

MERRI CREEK

— *From wasteland to parklands* —

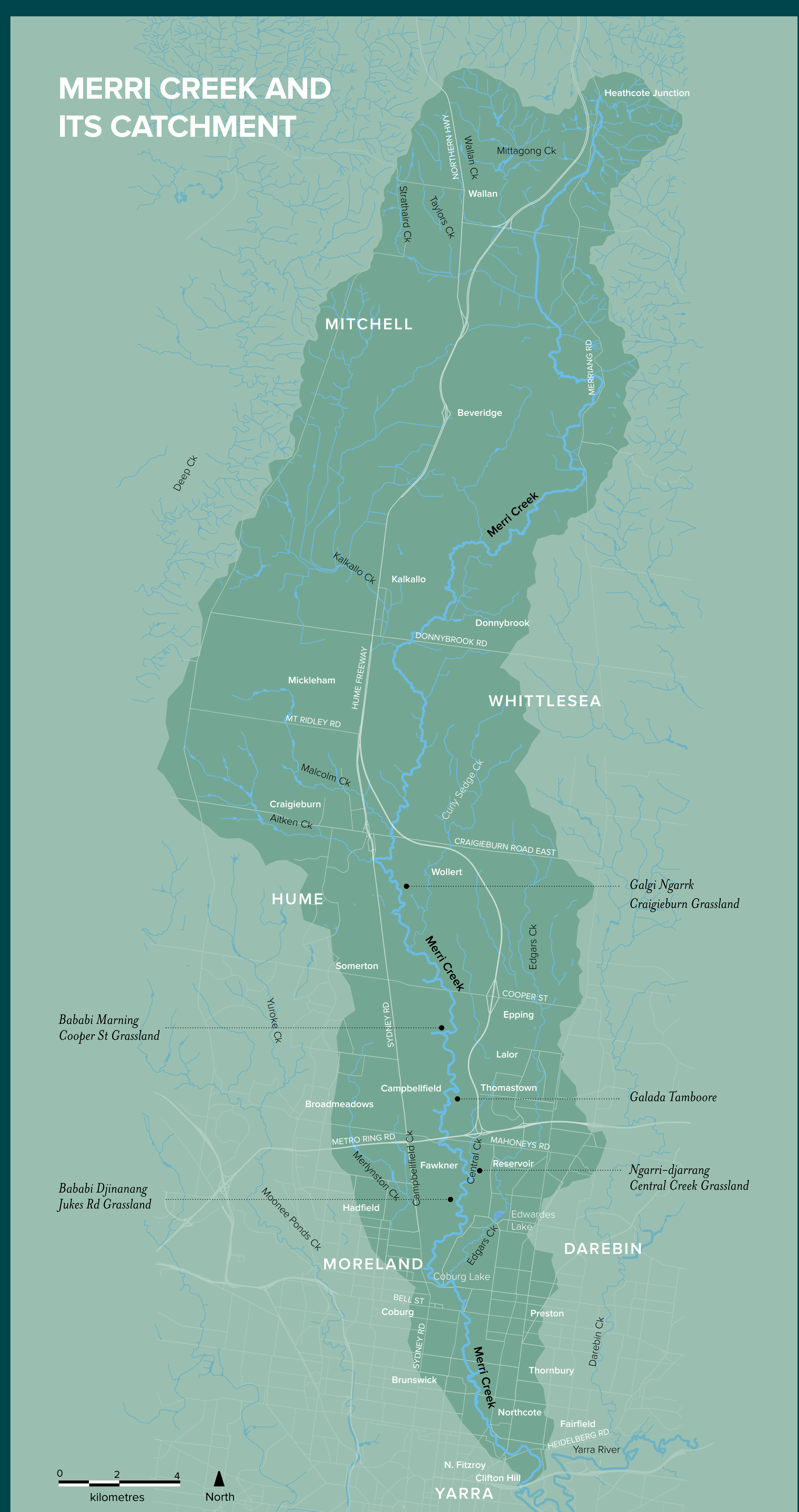
The Merri Creek is one of Melbourne's most popular waterways. It flows for 60 kilometres from the Great Dividing Range, through Melbourne's northern suburbs to the Yarra River.

For thousands of years, the Creek and surrounding lands were a source of food and culture which sustained the traditional custodians, the Wurundjeri people. But by 1970 the Merri was in crisis. Heavily polluted, with much of the native plants and wildlife gone, it had become a drain and dumping ground.

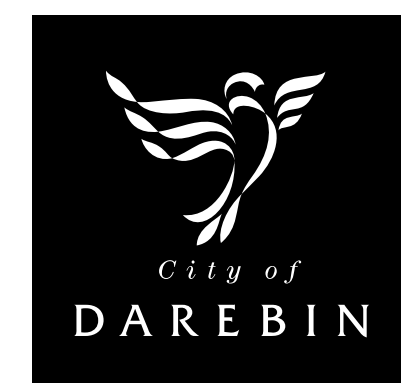
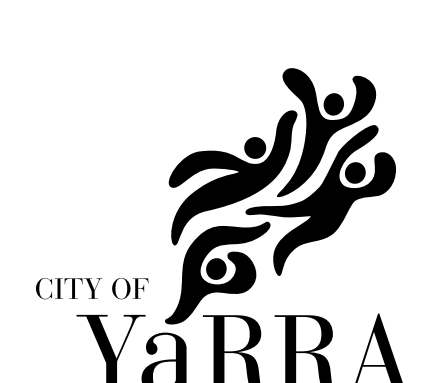
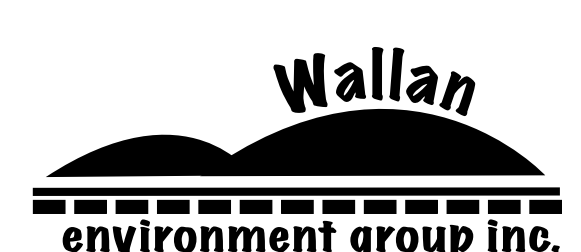
Over the past few decades, the story of the Merri has been one of transformation. A major step forward occurred in 1976, when local community groups and creekside Councils came together to form the Merri Creek Coordinating Committee, a precursor to Merri Creek Management Committee, formed in 1989.

Since then, the volunteer group Friends of Merri Creek has worked alongside the Merri Creek Management Committee and its staff to restore and protect Merri Creek and its tributaries. A key partner, Melbourne Water is the overall caretaker of waterway health across the Port Phillip and Western Port region.

