2. Values of the Lower Yarra River Corridor
“The Lower Yarra River will offer a variety of natural landscape settings and experiences in which its topography, banks and a continuous tree canopy are the dominant features in views of the river corridor.”
2.2 The River’s Significance

Waterways play an important role in many aspects of daily life. They provide the foundation of complex ecosystems and support the region’s productivity. They are also strongly linked to our sense of wellbeing as places of gathering, recreation and contemplation and popular recreational destinations for residents and tourists. Waterways are highly valued for their ecological importance, and provide water for drinking, industry and agriculture as well as critical ecosystem services such as nutrient cycling.1

The Yarra River and its corridor is recognised in State policy as a significant open space, recreation, aesthetic, conservation and tourism asset for Metropolitan Melbourne.

As indicated above, its significance is linked to a wide range of values, which can be grouped under the following themes discussed in this section of the report:

• Geographical Context
• Topography
• Environment & Biodiversity
• Character & Amenity
• Cultural Heritage
• Open Space, Recreation & Access

A statement of significance has been prepared to encapsulate the values of the Yarra River corridor, taking into consideration the corridor’s significance within its broader context. This was used to inform the corridor’s vision for the future set out opposite at 2.1.

“\textbf{The Yarra River and the landscape through which it passes have metropolitan significance as an environmental, aesthetic, cultural, recreation and tourism asset. The river corridor links parklands and reserves into a near-continuous vegetated landscape experience that provides a highly valued, secluded, natural environment, enjoyed by local and metropolitan communities.}”

\textbf{STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE}

---

1 Melbourne Water, Healthy Waterways Strategy, 2013
2.3 Geographical Context

The Yarra River, and its corridor, is a significant natural asset and forms an integral component of the fabric of metropolitan Melbourne.

From its upper reaches located in the Yarra Ranges National Park, the Yarra River meanders 242 km from its source to mouth.

The river passes through the forested hills surrounding Warburton, the flat open farmlands abutting Woori Yallock, the undulating slopes of the Yarra Valley wine region, and the broad floodplains around Yarra Glen.

The river enters Melbourne’s suburbs at Warrandyte where adjoining parklands and reserves contribute to the character and amenity of the corridor. As the river approaches inner Melbourne, it heads south from Fairfield, making a sharp turn to the west before passing along the southern side of the Melbourne CBD.

The river then flows out towards Port Phillip Bay through the Port of Melbourne and Hobsons Bay.

The Lower Yarra includes three of the river’s major tributaries: the lower reaches of the Merri Creek, which enters the Yarra near Dights Falls, Darebin Creek, which enters the Yarra near the Latrobe Golf Course; and Gardiners Creek, which enters near to the crossing the Monash Freeway over the Yarra River.
2.4 Topography

Natural forces have continually shaped the river and its environment over thousands of years. The river in its current formation is approximately 4000 years old, having been formed by lava flows from the volcanic activity to west of present day Melbourne.

Lava flows over the last two million years initially blocked the river’s course; however, after thousands of years, the river carved its current path. The differences in elevation between the river’s banks mark the edge of the lava flow. Erosion caused by water and wind continue to affect the river today.

The topography of the river environment around the Lower Yarra comprises the flatlands on the western side of the river, which are part of the western volcanic plain, and the elevated rises to the south, north and east. These changes in topography are a defining feature of the river within the Lower Yarra, and are expressed in the different character types that have been identified.

Areas of elevated topography form a horizon of distant hills and ridgelines. Land slopes down towards the river corridor where the embankments then drop steeply down to the water’s edge.

In many areas the natural topography has been heavily modified, particularly along the main road corridors.

The Yarra River is not a particularly wide river, compared to rivers that define other cities in the world such as the Seine or the Thames. Notwithstanding this, throughout the river’s course within the context of metropolitan Melbourne, the Yarra is a significant topographical feature and point of distinction.
### 2.6 Environment & Biodiversity

The Yarra River corridor contains some of the most valuable flora, fauna, geological and geomorphological assets in metropolitan Melbourne. Indigenous vegetation and remnant riparian vegetation provide an important habitat for native fauna, nurture fragile flora species, contribute to the protection of water quality and flow regimes, and add to amenity/social values of the river corridor.

The Interim Biogeographic Regionalisation for Australia (IBRA) developed by the Australian Government Department of the Environment is endorsed by all levels of government as a key tool for identifying land for conservation under Australia’s Strategy for the National Reserve System 2009-2030. The latest version, IBRA7, classifies Australia’s landscapes into 89 large, geographically distinct bioregions based on common climate, geology, landform, native vegetation and species information.

