



*Working together to protect & enjoy the Yarra*

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## **WHAT THE YARRA RIVERKEEPER ASSOCIATION THINKS ABOUT THE ISSUES FACING OUR RIVER**

The Yarra Riverkeeper Association is a not-for-profit community organisation that is working to restore and protect the Yarra River. We believe it is Greater Melbourne's most important natural asset that has outstanding environmental and social values. Yet the Yarra is suffering from a number of urban impacts, such as water pollution, over-extraction of its water and encroaching buildings.

Our work involves community education, government advocacy, monitoring the Yarra, spreading news about it, and running/supporting river events. We tell the river's story, and have earned the reputation of being "the voice of the Yarra". We believe that "people protect what they love" and so we draw attention to the many wonders of the river; its fascinating history, rich and special wildlife, and beautiful scenery.

This document is a summary of our "position" on the following important matters concerning the Yarra River:

1. Riverside development and planning
2. River flows and water supply
3. Water quality and pollution
4. Flora and fauna
5. Other social values

We welcome comments on this document; and as we learn more about the Yarra and its values, we will refine our "position".

4 October 2013

## 1. Riverside development and planning

The natural corridor of the Yarra is vital to Melbourne's amenity and liveability. It provides some of the most popular green open spaces for recreating and enjoying a natural setting, and hence is vital to community well-being. It is also rich habitat for native plants and animals, and for many species the continuity and vegetation of the river corridor are vital for their survival.



Healthy river environs



Building encroaching onto the riverine landscape

But the green environs of the Yarra continue to shrink from the pressure of urban growth and encroaching development. In the Lower Yarra the erection of huge apartment buildings is the most obvious problem, but just as damaging is the cumulative impact of many developments on single home sites. In the upper reaches of the river, the problem is that indigenous vegetation is being cleared to make way for expanding suburbia, infrastructure, new golf courses and the like.

**Our vision: The Yarra River and its environs are a continuous corridor of public green space and unbroken wildlife habitat along the entire length of the river.**

We believe that:

- All planning decisions in the corridor should be overseen by a single authority which has a whole-of-river perspective (beyond local council boundaries), consistent with the fact that the river's values and ecology relate to and are dependent on its entirety.
- The Yarra River and its environs are critical "natural infrastructure" for the city to function and be liveable; no less vital than public transport, hospitals and schools.
- To stop further encroachment (immediate action), planning controls need to be introduced
  - to ban the erection of additional buildings and structures on riverside land,
  - to ensure that any new/replacement building/structure is no taller, bigger or closer to the river than what exists on the site, and
  - to ensure other riverside works are compatible with the sought-after green riverscape.
- To restore the corridor (long term action), measures need to be introduced
  - to reclaim public ownership of land abutting the river, and
  - to replace, when possible, riverbank buildings with indigenous vegetation.

## 2. River flows and water supply

The health and values of the Yarra are closely linked to its water flows – both the quantity and the variability/pattern of flows. The native plants and animals that live in and by the river have evolved in sympathy with its flows. Many aspects of their lives (and thus the biodiversity) are dependent on different flow levels and flow “events”. Examples are - a short period of high flows to trigger Macquarie Perch spawning – inundation of a wetlands for nesting water fowl– alternating high and low water levels as needed by River Red Gums.



Healthy river flows



Dangerously low flows

But the capture and extraction of the Yarra’s water (by dams and pumps) to supply residences, factories and farms in the Greater Melbourne area has significantly altered both the quantity and pattern of river flows.

The program to release environmental flows down the Yarra which commenced in September 2011 is helping restore some of the natural flow pattern; but not all of the natural flows (eg inundation of floodplains) can be so restored.

In contrast no effort is being made to restore the natural quantity/level of flows, or size of the river. The river’s size governs the abundance of species, and has social values, being a factor in the river’s heritage, and water based recreation such as paddling. (NB We are not advocating big floods that would damage property or assets above the natural floodplain.)

**Our vision: River flows in the Yarra are as close to natural as possible – with the flow rate at least two-thirds of the natural rate and the flow pattern supporting a rich and healthy river ecology.**

(NB “two-thirds of natural” is recognised by river scientists as a rule of thumb for a healthy river.)

We believe that:

- To restore near-natural flow rates, the amount of water extracted needs to be reduced by
  - measures to lower total water consumption and
  - policies and major investment in alternative sources, such as recycled “waste” water and stormwater;
- To ensure a healthy flow pattern, the environmental flows program needs a greater water allocation and more security (e.g. government guarantee) during times of water scarcity.

### 3. Water quality and pollution

As widely acknowledged, the ecological and social values of the Yarra are dependent on it being pollution-free. The different forms and sources of water pollution include:

- litter and solid waste (so-called gross pollution) which has either been dropped or spilt in the catchment,
- disease-causing bacteria, coming mainly from leaking/overflowing sewerage systems but also contaminated stormwater, and organic waste,
- sediments contained in stormwater and runoff from cleared land, construction sites and dirt roads,
- nutrients coming mainly from sewage treatment plant effluent, cleared land, parks and gardens,
- other damaging chemicals (eg hydrocarbons, heavy metals and pesticides) coming mainly from stormwater run-off in urban streets and agricultural land. Heavy metals are also present in the river sediments and a legacy of past practices.

Some pollutants are directly harmful to animals and humans. Other pollutants will trigger unnaturally high levels of turbidity and algae, and low dissolved oxygen, which in turn are harmful.