Many individuals, all levels of government, community groups, foundations and businesses have supported and invested in a shared vision for the Merri. Much progress has been made. Today the Merri Creek is flourishing again, but there are many challenges ahead and there is still much work to be done. We invite you to join in this community effort.



We acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation as the traditional custodians of the land of the Merri Creek, and pay our respects to the Elders past, present and future.



MERRI MERRI

is Wurundjeri Country

The land of the Merri Merri is important to its traditional custodians, the Wurundjeri people, who continue to care for the Creek, the surrounding native grasslands and the red gum grassy woodlands.

SPECIAL PLACES

There are many places of cultural significance to the Wurundjeri along the Merri Creek.

In past times, the Wurundjeri had regular camping spots along the Creek, which they would visit according to season. One such place is Galada Tamboore, which is about 15 kilometres north of central Melbourne. The cliff tops were a lookout for hunting kangaroo and emu on the plains below. The Creek was full of fish and freshwater mussels, and the plants provided foods, fibres and medicines. People made stone tools and spears here.

LOOKING AFTER COUNTRY TODAY

Traditionally, the Wurundjeri ate the roots (tubers) of several plants, including Chocolate Lily (*Arthropodium strictum*), and probably replanted pieces of root to encourage new plants. The tubers of Plains Yam Daisy (*Microseris scapigera*) were a staple food, harvested by women. With the introduction of sheep from about 1835, grazing eliminated almost all the Plains Yam Daisies within a few years. Today, Wurundjeri people are involved in re-introductions of these food plants along the Merri.

The Wurundjeri Narrap land management team works with Merri Creek Management Committee staff to revitalise grasslands like Ngarri-djarrang through regular patch burning, which also reduces wildfire risk. Fires remove old grass and encourage new growth, which attracts kangaroos and other grazing animals and makes it easier to find native food plants.

RENAMING THE CREEK

The Friends of Merri Creek asked Wurundjeri Elders to give Woiwurrung names to significant places along Merri Creek. Bill Nicholson (senior) and Doreen Garvey-Wandin have given the following names:

Woiwurrung name	European name
Galada Tamboore (Stream Waterhole)	Barry Rd Rd Gorge
Bababi Marning (Mother's Hand)	Cooper St Grassland
Galgil Ngarrk (Back Bone)	Craigieburn Grassland
Bababi Djinanang (Mother's Foot)	Jukes Road Grassland
Ngarri-djarrang (Thigh)	Central Creek Grassland



Galada Tamboore.



Wurundjeri Elder Aunty Alice Kolasa lifting a Chocolate Lily at Ngarri-djarrang Grassland, Reservoir.



Chocolate Lily, a traditional food plant, in flower.



Wurundjeri Narrap team and Merri Creek Management Committee staff sow Plains Yam Daisy at Ngarri-djarrang Grassland.



Uncle Dave Wandin works at Ngarri-djarrang during an ecological burn in March 2013.

Merri Merri means ‘very rocky’ in Woiwurrung, the language of the Wurundjeri.

Volcanic plains grasslands and grassy woodlands once covered the Merri catchment and stretched across south western Victoria — the result of thousands of years of careful management by the land’s Indigenous custodians.

‘Batman’s treaty with the Aborigines at Merri Creek, 6th June 1835’ by John Wesley Burtt, circa 1888.

The treaty is the only documented time in Australia when Europeans negotiated their presence on Indigenous lands directly with the Traditional Owners. However the treaty was unfair as it was based on a misunderstanding; Batman claimed purchase of 600,000 acres of land but the Wurundjeri believed it only allowed temporary access to their land. This concept of land ownership was unfamiliar to the Wurundjeri, making the treaty meaningless as a contract to purchase land.

OVER TIME

the Merri became a drain



The Merri Creek's landscape changed dramatically following European settlement during the 19th and 20th centuries. Livestock grazing, tree clearing, farming and quarrying, then housing and industry all took a toll.

CLEARING, QUARRYING AND FILLING

The basalt of Victoria's volcanic plains was quarried along the Merri to extract bluestone for early Melbourne's buildings and roads. Many of the former bluestone quarries near the Creek became municipal rubbish tips. In some places, household waste and contaminated material slipped down the Merri's banks, reducing its capacity to carry floodwaters and polluting the stream.

DOWN THE DRAIN AND INTO THE CREEK

In the late 1800s, the Merri was a convenient place to dispose of noxious wastes from abattoirs, tanneries and manure depots. Pollution from street drains and runoff from industries in the catchment is still a problem today.

In 1995 a spill of printing ink from a factory in Preston travelled through drains and turned the Merri Creek bright blue. The usual clear water can be coloured brown by sediment washing off construction sites and soil erosion upstream. Melbourne Water and Merri Creek Management Committee run programs to encourage better practices to avoid pollution of our creeks.

NO ROOM TO MOVE

In some places, buildings crowd the banks of Merri Creek. For example in Thomastown near the Metropolitan Ring Road, factories, parking areas and fences narrow the habitat corridor along the Creek and leave little room for revegetation, a path or public access.

