2.2.3.3 The Post-Glacial Phase . . . . .	28
2.2.3.4 Early Holocene Channel Development . . . . .	31
2.2.3.5 Late Holocene Floodplain Development . . . . .	32

---

2.2.3.6	Holocene Climate Change . . . . .	32
2.2.4	Hydrologic Trends since European Settlement . . . . .	34
2.2.4.1	Rainfall Variations . . . . .	34
2.2.4.2	Changes in Streamflow . . . . .	35
2.2.5	Hydrologic Variability of Eastern Australia . . . . .	36
2.3	Floodplain Formation and Evolution . . . . .	42
2.3.1	Models of Floodplain Formation . . . . .	42
2.3.1.1	Floodplain Formation by Lateral Accretion . . . . .	43
2.3.1.2	Floodplain Formation by Vertical Accretion . . . . .	44
2.3.2	Catastrophic Floodplain Stripping . . . . .	45
<b>3</b>	<b>Data and Methods</b>	<b>49</b>
3.1	Topographic Surveying . . . . .	49
3.2	Stratigraphic Drilling . . . . .	51
3.3	Sedimentologic Analysis . . . . .	51
3.4	Aerial Photographs . . . . .	52
3.5	Bore Logs . . . . .	52
3.6	Climate Data . . . . .	53
3.7	Hydrographic Data . . . . .	53
3.7.1	Observational Hydrographic Data . . . . .	53
3.7.2	Modelled Hydrographic Data . . . . .	55
3.7.3	Flood Frequency Analysis . . . . .	58
3.7.4	Hydraulic Properties of Open Channel Flow . . . . .	60
3.8	Tidal Data . . . . .	61
3.9	Geochronological Methods . . . . .	61
3.9.1	Radiocarbon Dating . . . . .	61

---

3.9.1.1	Dating Fluvial Deposits with Radiocarbon From Detrital Charcoal . . . . .	63
3.9.2	Luminescence Dating . . . . .	64
3.9.2.1	Bleaching of Luminescence Prior to Burial . . . . .	65
3.9.2.2	Burial Dose Determination Using OSL . . . . .	66
3.9.2.3	Environmental Dose Rate Determination . . . . .	67
3.9.2.4	Analytic Procedures for OSL . . . . .	71
<b>4</b>	<b>Holocene Geomorphology of the Macdonald River</b>	<b>73</b>
4.1	Chapter Outline . . . . .	73
4.2	Geology . . . . .	73
4.3	Topography . . . . .	74
4.4	The Hawkesbury Estuary . . . . .	79
4.4.1	Hawkesbury Estuary Tides . . . . .	81
4.5	Climate . . . . .	83
4.6	Hydrology . . . . .	86
4.6.1	Rainfall–Runoff Relationships . . . . .	86
4.6.2	Flood Frequency Analysis for the Macdonald River . . . . .	88
4.6.3	Long Term Trends in Stream Discharge . . . . .	92
4.7	Vegetation . . . . .	92
4.8	The Fluvial Landscape . . . . .	94
4.8.1	Topography of the Sternbeck Stockyards Site . . . . .	99
4.8.1.1	Bedrock Hillslopes . . . . .	99
4.8.1.2	Channel Bed . . . . .	100
4.8.1.3	Point Bars . . . . .	100
4.8.1.4	The Contemporary Floodplain . . . . .	100
4.8.1.5	Erosion Scarp . . . . .	101

---

4.8.1.6	High Level Bar . . . . .	101
4.8.1.7	Mid-Level Bench . . . . .	102
4.8.1.8	Floodbasin . . . . .	102
4.8.2	Valley Cross Sections . . . . .	106
4.8.3	Long Profile of the Macdonald River . . . . .	106
4.9	Hydraulics of the Macdonald River . . . . .	109
4.9.1	Slope Measurement . . . . .	109
4.9.2	Estimation of Hydraulic Resistance . . . . .	109
4.9.3	Floodplain Inundation Frequency . . . . .	111
4.10	Sedimentology and Stratigraphy of Alluvial	
	Deposits . . . . .	112
4.10.1	Stockyard Bar Crest Core . . . . .	121
4.10.2	Pams Farm Bar Crest Core . . . . .	121
4.10.3	Pams Farm Mid-Bench Core . . . . .	122
4.10.4	Culvern Bar Crest Core . . . . .	122
4.10.5	Floodbasin Sediments . . . . .	123
4.10.6	Cumulative Burial Depth . . . . .	124
4.10.7	The Modern Floodplain . . . . .	124
4.11	Chronology of Floodplain Formation . . . . .	127
4.11.1	Selection of Dating Samples . . . . .	127
4.11.2	Formation Epoch of the High Level Bars . . . . .	130
4.11.2.1	Stockyard Bar . . . . .	130
4.11.2.2	Duck Bar . . . . .	133
4.11.2.3	Ferndale Bar . . . . .	136
4.11.2.4	Pams Bar . . . . .	139
4.11.2.5	Culvern Bar Crest . . . . .	141
4.11.3	Formation Epoch of the Mid-Level Bench . . . . .	142

