



THE YARRA RIVERKEEPER ASSOCIATION

Annual Report 2023



Thank you for supporting the Yarra Riverkeeper Association.

The Yarra Riverkeeper Association is an independent community-based organisation that advocates for the health and protection of the Yarra, Birrarung River and its tributaries.

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Yarra Riverkeeper Association, 1 St Heliers St
Abbotsford Vic 3067

-  info@yarrariver.org.au
-  <https://yarrariver.org.au/>
-  @YarraRiverkeeper
-  @TheYarraRiver
-  @yarrariverkeeper

Cover Photo & Design:
Anthony Despotellis

Acknowledgement of Country

The Yarra Riverkeeper Association acknowledges that the lands and waterways of the Yarra, Birrarung catchment, are the unceded territories of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and Bunurong peoples. We pay our respect to their Ancestors, who cared for Country since time began, and to all Traditional Owners who continue to speak and care for their Country. We acknowledge that the river now called the Yarra has always been known as the Birrarung by its custodians.

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“Our Yarra River, Birrarung, is recognised around the world as an iconic example of a nurturing relationship between a river and its community.

Flowing from source to sea, it is the resilient lifeblood of past, present and future generations of Victorians. It connects and enriches our flourishing city, suburbs, regions and beyond.”

Yarra River 50-Year Community Vision, Wilip-gin Birrarung murrn

The Yarra, Birrarung

The Yarra, Birrarung River, its tributaries and creeks span over 4,000 square kilometres and encompass more than a third of Victoria's population and animal species.

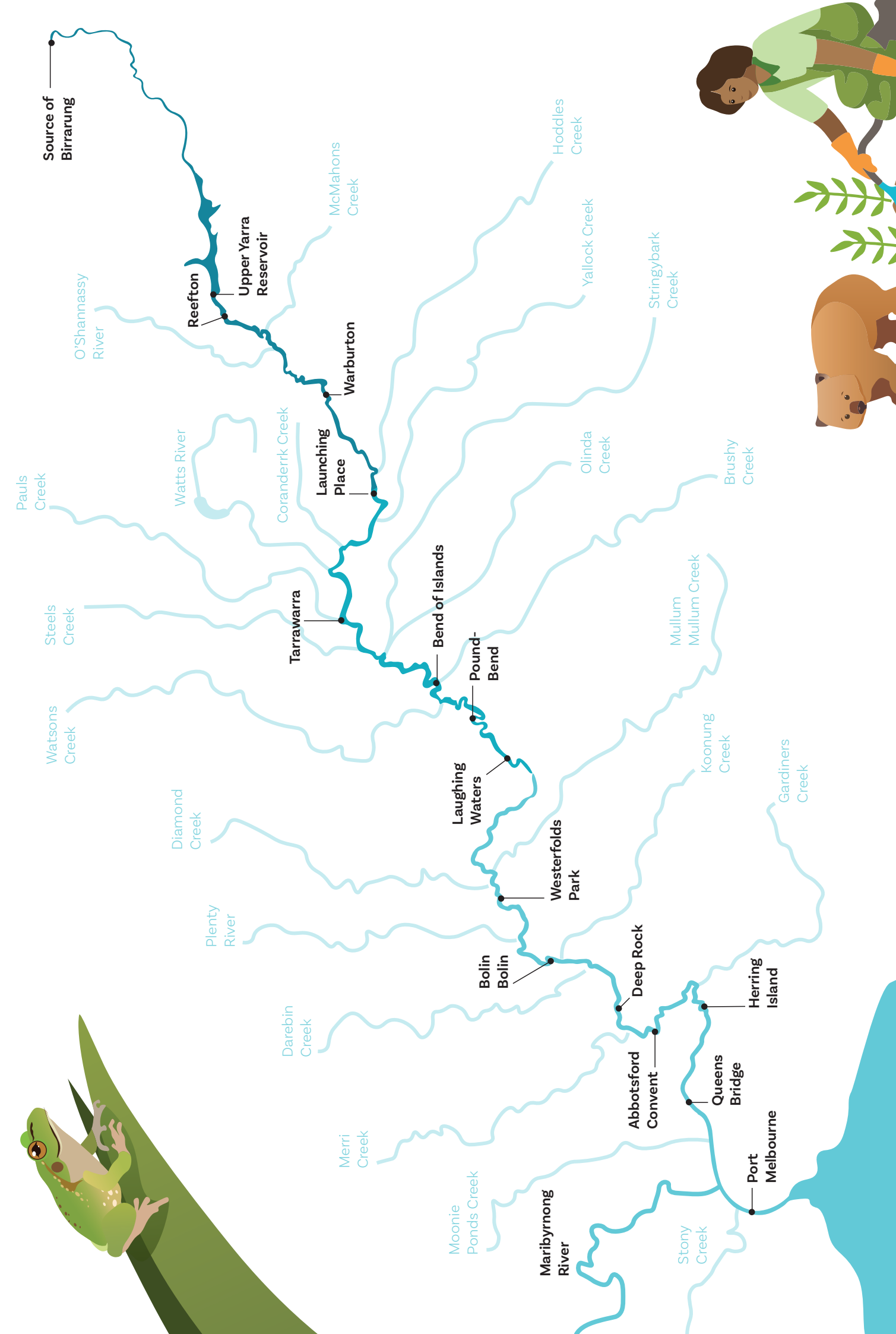
The Yarra, Birrarung, is a unique ecosystem that brings natural systems, culture, and people together and is one of Victoria's significant and critical natural resources. The river provides 70 per cent of Melbourne's drinking water and is home to hundreds of wildlife species, including platypus, rakali, blackfish, eels, owls and lyrebirds, turtles, wombats and kangaroos. The river has been a major food source and meeting place for First Nations peoples for more than 10,000 years. Melbourne, Naarm would not exist without the river, but this has come at great cost to its Traditional Owners and the environment.

The Yarra, Birrarung, is a special place. The river has provided a place to contemplate, revive our spirits, and enjoy, whether walking, canoeing, fishing, weeding, planting, or just sitting. The river has lived and breathed with us during difficult times. She has cared for us.

Unfortunately, the river is under threat. Issues such as poorly planned riverside

development, unhealthy flow regimes, declining biodiversity, climate change, and contaminated stormwater and pollution put the river and its flora and fauna in danger of degradation. Pollution from litter, a cocktail of urban wastes, and treated sewage effluent have resulted in water quality well below acceptable standards. Urban and industrial development has resulted in its wondrous wetlands and floodplains being severely damaged.

The many pressures facing the Yarra, Birrarung and the catchment present not only problems but also opportunities for our work. The Yarra Riverkeeper Association has unique capabilities, insight, and connection to the river and its communities, and proud history as a leading advocate for the river. We are an ally of Traditional Owners and all communities who work for the river and respect it as a living, breathing entity.



Reflections from the Riverkeeper and Chair



Charlotte Sterrett
Yarra Riverkeeper



Warwick Leeson OAM
Board Chair

This year (1 July 2022 – 30 June 2023), we’ve been busy engaging our head, heart and hands to nurture our beloved Yarra, Birrarung and Maribyrnong, Mirrumbidgee Rivers. It’s been a year of highs and lows for the Yarra Riverkeeper Association (YRKA). We started implementation of our 2022-2025 YRKA strategic plan, launched the new Maribyrnong River and Waterways Association, and made good strides in advocating for the effective implementation of the State Government’s Yarra Strategic Plan, and asking State politicians to acknowledge their contribution to support for river health. But our organisational health has struggled in the current economic climate, and we have needed to tighten our belts as a key strand of Federal funding came to an end in June 2022.

We influenced many people, including Federal, State and local politicians, as well as prominent businesses. We wrote reports, submissions, media pieces and took part in an election campaign. This work has led to some great outcomes, including the end of native forest logging¹, and the halting of specific urban developments along the river.

In our ongoing mission to create a continuous parkland along the river, our Regeneration Team was also hard at work. Our plantings are thriving, with a remarkable 90-95% survival rate, although the heavy spring floods affected about 500 plants. But we see every challenge as a learning opportunity. Floods are part of nature’s annual cycle, and as climate change intensifies extreme weather, we must allow rivers to ‘breathe.’ It’s time to work with nature, not against her.

We continued taking steps to tackle polystyrene pollution and have focused on the construction sector as a major source of river pollution. A recent roundtable with stakeholders revealed the obstacles and opportunities in reducing polystyrene pollution. By working together with government agencies, construction sector reps, and local councils, we aim to develop tangible actions to combat this pollution.

Building bridges with our community through engaging events has included 23 activities, from local tree planting to litter clean-ups with

¹ Forest campaigners drove this campaign for decades, but we were able to lend our voice in advocating for an end to logging in our water catchments.

people closer to their rivers. Our social media presence has grown with diverse narratives, celebrating World Days, election commitments, and the rights of rivers. We also introduced ‘Love Stories of the Birrarung,’ a collection of heartfelt river stories.

And that’s not all; we’ve strengthened our bonds with local businesses, like the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre and Yarra Trams, creating unique collaborations that support our mission. With your continued support, we’ll keep pushing for a healthier, happier river.

The Future

Every organisation needs a longer-term plan, and this year we started to implement our three-year strategy and achieve early success. We also recruited a new Board in October to

bring new ideas and vision to how we might achieve our goals in a more sustainable fashion.

We have many hopes for the Yarra, Birrarung, and its tributaries and the plants, people and animals that call its home. They include:

- Mindset change to foster positive water- and landscape change (with government, businesses, communities and the general public)
- Stronger communities (as active citizens lead to effective States)
- Better connections to each other and nature – together we become ‘one living, integrated entity’
- Realising Traditional Owner values in water policy and practice
- More water for the river
- A swimmable Yarra, Birrarung!



