

MERRI CREEK



MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

Merri Creek Management Committee Inc. (MCMC) is an environmental coordination and management agency formed in 1989 to achieve a shared vision for the waterway corridors of the Merri Creek Catchment. Its members include all municipalities in the catchment: Darebin, Hume, Moreland, Whittlesea, Yarra and Mitchell, plus the Friends of Merri Creek and the Wallan Environment Group.

Representatives of these member groups form the Committee of Management that guides MCMC's activities.

MCMC's primary aim is to ensure the preservation of natural and cultural heritage, and the ecologically sensitive restoration, development and maintenance of the Merri Creek and tributaries, their corridors and associated ecological communities. It employs specialist and dedicated staff and its programs are funded by Council members, by state and federal grant programs, by competitively won tenders, by grants from philanthropic organisations and through sponsorship.

MCMC's mission

MCMC respects and honours the spirit of the land and its peoples, indigenous plants and animals, and works with the community to preserve, restore and promote the Merri Creek, its catchment and neighbouring region as a vital living system.

Wurundjeri acknowledgement

MCMC acknowledges the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation as the traditional custodians of this land and we pay our respects to the Elders past present and future.

(Merri Creek flows south from the Great Dividing Range near Wallan, to join the Yarra River in Abbotsford, four kilometers north-east of Melbourne's CBD.)

Above: MCMC staff monitor vegetation amongst the spring wildflowers at Ngarrri-djarrang (Central Creek) Grassland in Reservoir.



Annual Report

2011-2012

President's Report

Restoring bushland in the suburbs, conserving rare plant populations, introducing children and adults to nature near home, advocating for the waterways and natural environment in the face of threats from urban and other development, connecting with Indigenous people and the land; these were core activities of the Merri Creek Management Committee (MCMC) in 2011-12.

As if to affirm our efforts, the Merri Creek is Victoria's most popular urban waterway, according to a Department of Sustainability and Environment survey.¹ This is quite a turn-around from it being widely regarded as simply a drain and dumping ground forty years ago.

The birds and other wildlife also appreciate our work, and are returning to many revegetated sites. For example, Red-browed Finches live on the creek banks between Northcote and East Brunswick, and in late November 2011, they regularly fed in the small indigenous front garden at MCMC's office and depot nearby. Another Platypus sighting in the creek was reported from Thornbury in December.

On the downside, the State Government's plans for the northern growth corridor continued to expand to encompass almost all of the Merri catchment. MCMC made detailed submissions to various plans and strategies, but our proposals to better protect the waterways and other significant natural areas seem to have been ignored. We will continue to seek improved environmental outcomes in new urban development.

It has been a difficult year financially,

resulting in a deficit. While success with some major grant applications did compensate for the loss of a couple of contracts, this highlights the year-to-year variability and uncertainty in MCMC's revenue. However, a good advance in that regard was the signing of a three-year Service Agreement with Moreland City Council. Hopefully that agreement will be the first of many with our five other Councils

Trevor Hausler, who was MCMC President for 13 years, stepped down in May 2012 to take on the role of MCMC Waterwatch Coordinator for a year. Trevor's inclusive, consultative and common-sense approach to leadership of the organisation and chairing of its meetings is much appreciated and we offer our grateful thanks for his contribution, both past and ongoing.

I would like to congratulate former MCMC President David Redfearn, who was awarded an Order of Australia Medal in January for his service to conservation and the environment, to local government, and to the community.

We were very pleased to welcome two Council officers to the MCMC Executive Sub-Committee this year: Fiona McKinnon (Moreland) and Damien Harrison (Hume).

Thanks to all the MCMC staff, volunteers and committee members for their contributions and commitment to the preservation, restoration and promotion of the Merri Creek, its catchment and neighbouring region.

**Ann McGregor, President,
November 2012**

¹ My Victorian Waterway: Personal connections with rivers, wetlands and estuaries in Victoria, Nov. 2011, p6. See: <http://www.water.vic.gov.au/environment/rivers/community-connections-to-local-waterways>

Parkland Management

– Restoration and revegetation

The Merri Creek Management Committee (MCMC) Parkland Management Team undertakes restoration, revegetation and maintenance at over 70 sites in the environs of the Merri Creek, its tributaries and adjoining catchments for ecological and amenity purposes.