The Lower Yarra River corridor falls within the South Eastern Highlands (SEH) – Highlands-Southern Fall, Southern Volcanic Plain (SVP) Victorian Volcanic Plain (VVP) and South East Coastal Plain (SCP) – Gippsland Plain bioregions. The dominant ecological vegetation classes include Floodplain Riparian Woodland and Riparian Woodland, which run along the entire river corridor. As the river passes through Yarra Bend Park the surrounds of the Yarra River are dominated by Plains Grassy Woodland, Escarpment Scrubland, Escarpment Woodland, and Box Ironbark Forest.

Significant tracts of remnant native vegetation exist along the river corridor such as River Red Gums, Yellow Gums, River Bottlebrush, as well as the presence of significant grasslands and woodlands. These vegetation communities provide habitat for an extensive variety of reptile, fish, amphibian, and mammal species.

The river is home to significant fauna species such as the threatened Australian Grayling, Striped Legless Lizard and Platypus. The river’s diverse and rich birdlife includes the Black-faced Cuckoo Shrikes, Willie-wagtails, Silvereyes and Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos. Further to this the river provides habitat for migratory birds, including seven species of migratory birds of international importance.

Over 240 flora and fauna species have been recorded within the Lower Yarra River corridor, including some registered under international agreements and some listed under the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act. This equates to approximately 1/10 of the State’s total number of identified flora species.

Yarra Bend Park is an important indicator of the study area’s underlying ecology and is listed on the Register of the National Estate in recognition of its outstanding ecological values. However, a large proportion of the study area contains vegetation classes classified as endangered or vulnerable. While remnant riparian plant communities are adapted to respond to natural disruptions from flooding and erozon, ongoing effort is required to balance destructive impacts from the surrounding city, including invasions of weeds, litter, urban development, and wear from recreational activities.

---

2. Yarra Bend Environmental Action Plan, 2001
3. Over 240 flora and fauna species have been recorded within the Lower Yarra River corridor, including some registered under international agreements and some listed under the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act. This equates to approximately 1/10 of the State’s total number of identified flora species.
4. Yarra Bend Park is an important indicator of the study area’s underlying ecology and is listed on the Register of the National Estate in recognition of its outstanding ecological values. However, a large proportion of the study area contains vegetation classes classified as endangered or vulnerable. While remnant riparian plant communities are adapted to respond to natural disruptions from flooding and erozon, ongoing effort is required to balance destructive impacts from the surrounding city, including invasions of weeds, litter, urban development, and wear from recreational activities.
2.7 Character & Amenity

The Melbourne Water 2012 Community Perceptions Survey identified that 95% of people consider waterways as ‘very important’ to Greater Melbourne’s overall liveability.

Urban & Landscape Character

The general value ascribed to the Yarra’s ‘natural’ landscape character, despite the obvious presence of buildings, rebuilt river banks, power lines, and so on, relies heavily on indigenous vegetation. According to the 2003 City of Yarra Built Form Review:

Most people … experience the river corridor not from the river and its banks, but from vantage points outside the corridor, or as they drive across the river on a bridge. What they see (or expect to see) is a line of trees, a heavily vegetated river corridor. They will rarely see the water itself, except perhaps as a glimpse amongst the trees. The expression of the river corridor as a corridor of vegetation, particularly of canopy trees, is most important.

This heavily vegetated river corridor underpins the distinctive character of surrounding suburbs including Kew, Hawthorn, Toorak and South Yarra. Even in areas where the river corridor has been subject to greater modification such as Richmond, Abbotsford and Cremorne, the presence of vegetation underpins the character of the river.

The Lower Yarra River corridor contains a variety of natural and modified landscapes, including reserves, parks, low density suburban dwellings, higher density urban development, industrial uses and floodplains. While parts of the study area are dominated by naturalistic landscapes, a river valley’s character is also shaped by, and reveals the character of, the land it passes through. So inevitably a river passing through an urban area will be shaped by, and reveal aspects of, the urban character. Similarly a river passing through a more isolated parkland setting will be shaped by its surrounding parkland landscapes.

The character of the river corridor often differs from one side of the river to the other largely because of the area’s topography, and history of development/land use.

Within the Lower Yarra River corridor, these variations in character are described by the five ‘river interface character types’ ascribed to the study area (refer to Chapter 3 for detail).