A Common wombat looks around after digging a hole. Photo: Unknown



Meeting local groups at Yellingbo. Photo: Ula Majewski

Thank You

We would like to express our gratitude to former CEO, Karin Traeger, for her leadership of YRKA in support of the Environmental Restoration Fund over the past three years. Under her leadership, the organisation achieved significant milestones, including the visual rebranding and development of a new website, securing of corporate partnerships with prestigious organisations, the planting of over 26,000 native plants, and the launch of campaigns such as the Plastic Paddle to raise awareness about issues affecting our local waterways. We were also inspired by her 2022 run along the whole length of the Yarra, Birrarung – 281 kilometres over six days. We are confident that Karin will continue to make a positive impact in her future initiatives, and we wish her all the best in her future endeavours.

We would also like to acknowledge the departure of Katrina Lee (Project Consultant), and two of our committed Board members, Ian Wong and Sally McPhee, at last year's AGM in November. Both of them brought much insight to the roles of Treasurer and Secretary, respectively and helped the organisation to implement new and efficient reporting systems.

YRKA is always a collective effort, and we would like to thank everyone – staff, Board, volunteers and supporters – for each person's unique contribution towards restoring the river to full health and for sharing and respecting its journey.

Burndap Birrarung burndap umarkoo (What's good for the Yarra, is good for all).

[Charlotte L. Sterrett](#)
Yarra Riverkeeper

[Warwick Leeson](#) - Chair



Short-beaked echidna, Upper Birrarung. Photo: Karin Traeger

IMPACT SNAPSHOT

INFLUENCE

MARIBYRNONG



Strategy, Website and
Mirrangbourn Film Launch

4

Government
Submissions



Comms Strategy and Social
Media channels launched

2

Boat trip with decision-makers
and influencers

YARRA, BIRRARUNG

1

Research
publication

6

Government
submissions

12

Boat trips with
decision-makers



Advocacy to safeguard the
Birrarung Act and Yarra
Strategic Plan;
to stop native forest logging;
to increase environmental
water & increase funding for
environmental groups

1

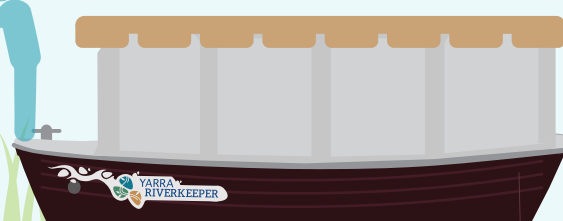
Election
campaign

540+

Attendees at 18
Riverkeeper talks



Strengthened advocacy
capacity in local groups



RIVER HEALTH

Litter



16

River clean ups



410

Kilograms of litter removed



1

Multi-stakeholder Roundtable



3

Restoration
Sites



5,750

Plants along the
YARRA CORRIDOR

COMMUNITY



4

Community-led
advocacy
campaigns



11

Business
partners

3,081



Up 17%

1,473



Up 8%

2,956



Up 18%

1,009



Up 29%

16

Corporate
volunteering events

3

Media items per
month (average)

23

Community
events

Digital events
and in person



Influencing

KNOWLEDGE

This year the Yarra Riverkeeper Association produced one report and made six submissions to government, which contributed to the body of knowledge on healthy rivers, and influenced decision-makers at local, State and National levels to inform and improve water policy and practice.

The report *Preventing Polystyrene in Melbourne's Rivers* summarised discussions and outcomes from our first multi-stakeholder roundtable to manage polystyrene pollution in the construction industry. It builds on our successful body of research and on-the-ground work on polystyrene pollution. The roundtable aims to eliminate polystyrene pollution in Melbourne's rivers. This first of three roundtables identified who can influence practices at each point in the Polystyrene Pathway, from the manufacture of EPS to its use on construction sites and disposal of waste EPS. The Roundtable made a first call on strategies that might influence policies and practices and which organisations might contribute.

We wrote several blogs and opinion pieces on issues of concern for the Yarra, Birrarung, including the future of platypus, deer damage in the Bolin Bolin Billabong, climate change, innovations in river clean-ups, the Victorian Container Deposit Scheme, State Election issues and the Central and Southern Gippsland Sustainable Water Strategy.

We made six submissions to governments in the past financial year. These included submissions to:

- the Federal Inquiry into Plastic Pollution in Australia's Ocean and Waterways;
- the Essential Services Commission Water Price Review (with the Concerned Waterways Alliance).
- City of Melbourne's Greenline Project
- Yarra Ranges Council on the Warburton Urban Design Framework
- Yarra Ranges Council to keep a significant tree in Warburton.

The Yarra Riverkeeper Association has also been heavily involved in providing inputs to the State of the Yarra Report, which is due for publication by the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability Victoria in late 2023.

GOVERNMENT ENGAGEMENT

This year, we have continued to engage with all levels of government – local, State and Federal. The first year of implementation for the Yarra Strategic Plan (Burndap Birrarung burndap umarkoo) (BBBU) is of utmost importance to the river and is central to YRKA's strategy as a community voice that can hold the Responsible Public Entities accountable.

We have spoken regularly with the BBBU implementation team at Melbourne Water and with members of the Yarra Collaboration Committee to stress that implementation of the Plan should match the ambition of the Community Vision, and that the voice of communities and the river they know and love must form part of the

INFLUENCE

Good river health decisions and actions are achieved through the co-creation of knowledge, advocacy, government engagement, and partnerships with diverse stakeholders.

ongoing decision-making process and actions on the ground. We have also engaged with the Birrarung Council as the statutory body created by the Yarra River Protection (Wilip-gin Birrarung murrn) Act 2017 (Yarra River Protection Act), and we look forward to continued engagement to support their advice and advocacy to the Victorian Government.

Our engagement with politicians has been significant this year, with YRKA focusing on nine key electorates across the catchment during the State Election Campaign to increase awareness of river issues and ask for actions to address our concerns. We asked all candidates to:

- Commit to water leadership in the climate crisis;
- Pledge new funds to support the implementation of the Yarra Strategic Plan;
- Stop native forest logging in our river catchments, and
- Provide financial resources to local environmental organisations to advocate for and support river health



Our #1 advocacy tool. Photo: Charlotte Sterrett

In line with our non-partisan approach, we met with candidates from all electorates and from all parties (including Independents). The Greens, Animal Justice Party and the Independent for Kew supported all four election commitments, and several other candidates supported some of the commitments. Our campaigning contributed to some success, with the Labor government announcing in May 2023 that native forest logging would come to an end as of 1 January 2024 and additional (if moderate) new funding for the Yarra Strategic Plan was announced in May 2023 by the Minister for Water. We continue to advocate for our other two commitments.

Our State Election campaign was part of a broader campaign with the Concerned Waterways Alliance. This campaign covered nine catchments and over 40 electorates across Victoria. It was the first time we jointly campaigned for water leadership in a climate crisis at a State level. It has provided a framework for future election campaigning.

We also had the opportunity to talk to the Federal Environment Minister, Tanya Plibersek. We discussed a broad range of issues, including river protections, better management of plastic, the importance of community participation in decision-making and the rights of rivers.

PARTNERSHIPS

This past year, we have continued our efforts to engage with Traditional Owners, government authorities, and local governments to strengthen relationships and build new ones. We

Influencing

have continued partnerships with key government stakeholders, including Melbourne Water, Parks Victoria, the Environment Protection Authority and the Department of Energy, Environmental and Climate Action (DEECA), working together to improve river health.

Melbourne Water continues to provide opportunities for the Yarra Riverkeeper to build connections with its staff and their work and is a long-standing supporter of our work. This has included site visits in the Upper, Middle and Lower Yarra, Birrarung, and dialogue about a range of issues such as environmental water, ecological monitoring (platypus and frogs), water treatment, billabongs, and safe cultural practices. We have also spent valuable time with the team leading the implementation of Burndap Birrarung burndap umarkoo (Yarra Strategic Plan), along with the Yarra Collaboration Committee to further conversations about how to support community participation in -making, as well as transparency and accountability.

In 2023, Melbourne Water entered into an important three-year partnership with the YRKA focusing on community engagement and regeneration on both the Maribyrnong and Upper Yarra, Birrarung River catchment. We hope this new program will be impactful from grassroots to State levels.

Parks Victoria continues to support our regeneration work in several sites in the lower Yarra, Birrarung and provided advice on increasing protections at Bolin Bolin Billabong (Bulleen). We have begun to expand our work further upstream beyond our traditional regeneration sites, and will have more to report on this in our next annual report. DEECA continues to support our

polystyrene pollution work (see River Health section of the report), and we continue to engage with key staff on the implementation of the Central and Gippsland Sustainable Water Strategy as part of our joint campaign with the Concerned Waterways Alliance to return more water to our waterways.

We continue to work with the Environment Protection Authority on issues of concern, including pollution incidents such as the drone incident in the Yarra, how to better educate communities on the General Environmental Duty, and how to better manage polystyrene pollution. We were successful in advocating for the inclusion of guidance on polystyrene handling practices in EPA industry guidelines. The EPA continues to be on our Polystyrene Pollution Phase 3 Project Steering Committee, and took part in the first multi-stakeholder roundtable.

This year, we also continued to build relationships with Traditional Owners through informal meetings and networks. This has provided YRKA with the opportunity to actively listen and learn from the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and Bunurong people. YRKA's strategic plan includes First Nations Reconciliation as a central value, as well as strategies and actions to partner with Traditional Owners to support cultural learning and healing of Country. We hope these relationships will deepen and be nurtured in the coming years.