‘Restoration’ describes the process of protecting and improving the condition of remnant native grasslands, grassy woodlands, escarpments, wetlands and creeksides. ‘Revegetation’ refers to planted vegetation that mimics the structure and processes of remnant vegetation. ‘Vegetation maintenance’ refers to the management of existing vegetation to maintain its biodiversity values, especially the control of weeds.

We also prepare management plans for specific sites and undertake surveys of flora and Golden Sun Moths.

Our funding sources 2011-12

Almost 32% of the Parkland Management Team’s funding was to implement 20 projects from Regional, State, Federal and Landcare grants. These grant funds were received by MCMC, Friends of Merri Creek and Merriang District Landcare Group. An additional 31% was funded by Darebin, Hume, Moreland and Yarra Councils, primarily for vegetation works. The remaining 36%, consisted of contract work, largely vegetation maintenance, for local government (30%) and other agencies (6%), including Theiss/ Melbourne Water and SP AusNet.

The loss of Yarra contracts and almost halving of Moreland contract work resulted in a \$152,000 income reduction which impacted efficiencies of scale.

Native Grasslands, escarpments and creekside ecological habitats

This year we planted 7,480 plants, 63% groundstorey, 16% trees, 15% shrubs and 6% semi aquatics. The cost of ongoing maintenance is a major constraint to expansion of ecologically diverse plantings, leading to reduced planting numbers.

Many ephemeral wetlands lingered in the Merri environs due to high rainfall, favouring waterbird breeding. The endangered Australian Bittern was reported from Wallan along with breeding by Spotted Crane. Spectacular White-necked Herons were seen close to the city and shy Buff Banded Rails were

observed breeding at several urban locations. Stubble Quail returned to grasslands and raptor numbers increased including Wedge Tailed Eagles and Black Shouldered Kites. There were two important mammal sightings: a Common Wombat in Merriang and Platypus in Thornbury and Wollert.

Major site projects

Grasslands

A focus on reinforcing the values of Native Grasslands continued this year, in particular through a three-year Australian Government *Caring for Our Country* grant which enabled ambitious restoration at five sites between Wallan and Reservoir.

Soil disturbance to stimulate wildflower regeneration in grasslands was trialled in partnership with Wurundjeri Traditional Owners and a gorse ‘mulching’ project along the Beveridge Wallan rail reserve achieved spectacular results at this biodiversity ‘hotspot’.

A two year monitoring project found how best to utilise a harmless browsing deterrent to protect plantings from Wallabies.

Another *Caring for Our Country* grant



Wurundjeri Elder, Aunty Alice Kolasa, digs Chocolate Lilies from the Ngarrri-djarrang Grassland in Reservoir with MCMC Parkland Management Team staff.



MCMC Parkland Management Team staff and Wurundjeri Elder, Auntie Alice Kolasa, after working together on three Native Grassland burns in Fawkner.

funded weed control along degraded reserve edges to buffer remnant vegetation at Rushwood Drive in Craigieburn, Galgi Ngarrk in Epping, and Bababi Djinanang in Fawkner.

The State Government's new *Communities for Nature* grants program funded three four-year projects with major MCMC involvement. They include: grassland and escarpment restoration at Galada Tamboore; Golden Sun Moth surveys and habitat enhancement at Bababi Marning (Cooper St) Grassland; and a project aimed at reversing the decline of remnant Plains Yam Daisy (a form of 'Murnong') in the Merri catchment.

The Friends of Merri Creek employed MCMC to work with Wurundjeri to burn and restore areas of Bababi Djinanang (Jukes Rd Grassland), to document site history, and to plant around a lookout. This project was supported by a Community Grant from the Port Phillip and Westernport Catchment Management Authority and Moreland City Council.

Riparian and other waterway vegetation

Unfortunately, we lost management responsibility for the sites that we established and developed over years with the City of Yarra. However, this setback did free up resources for restoration on the Merri escarpments within Yarra Bend Park for City of Yarra in partnership with Parks Victoria. We

secured two Melbourne Water *Corridors of Green* grants to restore creek-side vegetation along Aitken Creek in Craigieburn and Merri Creek in Wollert.

