

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

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

MCMC's 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.

MCMC employs specialist and dedicated staff and its programs are funded by member Councils, State and Federal grant programs, competitively won tenders, grants from philanthropic organisations and public donations.

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 Woi-wurrung acknowledgement

MCMC acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung People of the Kulin Nation as the traditional custodians of the land of the Merri Merri. We pay our respects to the Elders past present and emerging.

Above photo: MCMC staff record the calls of the threatened Growling Grass Frog species in Merri Creek at Galgi Ngarrk (Craigieburn Grassland) in January 2020.

Annual Report

2019-2020



President's Report

While the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns certainly limited or altered our activities this year, it also demonstrated just how valuable the restored Merri corridor is. Many, many people appreciated the parklands and shared path for their daily exercise in a natural setting.

Staff were busy with the usual activities for the first four or five months. Lockdown restrictions subsequently put a stop to face to face public, school and volunteer events.

We were extremely fortunate to continue our ecological restoration work at most sites and to have support for alternative delivery approaches for our engagement events. We were thus able to retain staff, meet our delivery commitments and sustain a positive financial position.

We had to quickly find new ways of working, including holding staff meetings, agency liaison and Committee of Management meetings online. Digital files were moved to the 'cloud' early in lockdown, making working from home feasible, and Covid-safe approaches to working in the field were rapidly developed.

Successful webinars were offered on topics ranging from Powerful Owls to litter clean-ups. These are available for viewing on the MCMC website. Another innovation on the website is a set of digital Merri Creek jigsaws.

In conjunction with Friends of Merri Creek, a series of small posters illustrating 12 local

birds was installed for several months of lockdown along the Merri Path.

Adoption of MCMC's 2020-2024 Strategic Plan in February was a significant step in setting our future directions. With some unexpected in-house graphic design skills the strategy has been turned into an attractive document for public circulation.

Regardless of the pandemic, advocacy continued for the Merri and its ecological systems through submissions to public inquiries, development applications and appeals, and planning panels. The risks of urban development on sodic, dispersive soils in the catchment were highlighted when MCMC convened a specialist inter-agency workshop in late 2019. The issue had a lengthy airing in the Panel hearings for Beveridge North West Precinct Structure Plan. The Panel accepted that sodic soils pose challenges and need specific management at the subdivision stage.

We acknowledge the contribution of long-serving member Stevan Kozmevski, who left the Committee of Management in late 2019. Thanks also to Councilors Natalie Abboud (Moreland) and Steph Amir (Darebin), who were very supportive during their time on the Committee of Management.

Even more than usual in the difficult 2020, we appreciate the efforts and innovations by our dedicated, skilled and hard-working staff.

Ann McGregor, President

Volunteering



402 volunteers*
*includes repeat volunteers

Environmental education



3322 participants

Events and classes



153 events

Delivery partners



45 organisations

Clients and funding bodies



34 organisations

Planning and Coordination

We receive funding from our member Councils to respond to issues, opportunities and threats affecting biodiversity, stream health, landscape, heritage and amenity along waterways in the Merri catchment. This funding, which totalled \$0.26 million for the year, also supports our governance, communication services and assistance to community groups.

We continued to promote our vision for the Greater Wallan - Merri Park and a functional ecological and open space network through the upper Merri catchment.

The high risk of urban development on sodic soils in the upper catchment was a major focus. MCMC convened a **specialist sodic soils workshop** that highlighted the lack of information on the extent of these soils in the upper Merri. Since then, the Victorian Planning Authority has commissioned soils studies which have confirmed the presence of highly sodic soils in development areas.

We commented on 13 planning permit applications for proposals on sites next to Merri Creek and participated in 3 VCAT reviews, with pleasing success.

We submitted on 4 planning scheme amendments and appeared at 2 panel hearings, the latter with mixed success.

We participated in Dept of Environment Land Water & Planning workshops for the new upper Merri parks and development of the Upper Merri Integrated Water Mngment Plan, bringing our local knowledge to these projects.

We benefited from the Nature Glenelg Trust's analysis of the potential to restore **Hanna Swamp**, south of Wallan, one of the 'forgotten wetlands of the Upper Merri'.

We provided specialist advice on translocation of rare plant species.

We developed 3 grant project proposals, 1 in partnership with the Friends of Merri Creek, 2 of which were successful. This was huge drop compared to 23 grant applications last year and reflects the lack of opportunities.

We finalised the **MCMC Strategic Plan** thanks to a grant from The Myer Foundation.