The Yarra Riverkeeper has been an active member of the Gardiners Creek (Kooyongkoot) Regional Collaboration (GCRC), which was formally launched in April this year. We are excited about this multi-stakeholder alliance that is working together to protect this at-risk catchment. We have begun the

“This year, we saw the voice of local advocates and stewards of the Yarra, Birrarung become louder. It has been immensely rewarding to see everyday people becoming riverkeepers in their own right. People love the Yarra, Birrarung and are willing to fight for its future.”

Charlotte Sterrett, Yarra Riverkeeper



Geoff the automatic river cleaner. Photo: Ula Majewski



The launch of the Gardiners Creek Regional Collaboration. Photo: GCRC

Influencing

process of developing a strategic plan, a data strategy and identifying regional priorities for revegetation across the region. A highlight this year was a study tour of the catchment which brought everyone together to see the issues first-hand.

STEWARDSHIP

The successes we achieve at YRKA are due to the dedication and commitment of scores of people across the catchment, and many others in other catchments with similar passions. Their stewardship of the land and waterways is a major contributor to our rivers' and waterways' health and protection.

This year, we have supported several community campaigns and celebrated some successes. These include:

- Winning a four-year battle over the proposed treetop Adventure Park in Heidelberg, which was abandoned by Banyule Council. Local groups led by the Friends of Yarra Flats and supported by the Yarra Riverkeeper Association held grave concerns about the impact of the proposed development on the local environment, particularly Banksia Billabong, as well as the negative impacts on a site of cultural significance for the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people.
- Stopping the removal of a significant 150 year+ tree in Warburton by helping local residents raise their voice with decision-makers. The campaign was led by local residents, with the Yarra Riverkeeper able to provide its support via letters to the Yarra Ranges Council, media

coverage and attendance at a council meeting where we, along with other community members, argued that the tree should be saved under the principles of the Yarra River Protection Act (2017) and the Yarra Strategic Plan.

- Ongoing advocacy and conversations with decision-makers and local community members to increase environmental protections for the Bolin Bolin Billabong to stop deer entering the inner billabong, and for dogs to be kept away from resident kangaroo, wallaby and other native species.
- Opposing the development of a large apartment complex in Richmond abutting the river. Unfortunately, the opposition of over 80 people and our submission did little to prevent the development from being permitted by the City of Yarra. We continue to oppose other developments that are contrary to the Yarra River Protection Act (2017) and the Yarra Planning Controls (2017). The Controls need to be improved and extended to the whole river, and Councils need to integrate the land-use framework into local planning schemes.

Riverkeeper talks to community groups have been popular this past year, with 18 talks and over 540 attendees over the 12-month period. We have also been fortunate to present at many forums and events, including Science Week, World Rivers' Day, and World Water Day.

Treetops development abandoned in a win for the river

In a win for the Yarra, Birrarung, a four-year battle over the proposed treetop Adventure Park in Heidelberg has been abandoned by Banyule Council.

Local groups led by the Friends of Yarra Flats and supported by the Yarra Riverkeeper Association held grave concerns about the impact of the proposed development on the local environment, particularly Banksia Billabong, as well as the negative impacts on a site of cultural significance for the Wurundjeri woi-wurrung people.

The proposed development had several ecological issues, including the the disturbance of the wetland habitat area, the impact on river red gums (several of which are hundreds of years old) from the development's infrastructure, the unknown consequences of the

impact on migratory bird species, and the impacts on the fragile Banksia Billabong itself.

In the proposal put forward by Ecoline, the community's values and local knowledge were also overlooked, despite 192 submissions against the proposal. The lack of assessment of any Traditional Owner issues was also noted, given the area's history of being frequented by the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung up until the 1840s, and its proximity to Bolin Bolin Billabong.

The Yarra, Birrarung has protections in the form of the Yarra Protection Act (Wilip-gin Birrarung Murrn), as well as the Yarra River Planning Controls. Plus, we have the Yarra Strategic Plan (Burndap Birrarung burndap umarkoo). Areas like these should be protected and we must listen to what the Traditional Owners have asked us to do to protect the river and its parklands.



Site of the proposed Treetops development.
Photo: The Age

Community Engagement

COMMUNICATIONS

At YRKA, we help tell the many stories of the river to community groups, supporters, governments, businesses, media and the general public. We are a trusted and credible source of information about the Yarra, Birrarung and Maribyrnong Rivers. We engage with people through our events, via social media, newsletters, website, and traditional media channels such as radio, television, print and online.

This year, our stories of the river and key messages about its health have been broadcast by national, State and local media across television, radio, print and online sources. Our work has been profiled by over a dozen national State, and local media outlets, with an average of three media items per month.

We have been growing our social media footprint across Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Stories and posts were made daily, ranging from issues-based narratives (rights of rivers, pollution, etc.) to fun facts, events, community stories, and animal profiles.

Our presence has grown considerably this year, with more than 8,519 followers across different platforms, which is an increase of 16% from the previous year.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

This year saw the year-long return to face-to-face events, and we wasted no time encouraging people to

Stewards of the Birrarung

This year saw us launch ‘Stewards of the Birrarung’, a very special collection of audio-visual stories collected up and down the river through meetings and encounters with some extraordinary humans who care for her. You can find them on our Instagram page. Here’s the first one featuring Eliza Lamb from Friends of the Helmeted Honeyeater:

https://youtu.be/sVVF-yjiqyl?si=NBTPyfvNT5McJqD_

engage with the Yarra, Birrarung and Maribyrnong rivers. The purpose of these events is to bring people together and to celebrate, connect with and care for our waterways. We do this in different ways to attract a diversity of groups and participants. Across both catchments this year, events ranged from community planting and weeding events, litter clean-ups and student excursions (kindergarten, primary and secondary) to nature walks, climbing ‘bees’, a Love Stories of the Birrarung event, a youth forum, a walking tour as part of Open House Melbourne’s Open Nature program, and even several river swims to celebrate World Bathing Day and the Solstices.

Community

Diverse individuals, communities, supporters and businesses are able to increase their understanding of, and be involved in, river stewardship and advocacy through social and traditional media, participation in events, training and knowledge-sharing opportunities.

“The Riverkeepers have so many educational and fun events. Even litter clean-ups, which you would think would be hard, are made fun and engaging. They work hard to connect people with the river.”

Community event participant/supporter



Campaigning for a swimmable Birrarung on World Bathing Day. Photo: Ula Majewski

We are particularly proud of the following projects and events:

- Care for Your Yarra: Funded by the Victorian Government, this project allowed us to build an educational platform to help people better understand the Yarra, Birrarung catchment. The website and training resources have supported individuals to learn more about advocacy, litter and regeneration.
- Climbees: Funded by Parks Victoria’s Volunteer Innovation Fund, this project brought together climbers (mostly women) to learn about river health through the act of restoration by climbing in and around Burnley climbing wall. Partnering with Women Uprising, this project

empowered women with the skills, knowledge and confidence to make their own decisions outdoors for the benefit of themselves and nature.

- Love Stories of the Birrarung: Carolyn Tate and Christine McFetridge came to us with the wonderful idea of telling the many stories of the river through the eyes and experiences of those who love and care for her. Since then, Love Stories has grown and will continue to grow as a testament to the power of storytelling and love. *You can see the first six stories here.* Many of us love the Yarra, Birrarung, so why not write your own love story to the river: riverlove@yarrariver.org.au

Community Engagement

- **Run the Riverkeeper:** Karin Traeger (Former CEO) ran the length of the river from source to sea (281 kilometres!) over 6 days to raise awareness of river health, in particular, over-extraction of water, as well as core funds for the Yarra Riverkeeper Association. Kicking off on World Rivers Day, Karin tested her endurance and love for the Birrarung. Both proved steadfast.
- **Surface Tension exhibition:** We were fortunate to be associated with John Inns' photographic exhibition that explored the river as she meanders from source to the sea. This artistic work was a co-collaboration between the artist and the river, with processed negatives immersed back into river water collected from locations along the Yarra, Birrarung. The result is more than photos, as the Yarra, Birrarung added its own memories to reveal secrets and stories that cannot be seen or told.

BUSINESS PARTNERSHIP ENGAGEMENT

This year, YRKA proactively engaged with local businesses that align with our vision and values to design and implement initiatives of benefit to YRKA and the Yarra, Birrarung. The creative juices flowed like the river!

Over the course of the year, we were supported by 15 businesses, in addition to the 16 organisations that took part in targeted corporate volunteering

activities. These businesses included six existing partners – Bulleen Arts and Garden, Kayak Melbourne, Open House Melbourne, Regen Melbourne, Regen Projects, Up the Creek Melbourne – and nine new partners – ERM, Fed Square, Little Lon Distillery, Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre, Paddy Pallin, The Plastic Runner, Vitality Brands, Yarra Falls and Yarra Trams.

There are too many collaborations to mention, but we would like to highlight a few to give a flavour to the range of ways in which we work with the business community to advance our work:

- **Yarra Trams:** We were fortunate to be one of 10 organisations to have a tram wrap as part of Yarra Trams' Community Partnerships Program for 2023. Anthony, our talented designer, came up with a beautiful tram adorned with a platypus, wombat, Growling Grass frog, and his own replica collecting polystyrene beads! We asked tram users on routes 48 and 109 and those seeing the tram from the roadside between December 2022 and April 2023 to #loveyourriver and #beariverkeeper. Thank you, Yarra Trams, for the opportunity to raise the voice of the river with Melbournians.
- **Yarra Gin:** We love it when businesses act in the interests of river health. Little Lon Distillery went above and beyond to create a very



Run the Riverkeeper

In September 2022, Karin Traeger ran the length of the river to raise awareness of river issues, particularly the over-extraction of water.