The Friends of Merri Creek contracted MCMC to implement two Melbourne Water Community Grants - in Northcote and Fawkner. We also managed a Friends' grant from Moreland City Council, establishing a small indigenous food and fibre garden near CERES.

Darebin and Hume Councils continued to contract MCMC to implement revegetation at Edwardes Lake, Reservoir, and on the Merri Creek escarpment near Bolinda Rd, Campbellfield, respectively. Through Landcare Australia, SP AusNet sponsored the rejuvenation of established plots at Albion and Clara Streets in Brunswick and revegetation along the path edge.

Site Management Plans

We developed a *Nassella* (Needle Grass) management plan with the Merriang District Landcare Group for five private properties on Merri Creek, and a vegetation management plan for Emma St Grassland in Fawkner.

Wurundjeri Traditional Owners

A highlight of the year was a strengthening of our relationship with the Wurundjeri Traditional Owners, including burns at Bababi Djinanang (Jukes Rd) Grassland in Fawkner and

digging/translocation of lilies at Ngarridjarrang Grassland in Reservoir. We also supported the Wurundjeri Council's restoration project adjacent to the Aboriginal Community Elders Service on Merri Creek in Brunswick.

Community involvement in restoration and revegetation

We hosted 33 community events including harvesting of seed, planting, hand weeding, woody weed control and student surveying/mapping activities. Over 1,300 hours was contributed to restoring, monitoring or learning about the Merri Creek environs by 468 community, student and corporate volunteers. Community and corporate plantings were again the most attended events with 384 attendees. However attendance at weeding and ecological monitoring activities increased with 109 and 32 attendees respectively. Staff groups from five organisations contributed 347 hours of restoration work.

Highlights included: volunteers helping find 80 new remnant Plains Yam Daisies (*Microseris scapigera*) at Kalkallo Common; and organising and presenting a Needlegrass Management workshop together with Merriang Landcare Group and seven agencies, offering 24 landholders management advice.



MCMC's Amy O'Dell controls the Ecological Burn at Ngarridjarrang (Central Creek) Grassland in Reservoir.

Catchment Program

– Environmental education, community engagement and stream health

Merri Creek Management Committee's (MCMC) Catchment Program worked with 4,108 people this year in over 174 educational and engagement opportunities offered through five different programs (in addition to *Waterwatch* sessions – see below).

The *Learning Grounds* program receives annual funds from the Cities of Darebin and Whittlesea to support those planning indigenous gardens in schools and other community areas. This year, 1,139 students and teachers from 13 schools and two community groups sought advice and support for plant lists and funding applications.

The *Education Program's* funding from the Cities of Whittlesea, Darebin and Yarra enabled us to tailor programs to help schools and community groups become more aware of biodiversity and waterways.

A bold initiative was created for Greening Australia Victoria's annual 2012 *Toolbox for Environmental Change – Leadership in Sustainability* conference at Melbourne Museum. MCMC, together with Wurundjeri Elder, Bill Nicholson, cultural ecology restoration consultant, Dave Crawford, and five students from Thornbury Primary School, co-presented *Cultural traditions and a sense of identity: Putting biodiversity into an Indigenous cultural heritage perspective*. Participant feedback rated this workshop the highest of the 27 conference workshops.

MCMC supported two primary schools to achieve outstanding results through the *Kids Teaching Kids* learning model, where students become the experts to teach others, with specially adapted workshops and field trips.

A grant from the Bjarne K. Dahl Trust enabled extension of previous community partnership projects with Merri Creek's Traditional Owners. Through the *Gum Meeting Place* project, Wurundjeri men were supported in their cultural revival of traditional practices related to *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* when they harvested bark and shaped new artefacts near Merri Creek in January 2012.

Now in its fourth year, the *Storming for Cleaner Water* project was delivered to 1,574 people in 75 sessions, in conjunction with Darebin Creek Management Committee, for Whittlesea City Council.