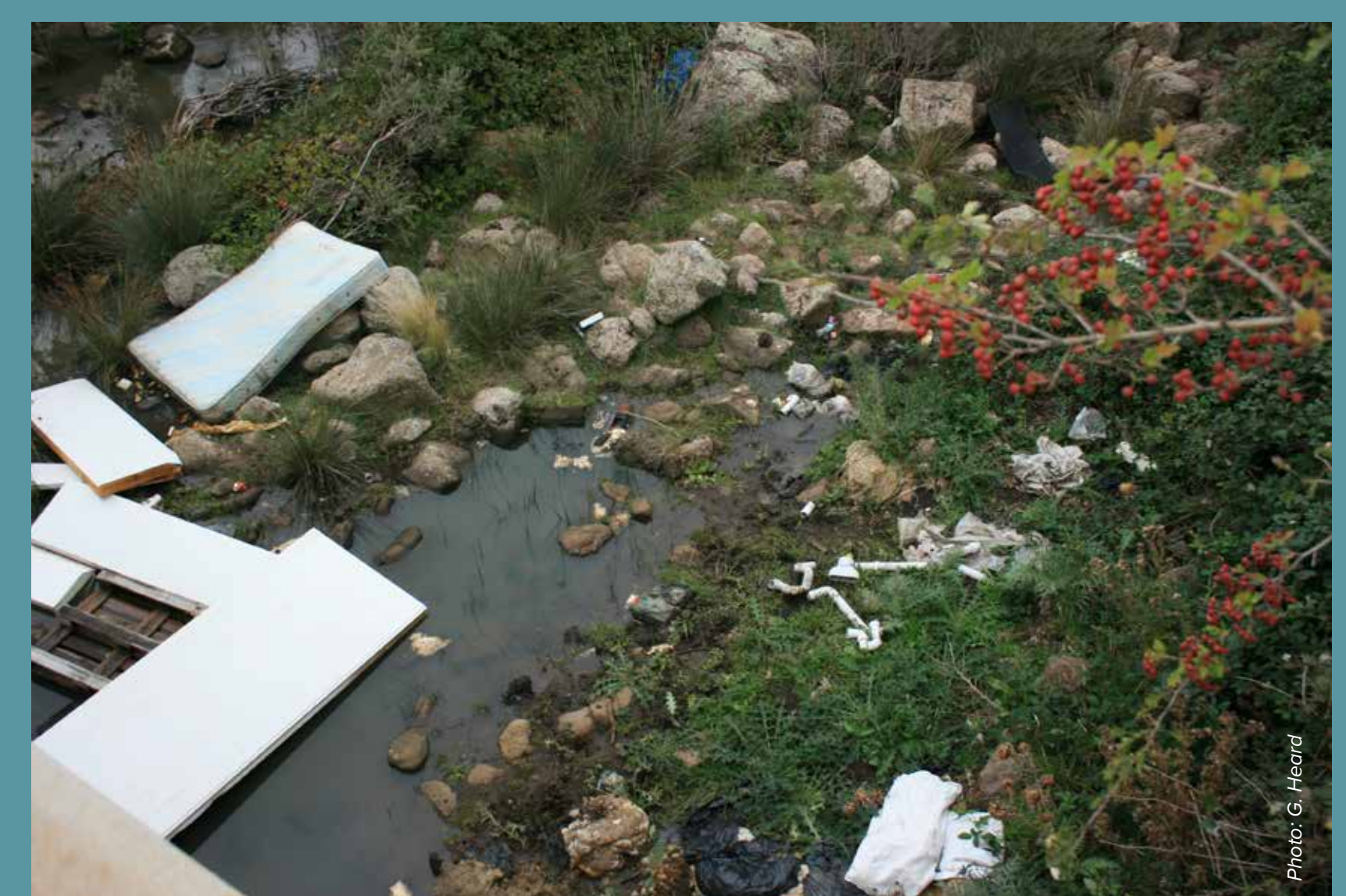
Further downstream, there are still some privately owned frontages that obstruct public access and limit revegetation. A long-term aim is to return this land to the public.



A rubbish tip on the banks of the Merri in East Brunswick in 1976.



Bright blue printing ink from a factory polluted the Merri Creek in 1995.



Rubbish dumping into the Creek continues to be a problem, Craigieburn 2013.



Buildings, car parks, and fences crowd the Merri in Thomastown.

“At first I had to pick my way between weeds and rubbish, plastic bags festooned the trees like ungodly prayer flags. Now I can walk through indigenous vegetation and listen to the birds. I am very grateful to the dedicated people and groups who continue to transform the Merri.”

— Ann Sanson, Darebin resident and member of Friends of Merri Creek.

WORKING TOGETHER

Community action to reclaim Merri Creek



Photo: G. McGregor

By the 1970s, the Merri Creek in the northern suburbs was in a bad state. But the local community recognised its potential to provide valuable green space, and began taking collective action to effect change.

The opening day in 1989 of the footbridge that links Summer Park in East Brunswick with Merri Park in Northcote.

CAMPAIGNING TO PROTECT THE CREEK

Plans to construct a freeway and to line the Merri valley with concrete from Craigieburn to Clifton Hill spurred the community into action. Strong opposition led to the freeway reservation being removed south of Bell Street first, and then south of Mahoneys Road in the late 1990s. It took a major campaign from 1997 to 2003, spearheaded by Friends of Merri Creek, to re-route the Hume Freeway-Craigieburn Bypass away from Merri Creek.

A line of pylons for a high voltage powerline from Brunswick to Richmond was proposed to run partly along the Merri Creek valley. The local outcry led to a State Government Inquiry in 1988-1989, and resulted in the powerline being directed underground, along another route.

MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN

The Merri Creek Coordinating Committee was formed in December 1976, when local councils and community groups came together with the shared goal of rejuvenating the Creek. In 1980, it published one of the first guides to local indigenous plants in Victoria. Indigenous plants are used exclusively in revegetation projects along Merri Creek.

The Coordinating Committee also commissioned a design study for the Merri Path, a shared trail for pedestrians and cyclists from Clifton Hill to Mahoneys Road. This opened up public access and provided a focus for continuing improvement of Merri Creek and its parklands. In 1986, the Australian Bicentennial Program gave the Melbourne & Metropolitan Board of Works (now Melbourne Water) \$1 million for Merri Creek. The grant was used to build paths and pedestrian bridges, and for revegetation works by a specialist team.

The Coordinating Committee was succeeded by Merri Creek Management Committee in 1989. Collaboration and cooperation with many partners continue to restore and protect the natural heritage of the Creek today.



The Friends of Merri Creek campaigning against the Craigieburn Bypass in 2000.



Environmental artist Neil Douglas planting a tree at Coburg Lake to launch the guide to local indigenous plants 'Plants of the Merri Merri' in 1980.



Merri Creek Management Committee's Revegetation Team Supervisor discusses proposed works in North Coburg with Coburg Council and Melbourne & Metropolitan Board of Works staff in 1990.

Gandhi said, "be the change you want to see in the world". Revegetation work on Edgars Creek and our community: that's the world I want to see and the world I want my kids to see.

— David Pavone, President, Friends of Edgars Creek, a tributary of the Merri.

TRANSFORMING THE MERRI *in the City of Yarra*

The section of the Merri Creek that carves its way through a spectacular volcanic gorge before joining the Yarra River brings the bush to the city and has been an important focus for our work.

WHERE THE MERRI MEETS THE YARRA

The Creek enters the City of Yarra near St Georges Road in North Fitzroy, and flows into the Yarra River just above Dights Falls between Yarra Bend Park and Clifton Hill.

The land around the meeting point of the Merri and the Yarra was a traditional meeting place. Following European settlement, the Merri Creek Aboriginal School and Merri Creek Protectorate Station were located nearby. The site continues to hold great significance for the traditional custodians. A Koori Garden in memory of Billibellary, a Wurundjeri clan headman, is planted just downstream.

