

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 Friends of Wallan Creek. 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.

MCMC prizewinner

MCMC was awarded the 2002 Theiss Services National Riverprize for excellence in waterway management.



Annual Report

2007-2008

President's Report

This year the outstanding work of Merri Creek Management Committee (MCMC), its staff and volunteers has received strong recognition. Merri Creek was one of eight Australian waterways featured in the International River Foundation's *River Journeys* book, issued to commemorate ten years of the National and International Riverprize winners.

MCMC's innovative approach to engaging with its culturally and linguistically diverse communities was given a great endorsement when the Bilingual Parks Tour Guides won the Parks Victoria 2007 Kookaburra Multicultural Award. The significance of MCMC's support to community was also attested to when staff member, Brian Bainbridge, won the 2008 Port Phillip & Westernport Landcare *Caring for Community Groups* Award.

Through all of this, the ongoing work of the MCMC has continued at a pace. Over the past winter MCMC's Parkland Management Team has been at its largest ever, reflecting both the enormous amount of new work and the task of maintaining existing sites. The Catchment Programs group has continued their work on communicating with diverse groups in the catchment. The *Multicultural Environment Advocates* were trained to speak on issues of waterway health and litter pollution and the *Waterwatch* program reached more than 6,000 people.

MCMC continued to successfully build contacts with the local and wider community, with 91 events, many of them planting activities, held for corporate and community groups. More than 500 sessions focused on stream health and biodiversity were held with school groups. For the first time, MCMC

worked with the artist in schools program. This led to the production of a bright mural by Northcote Primary School depicting changes in Merri Creek from Wurundjeri times until now. Contacts with indigenous people were developed, with MCMC assisting with creek walks conducted by the Maya Living Free Healing Centre.

During the year, the MCMC website was substantially upgraded, and now includes three virtual tours of the Merri Creek – a general one, one of sites of geological significance and one of native grasslands.

Under the auspices of the International River Foundation, Merri Creek has twinned with its namesake, the Merri River in Warrnambool, to bring about closer cooperation between people dedicated to preserving these waterways.

A very welcome external event was the long-awaited Federal protection for Victorian Volcanic Plain Grasslands through listing under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act. The middle to upper Merri catchment contains some wonderful examples of these remnant grasslands, some of which are managed by the Parkland Management Team.

Lastly I would like to thank the MCMC Manager and all staff for another wonderful year of hard work. Special recognition is due to Deb Lawson, who left MCMC to become a team leader with Conservation Volunteers Australia after more than 15 years of valued contribution. I would also like to thank all the committee members and Friends group members who have contributed time and effort to a great cause.

Trevor Hausler, President

Above: Ancient River Red Gums form part of the important remnant vegetation at Aitken Creek, Craigieburn.

Parkland Management

Management of native grasslands, escarpments and creekside ecological habitats

MCMC continued to restore more than 100 sites along the Merri, Edgars, Aitken and Central Creeks as well as several nearby sites outside the catchment. The Parkland Management Team's vegetation management works have improved the ecological resilience of our sites and strengthened the function of the Merri habitat corridor.

Core management for MCMC's ongoing sites was funded directly by MCMC's member Councils and through maintenance contracts. Grants and additional contracts improved several sites throughout the catchment.

Secure recurrent funding from member Councils is used to attract matching resources through grants. Grants are gained directly by MCMC or by Friends groups. Each direct funded and contract dollar received by MCMC was augmented by 30% with grant funding. MCMC aims to design plantings that are to a large extent, self-sustaining. However, all plantings and remnant vegetation require some level of ongoing maintenance. Sites with reliable funds allocated to their maintenance are generally the priority sites for expansion.

Major projects

In total 41,340 indigenous plants were planted. Of these, 11% were semi-aquatic species planted along creek banks, wetlands and drainage areas and 82% were ground-storey species.

MCMC had significant success in restoring Native Grasslands in the urban reaches of the Merri habitat corridor this year.