We continued to participate in RMIT's *Conservation and Land Management Program Advisory Group*.

Waterwatch

MCMC continued to host a *Waterwatch* program for the Merri and Moonee Ponds Creeks and the lower Yarra River in partnership between Melbourne Water and the municipalities of Darebin, Melbourne, Mitchell, Moonee Valley, Moreland, Whittlesea and Yarra. It is part of greater Melbourne's *Healthy Waterways Waterwatch*.

The *Merri and Moonee Ponds Waterwatch* program ran activities for 4,778 students and teachers from 38 pre-schools, primary and secondary schools and tertiary institutions. A further 1,155 people were reached through festivals, community days and training events. Activities included water quality monitoring, macro invertebrate (water bug) surveys, frog surveys, biodiversity talks, guided walks and stormwater investigation. We also supported 20 volunteers who monitored 12 sites on Merri Creek, Moonee Ponds Creek, and Westgate Park in Fishermans Bend.

In-stream Health

MCMC continued quarterly monitoring of five stream sites in the Merri catchment for water quality and biological health.

We were particularly concerned at high turbidity readings (or muddiness) recorded in late 2011 and the first half of 2012, indicative of highly degraded conditions, and undertook a detailed investigation of Merri Creek tributaries, Malcolm and Aitken Creeks in Craigieburn, and Taylors and Wallan Creeks in Wallan.

This showed high sediment levels in the creeks downstream of new housing development sites. The sediment is likely to be a key source of the high phosphate levels also detected in Merri Creek.

The vulnerability of our waterways was made real in January when a black water event in the Edgars Creek wetlands in Reservoir led to the death of hundreds of carp. This was due to severe oxygen depletion caused by the decay of dead plant material and sewage from a storm overflow. The decay also released phosphates which stimulated a phytoplankton bloom in Edwardes Lake, immediately downstream of the wetland. Edgars Creek is a key tributary of Merri Creek.

Macroinvertebrate assessments showed that Merri Creek's in-stream health continues to be poor due to significant pollution from urban and rural stormwater runoff. In urban areas, rain falling on the high proportion of impervious surfaces like roads and roofs generally carries pollutants and rubbish directly into the stream, rather than them being filtered out as the water passes through the soil. Stormwater from industrial areas, of which there are many in the Merri catchment, is often particularly contaminated.

Nevertheless, a local resident rescued a Platypus from near-death entanglement in rubbish in Thornbury in early January 2012. Platypus are not known to have bred in Merri Creek for many years, presumably due to poor water quality. Litter entanglement is a further serious hazard for animals attempting to recolonise the creek.



Waterwatch introduces the community to the diversity of life in the local waterways at the Coburg Carnivale in June 2012.

Planning and coordination

– open space and conservation

Merri Creek Management Committee (MCMC) receives funding from its member Councils to work on issues affecting biodiversity, stream health, landscape, heritage and amenity along waterway corridors in the Merri catchment.

MCMC's biggest focus this year was again on the expansion of Melbourne's Urban Growth Boundary (UGB). The gazettal of so-called 'Logical Inclusions' in September 2012 brought even more of the upper Merri into the metropolitan growth area. Areas of nationally significant Volcanic Plains Grassland and Red Gum Grassy Woodlands, and habitat for Golden Sun Moths, Growling Grass Frogs, Curly Sedge and Matted Flax Lily are now expected to co-exist with new urban areas and a massive freight terminal.

MCMC also made a brief submission on the Victorian Planning Zones Review, particularly about the downgrading of Green Wedge and Rural Conservation Zones.

In existing urban areas adjacent to Merri Creek, MCMC commented on 15 planning permit applications, appeared at one VCAT review (without success), and made comments on four planning scheme amendments. MCMC also gave advice on a number of pre-application plans and commented on two Council planning reviews plus a referral under the Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act – for the decommissioning of a quarry in Campbellfield which contains Growling Grass Frogs.

Merri Creek and Environs Strategy

Implementation of MCMC's Merri Creek and Environs Strategy 2009-2014 (MCES) proceeded, and it was decided to amend the MCES to better address the dramatic expansion of the UGB. A key action, to develop an Upper Merri Integrated Fire Prevention Plan, was dropped due to insufficient support from councils and other agencies.

