



River bank spins tales of the spirit

Harriet Alexander

WHEN the nights got so hot in their East Hills fibro house that the sheets felt like blankets, Carol Jacobsen and her siblings would go for a dip in the Georges River.

If the tide was out, the swimming hole turned to mud and the jelly blubbers rotted from where they had become stranded in the nets designed to keep them out. "It wasn't glamorous, love," Mrs Jacobsen remembered of the 1940s and 1950s. "It wasn't glamorous in any way but we knew nothing else.

"It was our experience, and you played cricket in the park and you would meet your relations in the park and sit out and have a picnic with them because your house was too small. We had nothing and we had the most fantastic life."

Mrs Jacobsen is one of 150 people who have had their say in a study on the use of parks, which was led by researchers from the University of Technology, Sydney, in partnership with the NSW Department of Environment and

Conservation. Another contributor was Janny Ely, of the Gandangara Local Aboriginal Land Council, who has campaigned for significant indigenous sites along the river to be protected.

She survived a childhood spent jumping into the river off the old railway bridge. "I look at it now and think I mustn't have had a brain in my head."

Residents of Vietnamese origin told the researchers of how they used the river and parkland for meditation.

Wafa Zaim said the park was "a huge part of our Muslim community". She organises gatherings of her extended family in the park during Ramadan so they can break their fast together.

Everyone who uses the Georges River and the parks lining it, from Liverpool to Botany Bay, sees it as a spiritual place, say the researchers, who will present their initial findings today as part of Parks Week.

"In all of the groups we spoke to, nature is seen as a way to

access spiritual life," said Associate Professor Heather Goodall, a social historian.

"All of these cultures have a sense that God, however that might be understood, is present in the landscape."

The research looks at how different cultures respond to nature and how people cope with migration and change, using Anglo-Celtic, Aboriginal, Arabic-speaking and Vietnamese people as its points of reference.

"People from all of these groups – but particularly the migrant groups, the Vietnamese and Arab speakers – really love being in parks because it gives them an opportunity to observe people from other cultures, to watch how they do things and to meet other people and to share a bit of interaction with them," Professor Goodall said

It was not all harmony and bliss. Arabic speakers, especially women wearing the hijab, complained of being intimidated, and some criticised Vietnamese for keeping fish so small they should be thrown back.



All things to all men ... Jake Schembri, 12, enjoyed the Georges River National Park in his own style yesterday with a dip in Morgans Creek. Photo: Kate Geraghty