Amenity

The extent of the remnant bushland and ‘leafy’ environment that provides habitat for wildlife and a secluded, peaceful haven for visitors, is a highly valued and unique asset contributing to the character and amenity of Melbourne’s northern and eastern suburbs.

The heavily vegetated river corridor provides a significant setting and backdrop for surrounding suburbs and activity centres as far out as Box Hill. Indeed, many real estate agents market the river’s ‘green-treed corridor’ as a point of difference to attract investment.


---

1 Review of Policies & Controls for the Yarra River Corridor, 2005
2.8 Cultural Heritage

The Yarra River has been the ‘lifeblood’ of the region for tens of thousands of years. Over the last two centuries, it has played a pivotal role in the development of Melbourne. The landscapes that we see and experience today have been shaped by human values of the river over time.

Cultural heritage elements, which show the history of human interaction with the landscape, occur throughout the Lower Yarra River corridor and include features of European and Aboriginal heritage significance.

The river flows through Wurundjeri Country, part of the East Kulin Nation, and is known as Birrarung, meaning ‘place of mists and shadows’. For at least thirty thousand years prior to European settlement, it was the lifeblood of the community; an abundant source of fresh water, food, and resources, and a focal point of daily existence. Spiritually, the river is a dreaming path and a point of deep connection to the land, and prior to European settlement, clans followed its course and camped on its banks throughout the year.

While the available data on Aboriginal heritage values is varied, scatters of stone artefacts, tools, and river red gum scars provide clues of an association with the river over a long period of time. Today, Aboriginal cultural heritage values are particularly associated with the waterway itself, and areas of natural landscapes which remain undeveloped. Key landscape features such as river confluences with its tributaries, including the Darebin, Merri and Gardiners Creeks; high points, and the Bolin Bolin Billabong, were important meeting places with other clans of the Kulin Nation and also have a high value for Aboriginal communities.

The entire Yarra River and its immediate environment is recognised as an area of Aboriginal heritage sensitivity. There are numerous sites of particular significance along the river, such as:

- Como Park North, which was the site of an aboriginal campsite and meeting place known as ‘Turrak’.
- The site of Melbourne High School was the camping ground of Derriurn, a leader of the Yalukit-willam who formed a positive relationship with the European Settlers.
- The confluence of the Yarra River and the Merri Creek which includes the burial place of Willillabiny, a higurungapa or clan headman, and the site of an early Aboriginal Protectorate.
- Scarred tree sites within parkland along the river in the City of Boroondara.

The discovery of the Yarra, and its fresh water, was crucial to the founding and subsequent development of Melbourne. The first European to appreciate the pristine beauty of the meandering waterway was Charles Grimes, Acting Surveyor General of New South Wales. During his exploration in 1803 he named it ‘Freshwater River’, with another member of the party, James Ferguson, declaring it to be ‘the most eligible place for a settlement that I have seen’.

On the banks of the Yarra on 8 June, 1835 John Batman enacted his now infamous purchase of 600,000 acres of land with the local Kulin clans. Three months later, huts were constructed near the site of the present day Immigration Museum.

The river was the lifeblood for the fledgling colony, providing water, fertile land for farming and access. However, over the subsequent decades its role and value changed dramatically - it was a ready-made sewer and it gave early industries the water necessary in their processes. After a steady deterioration in water quality during the 19th century, measures have been undertaken over recent decades to clean up the river.

Features and places of European heritage value occur throughout the study area, including structures such as bridges, boat houses, former industrial sites, locations of social significance, and areas associated with the visual arts.

In addition, the study area contains a number of more modern places of heritage significance including Kew Cottages, former Willisseere Hospital, Fairfield Hospital, Dights Mill Site, former Convent of the Good Shepherd, Tay Cregan, Flournley Gardens, Edzell, Como House and Richmond Maltings. These sites and their mix of residential, industrial, institutional and recreational uses provide an important reflection of the area’s history and past land uses.

All of the sites listed above have been classified as heritage places of State significance and are listed on the Victorian Heritage Register.

Information Sources:
- Yarra Valley Parklands Management Plan, 2002
- Stonnington Thematic Environmental History
- Traditional areas in the City of Boroondara [online] https://www.boroondara.vic.gov.au/our-city/community/indigenous-community

Edzell House, Toorak (circa 1891)

Postcard image of Alexandra Avenue, 1911.
2.9 Open Space, Recreation & Access

The Lower Yarra River corridor is one of the most visited areas of regional open space in Melbourne, attracting over one million visits per year\(^1\). The diverse range of landscapes offer a wide variety of recreational pursuits, providing health and wellbeing and social benefits for a broad cross-section of the community.