We worked on a priority action from the Strategic Plan to develop a *Statement of Partnership and Commitments* with the Wurundjeri Woi wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation, again with support from The Myer Foundation.

We publicised 59 community events on the Merri events calendar (down from last year's 117 because of Covid); sent out customised emails for 21 of these events, including 9 webinars; produced 4 issues of *Merri e-News*; posted every 5 days to our Instagram page, which now has over 1,400 followers; and regularly contributed event items to the Friends of Merri Creek Facebook page and to Council's and Friends' newsletters.

Our Committee of Management and its sub-committees met frequently, despite the challenges of Covid-19 (see p.4). In addition to regular monitoring and reporting functions, and finalising the Strategic Plan, numerous Covid-related policies and procedures were adopted, in the face of rapidly changing requirements.

Our seventh Annual mid-year Appeal raised \$14,500 in donations to the Merri Creek Environment Fund to support the Merri 'ribbon of magic'. We also received \$13,714 from other donations during the year.



Ecological Restoration

Our Ecological Restoration Program (ER) manages indigenous vegetation at 81 sites along Merri Creek, its tributaries, adjoining catchments, and some ecologically significant locations well beyond the Merri catchment.

This year around 44% of our works focused on grassland ecosystems, 31% on shrublands and woodlands, and 21% on wetlands and the banks of waterways. Around 71% of these works assisted the regeneration of remnant vegetation, while reconstruction of significantly degraded sites accounted for 23% of our works. Ecological consultancy, monitoring and community engagement made up the remaining 6% of works.

We planted approximately 17,500 plants, 79% of which were ground-storey, 16% were shrubs, 3% were trees and 2% aquatics and semi-aquatics. This included creating *in-situ* Seed Production Areas (SPAs) for 3 plant species rare to the catchment. SPAs set up in previous years yielded 158g of seed from 9 rare species, which were reintroduced by direct sowing into 12 different sites. A total of 1.3kg of seed from 26 different species was sown into 27 sites this year.

Our **Flora and Fauna report** outlines key sightings and discoveries for the year.

Volunteer contribution

Involving the community in hands-on activities is key to our work. The COVID-19 pandemic severely reduced opportunities for volunteering this year. Nonetheless, in the first few months of the financial year, 377 volunteers from the community, Friends of Merri Creek members, students and corporate groups assisted with our ecological restoration projects, contributing 810 hours, equivalent to \$24,300 of work. We hosted 22 community events including weed workshops, planting days, fauna surveys and guided tours.

Of the 377 volunteers, 100 attended weed removal events (271 hrs), 124 attended planting events (90 hours) and 86 helped monitor nest boxes (151 hours). Individual volunteers with our on-ground team worked with us for 33 days, contributing 256 hours and gaining hands-on restoration experience.

A further 24 people attended a nest box information session and 20 people joined a tour around Bababi Djinanang grassland.

Wurundjeri collaboration

Our collaboration with Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Traditional Owners continued to develop. We worked closely with the Narrap Ranger Team to begin initial restoration of the grassland recently purchased by Moreland City Council at Leonard St, Fawkner, and continued to work with Narrap Rangers to restore salt-seep vegetation communities at Galada Tamboore in Campbellfield. We also provided advice to the Narrap Team on riparian restoration techniques and the ecological values of Galada Tamboore to aid in the design of Narrap projects.

Funding

The total income for Ecological Restoration projects was \$1.11 million.

Agreements with member Councils: Ongoing funding agreements with Darebin, Hume, Moreland and Yarra Councils funded \$319,100 of our vegetation management and community engagement work.

Grants: We delivered \$175,200 of works funded by grants from federal, state and local governments, Melbourne Water, Port Phillip & Westernport CMA, the Hazel and Arthur Bruce Bequest, and donations to our own **Merri Creek Environment Fund**. Approximately \$93,600 of these grants were received by Friends of Merri Creek and Collingwood Children's Farm, with grant applications developed by MCMC.

These grants, plus the \$24,300 worth of volunteer contributions, added significant value to our council-funded restoration and vegetation maintenance works.



Photos: Top: MCMC attendees at the February 2020 Committee of Management Zoom meeting. Above: Surveying for Striped Legless Lizards at Diggers Rest, October 2019.

Contracts: We maintained various bushland and grassland areas in Brunswick, Fawkner and Reservoir through contracts with local councils worth approximately \$209,900. Contracts with other clients worth \$407,200 included: continued management of a vegetation offset at a grassland in Craigieburn; control of serious weed infestations at grasslands in Wollert and Merriang for the *APA Group* and private landholders; restoration and management of 21 ecologically diverse rail biosites throughout metropolitan Melbourne for *Metro Trains* and *VicRoads*; and vegetation assessments and fauna surveys for many of the aforementioned clients.