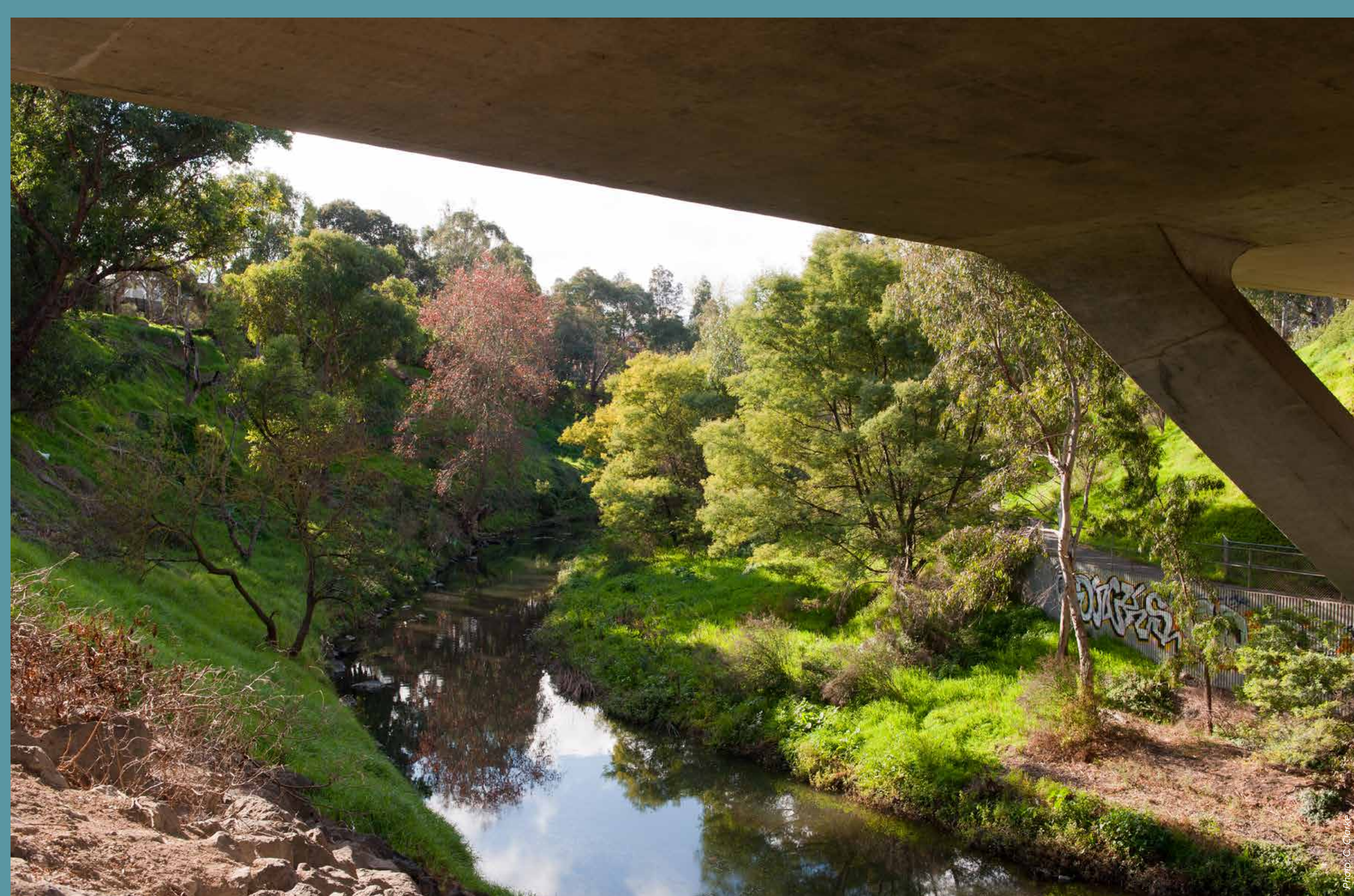
The Eastern Freeway crosses the Merri nearby. In the early 1980s, the freeway spanned the weed-infested banks of the Merri Creek in a harsh industrial landscape. Today, planted indigenous vegetation is flourishing on the banks of the Creek. New paths and public parks are well used.

HALL RESERVE, CLIFTON HILL

By 1982, an early section of the Merri Path had been constructed. But it passed through a weedy, windswept landscape, with dense thickets of fennel, and there was much more work to be done. Over the years, the community has helped replant the valley. Today, many indigenous trees and shrubs are thriving. This is one of ten sites regularly surveyed for birds by Friends of Merri Creek, with between 20 and 30 species recorded each time.



Before: the Eastern Freeway spanning the banks of the Merri in 1982.



After: the same view in 2015.



Before: an early section of the shared trail along the Merri, Hall Reserve in Clifton Hill in 1982.



After: the same section of Hall Reserve in Clifton Hill in 2015.

“I love walking along Merri Creek. There is the bike track, sports grounds, but my favourite places have a dirt track and vegetation close to the path. It is nice to see and hear the birds flitting around in the bushes and get the feel of being far away from the city.”

— Sally Martin, Yarra resident and walker.

Looking upstream in Hall Reserve Clifton Hill, opposite Yarra Bend Park.

TRANSFORMING THE MERRI

in the City of Darebin

Merri Creek and its parklands form most of the western boundary of the City of Darebin in Northcote, Thornbury and Reservoir; a green corridor passing through an urban landscape.

The resident kangaroos at Ngarrri-djarrang are popular with local families.

MERRI PARK, NORTHCOTE

A Melbourne & Metropolitan Board of Works depot was sited on a former billabong and the floodplain of the Merri. When the Board left the site, plans for industrial development and a high concrete floodwall along the Creek were put forward. The Merri Creek Coordinating Committee proposed an alternative: the creation of new parkland. Using funds from the Australian Bicentennial Program, an earthen levee bank was built to protect nearby houses from flooding. Thousands of trees and shrubs were planted and a billabong was created. The area is now mature woodland, an extension of Merri Park that is much loved by local residents.



Before: Looking east over the Board of Works depot in Northcote from the Brunswick side of the Merri in 1986.

MERRI PARK WETLAND, NORTHCOTE

As part of the Bicentennial works in Merri Park, a retarding basin was constructed by Melbourne Water in 1989. It holds back stormwater runoff from the neighbourhood before discharging it to Merri Creek. Ten years later, Merri Creek Management Committee created a series of small wetlands in the basin, with aquatic plants to help cleanse the stormwater. More than 16,000 grasses, shrubs and trees have since been planted by many community volunteers, creating a wildlife haven.



After: The same view, now Merri Park, in 2015.