"It's been a while since I completed my epic journey along the Yarra, Birrarung River, from source to the sea. It was a remarkable adventure that allowed me to explore trails, reconnect with nature, and raise awareness about river issues. The journey began on World Rivers Day, a fitting tribute to the Birrarung. It was my first foray into multi-day stage running, and the experience was eye-opening.

The GOOD

After months of isolation, spending time with friends and the trail community was rejuvenating. It was a "for purpose" adventure that allowed me to reconnect with those who felt like a family away from home.

Exploring the Birrarung one step at a time while sharing the experience with the community was a life-changing memory. It was a way to truly walk (or run) the talk and connect with the waterways that I'd been advocating for.

Karin and support at the finish line.
Photo: ABC News: Margaret Paul

The BAD

A rookie mistake with brand-new shoes resulted in swollen feet and on-and-off pain throughout the week. I learned the importance of 'breaking in' new gear before a long journey. Forgetting my torch on Day 2 was a humbling experience. It taught me to respect the trail, stay humble, and always carry the essentials, especially on less-travelled paths.

The UGLY

Discovering litter in isolated places was disheartening. Even in the remote wilderness, the impact of human negligence was evident. I reported litter using the Snap Send Solve App to alert the relevant authorities.

Polystyrene pollution around Mt Lofty was a stark reminder of our environmental challenges. Efforts to address this issue were underway, but the fight to preserve pristine places continued.

In the end, this project was a testament to the outdoor community's support, encouragement, and passion. It was a journey of empowerment, advocacy, and an opportunity to represent Latina women in the world of outdoor exploration and advocacy."

Community Engagement

special gin as a tribute to the beauty and nature of the Yarra, Birrarung, the people, and the city that is Melbourne. Using water collected and filtered from the original Yarro Yarro Falls in the city, it was crafted with a harvest of native botanicals that once graced the river's banks. With only 500 bottles made and hand-labelled and numbered, this gin is a rare example of how to tell the story of the Yarra, Birrarung in a different way to reach new audiences. We love the gin's taste and say thank you to Little Lon Distillery for the receipt of 10% of all sale proceeds to support our advocacy work.

- Regen Projects and Regen Melbourne: We would like to acknowledge both organisations for their financial and in-kind support for our vision. This year, we have collaborated on several initiatives including the Swimmable Birrarung by 2030 Alliance (SB2030), which brings together businesses, government and communities to create a movement for river health and activation in Melbourne, and the Melbourne Business & Biodiversity Circle, which has been a collaborative space with professionals working at the intersection of economy and nature who come together to share their knowledge, visions and anxieties in a positive, aspirational space. We look forward to deepening relationships and impacts as these initiatives mature in the coming

years. Watch this space!

Moving forward, YRKA will increase our business partnerships and encourage businesses to become financial members of the organisation to support our core advocacy work. If you would like to support our mission, please get in touch. You and the Yarra, Birrarung will benefit.

Yarra Gin. Photo: Charlotte Sterrett



Love Stories of the Birrarung event. Photo: Unknown



Launching the Yarra Riverkeeper Tram. Photo: Yarra Trams

River Health

REGENERATION

With plenty of rain, we have had two very good growing years, so all the plantings are doing exceptionally well. We are now entering a drying cycle, so next year's plantings will be restricted, and some of this year's plantings will need to be watered through summer.

However, the increased rainfall wasn't good for all the plantings, with floods drowning approximately 500 plants. At the Fox Billabong site, we had to get in canoes to retrieve guards before they floated down the river. It was a valuable learning experience to note which species could survive inundation for an extended period.

The browsing pressure of many rabbits and some deer has meant that many tree guards have had to be upgraded, substantially adding to costs and labour. We are encouraging Parks Victoria to cull the handful of deer that are roaming around the lower Yarra.

Our commitment to the vision of a continuous parkland along the Yarra, Birrarung River remains strong, with 5,750 plants finding their permanent homes across three sites. However, we worked in fewer sites than the previous year due to the finalisation of the Environmental Restoration Fund grant in June 2022. We also changed our operational model, moving from mostly standalone sites (FY22) to working mostly in partnership with local regeneration groups this year. We believe this model is more sustainable in the long term and increases community

'Walking through a two-year old planting site that is now taller than me and super healthy, makes all the hard work worthwhile.'

Andrew Wood
YRKA Regeneration Lead



Tubestock ready for planting. Photo: Ula Majewski

River Health

Improved ecological health, biodiversity, water quality, cultural healing, and climate resilience is realised through good practice regeneration approaches. Litter and polystyrene pollution are reduced through research and multi-stakeholder engagement.

impact, and drives better advocacy outcomes for all.

A big thank you to our Regen Team and the many community groups, volunteers and contractors for completing this enormous task.

Thanks, especially to Andrew Wood, Jode Moorthy, John Temme, and our Bush Crew, as well as Friends of Andrews Reserve, Friends of Yarra Flats, and Friends of the Yarra Valley Parks.

We are proud to report an average survival rate between 90-95% on our sites. Our passionate

team and volunteers' careful planning and implementation have been key to this result.

Our next steps for the regeneration portfolio include ongoing maintenance of sites at Fox Billabong, Murandaka, Mullum, Andrews and Chandler, regeneration activities at a new site close to Montepelier Billabong (working with local landowners), and a new four-hectare site in the Banyule area. We will also continue to build relationships in the upper catchment, with a view to be operational towards the end of FY24.



Planting day at Fox Billabong. Photo: Ula Majewski



Plants. Photo: Ula Majewski

Andrews Reserve 500 plants

This was another successful community partnership! In collaboration with Friends of Andrews Reserve, YRKA increased the size of the local corridor, boosting the number of species within the Reserve.

Countless hours of hand weeding have ensured that the grassland is thriving. 500 Kangaroo grass and various herbs such as Yam Daisy have been planted. Direct seeding of Wallaby grass and microleana were successful and will be continued over the coming years.

Fox Billabong 5,000 plants

4,500 plants of 15 different species were planted around the northern and eastern sections of the Billabong, which means that the whole area around the billabong has been planted. We also planted flood affected areas with 500 water-tolerant plants to replace those that were drowned. Next year another 1,000 plants will create a unique refuge of species diversity that will be an inspirational model for plantings on other sites.

YRKA staff and volunteers from the Friends of Yarra Flats completed all the work.



Plants. Photo: Ula Majewski

Mullum 250 plants

After some delay, we gained approval from Parks Victoria to undertake a modest planting near the Yarra and Mullum Mullum Creek confluence. A broad variety of 15 different species consisting of shrubs and tussocks were planted with the help of the Friends of Yarra Valley

Mullum Mullum Creek Confluence

Fox Billabong

Plastic in the trees. Photo: Ula Majewski



The Floods of Spring 2022

October 2022 saw record floods across much of Victoria, with impacts devastating many communities. The Yarra, Birrarung catchment also experienced moderate flooding, though not to the same extent as the Maribyrnong River and many of the catchments further north. While floods are often seen as a 'natural disaster' by humans, flooding at this time of year is part of the annual cycle of nature. Unfortunately, we have tended to build on floodplains, particularly in

urban environments, which means that when rivers flood, they impact buildings and infrastructure. As climate change starts to increase the intensity and frequency of extreme weather events, it's important to let rivers 'breathe'. Given enough forest, wetlands and floodplains, they have a remarkable capacity to absorb rainfall and runoff. Rivers are not just bodies of water; they are the lifeblood of ecosystems – let's value them as such. It's time to work with nature rather than trying to control it.

Andrew's Reserve

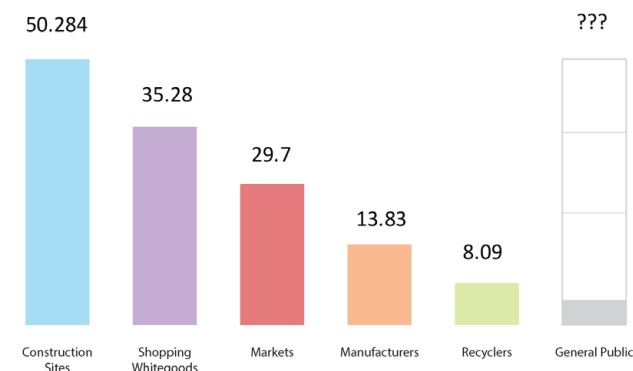
River Health

LITTER

‘We need better education about the impact of polystyrene pollution, ways to avoid it, and targeted enforcement. The pollution is pervasive so it requires a multi-stakeholder effort.’

Jessica Rosien,
Polystyrene Project Coordinator

This year marked the end of Phase 2 of our polystyrene work and the start of phase 3. In Phase 2 we documented the widespread scale and source of polystyrene pollution in Melbourne. We are now working with stakeholders from government agencies, the private sector and civil society to identify tangible interventions to reduce polystyrene leakage into our rivers. Phase 3 of the project runs from 2022 - 2024 and is funded by the Department of Environment, Energy and Climate Action (DEECA) and is an initiative of the Iconic Urban Waterways Program. Our research shows that construction is one of the biggest contributors to polystyrene pollution in our rivers. Hence, we decided to focus on identifying measures that will reduce leakage from this source. We also know that while other organisations and government agencies are working on

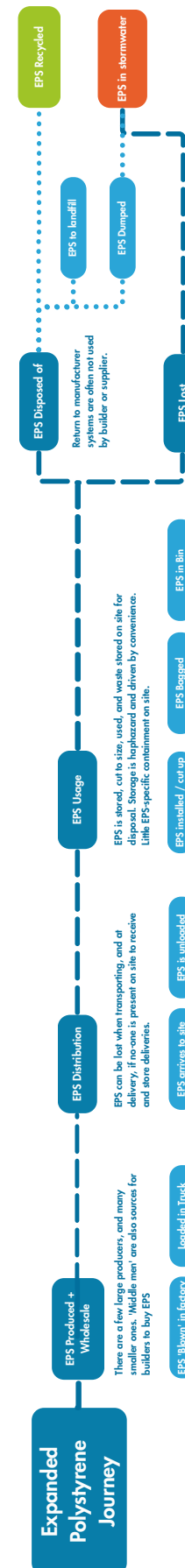


other types of polystyrene pollution, for instance, with retailers or consumers, the construction sector has not been a focus for polystyrene waste reduction. Our intention is to fill that gap.