MCMC exchanged information with Aboriginal Affairs Victoria and discussed updating of cultural sensitivity mapping in the Merri catchment. We also strongly supported the role of Traditional Owners in submissions to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Representative Aboriginal Parties and the review of the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Act.

Stakeholder Liaison

MCMC continued its close liaison with Melbourne Water and participated in consultation for their draft Storm-water and Healthy Waterways Strategies. We also attended a number of briefings about Melbourne Water's proposed changes to *Waterwatch* and had representation on the Waterways Advisory Committee.

We were involved in a University of Melbourne project to produce a Grasslands Technical Guide and provided information for a Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA) publication, *Start with the Grasslands*.

MCMC attended community forums held by the EPA and a regional Catchment Management Authority forum. We also collaborated with the VNPA's *NatureWatch* community survey program for Plains Yam Daisy and Golden Sun Moth.

Upper reaches of Merri Creek – Wallan to Donnybrook

Although the upper part of the Merri catchment is still predominantly rural, most of it, including Wallan township and the flood-prone Hernes Swamp area, is now within Melbourne's UGB.

MCMC liaised closely with Hume Council on the ecological management of the Kalkallo Common Grassland and with the Cemetery Trust on the management of important remnant vegetation in the adjacent Donnybrook Cemetery.

In January 2012 MCMC commented on draft Precinct Structure Plans (PSPs) for the new suburbs of Lockerbie, Lockerbie North and Merrifield West. We were most concerned that the Lockerbie PSP limits the conservation corridor along Merri Creek to a mere 50m either side of the creek and locates a Principal Town Centre spanning the creek corridor.

Middle reaches of Merri Creek – Kalkallo to Western Ring Road

The middle reaches of the Merri catchment contain a mix of established and new residential and industrial/business areas, as well as rural and extractive industry zones.

We provided feedback to Melbourne Water's riparian weed control and revegetation works between the Ring Road and Craigieburn and convened a



One of the Red-browed Finches which became regular visitors to MCMC's front garden in late 2011. This shows how indigenous plants create habitat even in a small area.

multi-agency site meeting about the problems of illegal vehicle access and dumping in creek parkland in Campbellfield.

We commented on three masterplans for open space reserves, all with creek interfaces and potential for enhanced biodiversity as well as community use.

Lower reaches of Merri Creek – Western Ring Road to Clifton Hill

The lower Merri catchment is highly urbanised and the creek corridor provides a critical link for habitat and for community connection with nature. An ongoing focus for MCMC is the redevelopment of infrastructure located in the creek corridor and improvement of habitat and community amenity.

MCMC was a member of the project advisory group for the Edgars Creek Conservation and Development Plan, auspiced by Moreland and Darebin Councils.

We provided advice for the final landscaping plans of a former shaft site of the Northern Sewerage Project at De Chene Reserve in Coburg, but we were unsuccessful in a VCAT challenge to Yarra Valley Water's retention of an extremely large shed on their creek-side shaft site in Coburg.

Financial Report

Summarised Balance Sheet as at 30th September 2012

	2012	2011
EQUITY:		
Retained Funds - Start	193,723	161,647
Transfer from Env. Fund Reserve	(23,360)	
Environment Fund Reserve Balance	29,358	-
Add Surplus / (Deficit)	(82,881)	32,076
Retained Funds - End	116,840	193,723
Represented By:		
Current Assets:	547,653	551,835
Fixed Assets:	132,138	152,466
TOTAL ASSETS:	679,791	704,301
Less:		
TOTAL LIABILITIES:	562,951	510,578
NET ASSETS:	116,840	193,723

Summarised Statement of Income & Expenditure For the twelve months ended 30th September, 2012