NGARRI-DJARRANG (CENTRAL CREEK) GRASSLAND, RESERVOIR

This patch of wildflower grassland supports over 120 species of native plants, some endangered. A 10-year campaign led by Friends of Merri Creek saved nine hectares along Central Creek (a Merri tributary) from subdivision for housing. Darebin Council funds Merri Creek Management Committee to control weeds and conduct ecological burns in the reserve.



Before: The Merri Park retarding basin in flood in 1990.



After: Today the Merri Park wetland is a wildlife haven.



Wildflowers at Ngarrri-djarrang.

“The Merri Creek is a special place. I love the biodiversity and the people. It brings together the community in so many different ways. I’ve come to the creek since I was very little.”

— Romy, 11 years old.

TRANSFORMING THE MERRI *in the City of Moreland*

The Merri Creek and its parklands form an open space corridor along the eastern boundary of the City of Moreland, from East Brunswick to Fawkner. A major tributary, Edgars Creek, flows into the Merri in Newlands.

Meadow Argus butterfly (*Junonia villosa*) and Rice-flower (*Pimelea* sp.).

KIRKDALE STREET PARK, EAST BRUNSWICK

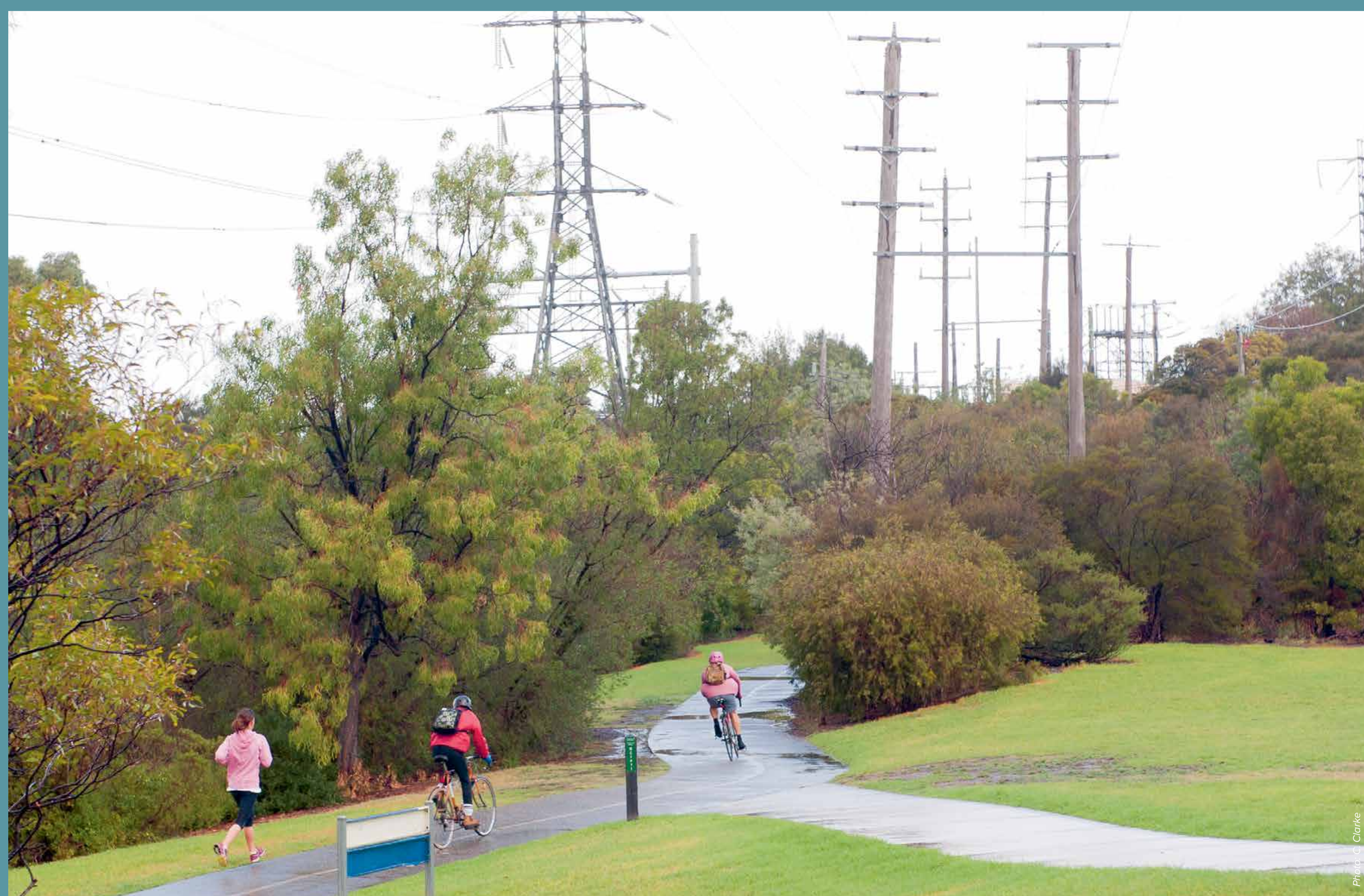
Bluestone (basalt) was extracted from Wales Quarry from the 1860s to the 1960s, leaving a hole over 50 metres deep. The hole was filled with rubble from buildings demolished across Melbourne by Whelan the Wrecker. Strong community advocacy led to Brunswick Council (now Moreland City Council) acquiring part of the site. It is now a popular, well-vegetated park with a busy shared path beside Merri Creek. The power lines remain, limiting the height of the vegetation that can be grown underneath.



Before: In 1986 there was no official public access along Merri Creek through this privately-owned tip site at Kirkdale Street, East Brunswick.

BEAU MONDE RESERVE, EAST COBURG

In 1993, unwanted landfill was dumped into the Creek valley and a high fence blocked public access just north of Moreland Road. Today the adjoining buildings have been screened by indigenous vegetation, and the Merri Creek valley is accessible to walkers and joggers. The bank is still weedy, another site needing restoration.



After: The Kirkdale Street Park, East Brunswick in 2015.

