In recognition of the importance of the Tank Stream to the people of Sydney and New South Wales, it was protected by a Permanent Conservation Order in 1989 and entered on the NSW State Heritage Register in 1999. The Tank Stream is recognised as being of national importance to the European settlement of Australia.

Aboriginal occupation

Due to the almost immediate impact of European colonists, our knowledge of Sydney’s Aboriginal people is limited. Early settlers casual and systematic observations provide some insight, but basic information is missing or ambiguous. Even the names of the Aboriginal landscape with the names of the stream and the other features in the catchment have been lost.

Recently researchers favour Gadigal (often spelt Cadigal) as the name of the group that had some rights and obligations for the land around Sydney Cove. The Gadigal spoke the coastal dialect of Dharug, which makes them part of a larger group within the Sydney region.
Major Grose made a significant environmental decision. He allowed the military to build houses and pigsties in the Tank Stream’s green belt, causing pollution and illness. In wet weather, the tanks would fill with sand and silt and in dry weather, the Tank Stream would dwindle to a brook. As the population grew, the quality of the water became as much of a problem as the quantity. New governors passed increasingly severe, but unsuccessful laws in an attempt to prevent pollution. In 1800, Governor King even tried flogging offenders and demolishing their houses, but by 1828 all attempts to save the Tank Stream for drinking were abandoned. It became an open sewer and a source of water-borne disease. So in 1858, the Tank Stream was diverted under Pitt Street and 150 metres of stone culvert was built over it from Circular Quay. The stream was eventually fully buried beneath the growing city.

Today the Tank Stream still functions as a stormwater drain. The stormwater flows from the lower CBD to the harbour, through what was once a vital water supply for the city.