Stormwater pollution



Litter caught in a litter trap

**Our vision: The Yarra's water can support all its naturally occurring aquatic life forms and is free of all pollutants that may be harmful to them or humans.**

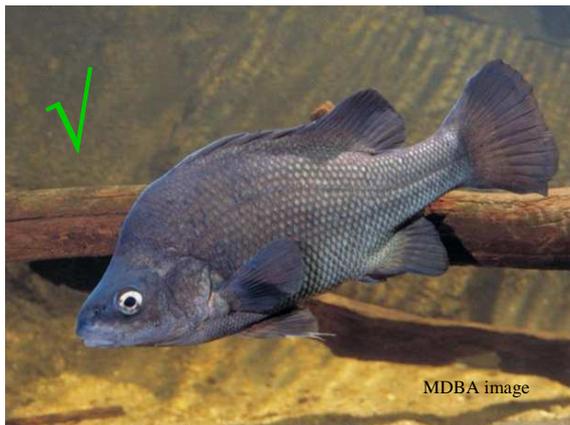
(NB This vision aligns with the objectives of the *State Environment Protection Policy (Waters of Victoria)* which is the relevant legislative framework under Victoria's environmental laws. It is also consistent with the vision of the international Waterkeeper movement, of which we are a member, of fishable, swimmable and drinkable waterways worldwide.)

We believe that:

- Whilst many measures are being implemented to reduce pollution, both at its source and in its transport to the river, the pollution is still unacceptable.
- To stop pollution, all stormwater run-off and all used water ("waste water") has all toxins and excess nutrients removed and is reused or infiltrated into the ground, such that none flows directly into the Yarra River.

#### 4. Flora and fauna

The environmental and social values of the Yarra are related to it being home for a wide variety of plants and animals, especially indigenous species. However, the number and population of native species are severely affected by the spread of introduced species, notably weeds, exotic fish, domestic stock and feral animals. Nonetheless the circumstances vary widely along the river and across the catchment. In the older urban areas exotic garden plants and pet animals are valued by the community. On sporting fields and golf links, open mowed exotic grass is the norm. In agricultural areas, stock animals and food crops are intended. It is in the parks, bushland and the waterway itself where the objective is for only indigenous species.



Macquarie Perch, *Macquaria australasica*



Spreading Wattle, *Acacia genistifolia*

Revegetation with indigenous plant species is being undertaken by many community groups and most local authorities, and there are numerous success stories. But the attractiveness of exotic plants and animals, and the fact that many out-compete native species are formidable barriers, such that it is doubtful whether the overall situation is improving.

**Our vision: All the flora and fauna of the Yarra catchment are indigenous species except:**

- . **for endangered but non-indigenous native species, such as Macquarie Perch, for which the Yarra provides crucial habitat,**
- . **on land set aside for agriculture and recreation, and**
- . **where exotic species (pet and stock animals, food and garden plants) are securely contained.**

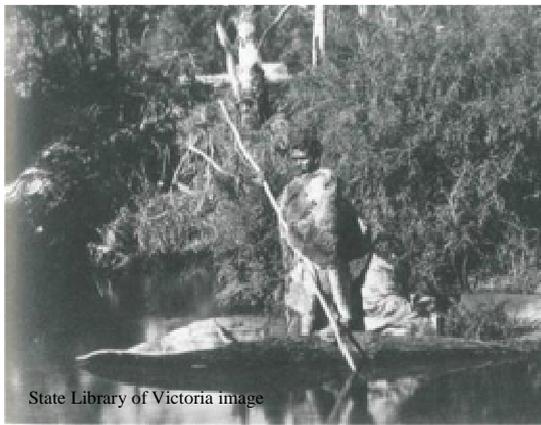
## 5. Other social values

The community values the Yarra in ways beyond those described above. These social values include its rich human heritage (both aboriginal and post-European settlement); the many forms of recreation beside and on the river; its inspiration to artists, photographers, authors and poets; the personal stories and associations with it; and the role the Yarra plays in civic and cultural events and celebrations.

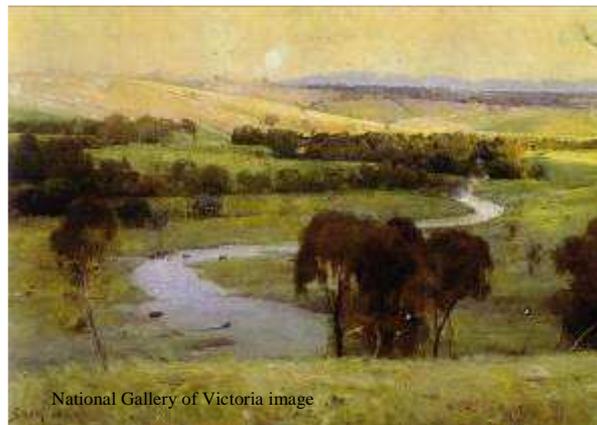
Furthermore, the extent to which the community values the river has an important impact on its environmental values, because “people protect what they love.”

### **Our vision: All Melburnians:**

- **appreciate, understand, enjoy and celebrate the many wonders of the Yarra,**
- **see its existence and its health as vital to their lives, and**
- **actively care for it.**



State Library of Victoria image  
Koorie men in bark canoe, photo by Fred Kruger, 1880



National Gallery of Victoria image

Arthur Streeton's *Still Glides the Stream*, 1890



Melbourne Water image

Kayaking on the Yarra



Melbourne Water image

Main Yarra Trail