In April 2023, we held a roundtable with approximately 20 participants from government agencies, construction sector peak bodies, local councils, and non-government organisations. You can find the full report from our first roundtable on our website. We unpacked the journey of expanded polystyrene in the construction sector:

Understanding the different steps of the journey helped us identify the obstacles and opportunities in reducing polystyrene pollution from construction sites. We considered the reality on the ground at each of the steps. Obstacles include:

- Only a small percentage of polystyrene is bagged and collected from construction sites as this is voluntary for the builder.
- Site infrastructure is not capable of containing stored polystyrene
- Managing polystyrene pollution is not a priority on construction sites, as other environmental, health, and safety measures are more strictly monitored and enforced.
- Construction workers on site are under pressure to complete the project and won't focus on polystyrene waste management.
- Councils and the EPA don't have the resources to monitor polystyrene waste management on construction sites.



If we want to put in place interventions to improve polystyrene waste management in the construction sector, we need to involve all the different stakeholders that have responsibility and influence over the polystyrene journey. At our first roundtable we identified the influencers of the polystyrene journey in construction. These are: local government agencies, Environment Protection Authority, Melbourne Water, DEECA, polystyrene manufacturers (peak body is Expanded Polystyrene Australia), construction companies, peak bodies, and unions. At our second roundtable, planned for November 2023, we will work with all these groups to put in place tangible actions to reduce polystyrene pollution in our rivers. At the third roundtable, planned for June 2024 we will review whether those actions have been implemented and are on track.



EPS Roundtable 1. Photo: Anthony Despotellis



EPS waffle pod on site. Photo: Kitty Lovell

River Health

Microplastic Litter traps

This project started off where Anthony left it in 2019, after completing his honours at RMIT - with the trap requiring more development before it would be ready to effectively capture microplastics in rivers.

We re-entered the design phase to work on two main limitations:

- Plastics flowing around the trap rather than through it
- Refining frame design and trap dimensions

The main limitation for capture was the resistance in the trap, mostly due to the tiny .3micron holes in the net mesh (standardised microplastic mesh size). Plastics flowed around the mouth because there was less resistance.

To try and improve flow, the 2nd generation traps have a wider mouth, and shallower depth, and we opted to try larger mesh apertures. The new designs were sent off for manufacturing, with unavoidable and significant delays reported. We would not receive the traps until the next financial year.

As well as making modifications to the trap's dimensions and specs, a new idea appeared to get microplastics flowing inside and during the waiting period for the 2nd generation traps, we explored this new idea.

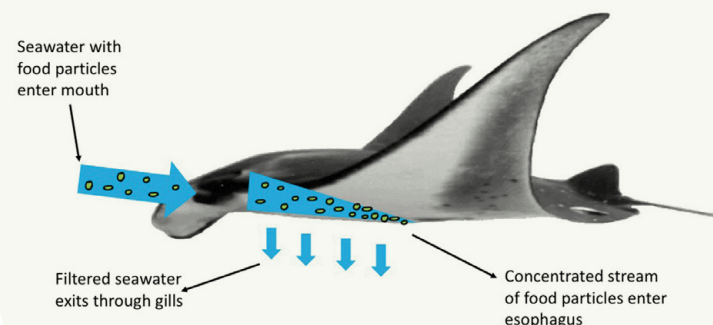
Exploring microplastic filtration

During the research phase of the trap's development, we came across the biomimicry of manta ray's filtration as a way to potentially capture small particles - like microplastics. While the delays in trap manufacturing took place, we began to explore this idea.

Manta rays have a unique 'ricochet' filter which sends most of the water one way, and bounces/swirls small food particles concentrating into its stomach. This filtration of small particles is well placed to filter microplastics, however, no one has successfully developed a working prototype that concentrates microplastics plastics in this way.

Working with the team at Co-Labs Melbourne (a community orientated lab space and future innovation hub), Anthony designed the 3D models and built a water flume tank to test them in. Using 3D printers to form the complex models, we went through a series of tests documented on the right. We used food dye and real microplastics to test the models.

Diagram of manta filtration process.



“We hoped to mimic the natural filter feeding from manta rays, building on existing research to develop a filter that could passively work in the Yarra.”

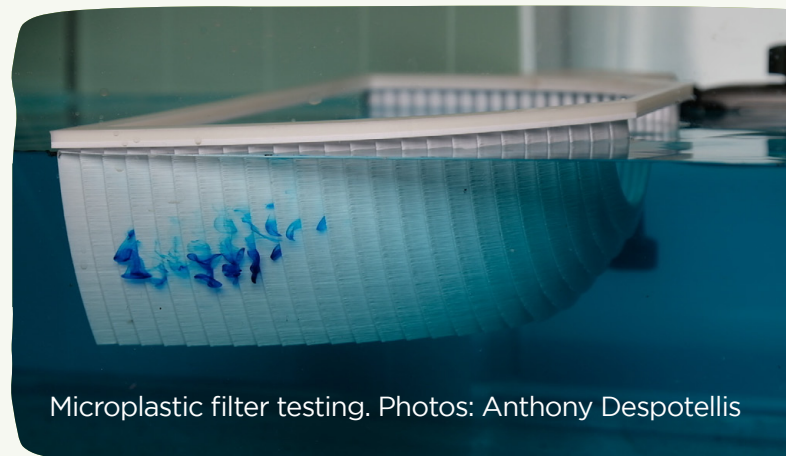
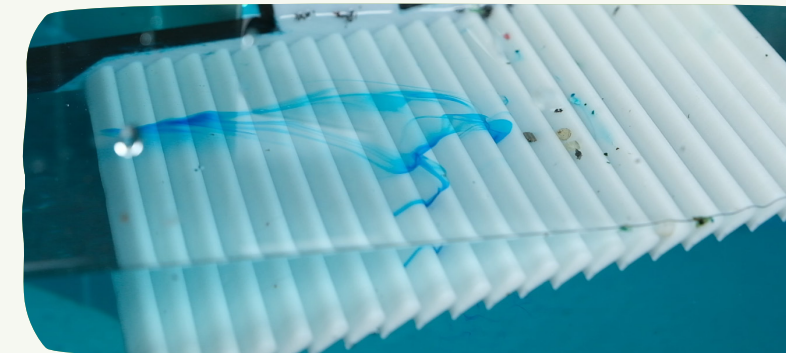
- Anthony Despotellis

Aim of study: To replicate the 'ricochet effect' in Manta ray's gill rakers, directing particles into a catchment area, while allowing water to pass through. Replicating this filter would allow the trap to capture a greater concentration of microplastics.

Learnings:

- Gen 1 showed that the angle of the 'wings' matter greatly in the suction of water/dye through the filter.
- Plastics can build up where they are too big to fit and the current isn't strong enough to push them over.
- Some plastics went around the filter, meaning the next design needs a way to contain them from moving out too early.
- Gen 2 showed that the new rib design still had the 'suction' effect of dye through to the otherside
- It also showed that some plastics still went around the outside, however, those who went in did not escape there after
- There is some resistance created by the rib design, which when a net is put on the back, may inhibit the flow/suction
- Gen 3 showed that the reversed rib direction didn't make a big change.
- It also showed that the manta-like wings at the front did not help push submerged plastics up into the filter.
- The rib like shape may not be the best design

The conclusion from this exploration is that currently we do not have the expertise or funds to develop the filter to a suitable point where it can passively filter microplastics.



Microplastic filter testing. Photos: Anthony Despotellis

Organisational Resilience

“This year has been challenging but we remain committed to our vision and values. We ask all those who are connected to, and who benefit from the Yarra, Birrarung - as the lifeblood of Melbourne - to join us in restoring the river to full health.”

Warwick Leeson, Board Chair

Waterkeeper Movement Building

The Yarra Riverkeeper Association is part of a global alliance of waterkeepers – 311 across 47 countries – that fight for clean water. Together we patrol and protect 700 million hectares of waterways on six continents.

In Australia, we have supported the establishment of the Richmond Riverkeeper in New South Wales, which is going from strength to strength. Already, in their first year, they have held many events, including several workshops (for example, weeds and waterways, research symposium), a photography competition, yarning circles, as well as undertaken water bug surveys, lots of plantings, and a community catchment health survey.

Closer to home, we have been proud to host the incubation and formal launch of the Maribyrnong River and Waterways Association (MRWA) with Nicole Kowalczyk at the helm. In this role, and funded by the Ross Trust, Nicole Kowalczyk, has been engaging with the Maribyrnong River community

to build a united voice for the river, to raise the profile of the Maribyrnong River, and to develop a governance framework and a strategic plan to guide the next three years, to ensure ongoing community support and action for the Maribyrnong River. With devastating floods on the Maribyrnong in 2022, the community is keen to be involved and drive greater river awareness. Key initiatives have included:

A Co-Design Journey: 2023-2026 Strategy

The development of the 2023-2026 strategy was a collective endeavour, reflecting the shared vision and values of stakeholders invested in safeguarding the Maribyrnong River. Agency representatives, community members, environmental experts, and volunteers convened over two forums to contribute their perspectives, knowledge, and aspirations. This inclusive process allowed for a holistic strategy that balanced conservation needs with community priorities. Forum participants discuss how to best protect and care for the Maribyrnong. Credit: Nicole Kowalczyk

Outputs from the two forums were used to develop the MRWA 2023-2026 strategy which was launched at Footscray Community Arts Centre on the 7th of June 2023.