Restoration of Ngarri-djarrang (Central Creek Grassland) in Reservoir was boosted with grants from the Port Phillip and Western Port Catchment Management Authority (PPWPCMA), the Natural Heritage Trust and Envirofund. Vegetation quality mapping was undertaken in spring for the fourth time since 1994. This monitoring sequence shows an overall increase in the area defined as being of 'high vegetation quality.' Works focused on restoring areas degraded by surrounding developments and previous land uses.

When slashing ceased in the recently extended areas of Bababi djinanang (Jukes Rd Grassland) in Fawkner, it revealed significant stands of native grasses. Consistent low-key interventions in future years are likely to bring this previously mown parkland up to moderate quality Native Grassland. Direct-seeded Kangaroo Grass established well in disturbed areas thanks to rains of summer 2007-08. These sturdy plants are now producing seed to continue the regeneration of this endangered grassland. Works at Bababi djinanang were funded by Landcare/Spicers Paper, PPWPCMA and Natural Heritage Trust.

Nearby Emma St escarpment in Fawkner, formerly marred by rubbish dumping and woody weeds, has received significant restorative attention over the last two years. This year, funding from the alternative sentencing provision of the Environment Protection Act and Melbourne Water enabled the remaining woody weeds to be replaced with local shrubs and groundcovers. Dumping has virtually ceased, presumably due to improved public perception of the site.



The escarpment at Emma St Fawkner before and after restoration works.

The habitat link between wetlands in Clifton Hill was reinforced by establishing ground-storey vegetation amongst the woodland between the existing Hall Reserve wetland and the recently created Walker St wetland. This important work was funded by a Melbourne Water Community Grant.

A Federal Community Water Grant enabled the restoration of the biologically productive and dynamic vegetation that fringes the Merri and Aitken Creeks. This vegetation offers habitat for waterbirds, amphibians and invertebrates, as well as providing a link between the water's edge and other revegetated areas further from the creeks. MCMC discovered Critically Endangered Matted Flax-lily (*Dianella amoena*) at Aitken Creek Reserve in Craigieburn. The endangered vegetation at this site has been receiving restorative attention through MCMC/Friends of Merri Creek grant funding in recent years. This work was complemented by colourful A3 size laminated 'flip books' that convey the results of up to 20 years of restoration work in riparian habitats.

The 'Wildlife and Habitat Guide for Merriang Landholders' was produced by MCMC as a key outcome of the Merriang Local Area Biodiversity Plan. The guide informs landholders in the Victorian Volcanic Plain Bioregion how to target their conservation efforts or modify their current practices to encourage local wildlife.

The Merri and Edgars Creeks Confluence Area Restoration Group and the Friends of Edgars Creek secured and extended their sites with MCMC support in gaining funds and undertaking works.



Keen young planters at the Bridging Communities planting in Clifton Hill.



Students from Northern Melbourne Institute of Technology who helped revegetate Robinson Reserve, Preston.

Community involvement in restoration and revegetation

MCMC's relationship with community groups was strengthened by hosting 91 community events. Many of these events varied from the traditional planting days and included weed workshops, Fawkner safaris, walking tours with indigenous people, historical tours, Native Grassland tours, school holiday programs, a festival, seed harvesting days, and a huge celebratory planting day at Rushall Station, North Fitzroy. There were also many days hosting Green Corps, Green Gym and corporate teams as they helped restore the creek environs.

Many community events were part of the two year *Northern Nature Creek Connections* project funded by Natural Heritage Trust including a two day *Enabling Change* workshop focused on Native Grasslands. The workshop helped environment managers to work better with the community.

Reservoir residents have been seeking further interpretation of their local endangered Native Grassland, Ngarrri-djarrang (Central Creek Grassland). In response, MCMC's grassland management was boosted with eight planting and mulching activities, a snake information day attended by more than 80 people, and two school holiday program education events.