	2012	2011
INCOME:		
Grants		
Municipalities	598,230	540,460
Other Government	106,453	158,179
Non Government	166,397	56,370
Contracts	409,187	611,089
Profit on Sale of Fixed Assets	-	4,228
Sale of Publications	2,027	741
Environment Fund Donations	(see*) -	1,777
Interest & Sundry Income	27,726	39,278
Total Income:	1,310,020	1,412,122
LESS EXPENDITURE:		
Wages, Salaries & Oncosts	1,036,893	1,173,596
Materials & Plant Hire	56,288	61,940
Vehicle Running	25,244	20,137
Admin, Project & General	105,628	92,852
Environment Fund Disbursements	-	-
Depreciation & Leave Provisions	40,388	31,521
Total Expenditure:	1,392,901	1,380,046
NET SURPLUS / (DEFICIT):	(82,881)	32,076

* In 2012, \$5,998 of Environment Fund Donations is included under EQUITY - Environment Fund Reserve Balance.

The above reports have been summarised from the audited financial statements of the Merri Creek Management Committee for the year ended 30th September 2012. The full financial statements and the Auditor's report are on the MCMC website.

Treasurer's Note: The deficit this year is primarily due to an unanticipated drop in income and MCMC's limited ability, in the short term, to reduce fixed costs and to gain additional income. The reduction in overall income had its greatest impact on the Parkland Management cost area and also affected MCMC's ability to cover administrative costs. A smaller part of the deficit was due to previously approved expenditure of reserve funds.

Auditor: MCMC's Auditor is Fred Gerardson, Registered Company Auditor, Colville Williams & Co. P/L, Lower Plenty.

Member Representatives and staff 2011-2012

Committee of Management 2012:

(With number of meetings attended in brackets - max. 4)

City of Darebin:	Cr Trent McCarthy (0), Cr Tim Laurence (0), Flynn Hart (sub.) (1), Alison Breach (sub.) (3).
City of Hume:	Cr Drew Jessop (4), Damien Harrison (4).
City of Moreland:	Cr Jo Connellan (4), Fiona McKinnon (Vice President) (3), Lori Arthur (Sub.) (1).
City of Whittlesea:	Cr Stevan Kozmewski (2), Rebecca Passlow (3).
City of Yarra:	Carrie Lindsay (1). (No Councillor rep. appointed.)
Shire of Mitchell	Vivian Pasic (0).
Friends of Merri Creek:	Trevor Hausler (President until May 2012) (2), Ann McGregor (Secretary until May, then President) (4), Allie Dawe, (Treasurer) (4), Paul Prentice (Vice President) (3), Nicole Lowe (3), Ruth Shiel (2), Pascale Pitot (1), David Redfearn (sub.) (3), Louise Wright (sub.) (1).
Wallan Environment Group:	Rob Eldridge (3).

Sub-Committees in 2012:

The following Sub-Committees also met during the year: Executive Sub-Committee, Finance Sub-Committee, and the Merri Creek & Environs Strategy Implementation Sub-Committee; while reports were issued in lieu of Planning & Issues Sub-Committee meetings.

MCMC Staff:

Manager:	Luisa Macmillan
Admin/Information Officer:	Ray Radford
Administration Officer:	Monica Williamson
Finance Officer:	Ruth Rankin
IT Manager/Strategic Projects:	Tony Faithfull
Cleaner:	Christine Pesak, Suzannah Carroll

Catchment Program Team

Waterwatch Coordinator:	Jane Bevelander, Trevor Hausler
Catchment Program Officer:	Angela Foley

Parkland Management Team

Conservation Program Manager:	Katrina Roberg
Team Coordinator:	Ben North
Ecological Restoration Planner:	Brian Bainbridge
Team Leaders:	Dave Crawford, Meg Gasson, Maryann Weatherill, Dave Woods.

Team Members:
Jim Brien, Aaron Eulenstein,
Emily Jordan, Michael Longmore,
Amy O'Dell, Will Parker.

Temporary Team Members:
Michael Day, Tom Dell'Oro,
Clayton Fenech, Deb Hatton,
Malcolm Hauser, Arthur McManus.

Trainee Team Member:
Clinton Hallissey

Planning Consultant

Michael Kirsch



Merri Creek Management Committee

2 Lee St, East Brunswick, Victoria Australia 3057.
Telephone (03) 9380 8199. Fax (03) 9380 6989.
Email: admin@mcmc.org.au
Website: www.mcmc.org.au
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