Organisation

Strengthened efficacy, efficiency, and resilience of the organisation is fostered through good governance and practice, transparency, and accountability.

Communication Strategy and Social Media Implementation

Recognising the importance of effective communication, a comprehensive communication strategy was devised incorporating the need to reach diverse audiences in the Maribyrnong catchment. This strategy aimed to engage the broader public, promote awareness, and foster community involvement in river conservation efforts. A suite of social media channels was established to implement the communication strategy. Regular updates, educational content, and inspiring visuals were shared to cultivate a sense of stewardship among

followers. The growing online presence facilitated dynamic interactions with the community and strengthened the organisation's reach. You can follow MRWA socials here:

LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/company/91323034/admin/feed/posts/

Facebook: www.facebook.com/maribynongriverandwaterwaysassociation

Instagram: @maribyrnongriverandwaterways

Mirrangbamurn, Maribyrnong Film



Forum participants discuss how to best protect and care for the Maribyrnong. Photo: Nicole Kowalczyk

A key achievement during this period was the creation of a 15-minute film titled 'Mirrangbamurn, Maribyrnong', funded by the West Gate Community Neighbourhood Fund. The film, a collaborative effort by filmmaker Stephen Curtain, with appearances by Wurundjeri Elder David Wandin, long-time environmental advocate Helen Van Den Berg, and Councillor Bernadette Thomas, showcased the unique cultural and environmental significance of the Maribyrnong River. By capturing the catchment's natural beauty and cultural heritage, the film ignited a sense of pride and commitment to its preservation. The film was launched at Footscray Community Arts Centre on the 7th of June 2023 to representatives from local environmental groups, local councils, state agencies and Maribyrnong River enthusiasts.

Informative Website Development
The launch of the MRWA website proved to be a key milestone in enhancing organisational transparency and accessibility. The website serves as a centralised platform, providing valuable information about MRWA's mission, ongoing projects, and upcoming events. Additionally, the website featured a comprehensive directory of other on-ground groups working diligently to protect and restore parklands and waterways within the catchment.

Demerging Process

As part of MRWA's growth and maturation, the organisation is on track to become an independent entity by the end of June 2024. A demerging process is underway to ensure a smooth transition, allowing MRWA to forge its path while maintaining strong ties with the Yarra Riverkeeper Association and the broader waterkeeper movement. Policies and procedures, guided by a governance committee, are being put in place to facilitate this transition with precision and responsibility.

Advocacy Efforts

Nicole Kowalczyk has continued to champion the MRWA cause through active participation in forums, alliances, and events. Her efforts have played a significant role in raising the profile of the river and garnering support from diverse stakeholders. Nicole has contributed to the Concerned Waterways Alliance, attended forums related to wastewater management, written submissions to the Melbourne Water and Parliamentary flood enquiries, and attended a VCAT hearing to better understand the impact of newly gazetted planning controls for waterways in the west. She has been a guest presenter at numerous events and has advocated for greater commitment and investment in protecting and restoring waterways in the Maribyrnong catchment.

The development of the Maribyrnong River and Waterways Association under the 2023-2026 strategy has been a transformative journey guided by collaboration, community engagement, and environmental stewardship principles. MRWA's efforts to enhance communication, create captivating visual content, and establish a robust online presence have strengthened its influence and garnered broader support. As MRWA prepares for independence, it does so with a well-defined governance structure and a passion for safeguarding the Maribyrnong River for generations to come.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all stakeholders, community members, volunteers, and advocates who have contributed to this remarkable journey of conservation and empowerment.



Mirrangbamurn

On the 7th of June 2023, community members, agency representatives, and council officers, attended the launch of the Maribyrnong River and Waterways Association's film 'Mirrangbamurn' and the release of the 2023-2026 Strategy, an event was funded by the West Gate Tunnel Neighbourhood Fund. The event took place at the picturesque setting of Footscray Community Arts Centre, on the banks of the lower Maribyrnong River, where some of the scenes from the film were captured.

Footscray Community Arts is an arts precinct dedicated to sharing stories, the ideal space to hear the stories of Uncle Dave Wandin and Helen Van Der Berg in the film, where they shared the significance of waterways in the Maribyrnong catchment to them personally and to overall ecological integrity.

The event also brought together the Port Phillip Baykeeper, Neil Blake, the Werribee Riverkeeper, John Forrester, the Yarra Riverkeeper, Charlotte Sterrett and the Maribyrnong Waterways Coordinator Nicole Kowalczyk. The occasion attracted an enthusiastic gathering of 60 individuals who shared a common vision for the Maribyrnong River's restoration.

Across Uncle Dave and Helen having a yarn
Photo: Nicole Kowalczyk



The headwaters of the Maribyrnong.
Photo: Nicole Kowalczyk

Organisational Resilience

PEOPLE & CULTURE

At YRKA, we aim to attract and develop talented and passionate staff and volunteers. This focus on our people is critical in achieving our vision of a healthy, protected and loved, Yarra, Birrarung.

Our full-time equivalent (fte) staff was 2.8 spread over six positions (as of 30 June 2023), down from 3.8 (spread over five positions) in the previous year (30 June 2022). Of this, 1.7 fte was project funded.

This year, staff participated in several webinars and in-person workshops to increase their knowledge and skills in waterways management. We also dedicated time at the start of fortnightly staff meetings and quarterly reflections to increase our cultural awareness and understanding of First Nations. This is an ongoing learning journey.

Additionally, we supported some team members to undertake professional development courses to improve their knowledge and skills. Examples include a 4-day Partnership Brokering vocational training course, and an Advanced Groupwork Facilitation Course.

However, this year the organisation confronted the need for ongoing funding for its core work of advocacy. The CEO position that had been funded by the Federal Government Environmental Restoration Fund from 2019-2022, had to be made redundant and put in stark relief the financial challenges of sustainability in the environmental sector. The absence of this role has put pressure on the remaining staff to manage both operational and advocacy workstreams.

In better news, we recruited a Project Coordinator for our Polystyrene Project (phase 3) due to funding from DEECA, and contract individuals to support key tasks of social media and administration.

ORGANISATIONAL RESILIENCE

In the past year, we also looked at how to improve diversity within the YRKA and made the decision to expand Board membership. As a result, we have a new Treasurer (Candice Charles), a new Secretary (Arte Kousis) and two new general board members (Lara Werbeloff and David Redfearn). We said goodbye to Ian Wong (former Treasurer) and Sally McPhee (former Secretary). We are confident that new members have added to the existing knowledge and skill base and have brought new knowledge and skills to support the delivery of our three-year strategic plan.

This year, we completed the first year of our strategic plan. We are pleased to report that despite a reduction in staff, progress has remained largely on track (74% of indicators are on track). Strategic Plan Year One Indicator Results:



River Health 67% on track

2 out of 3 indicators are on track



Organisational Resilience 80% on track

8 out of 10 indicators are on track

Community engagement indicators that require improvement include:

- **20% annual growth in participation in YRKA events from baseline**
- **At least four webinars or training opportunities provided per year**
- **One business partner event delivered.**

We were unable to achieve these due to not having a Community Engagement Coordinator. We are pleased to announce that we have secured funding for a dedicated staff member until June 2026. We expect community education indicators to get back on track by the end of June 2024.



Influence 83% on track

10 out of 12 indicators are on track



Community Engagement 50% on track

3 out of 6 indicators are on track



YRKA staff on patrol. Photo: Ula Majewski

2022-2023 Finance

TREASURER’S REPORT

The information in this report has been extracted from the audited financial statements and covers the period 1 July-30 June 2023. More detailed information is available in the YRKA annual financial report.

While YRKA has continued its success in securing long-term government grants and is delivering great outcomes on these projects, the Yarra Riverkeeper Association, like many Australian charities, has struggled to attract donors given the current cost-of-living pressure on households and the general downturn in giving since the COVID pandemic. Donations and income from individuals and corporate partnerships are essential to the Association as government grants do not cover our role in advocating for the Yarra, Birrarung.

Highlights:

- Securing a three-year \$300,000 partnership agreement Melbourne Water to deliver a range of community engagement programs and improvements to stormwater outcomes on the Yarra, Birrarung
- A similar three-year agreement for the Maribyrnong to the value of \$160,000 for the Maribyrnong
- Receiving untied funding in excess of \$73,000.

YRKA remained under financial pressure in 2022-23, recording another significant deficit of \$166,183.

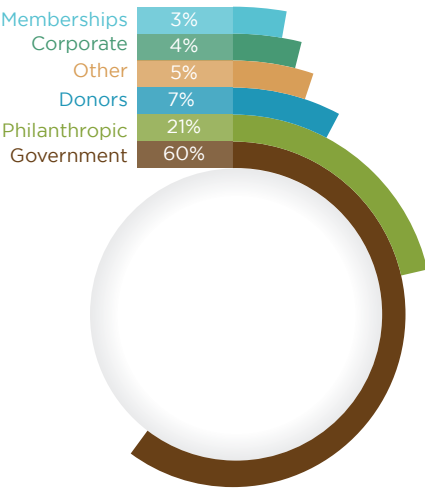
- Total income fell by \$138,886 (a 25% decline on the previous year)
- Expenses were reduced by 15% to \$102,296
- Our cash position remains strong, with \$508,687 received before 30 June for projects to be delivered in 2023-24 and 2024-25 (\$307,650 in the previous year).