Weed workshops hosted by MCMC aimed to build enthusiasm among interested groups for activities that maintain community plantings. These groups included Friends of Merri, Darebin and Edgars Creeks, Strathnaver Grasslands, and South Alphington and Fairfield Civic Association. These workshops

culminated in an enjoyable *Weed and Wine Night*, an evening of networking, feedback and wine tasting. Further activities included collaborating on the Australian Field Naturalists/Weed Spotters' alligator weed walk and the Weed Society of Victoria's *Voyage of Discovery Merri Creek* walk.

Corporate contribution to the Merri's restoration continued to grow with 339 corporate volunteers contributing 1,514 hours over 28 events in the year. These included volunteer teams from ANZ Bank, BP Elite and Sensis, arranged with the help of Tree Project. In addition, volunteers from our Landcare sponsors, Citipower, Spicers Paper and SP AusNet also participated in planting activities.

Eleven educational institutions (primary and secondary schools, TAFEs, Universities and school holiday programs) were supported by the Parkland Team. A notable example was the NMIT Land Conservation and Restoration class which contributed 213 hours to the revegetation project at Robinson Reserve, Preston, funded by Landcare Australia/ SP AusNet. In return, MCMC supported the students' study by demonstrating the design and implementation of this site's revegetation.

MCMC parkland management staff also supervised and/or trained eight new staff, 350 students, six work experience volunteers, and at least 1,838 volunteers. Volunteers contributed 5,994 hours to the restoration of the Merri Corridor with this contribution valued at \$179,820 (using the Federal Government recommended rate of \$30/hour).

Of course, the overall social and ecological benefits of volunteers' work for the creek and its community are incalculable!

Catchment Program – stream health and environmental education

MCMC's Catchment staff have developed a variety of biodiversity and waterway focused activities to provide engaging opportunities for the community to learn about the Merri and nearby catchments. This year a total of 529 sessions, including *Waterwatch* sessions, were attended by over 8,550 participants ranging in age from pre-school to adults.

Stimulating curiosity and further community connection to local environmental areas is central to the achievement of stream health and overall environmental education objectives. Participants were encouraged to use their senses and work creatively with their hands. For example, as a complement to observing water creatures or planting activity, kids created animals out of a variety of found materials and used drawing and cameras to explore and connect with natural areas.

The *Out on a Limb* project, funded by The Ian Potter Foundation, enabled MCMC to take 431 students beyond their school grounds to local waterways. We integrated natural science and art education sessions both in the field and the classroom to optimise participation and involvement.

The alternative sentencing provision of the Environment Protection Act provided funding for the *Streets to Stream* project with a range of activities focusing on impacts of stormwater upon waterways in urbanised settings. It also provided an opportunity to consider the catchment in pre-colonial times. Weaving with indigenous grasses and sedges, traditionally used to make such things as baskets and eel traps, was a highlight during school excursions and meetings with residents at Holmes Street Housing Estate in Northcote.

The *Learning Grounds* program (funded by the Cities of Whittlesea and Darebin), supported twelve schools in their development of indigenous gardens in school yards through our assistance with funding submissions and master planning. Students from Thomastown Primary School were creative in their planning, adding murals featuring native wildlife and landscapes as the backdrop to their new indigenous gardens.

MCMC also supported the development of *Seeding the Future* a training film for conservation volunteers in seed collection and storage, part funded by Melbourne Water.

This year saw the completion of the two year Natural Heritage Trust funded *Northern Nature Creek Connections* project. MCMC collaborated with staff from Darebin and Moonee Ponds Creek Committees on education initiatives focused on the Victorian Volcanic Plain Bioregion. Ngarri-djarrang (Central Creek Grassland) in Reservoir was

the perfect setting for two special events: live snake and bug demonstrations and kingfisher art for a school holiday program; also a presentation on prescribed burn areas and procedures for tertiary students. We also supported the further development of the Bilingual Park Guides group to bring information to their own communities and to conduct group outings. Funding from MCMC's member Councils, Darebin, Yarra and Whittlesea, complemented the project.