Catchment

Our Catchment Program engaged with 3278 people for eco-cultural waterway and biodiversity learning. This included *Waterwatch* and *Catchment Education* activities. In total, 131 events/sessions were held, with support from 12 funding streams, including recurrent funding from five of our member councils, Darebin, Moreland, Whittlesea, and Yarra.

Funding

Total income for Catchment projects was \$0.18 million. Of this, 67% was from member councils through ongoing funding agreements; the rest came from partnerships and grants, and a small number of fee-for-service projects.

Catchment Education

We worked across the primary, secondary, and tertiary education sectors, delivering face to face activities, and then online when Covid restrictions curtailed our usual approach.

Likewise we reached the general community at a number of festivals and events before switching to digital engagement.

Highlights included a National Threatened Species Day 2020 webinar on **Whittlesea Grasslands** and teaming up with Deakin University and the City of Yarra for a **Powerful Owl webinar**. We also worked towards a **webinar with early childhood educators** on ways to support more access to local natural areas in kindergarten programs for nature play.

We evaluated Moreland Primary School's innovative **Creekulum Education Project** which we had previously helped to deliver.

Waterwatch

Our *Waterwatch* program, funded by Melbourne Water, the Cities of Darebin, Moreland, Moonee Valley, Whittlesea, Yarra and fee for service, supported ten volunteer groups to conduct regular monitoring of water quality at 15 sites in the Merri, Darebin, Moonee Ponds and Lower Yarra catchments, including Westgate Park and Trin Warren Tamboore Wetlands in Parkville. Ten volunteers led these groups and a further 25 community members contributed regularly. The data collected by these groups can be viewed in their **annual water quality summaries**.

Water quality monitoring results showed no improvement in the poor condition of Merri Creek and its tributaries. The lower, urbanised reaches were in worse condition with high amounts of litter (see "Litter Project" below), however there are a number of issues in the mid to upper Merri catchment, including erosion which has contributed to very **muddy flows** after heavy rain.

Waterwatch Victoria has completed the **2019-20 Annual Achievements report** which provides a statewide update on the activities of the Victorian waterway citizen science programs, showing how community monitoring programs are used to inform waterway management decisions while strengthening community engagement in waterway stewardship.

We engaged 2,395 students, early years and other community members in 89 **Waterwatch education** sessions at a variety of creek-side locations, and in schools, kindergartens, local libraries, workshops and at festivals.

COVID restrictions initially slowed the *Waterwatch* program down, but we were able to pivot, and from May until late September six **webinars** on various topics were offered to the community. Other **digital resources** were compiled and social media presence was used to support household only litter clean ups through the new **Facebook page**.

Litter Project

Congratulations to the Merri Creek community! In the three years of the *Rapid Response to Litter after rainfall* project, coordinated by Friends of Merri Creek and MCMC, 84 events and training sessions were held with 970 participants.

Over 700 kgs or 21,000 pieces of litter, much of this macro plastics, was removed from the Merri Creek catchment. (Data is stored on the **LitterWatch** website.)

Photos: Top: Participants at the *Frogs of Edwardes Lake* event, Reservoir, November 2019.

Left - first: Girl at the *Kingfishers on Kids* session, Nth Fitzroy Library, January 2020.

Left - second: Powerful Owl family (for the webinar on Powerful Owls in Yarra). Photo by David Diehm.

Left - third: Native bees resting in Golden Moth orchids near Beveridge, September 2020.

Left - bottom: An Ecological burn at Bababi Djinanang Grassland Fawkner, May 2020.

Financial Report

Summarised Balance Sheet as at 30th September 2020

	2020	2019
EQUITY:		
Retained Funds - Start	202,100	142,157
Transfer (to)/from Env. Fund Reserve	(2,832)	(6,273)
Add Surplus / (Deficit)	189,643	66,216
	388,911	202,100
Environment Fund Reserve Balance	77,173	74,341
Retained Funds - End	466,084	276,441
Represented By:		
Current Assets	1,141,917	922,523
Fixed Assets	115,957	78,440
TOTAL ASSETS	1,257,874	1,000,963
Less:		
TOTAL LIABILITIES	791,790	724,522
NET ASSETS	466,084	276,441

Summarised Statement of Income & Expenditure for the twelve months to 30th September, 2020