---

4.11.4	Formation Epoch of the Modern Floodplain . . . . .	143
4.12	Historical Channel Change . . . . .	143
4.12.1	Early Twentieth Century Evolution . . . . .	144
4.12.2	1949-55 Floods and Channel Responses . . . . .	146
4.12.3	Summary of Dating Results and Floodplain Evolution . . . . .	153
<b>5</b>	<b>Holocene Geomorphology of the Tuross River</b>	<b>155</b>
5.1	Chapter Outline . . . . .	155
5.2	Geology . . . . .	155
5.3	Topography . . . . .	158
5.4	The Tuross Lakes Estuary . . . . .	163
5.4.1	Tuross Estuary Tides . . . . .	163
5.5	Climate . . . . .	166
5.5.1	Regional Climatology . . . . .	166
5.5.2	Temporal Trends in Annual Rainfall . . . . .	169
5.6	Hydrology . . . . .	172
5.6.1	The Rating Curve for the Eurobodalla Gauge . . . . .	172
5.6.2	Rainfall-Runoff Relationships . . . . .	175
5.6.2.1	Individual Rainfall Events and Flood Peaks . . . . .	175
5.6.2.2	Monthly Rainfall Runoff Relationship . . . . .	177
5.6.3	Twentieth Century Trends in Stream Discharge . . . . .	179
5.6.4	Flood Frequency Analysis . . . . .	182
5.7	The Fluvial Landscape . . . . .	186
5.7.1	The Long Profile . . . . .	191
5.7.1.1	Thalweg and Channel Characteristics . . . . .	191
5.7.1.2	Alluvial Surfaces . . . . .	192
5.7.2	Channel Cross Sections . . . . .	195

---

5.7.3	Topography of the Donga Site . . . . .	196
5.8	Channel Hydraulics and Inundation Frequency . . . . .	201
5.8.1	Hydraulic Model Parameterisation . . . . .	201
5.8.2	Inundation Magnitude and Event Frequency . . . . .	204
5.9	Alluvial Stratigraphy and Depositional Chronology . . . . .	206
5.9.1	The Redbank Sediment Core . . . . .	209
5.9.1.1	Stratigraphy, Sedimentology and Core Chronology . . . . .	211
5.9.2	The Tally Ho Sediment Core . . . . .	219
5.9.2.1	Stratigraphy and Sedimentology . . . . .	221
5.9.3	Old Cadgee and Quiltys Cutting . . . . .	221
5.9.4	The Mid-Level Bench . . . . .	226
5.10	Twentieth Century Channel Change . . . . .	229
5.11	Summary . . . . .	232
<b>6</b>	<b>Discussion of Results</b>	<b>235</b>
6.1	Macdonald River Evolutionary Model . . . . .	235
	Phase 1 (Pre-10 ka): <i>Lowstand Sea Levels followed by Post-Glacial</i>	
	<i>Marine Transgression</i> . . . . .	235
	Phase 2 (10 to 6 ka): <i>Conclusion of Post-Glacial Sea Level Rise</i> . . . . .	239
	Phase 3 (6 to 1.5 ka): <i>Channel and Floodplain Stabilisation</i> . . . . .	243
	Phase 4 (1500 to 150 BP): <i>Bench construction</i> . . . . .	245
	Phase 5 (150 to 0 BP): <i>The Historical Period</i> . . . . .	247
6.2	Tuross River Evolutionary Model . . . . .	248
	Phase 1: <i>Pleistocene Landforms and Early Holocene Aggradation</i> . . . . .	249
	Phase 2: <i>Holocene Fluvial Aggradation</i> . . . . .	253
	Phase 3: <i>Late-Holocene Bench Formation</i> . . . . .	256
6.3	Pre-Holocene Evolution of Coastal River Systems . . . . .	259



---

6.4	Understanding the Factors of Change in the Holocene . . . . .	260
6.4.1	High Level Surface Abandonment . . . . .	262
6.4.2	Channel Change and Sediment Transport Regimes . . . . .	267
<b>7</b>	<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>273</b>
<b>A</b>	<b>Appendix</b>	<b>281</b>
A.1	Macdonald River Channel Cross Sections . . . . .	281
A.2	Tuross River Channel Cross Sections . . . . .	286