MOOMBA PARK, FAWKNER

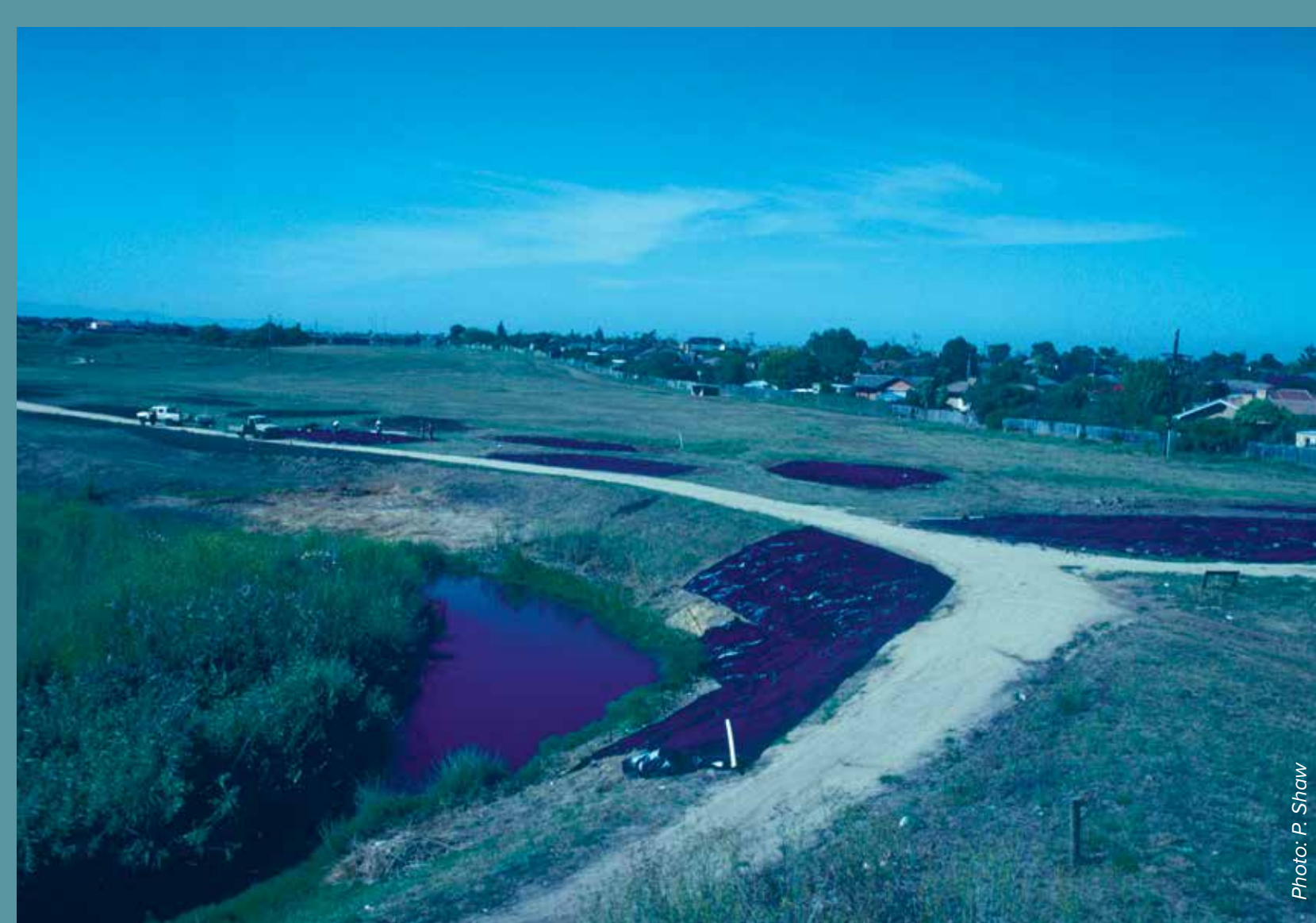
Moomba Park was a dairy farm until the mid-1950s. Many volunteers have helped with planting days, litter collections and mulch-a-thons here. Today, the revegetation has matured to form a bushland corridor along the Merri Creek. There is good access along a sealed shared path.



Before: Beau Monde Reserve, East Coburg in 1993.



After: Beau Monde Reserve, East Coburg in 2015.



Before: Planting with native trees and shrubs at Moomba Park in Fawkner had just begun when this photo was taken in May 1988.



After: Moomba Park, Fawkner in 2015.

PROTECTING THE MERRI *in Hume City*

Merri Creek forms the eastern boundary of Hume City, from the Ring Road and through industrial areas to future suburbs around Donnybrook. Along the way there are hidden wonders, many still inaccessible to the public.

GALADA TAMBOORE, CAMPBELLFIELD

Galada Tamboore is a spectacular rocky stretch of the Merri owned by Melbourne Water. In the past it was a weed-infested car dumping-ground. The Craigieburn Bypass was originally planned to run along the Merri Creek valley here. After a strong campaign led by Friends of Merri Creek, it was re-aligned to the east. For over 20 years there has been intensive weed control and restoration of indigenous vegetation in the gorge. Melbourne Water now actively maintains the area.

BABABI MARNING

Less than one per cent of volcanic plains grasslands have survived European settlement. A 45-hectare patch was slated for industrial subdivision, but was saved by community protests in the late 1980s. Today it is a conservation reserve, Bababi Marning (Cooper Street Grassland Reserve), and is managed by Parks Victoria.

AITKEN CREEK, CRAIGIEBURN

Aitken Creek is a tributary of the Merri. The Creek valley had already lost most of its native vegetation by 1980, when subdivision and fencing reduced the opportunities for restoration. Today, revegetation work carried out by community volunteers, Hume City Council and Merri Creek Management Committee has re-created wildlife habitat and attractive parkland, screening the nearby houses.



Before: Galada Tamboore, Campbellfield after a bushfire in 1990.



After: Galada Tamboore, Campbellfield today.



Radar Beetle (*Rhipicera femorata*).



Grassland Bindweed (*Convolvulus angustifolius* ssp. *omnigracilis*).



Before: Houses being built in 1981 with rear fences running down the valley slopes at Aitken Creek, Craigieburn.



After: Revegetated Aitken Creek in 2015.



Native grasslands are best appreciated up close. These girls were doing just that, at a community rally to save the Cooper Street grassland in 1989.

“I love being knee-deep in my waders, in the creek with my net in hand, ready to discover what amazing water bugs inhabit Merri Creek.”

— Jane Bevelander, Waterwatch Coordinator, Merri Creek Management Committee.

THE UPPER MERRI

in the City of Whittlesea and in Mitchell Shire

Merri Creek's headwaters rise on the slopes of the Great Dividing Range north of Wallan, in Mitchell Shire. It flows through rural landscapes and into the northern suburbs along the City of Whittlesea's western boundary.