	2020	2019
INCOME:		
Grants:		
Municipalities	747,939	640,153
Other Government	65,023	104,928
Non Government	48,449	97,188
Contracts	*714,135	*544,853
Profit on Sale of Fixed Assets	-	-
Sale of Publications	7,402	3,698
Environment Fund Donations	28,224	20,151
Interest & Sundry Income	#94,854	9,193
Total Income:	1,706,028	1,420,164
LESS EXPENDITURE:		
Wages, Salaries & Oncosts	1,213,705	1,102,239
Consultants, Materials & Plant Hire	90,242	76,147
Vehicle Running	27,966	23,048
Admin, Project & General	120,582	128,381
Depreciation & Leave Provisions	63,892	24,133
Total Expenditure:	1,516,386	1,353,948
NET SURPLUS / (DEFICIT):	189,643	66,216

*Includes delivery of grants for community groups valued at \$111,376 in 2020 and \$113,871 in 2019. These were projects where MCMC played a lead role in designing and developing the grant applications and took responsibility for delivery and reporting.

#Includes Federal Govt's Covid-19 cash flow stimulus to Not For Profits.

The above reports have been summarised from the audited financial statements of the Merri Creek Management Committee for the year ended 30th September 2020. The full statements are on the MCMC website.

Auditor:

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

Merri Creek Environment Fund:

We gratefully acknowledge the 85 donors to the Merri Creek Environment Fund, including the Holloway Family Endowment, Pamela McLure, Evelyn Portek, the Schudmak Family Foundation, David Tatnall and Adi Tudor.

Member Representatives and Staff 2019-2020

Committee of Management:

(With number of meetings attended in brackets – max: 3. The quarterly meeting scheduled for May 2020 was cancelled due to COVID-19).

City of Darebin:	Cr Steph Amir (3) Luke Sandham (2)
City of Hume:	Cr Jodi Jackson (1) Damien Harrison (Secretary) (2) Daniela Pacuzzo (Sub.) (1)
City of Moreland:	Cr Natalie Abboud (2) Alli Coster (2) Vince Andreana (Sub.) (1)
City of Whittlesea:	*Cr Stevan Kozmevski (0) Tim Connell (Vice-President) (3)
City of Yarra:	Cr Bridget O'Brien (2) Craig Lupton (1)
Shire of Mitchell	Cr Rob Eldridge (2) Elyse Kelly (2)
Friends of Merri Creek:	Ann McGregor (President) (3) Ann Sanson (Treasurer) (3) Nicole Lowe (Vice-President) (3) Pascale Pitot (3) Jane Miller (3) Lisa Lawrence (2) Anne Frost (Sub.) (1)
Wallan Environment Group:	Claudia James (3)

* Whittlesea Council did not appoint a Councillor representative for 2020.

Sub-Committees:

The following Sub-Committees met during the year:

Executive Sub-Committee (6 times)

Finance Sub-Committee (4 times)

Merri Creek Environment Fund Sub-Committee (1 time)

MCMC Staff:

Manager:	Luisa Macmillan
Information Officer:	Ray Radford (p/t)
Administration Officer:	Monica Williamson (p/t)
Finance Officer:	Ruth Rankin (p/t)
IT Manager/Strategic Projects:	Tony Faithfull (p/t)
Cleaner (casual):	Diana Ramirez
Volunteer Support on Sodic Soils:	Darcy Coombes

Catchment Program:

Engagement Coordinator:	Angela Foley (p/t)
Waterwatch Coordinator:	Julia Cirillo (p/t), Trevor Hausler (casual)

Program Volunteer Assistants:
Elliot Alder, Wei Heng Chan,
Alycia Crofton, Melanie Halliday,
Silvie Tynan, Kate Ward (all p/t)

Ecological Restoration Program

Program Manager	Michael Longmore
Program Coordinator:	Sarah Boys
Technical Officer:	Chris Geary
Team Leaders:	Megan Maroney (p/t), Jessica Slade, Charlotte Wood
Team Members:	Tony Bracey, Pip Jones, Sophie Lavence, Dominic McKenzie, Cameron Walls
Temporary Team Member:	Angela Viney (p/t)
Team Volunteers & Interns:	Richard Camilleri, Daniel Fernandez, Hannah Glasson, Shelby Jones, Jaimee Liden, Ellen Pearson, Lily Probst, Alice Verrall

Dr Stephen Rowley assisted MCMC on specialist planning matters, and Peter Batchelor provided invaluable support for webinars and creating our digital resources.



Merri Creek Management Committee

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