Waterwatch

MCMC continued to host the *Waterwatch* program for the Merri and Moonee Ponds Creeks and the lower Yarra River. It is part of Port Phillip & Westernport Waterwatch and is supported by the Natural Heritage Trust, Melbourne Water, and the municipalities of Darebin, Hume, Melbourne, Mitchell, Moonee Valley, Moreland, Whittlesea and Yarra.

During the year more than 4,300 students from 51 primary, secondary and tertiary institutions were involved in one or more of the following activities: water quality monitoring, biological assessments of aquatic life, drain stenciling, and freshwater habitat surveys. *Waterwatch* activities at festivals, community days and training events reached a further 1,837 people, leading to a better understanding of waterway pollution and stream health.

A highlight of the year was our first frog census, held at Merri Park Wetlands in Northcote. On this successful evening, 40 locals turned up to learn about and listen to the local frogs.

There are currently eight community groups conducting regular *Waterwatch* monitoring of 16 sites within the Merri and Moonee Ponds Creeks catchments. In addition several schools in Reservoir have combined to conduct quarterly monitoring of a further four sites along Edgars Creek and Edwardes Lake. Known as *Lake Watch*, this program was part of the Edwardes Lake Neighbourhood Environment Improvement Program.

Merri Creek in-stream health

MCMC staff continued to undertake quarterly monitoring of five sites on the Merri and one on Malcolm Creek (a tributary) for physical/chemical parameters and macroinvertebrates (SIGNAL score). Results confirmed the poor in-stream health of Merri Creek, particularly in the lower reaches. This was highlighted by the low SIGNAL scores (a measure of diversity and abundance of macroinvertebrates) and high levels of phosphate. The key reason for poor in-stream health is the poor quality of stormwater

entering the creek, especially from industrial areas. Better in-stream conditions were generally found in upstream areas near Craigieburn as indicated by higher SIGNAL scores and lower phosphate levels.

Butt litter

MCMC's interest in enhancing community understanding of waterway health was given a boost with funding from Sustainability Victoria which enabled MCMC to train multilingual environment advocates to take the message of waterway health and 'no butts' to their communities. Trainees gave both direct presentations and segments on community radio.



Working with *Lomandra longifolia* as part of the Bridging Communities project.



Developing community engagement and enhancing learning through active creativity.



Children had fun colouring-in Sacred Kingfishers at Ngarri-djarrang (Central Creek Grasslands), Reservoir.

Planning and Coordination – open space and conservation

Merri Creek Management Committee (MCMC) works closely with government agencies and the community on a range of issues affecting biodiversity, stream health, landscape and amenity values along waterway corridors in the Merri catchment. We are supported in this role by direct funding from member Councils.

This year MCMC commented on five planning scheme amendments and participated with success in two panel hearings. We responded to 35 planning permit applications, presented successfully to three VCAT reviews, gave advice on six plans prior to formal application and commented on a planning enforcement issue of unauthorised vegetation destruction. For most planning applications we provided detailed information on landscape plans and appropriate indigenous species.

MCMC also dealt with a number of requests for information on potential 'offset' sites for Golden Sun Moth habitat and Victorian Volcanic Plain Grasslands.

Written submissions were made to the State Government's Land and Biodiversity Green Paper and on the terms of reference for two Victorian Environment Assessment Council investigations (Metropolitan Melbourne and Remnant Native Vegetation). MCMC participated in workshops for the Melbourne 2030 audit, the Whittlesea Green Wedge Management Plan, the Metro Sewerage Strategy, and in a specialist workshop convened by the Federal Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts on Golden Sun Moths. MCMC was also represented on the stakeholder advisory group for the Better Bays and Waterways water quality plan.

A key achievement this year was the preparation of the draft *Merri Creek and Environs Strategy 2008-2013* for public comment. This document gives direction to managers of waterways corridors of the Merri catchment, a vitally important matter given the growth pressures on the upper Merri catchment.

Of great concern to MCMC has been the delay in strengthening of waterway planning controls and the slow pace of progress in implementing the new Merri Creek Park (Marran baba).