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# List of Figures

---

2.1	Relevant Landforms of southeastern Australia . . . . .	8
2.2	Regional geology of south eastern Australia. . . . .	10
2.3	Oxygen isotope record of the last 300,000 years . . . . .	13
2.4	Holocene sea level curve for the New South Wales coast . . . . .	15
2.5	Late Holocene sea level observations from the central NSW coast . .	17
2.6	Estuary cross section . . . . .	19
2.7	Stages of infilling of a wave dominated estuary . . . . .	21
2.8	Linkage between fluvial progradation and aggradation . . . . .	22
2.9	Flood variability in eastern Australia . . . . .	38
2.10	Gauging station locations for eastern Australia . . . . .	39
2.11	Area specific discharge rates for eastern Australia . . . . .	41
3.1	Horizontal and vertical GPS precision . . . . .	50
3.2	Observed and modelled discharge for the Macdonald River . . . . .	57
3.3	Observed and modelled discharge for the Tuross River . . . . .	58
3.4	Minimum age model in OSL dating . . . . .	68
4.1	Regional topography of the Macdonald River . . . . .	75
4.2	Coarse long profile for the Macdonald River . . . . .	76
4.3	Topographic transect across the Macdonald valley . . . . .	78
4.4	Hypsometric curve for the Macdonald River catchment . . . . .	79
4.5	Hillslope soil profile in tributary valley to the Macdonald. . . . .	80
4.6	Tidal observations for the Hawkesbury River . . . . .	82

---

4.7	Annual rainfall at Kindarun . . . . .	83
4.8	Monthly climate data for the Richmond RAAF base . . . . .	84
4.9	Monthly climate data for Kulnurra . . . . .	85
4.10	Rainfall intensity-frequency-duration curves for Lithgow. . . . .	85
4.11	Rainfall runoff relationship at Howes Valley . . . . .	87
4.12	Flood frequency distribution for Macdonald River at St Albans . . . .	89
4.13	Flood frequency distribution for Macdonald River at Howes Valley . .	90
4.14	Cumulative residual discharge plot for the Macdonald River at Howes Valley . . . . .	93
4.15	Map of study sites along the Macdonald Valley . . . . .	95
4.16	Landforms of the Stockyards and Duck Bar . . . . .	104
4.17	Panoramic north facing view of the Sternbeck Stockyards site. . . .	105
4.18	Detailed profile of the Macdonald River thalweg and alluvial deposits	108
4.19	Mannings $n$ for Wollombi Brook . . . . .	110
4.20	Stockyard bar crest sediment core with dates . . . . .	114
4.21	Stockyards sediment core and valley section . . . . .	115
4.22	Pams Farm bar crest sediment core with dates . . . . .	116
4.23	Pams Farm sediment core and valley section . . . . .	117
4.24	Pams Farm mid-level bench core with dates . . . . .	118
4.25	Culvern bar crest sediment core with dates . . . . .	119
4.26	Culvern sediment core and valley section . . . . .	120
4.27	Cumulative burial curve for the Macdonald Valley . . . . .	125
4.28	Photograph of modern floodplain sediments . . . . .	126
4.29	Depth versus age plots for the Macdonald valley . . . . .	132
4.30	Photography of Duck Bar sediments . . . . .	134
4.31	Duck Bar cross section with dates . . . . .	135
4.32	Photograph of the Ferndale soil pit and OSL sampling tube. . . . .	137

---

4.33	Ferndale cross section and OSL date . . . . .	138
4.34	1944 air photograph of the Stockyards and Duck Bar sites . . . . .	145
4.35	Bed width of the Macdonald River . . . . .	148
4.36	Sedimentation pattern around Central Macdonald . . . . .	150
4.37	Wonga valley fill cross section . . . . .	151
5.1	Geology of the Tuross Valley . . . . .	157
5.2	Topography of the Tuross Valley . . . . .	159
5.3	Photograph of the Tuross River gorge . . . . .	160
5.4	Coarse long profile of the Tuross River . . . . .	161
5.5	Hypsometric curve for the Tuross River . . . . .	162
5.6	Aerial photo of the Tuross estuary barrier . . . . .	164
5.7	Tidal observations for the Tuross estuary . . . . .	165
5.8	Climate data for Narooma . . . . .	167
5.9	Climate data for Bodalla State Forest . . . . .	167
5.10	Climate data for Nimmitabel . . . . .	168
5.11	Climate data for Braidwood . . . . .	168
5.12	Temporal distribution of rainfall records for the Tuross River region. .	169
5.13	Pre and post-1949 annual rainfall for the Tuross Region . . . . .	173
5.14	Eurobodalla rating curve . . . . .	174
5.15	Tuross River hydrograph for 1978 . . . . .	176
5.16	Tuross River hydrograph for 1991 . . . . .	176
5.17	Monthly rainfall–runoff relationship for the Tuross River at Eurobodalla	178
5.18	Cumulative residual discharge plot for the Tuross River at Belowra . .	181
5.19	Flood frequency distribution for the Tuross River at Eurobodalla . . .	185
5.20	Site map for the lower Tuross River . . . . .	187
5.21	Detailed long profile of the Tuross River with alluvial deposits . . . .	194
5.22	Topographic and geomorphologic map of the Donga site . . . . .	198