With two significant losses (\$129,593 in 2021-22) consuming our reserves, the Board has taken a number of difficult decisions and worked closely with management to reduce expenses and increase the effectiveness of our fundraising activities in 2023-24. These efforts have already borne fruit with an improvement in our balance sheet since the end of the financial year, and we are confident we will return to a positive equity position by January 2024.

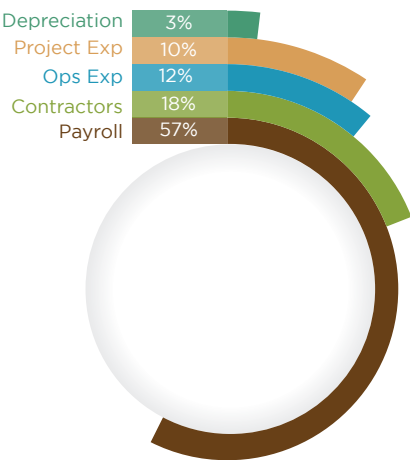
Additional work has also been done to strengthen financial reporting and rectify errors in our bookkeeping. We have enhanced the accuracy of the information available to the staff to assist them in managing within the approved project and administrative budgets. I would like to thank Charlotte Sterrett for her diligence and perseverance as we worked through these issues.

Candice Charles, Treasurer

FY23 Funding Sources



FY23 Expenses



Income	2021-22	2022-23
Members	3,613.37	1,413.50
Donors	39,745.3	30,540.91
Corporate	53,000	18,785.82
Government	340,432.71	255,447.13
Philanthropic	110,609.1	89,035.74
Other	10,273.13	23,564.19
Total	557,673.60	418,787.29

Expenditure	2021-22	2022-23
Employees	401,304	333,866.88
Contractors	12,245	108,507.17
Project Expenses	203,162.25	59,484.48
Operational Expenses	58,669.72	69,634.51
Depreciation	11,885.03	13,476.96
Total	687,266	584,970

Governance

Board and Committees

Under the leadership of the Board Chair, Warwick Leeson, the Board met thirteen times in the past year in addition to the Annual General Meeting (AGM), which included 11 scheduled meetings and two Board-only meetings to discuss and agree on urgent issues. Minor issues that needed approval between meetings were voted on using Flying Minutes enabled through BoardPro.

A decision was made and approved by the Board before the AGM (November) to increase the frequency of meetings to monthly with the exception of January and July and to align meetings with school holidays. The Board made an effort during the year to conduct most meetings face-to-face, and staff were also able to collaborate face-to-face at the Abbotsford Convent office. Technology continued to play a key role in conducting business with some meetings conducted virtually to enable quick collaboration. The Board's valuable online governance tool, BoardPro, provided an accessible and reliable platform for documenting board operations and communications.

An active campaign was held before the AGM to recruit new Board members with advertisements in relevant online platforms. As a result, four new members joined the Board at the AGM, with one stepping down shortly thereafter due to a conflict of interest, and a replacement Treasurer being recruited in February. This has considerably refreshed the experience and skills of the Board and set a pattern for recognising the

need for renewal, competency and governance in recruitment for the Board going forward.

The Association's Strategic Plan created a solid framework on which to regularly monitor performance and progress against goals and objectives. Clear traffic light updates provided by the Riverkeeper to the Board at every meeting ensured issues could be identified early and managed in a timely manner.

Governance & Risk Committee

A Governance and Risk Committee was established in 2023 to provide focused advice to the Board and undertake specific governance tasks. Tasks include the development of a skills matrix for the Board and a strategy for recruitment, identifying risks that need to be managed and providing advice to the Board on managing these risks, reviewing insurance needs, as well as reviewing and developing policies (such as reviewing the procurement and delegations' policy and developing a privacy policy).

Looking ahead, the Committee will turn its focus on establishing a process for recruiting for a role to support office management and for an evolved model to support the ongoing success of YRKA, following the departure of Riverkeeper Charlotte Sterrett in November 2023.

Memberships

A big welcome to new members, and thank you to those members who have renewed their membership and for your



Fallen tree, after the 2022 flood. Photo: Charlotte Sterrett

ongoing support. In this report, we have updated how we report on our memberships and now focus on active financial memberships.

Our total financial memberships are 113 made up of individual, family and business memberships. Thank you to everyone who joined to help us achieve our goals and to all who continue to support YRKA's work.

Arte Kousis

Advocacy Committee

The Yarra Birrarung faces many complex challenges. The role of the Advocacy Committee in our small organisation is to guide the Riverkeeper's advocacy and influencing work for a Yarra, Birrarung that is healthy, protected and loved. With the Riverkeeper, it identifies priority issues to be taken up, and monitors the effectiveness of campaigns and actions.

This year was an intense year for our advocacy work. This includes the State Election, and our ongoing work with the Concerned Waterways Alliance to strengthen the water policy and action in Southern Victoria.

The Yarra Riverkeeper has sought and found opportunities for a community voice and perspective to be heard in the many networks, collaborations, and agencies that work on and for the River.

The Yarra River Protection (Wilip-gin Birrarung murrn) Act is the reference point for our work. We have argued strenuously for the voice of the community to be heard in the delivery of the Yarra Strategic Plan.

In the latter half of the year, the Advocacy Committee began work on a report on the first year of implementation of the Yarra River Strategic Plan (published outside of this reporting period).

Governance

We continued working with the University of Melbourne on the Birrarung confluences report. It suggests the many possibilities presented by these confluences for 'net gain' as articulated in the Act. While the Warburton Mountain bike trail project was approved, those parts of the trail in the Yarra Ranges National Park were not.

Thank you to Tony Isaacson, Andrew Kelly, Warwick Leeson and Scott Seymour for their contribution to the Advocacy Committee.

Janet Bolitho

Fundraising Committee

The Fundraising Committee supports YRKA in the planning, coordination and implementation of all fundraising activities, consistent with our strategic priorities. An effective and sustainable fundraising strategy is critical to provide a platform to amplify our impact and seek sustainable funding income into the foreseeable future. Attracting fundraising in an ever-increasingly competitive market is an ongoing challenge, especially in the last two years.

This year, we continued to work with an external consultant (Wendy Brooks) to assist us in providing strategic fundraising services to enable us to develop an effective and targeted strategy. We have begun to implement several of the

recommendations. The Committee is in the process of recruiting members with fundraising knowledge and expertise and knowledge to build a sustainable funding base for YRKA over the next financial year.

We held two major fundraising campaigns this year (in December and June), which raised over \$22,000 collectively.

Two evolving sources of funding are corporate volunteering, where businesses can volunteer with YRKA to undertake river clean-ups (on land and water), and business memberships, where businesses can align with and support our values, vision and on-the-ground work through financial and in-kind support. We are excited to see our impacts grow in these areas, for they deliver both financial and on-the-ground impact.

As the Fundraising Committee Chair, I would like to say a big thank you to all our dedicated donors, supporters and volunteers for their contributions this past year, which have greatly assisted us in continuing the vital advocacy and stewardship work needed to keep our beloved Yarra, Birrarung River healthy, protected and loved for generations to come. This work would not be possible without their help and concern for our environment.

David Redfearn



Sulphur-crested cockatoo, North Warrandyte. Photo: Bronwyn Thomas

Our Team



Charlotte Sterrett
Yarra Riverkeeper

Charlotte is the Yarra Riverkeeper responsible for delivering YRKA's vision of a healthy, protected and loved Yarra, Birrarung. She does this through advocacy, research, citizen science and communications with governments, communities, grassroots organisations, media and business.

For 20 years, Charlotte has been a passionate advocate for climate and environmental justice here in Australia and overseas. Charlotte lives by the Yarra, Birrarung in Warrandyte and takes every opportunity to spend time by the river through walking, swimming, and canoeing.



Nicole Kowalczyk
Maribyrnong Officer

Nicole is our Maribyrnong Coordinator responsible for advocacy along the Maribyrnong River and leads the newly established Maribyrnong River and Waterways Association

Nicole is a qualified primary school teacher and ecologist. She has studied both the nesting behaviour of the leatherback turtle in Costa

Rica and the foraging and reproductive ecology of the St Kilda little penguin as part of her Masters and PhD, respectively.

Nicole lives close to the Maribyrnong and enjoys cycling along its banks, looking out for native wildlife, particularly the diverse, colourful and loud birds she frequently encounters.



Anthony Despotellis
Litter Officer & Graphics

Anthony is our Litter Officer responsible for increasing knowledge about litter and advocacy to reduce pollution to improve the water quality in the Yarra, Birrarung catchment. He also leads our work to design and trial an effective micro-plastic trap.

He holds a Bachelor of Industrial Design and is a talented graphic designer, contributing to the organisation's promotional and highly commended educational materials through his artistic vision. Anthony also runs a self-founded business 'Remedy Art', painting street art murals all over Melbourne.



Andrew Wood
Regeneration Advisor

Andrew is our Regeneration Lead responsible for YRKA's regeneration work across many sites in the Yarra, Birrarung catchment. He ensures our work supports ecological health, climate resilience, and Traditional Owner priorities.

Andrew is a qualified landscape architect with diverse professional experience as a

landscape contractor, builder, furniture maker, artist, sculptor, permaculture designer and teacher. He is an avid sailor.

Andrew is most at home amongst the plants, and while he tries not to have a favourite part of the river banks, his home regen site is Andrew's Reserve, close to YRKA's offices.