Upper reaches of Merri Creek – Wallan to Donnybrook

Although the upper part of the Merri catchment is predominantly rural, rapid growth in Wallan is impacting on local tributaries. MCMC worked closely with the Friends of Wallan Creek on a number of matters, including consideration of a Melbourne Water proposal for a stormwater

treatment wetland in Wallan Community Park. Advice was provided to Mitchell Shire on managing remnant wetland vegetation in Spring Reserve, Beveridge, on a strategic plan for Taylors Creek, and at a site inspection of the local volcanic cone, Green Hill. MCMC was pleased by the success of local residents at VCAT in preventing a re-subdivision of rural land in a headwater area with significant remnant vegetation.

MCMC also worked with the Merriang Landcare Group. The Merriang to Donnybrook reach of the Merri includes significant remnant vegetation on private land and key fauna habitat.

Middle reaches of Merri Creek – Kalkallo to Western Ring Rd

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

MCMC participated in the Community Reference Group for Yarra Valley Water's *Northern Sewer Project – Campbellfield to Craigieburn* and provided detailed information on areas of significance within the alignment. Comment was also made to ensure the alignment of transfer pipes between the Aurora Treatment Facility and the Craigieburn Sewage Treatment Plant was largely kept out of Galgi ngarrk (Craigieburn Grasslands).

Discharges to Merri Creek from the Craigieburn Sewage Treatment Plant were a focus of a Yarra Valley Water workshop attended by MCMC. This considered how to best minimise risks to the downstream Growling Grass Frog population.

Illegal activities including rubbish dumping are still an issue in this section of the creek and MCMC sought action at a number of sites including Bababi marning (Cooper St Grasslands) and Galada Tamboore.

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

The lower Merri catchment is fully urbanised, the creek environs providing a ribbon of habitat. The redevelopment of infrastructure in the corridor and agency plans for improved habitat and community amenity are a focus for MCMC's involvement.

Works for the *Northern Sewerage Strategy* progressed along the creek in close consultation with MCMC and productive liaison with Melbourne Water waterway planners for revegetation and weed control works along the creek continued as part of the Regional River Health Strategy.

The location of new stormwater outfalls to the creek continued to pose potential problems.

MCMC's identification of an unacceptable impact on native vegetation led to a proposed new outfall in Fawkner being abandoned.

MCMC maintained its involvement in the final year of the Edwardes Lake Neighbourhood Environment Improvement Plan in Reservoir and made a commitment to support local community interest in the lake beyond the life of the plan.

Plans for the progressive upgrade and realignment of the Merri Shared Trail and associated new bridges generated many opportunities for MCMC comment. Information on the location and significance of indigenous vegetation was provided for new sections of trail in Fawkner, East Brunswick and North Fitzroy and preliminary consideration was given to a new crossing between Northcote and North Fitzroy across a water supply pipe.

We liaised closely with contractors on maintenance works for the underground high voltage power lines which follow the creek corridor between East Brunswick and Clifton Hill, as well as on the Clifton Hill Rail Project, which includes duplication of the Merri Creek rail crossing.

MCMC was also involved in preliminary discussions for a possible new wetland at Hewson's Hollow in Clifton Hill.



Fawkner Safari walking group with MCMC staff members at Moomba Park, Fawkner.



A Great Egret on Merri Creek in Coburg beautifully illustrates the importance of restoring semi-aquatic vegetation.

Financial Report

Summarised Balance Sheet as at 30th September 2008

	2008	2007
EQUITY:		
Retained Funds – Start	289,547	296,241
Add Surplus / (Deficit)	(7,416)	(6,694)
Retained Funds – End	<u>\$282,131</u>	<u>\$289,547</u>
 Represented By:		
Current Assets:	868,291	834,023
Fixed Assets:	119,766	122,951
TOTAL ASSETS:	<u>988,057</u>	<u>956,974</u>
 Less:		
TOTAL LIABILITIES:	<u>705,926</u>	<u>667,427</u>
 NET ASSETS:	<u>\$282,131</u>	<u>\$289,547</u>