---

5.23	Photograph of high level surface at Donga . . . . .	199
5.24	Erosion scarp at Donga . . . . .	200
5.25	Channel capacity for the Tuross River . . . . .	205
5.26	Air photographs of Redbank and Tally Ho . . . . .	208
5.27	Redbank sediment core and valley cross section . . . . .	210
5.28	Redbank sediment core with dates . . . . .	215
5.29	Age-depth profile for the Redbank sediment core . . . . .	216
5.30	Tally Ho sediment core and valley cross section . . . . .	220
5.31	Tally Ho sediment core with dates . . . . .	222
5.32	Old Cadgee Pleistocene alluvium . . . . .	224
5.33	Quiltys Cutting Pleistocene cobbles . . . . .	225
5.34	Rewlee bench sand extraction pit . . . . .	227
5.35	Rewlee bench sediments with radiocarbon dates . . . . .	228
5.36	Bedwidth of the Tuross River from 1944 and 2002 . . . . .	230
6.1	Holocene long profile of the Macdonald River . . . . .	238
6.2	Australian area specific sediment yields . . . . .	242
6.3	Holocene evolutionary sequence for the Macdonald River . . . . .	246
6.4	Holocene long profile of the Tuross River . . . . .	251
6.5	Holocene evolutionary sequence for the Tuross River . . . . .	257
6.6	Holocene sea levels and floodplain aggradation rates . . . . .	264
6.7	Flood frequency distributions for the Tuross and Macdonald rivers . . . . .	269
6.8	Monthly discharge versus rainfall plot for the Tuross and Macdonald rivers . . . . .	270
A.1	Modern valley cross sections along the Macdonald River from Jurds Creek to Duck Bar. . . . .	282

---

A.2	Modern valley cross sections along the Macdonald River from Ninians to Gorricks Run. . . . .	283
A.3	Modern valley cross sections along the Macdonald River from Fern- dale to Pams Farm. . . . .	284
A.4	Modern valley cross sections along the Macdonald River from Race- course to the Word of life camp. . . . .	285
A.5	Channel cross sections of the Tuross River. . . . .	287
A.6	Channel cross sections of the Tuross River. . . . .	288
A.7	Channel cross sections of the Tuross River. . . . .	289
A.8	Channel cross sections of the Tuross River. . . . .	290
A.9	Channel cross sections of the Tuross River. . . . .	291
A.10	Channel cross sections of the Tuross River. . . . .	292
A.11	Channel cross sections of the Tuross River. . . . .	293





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# List of Tables

---

3.1	Macdonald climate stations . . . . .	53
3.2	Tuross climate stations . . . . .	54
3.3	Macdonald River gauging stations . . . . .	55
3.4	Tuross River gauging stations . . . . .	55
4.1	Tide data for Sydney and Newcastle . . . . .	82
4.2	Historical floods of the Macdonald River . . . . .	91
4.3	Channel capacity of the Macdonald River . . . . .	112
4.4	OSL dates for the Macdonald Valley . . . . .	128
4.5	Radiocarbon dates from the Macdonald Valley. . . . .	129
4.6	Macdonald valley aggradation summary . . . . .	152
5.1	Tide data for Sydney and Port Kembla . . . . .	165
5.2	Mean annual rainfall totals for the Tuross River region . . . . .	170
5.3	Annual peak instantaneous discharge data for the Tuross River. . . . .	183
5.4	Calibration of Mannings $n$ . . . . .	202
5.5	OSL dates from the Tuross Valley . . . . .	217
5.6	Radiocarbon dates from the Tuross valley . . . . .	218
6.1	Externally sourced radiocarbon dates from the Tuross River . . . . .	256
6.2	Relative sediment transport capacity for the Tuross and Macdonald Rivers . . . . .	271

