Now, more than 180 years after British settlers arrived in the catchment and with the river continuing to show signs of stress, Edith Cowan University researchers have documented the relationship that local residents have with the estuary.

The collaborative project was funded by the Department of Water, the Leschenault Catchment Council, South West Catchments Council and sustainability group Hot Rock, and included funding from the Australian Government’s Caring for our Country program.

The study, titled ‘A Sense of Home: a Cultural Geography of the Leschenault Estuary District’, found residents “cherish” the river and aspire to improve its ecological health.

ECU Regional Professional Studies associate professor Sandra Wooltorton says the complex project was immensely engaging, allowing the University to work closely with the community, including high-school children, the Wardandi Noongar people, and local businesses.

“The idea of the project was to look at the way the local population feel about place, so looking at what their relationship with place is,” Professor Wooltorton says.

She says the data will be useful to government departments and anyone who is interested in knowing how people value their place.

“It’s important for social planning to know and understand the relationship between people and place, it’s important for making development decisions,” she says.

The team spent 18 months reviewing current and historical literature on the region, interviewing experts and surveying more than 750 people using questionnaires, focus groups and one-on-one discussions.

The researchers found that the majority of residents use the estuary for recreation but during the past 50 years forest and open space had diminished.

Professor Wooltorton says the study shows the community wants to see policy changes and better education to improve the health of the river system.

“The highest value that the population have for the place is natural open space and everyone wants improved ecosystem health,” Professor Wooltorton says.

“So it’s actually quite clear that the population today wishes for natural values to be maintained and enhanced, and for the river to have high ecological value.”

More than 80 per cent of people surveyed used the estuary or inlet for walking, jogging or running and for foreshore recreation.

Meanwhile, 50 per cent of people described the estuary as a place for walking their dogs, crabbing, meditating and taking part in outdoor sports.

Importantly, 95 per cent of respondents wanted the environment considered in all decision-making, with the report finding the estuary was showing signs of stress, including occasional fish, dolphin and swan deaths, macro-algal blooms and reduction in fish, prawn and crab stocks.

More information can be found at www.leschenaultproject.org.au

The Leschenault Estuary District is naturally beautiful, rich in history, and under threat.