Summarised Statement of Income & Expenditure For the twelve months ended 30th September, 2008

	2008	2007
INCOME:		
Grants		
Municipalities	459,473	490,930
Other Government	168,147	212,109
Non Government	66,066	40,887
Contracts	535,091	443,590
Profit on Sale of Fixed Assets	–	–
Sale of Publications	922	678
Environment Fund Donations*	11,150	865
Interest & Sundry Income	42,854	28,335
Total Income:	<u>1,283,703</u>	<u>1,217,394</u>
 LESS EXPENDITURE:		
Wages, Salaries & Oncosts	1,029,993	944,092
Materials & Plant Hire	90,362	75,825
Vehicle Running	17,428	14,236
Admin, Project & General	128,739	125,114
Environment Fund Disbursements	–	–
Depreciation & Leave	24,597	64,821
Total Expenditure:	<u>1,291,119</u>	<u>1,224,088</u>
 NET SURPLUS / (DEFICIT):	<u>(\$7,416)</u>	<u>(\$6,694)</u>

The above reports have been summarised from the audited financial statements of the Merri Creek Management Committee for the year ended 30th September 2008. The full financial statements and the Auditor's report are on the MCMC website at www.mcmc.org.au or copies are available from the MCMC office, 2 Lee St East Brunswick.

Auditor

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

*We acknowledge, with thanks these substantial donations to the Merri Creek Environment Fund: Schudmak Family Foundation Pty Ltd: \$1,000; Michael Leunig: \$10,000.

Member Representatives and staff 2007–2008

Committee of Management 2008:

City of Darebin:	Cr Vince Fontana, Allan Wicks (<i>on leave 2008</i>), Susan Hecker and Luke Sandham (<i>Sub's.</i>)
City of Hume:	Cr Drew Jessop, Jason Summers
City of Moreland:	Cr Andrea Sharam, David Dunstan
City of Whittlesea:	Cr Stevan Kozmevski, David Turnbull (<i>Vice President 1</i>), George Saissanas (<i>Sub.</i>), Bruce Schroder (<i>Sub.</i>)
City of Yarra:	Cr Kathleen Maltzahn, Silvana Predebon
Shire of Mitchell	Cr Donna Allan
Friends of Merri Ck:	Trevor Hausler (<i>President</i>), Ann McGregor (<i>Secretary</i>), Allie Dawe (<i>Treasurer</i>), Paul Prentice (<i>Vice President 2</i>), Ruth Shiel, Louise Grgat, Harold Mackrell (<i>Sub.</i>)
Friends of Wallan Ck:	Claudia James

Sub-Committees in 2008:

The following Sub-Committees also met during the year: Executive Sub-Committee, Finance Sub-Committee, and Merri Creek & Environs Strategy Implementation Sub-Committee; while the Planning & Issues Sub-Committee distributed reports by email.

MCMC Staff:

Manager:	Luisa Macmillan
Admin./Information Officer:	Ray Radford
Admin. Assistant (temp.):	Monica Williamson
Finance Officer:	Ruth Rankin
IT Manager/Project Officer:	Tony Faithfull

Catchment Program Team

Manager/Waterwatch Coordinator:	Greg Woodward
Environmental Education Officer:	Jane Bevelander
Catchment Program Officer:	Angela Foley
Catchment Program Officer:	Dimi Bouzalas

Parkland Management Team

Conservation Program Manager:	Katrina Roberg
Coordinator:	Megan Jericho
Senior Technical Officer:	Brian Bainbridge
Team Leader:	Alex Davern
Team Members:	Dan Barnett, Dave Crawford, Deb Lawson, Ben North, Aaron Eulenstein, Maryann Weatherill.

Temporary Team Members:	Patrick Brazenor, Danielle Guilfoyle, Luke Hitchcock, Eliza Knight, John Loschiavo, Susan Miller, Tristan Mules, Erika Oakes, Martin Roberts.
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Planning Consultant

Michael Kirsch

MERRI CREEK



MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

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