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Australian War Memorial expansion: Community fights to save memorial's WWII-era trees



[Sarah Basford Canales](#)

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A group of concerned citizens have joined forces to peacefully protest the planned removal of more than 100 trees on the Australian War Memorial grounds ahead of a controversial \$500 million proposal to expand the national institution.

The demonstrators gathered on Wednesday morning to tie red ribbons around trees earmarked for removal as part of a push by heritage interest group Heritage Guardians.

The proposed redevelopment will see the award-winning Anzac Hall destroyed and 116 trees removed from the site in order to make way for a new exhibition hall, totalling an estimated cost of \$498.7 million.

It has received heritage and parliamentary approval but requires a final tick from the National Capital Authority before major works can be undertaken.

As [a part of the project's early works program](#), it's expected the trees will be removed before receiving the authority's final approval.

Medical Association for Prevention of War president and long-time opponent of the plans Dr Sue Wareham said it was important for Canberrans to see a visual representation of the trees eyed for destruction as part of the plans.

"It's important that the people of Canberra, and elsewhere, know exactly what's planned for the war memorial," Ms Wareham said.

"The number [of trees] we've highlighted here at the front are just the start. There are a lot more around the ground today that are going to be destroyed."

Nine-year-old Annabel Papps joined the group for a simple reason - her love of trees.

"I'm down here because I want to save the trees," Annabel said.

"I absolutely love trees. They are helpful for the world."

University of Canberra researcher and former war memorial historian Professor Peter Stanley said some of the trees marked for removal had been planted during the memorial's opening in the 1940s.

He believed it meant some of the trees were approaching 80 years of age.

"These trees were, I believe, planted around the time the memorial was opened in November 1941," Professor Stanley said.

"These trees are Second World War veterans, and the memorial's chopping them down.

The capital authority has begun its public consultation period with submissions open until the end of April.

While the group said they'd faced a number of setbacks already, they hoped the authority would listen to the project's groundswell opposition.

ACT Greens federal candidate Tim Hollo said it was important that community concerns with the project were listened to and factored into the final process.

"The NCA has a particular responsibility for protecting the national capital for the people of Australia," Mr Hollo said.

"If [the NCA] hear very loud and clear the voices of a whole lot of people around Australia saying, 'We do not want this to go ahead,' the NCA has to listen to that."

The plans were first proposed in 2018 and have since cleared all but one aspect of the approval process - the National Capital Authority's approval.

Ms Wareham said she felt politicians and interest groups were steaming ahead without addressing the concerns heritage experts, historians and architect groups had raised.

"It's a travesty of the democracy that we're told our troops fight for every time we go to war," Ms Wareham said.

"We're always told it's about freedom and democracy. Well, what democracy is there when people don't want a major redevelopment and it goes ahead anyway?"

The war memorial undertook a national survey in February, which director Matt Anderson said showed overwhelming support for the project with only 6 per cent of the 4000 respondents being opposed to it.

A spokesperson for the war memorial added no external parties had influenced the project.

"The memorial has and continues to listen to all voices, including those opposed to the project," a spokesperson said.

"The memorial remains, as it always has and will, apolitical - it is a place for all Australians to remember those who have served and sacrificed regardless of any political or other affiliations or beliefs.

"The defence industry has not been involved in any stage of the proposed development project."

Concerned citizens tied red ribbons on trees marked for removal as a part of the Australian War Memorial's proposed expansion. Picture: Karleen Minney

The war memorial said it has plans to replace all of the trees with newly-planted ones, adding an extra 70 to the site.

It added the existing eucalypts had required a lot of management in order to ensure the safety of visitors and more suitable replacement species would be used instead.

But Professor Stanley said this wasn't an acceptable alternative in the interim period.

"The next time this site would look like this is in 50, 60, 70 years time. Chopping trees like this down is a profound insult to the land," Professor Stanley said.

"It disillusioned me because it means the democratic processes that we all put so much faith in actually aren't much of a safeguard in the end."

The NCA's public consultation period will remain open until April 30 and is accepting submissions on the war memorial's planned developments.