Jessica Rosien
EPS Project Coordinator

Jessica is our Polystyrene Pollution Project Coordinator responsible for working with government, industry and community stakeholders to co-design solutions to prevent polystyrene pollution in our rivers.

She has community and international development expertise

with a focus on natural resource management. She has worked extensively on water issues such as dams, planning and community decision-making.

Jessica values trans-disciplinary approaches and opportunities to solve complex environmental issues. She is an advocate by heart.



Enza Kursun
Administration Officer

Enza is our Administration Officer responsible for a range of administrative tasks, as well as managing sales and bookings for corporate volunteering.

She has a broad background in business administration, managing staff, and personal assistant support for

more than 30 years in various sectors, including banking, government and Not-For-Profit.

Enza, through her work at YRKA, feels that she is contributing to the health and protection of the river, particularly when connecting with businesses through corporate volunteering.



Ula Majewski
Social Media Lead

Ula is YRKA's Social Media Lead and is responsible for connecting diverse individuals and groups to the Yarra, Birrarung through engaging stories, campaigns and information.

Ula has storytelling and campaigning in her blood, and tons of delivering and supporting change-

making campaigns across Australia, Timor-Leste and the Pacific region on climate justice, women's rights, and nature. In her spare time, she writes for surf magazines White Horses and Surfing World and cleans up thousands of pieces of polluting plastic rubbish from Lutruwita/Tasmania's most remote beaches.

Our Vision

We believe that the Yarra, Birrarung – our beautiful, spiritually significant, and resilient river – brings life, joy, and balance along its 242 kilometres journey from source to sea. The river we know, and love, is not just water, but lands, terrain, ecosystems, people, community, and culture – together as one living and integrated natural entity from source to sea.

Founded in 2005, the Yarra Riverkeeper Association is a values-driven community-based organisation that works with communities, Traditional Owners, governments (local, state, and federal), statutory authorities, and businesses to advocate for the health of the whole river. We are a not-for-profit organisation with a paid staff and volunteer Board. We are independent of the government and transparent in our decision-making.

Our vision is a healthy, protected and loved Yarra, Birrarung River. We seek to understand and partner with Traditional Owners to re-energise the river ecologically and culturally, bringing back biodiversity and health. Every day we work to make this possible, through vibrant advocacy, education, community engagement, on-the-ground litter and regeneration programs, and fundraising.

As Melbourne’s population grows and the climate crisis worsens, the Yarra, Birrarung is coming under increasing environmental pressure, pollution, and habitat fragmentation affecting biodiversity and health. Riverkeepers are vital to keeping the Yarra, Birrarung healthy.

Healthy



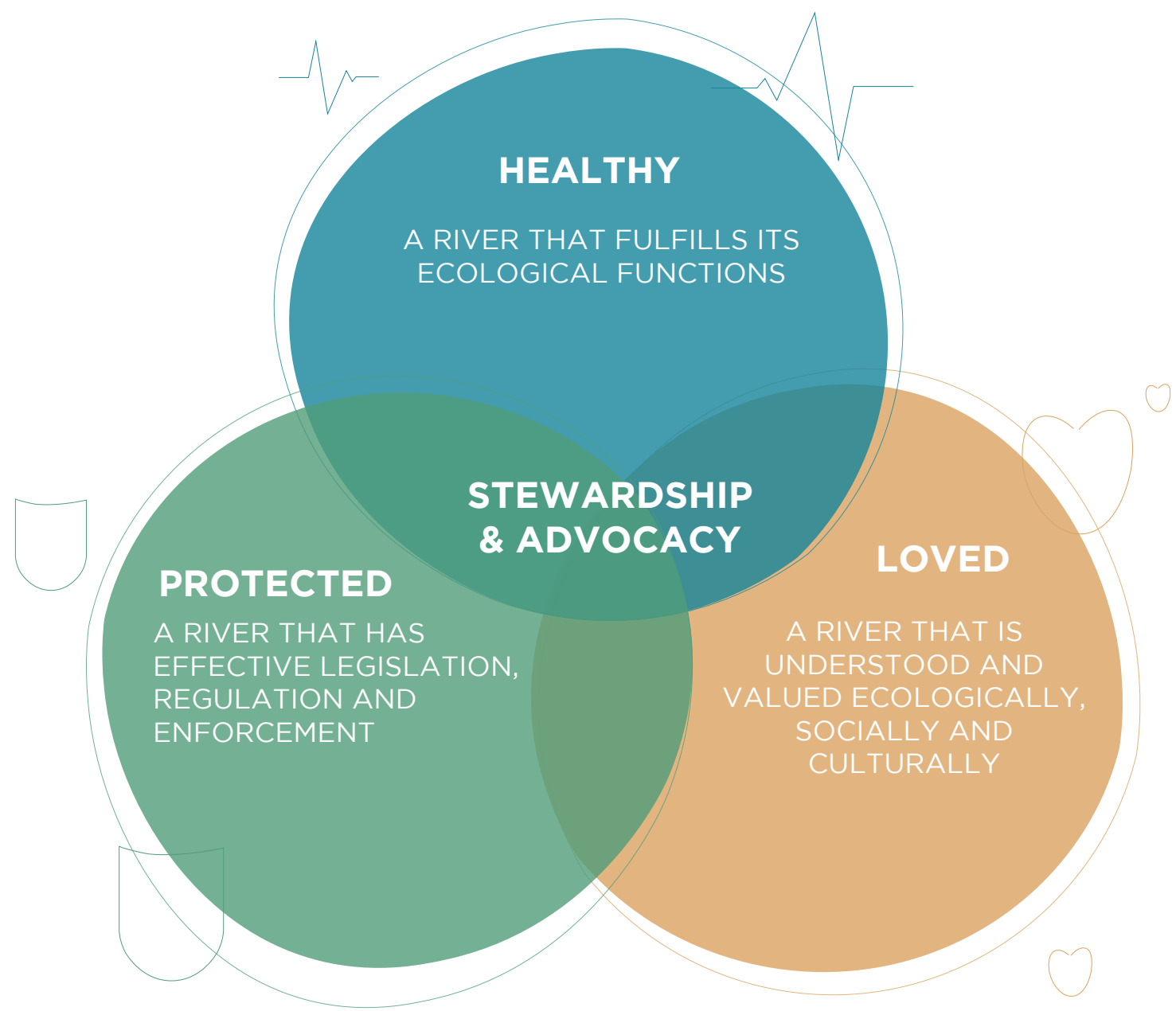
protected



Loved



“Our vision is a healthy protected and loved Yarra, Birrarung River”



Thank you for your support

The work of the Yarra Riverkeeper Association would not be possible without the support of the many organisations, communities and people who love and care for the Yarra, Birrarung River. We are deeply grateful for your ongoing dedication, commitment and support.

Patron

Her Excellency, the Honourable Linda Dessau AC, Governor of Victoria

Supporters

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Moonee Valley City Council
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Department of Industry, Science, and Resources
Federal Australian Government:
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Victorian Government: Department of Energy, Environment & Climate Action (DEECA)
Victorian Environment Protection Authority (EPA)
Melbourne Water
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Australian Plants Society
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Thank you for your support

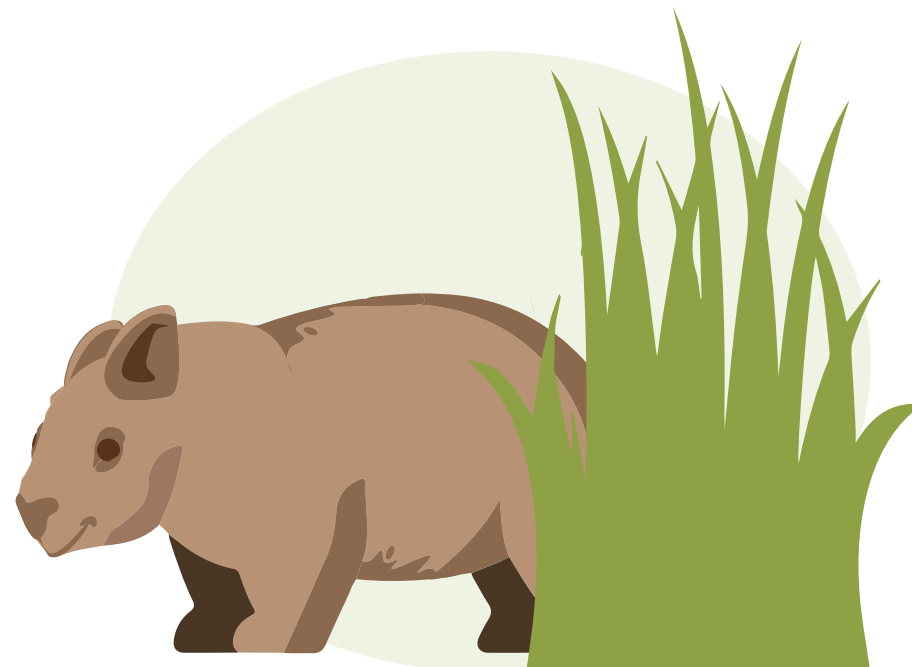
Kirinari Kayak Klub
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Jode Moorthy
John Temme
Rasika Mhetre
Scott Seymour



Corporate volunteering litter clean up. Photo: Anthony Despotellis



A messy river is a healthy river.
Photo: Anthony Despotellis

Thank you for supporting the Yarra Riverkeeper Association.

The Yarra Riverkeeper Association is a not-for-profit organisation. We rely on donations from the public. We appreciate your contributions. All donations over \$2 are tax deductible.

[Donate here](#)



info@yarrariver.org.au



<https://yarrariver.org.au/>



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