WALLAN CREEK, WALLAN COMMUNITY PARK

Local grasses, shrubs and flowering groundcovers have been planted by Wallan Environment Group volunteers along Wallan Creek, a tributary of the Merri. Today the revegetation is flourishing and local residents enjoy using the path through Wallan Community Park and along Wallan Creek. Wallan Environment Group and Mitchell Shire continue to work in partnership to maintain this parkland. Melbourne Water has created a wetland in the park to filter stormwater before it flows into the Creek.



Before: young Scouts weeding a revegetation bed in Wallan Community Park in 2012.



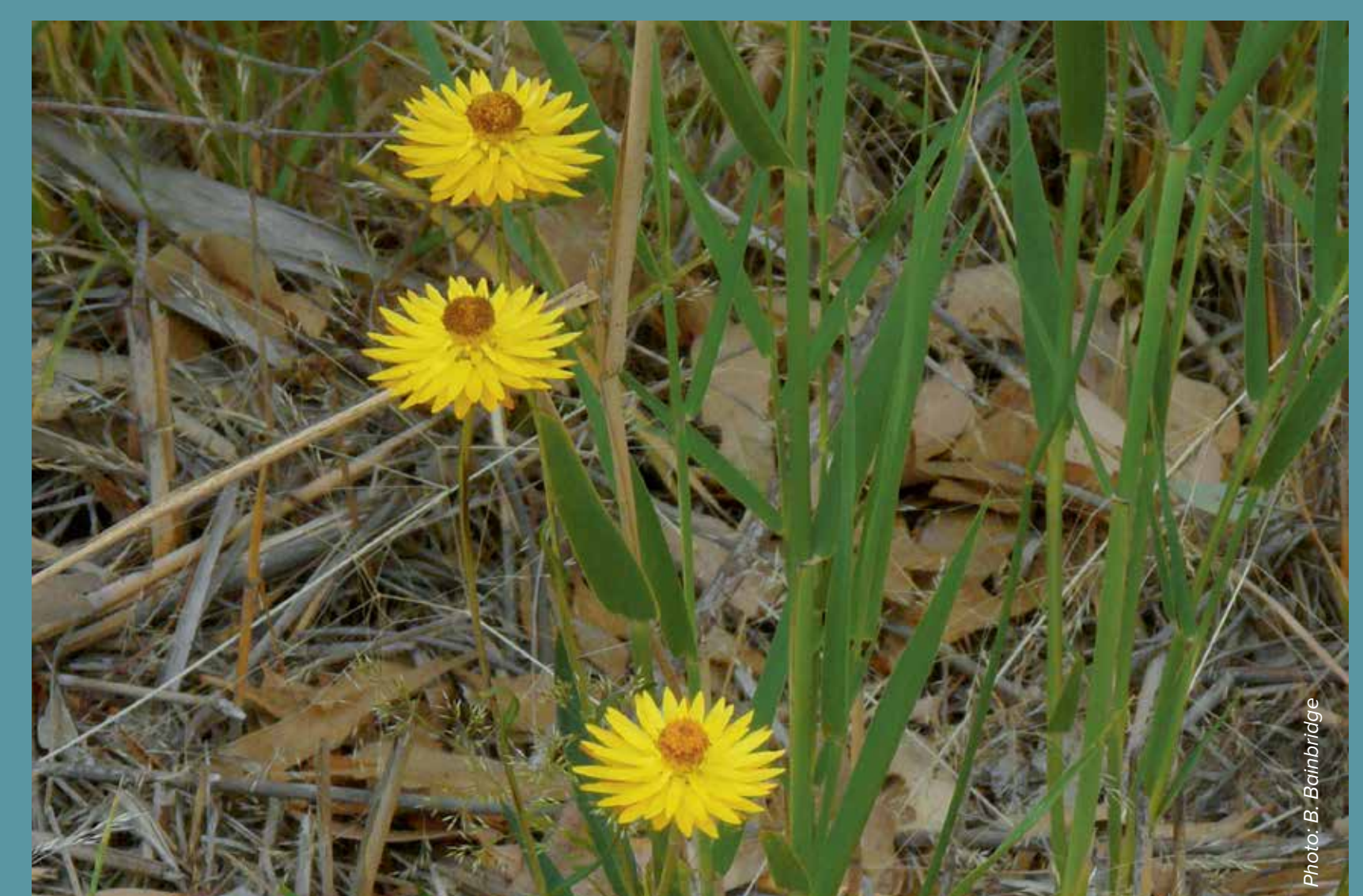
After: the same view of the Wallan Community Park just a few years later in 2015 shows the site flourishing.

HERNES SWAMP, BEVERIDGE AND WALLAN

Hernes Swamp was once a vast seasonal wetland, rich with bird and plant life, but it has been extensively cleared and drained. There is a precious remnant of the special wetland vegetation in the rail reserve between Beveridge and Wallan. Merri Creek Management Committee staff have worked with Merriang Landcare group and government agencies to prepare a management plan, clear weeds, map the location of rare plants and conduct ecological burns to rejuvenate the site.



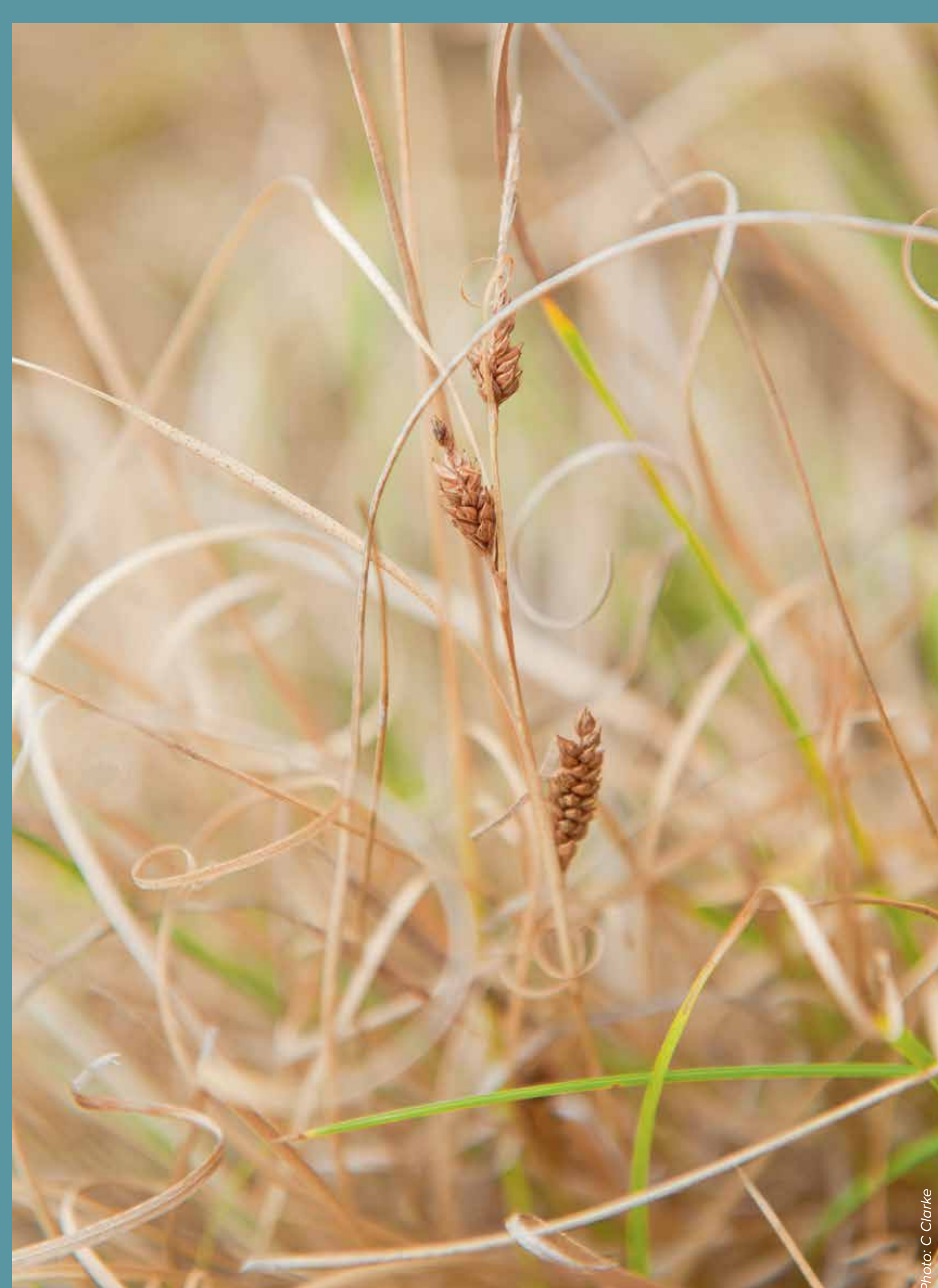
In part of Hernes Swamp along the rail line between Beveridge & Wallan, invasive Canary Grass (*Phalaris aquatica*) crowded out native understorey plants and created a high fire risk.



With a grant from Melbourne Water, Merri Creek Management Committee cut and sprayed the Canary Grass. Wildflowers like the Swamp Everlasting Daisy (*Xerochrysum palustre*) reappeared and flowered.

GALGI NGARRK (CRAIGIEBURN GRASSLAND RESERVE), EPPING/WOLLERT

Galgi Ngarrk is a nationally-significant native grassland nature conservation reserve of 342 hectares next to Merri Creek that is managed by Parks Victoria. Merri Creek Management Committee and Friends of Merri Creek help to manage the vegetation and wildlife habitat here. The rare Curly Sedge (*Carex tasmanica*) grows along Curly Sedge Creek in Galgi Ngarrk, where it is the only Victorian population of this species protected in a conservation reserve. Other endangered species are the Growling Grass Frog (*Litoria raniformis*) and Golden Sun Moth (*Synemon plana*), both of which are threatened by loss of habitat due to planned urban growth across the Merri catchment.



The well-named but rare Curly Sedge.



The Golden Sun Moth is an endangered grassland species which was rediscovered along the Merri by Friends of Merri Creek.



This steep rocky escarpment on the western boundary of Galgi Ngarrk (Craigieburn Grassland Reserve) leads down to Merri Creek. Tree guards from recent plantings by Melbourne Water can be seen.

The Growling Grass Frog is endangered in Victoria, yet healthy populations remain along Merri Creek.

LOOKING FORWARD

Protecting the Merri for future generations

Improvements along the Merri Creek over the last 40 years have turned it into a valued community asset. But the future holds many challenges.

Friends of Merri Creek weed beside Strettle wetland in Thornbury, 2014.

In collaboration with Melbourne Water, the Merri Creek Management Committee and Friends of Merri Creek are committed to restoring and caring for the environment of the Merri Creek catchment, respecting and working with the Wurundjeri and continuing to encourage community custodianship and interest in the Merri catchment's creek corridors. We need your help to do this!

CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

- Urban development will extend across most of the catchment, affecting natural environments and the Merri Creek along its entire length.
- Pollution carried through drains degrades our creeks and Port Phillip Bay.
- Private ownership of some parcels of land on the Creek's edge interrupts the public parkland corridor.
- Securing funding to continue restoration and maintenance of the Merri parklands is an ongoing challenge.
- Climate change is predicted to bring more frequent and more extreme floods and droughts, with disastrous consequences for the Creek.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

- Encourage Local, State and Federal governments to provide adequate funding for the work of protecting the Merri.
- Join the Friends of Merri Creek.
www.friendsofmerricreek.org.au
- Come along to a community event on the Merri or a tributary.
- Keep litter and pollutants out of streets and drains.
- Plant local native plants in your garden.
- Lend historical photos and papers to Merri Creek Management Committee to copy for our archive.
- Donate to the Merri Creek Environment Fund.
www.mcmc.org.au



The Flame Robin may be displaced from the Merri's grasslands as the suburbs spread northwards.



Inspiration for the exhibition stamp is the Matted Flax-lily (*Dianella amoena*), a nationally-significant endangered plant and a focus for restoration along the Merri.

WHAT PROSPECTS FOR THE MERRI'S FLAME ROBINS?

The male Flame Robin (*Petroica phoenicea*) brings an orange-red flash of colour to the grasslands of the Merri. Flame Robins breed in the high country, then migrate to lowlands for the autumn and winter. As Melbourne's suburbs spread northwards across the Merri catchment, will there be enough open grassland for Flame Robins to live and feed in during the cooler months? How can we plan and design a liveable city for people *and* wildlife?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The exhibition sponsors: Melbourne Water Corporation, Merri Creek Environment Fund and ClifRoy Community Bank branch of Bendigo Bank.

The exhibition creators: the volunteer exhibition working group, photographers, and Viola Design.

All those who have cared for the Creek, provided funds, planted, weeded, collected litter, planned, designed and constructed paths and bridges, propagated, campaigned, recorded wildlife sightings, made art, attended meetings, lobbied, educated and raised awareness, or otherwise contributed to the protection and restoration of the Merri Creek and its tributaries.



We acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation as the traditional custodians of the land of the Merri Creek, and pay our respects to the Elders past, present and future.