Open spaces associated with the Yarra River represent the largest and most important resource of parklands and green spaces in inner Melbourne, particularly in the more built-up areas, where the density of development is such that access to open space is limited. These areas of public parkland and open space are vital in contributing to the health and wellbeing of the community and the character of the local and regional landscape.

The Lower Yarra River open space corridor is readily accessible to a large proportion of Melbourne’s population, particularly for those located in the inner and eastern suburbs. Furthermore, wider metropolitan access to the corridor has been improved in recent years, with the development of bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure.

The Lower Yarra River corridor comprises a series of regionally significant parks and reserves that extend along the Yarra River for approximately 16km, from Kew to South Yarra. Parklands and open space within the study area include land managed by Parks Victoria, local government, VicRoads, Melbourne Water and private land owners.

The Main Yarra Trail traverses the entire length of the study area from Kew and Bulleen through to the West Gate Bridge to the north of the mouth of the river. This linear trail network connects the Lower Yarra River corridor to other areas of open space, schools, surrounding suburbs and the city, offering urban dwellers ready access to a unique naturalistic setting to enjoy their daily commute and other recreational pursuits.

A central objective of previous strategic planning of the river corridor has been to develop a continuous linear trail network for non-motorised movement within the area, which will link with areas of open space upstream and downstream and facilitate cross-valley movement (1985 Lower Yarra River Development Plan, and repeated in later plans including Linking People and Spaces, 2002). While this has been largely successful with the development of the Main Yarra Trail and associated links, the linear trail network currently has some gaps and issues with connectivity with surrounding areas.

The open space corridor varies in width from substantial parklands, to narrow linear reserves at the river’s edge. Sports fields, playgrounds and golf courses dominate the lower reaches between Burke Road and Hoddle Street. The middle section of the corridor is primarily a linear park, which occasionally opens out to substantial areas of parkland (e.g. Yarra Bend Park) available for informal active and passive recreation.

In some sections public access to the open space corridor becomes more limited due to deviations in the course of the Main Yarra trail, or the presence of private property, golf courses or public institutions adjoining the river’s edge. As a result, some sections of the corridor are accessible only via the river itself.

A number of recreational facilities such as barbecues, picnic shelters, fishing jetties, viewing platforms and boardwalks are provided at various locations along the rivers banks.

Increasing investment in public facilities, including recreation facilities continues to progressively improve the range of facilities and access options within the river corridor.

The cultural and environmental significance of many of these spaces is also recognised by heritage or environmental controls over buildings or structures within these spaces, the river banks, significant trees or the parklands themselves.

Key open space and recreation features along the river corridor are shown on the map on the following page. This includes the river’s parklands, walking trails, key public recreation nodes and facilities, and main access points. This network of features offers a wide range of economic, health and wellbeing, and social benefits for a broad cross-section of the community.

A number of key public recreation nodes exist along the river, which encompass significant tracts of parkland and provide views of the river and public access to its water. Four key nodes have been identified as shown on the map on the following page:

- Como Park and Herring Island, South Yarra
- Burnley Park and Kevin Bartlett Reserve, Burnley
- Studley Park and Yarra Bend Park, including Yarra Bend Golf Course, Kew and Fairfield
- Golf Courses and parklands of East Kew and Ivanhoe (within the Middle Yarra River study area)
2.10 Threats & Pressures

Threats to Built Form Character

Potential threats to the character of built form throughout the study area include:

- Built form that is highly visible along the ridgeline/skyline and surrounding hillslopes, as viewed from the Yarra River corridor and areas of public open space
- Bulky, heavily massed buildings
- Bold, bright colours and reflective finishes on buildings
- Large surface areas of white/off-white/light shades of colour
- Built form that is not substantially screened by vegetation
- Built form that does not respect the preferred building height for the area
- Built form that does not respect the heritage values of the local area
- Built form that is on and too close to the banks of the Yarra River
- High, solid fencing or gates
- Signage that is out of scale or character with the landscape.

Threats to Landscape Character

Potential threats to the landscape character of the study area include:

- Removal of significant indigenous vegetation
- Loss of mature vegetation and canopy trees
- Lack of vegetation/landscaping
- Built form that penetrates the predominant tree canopy height
- Excessive disturbance to existing topography caused by cut and fill
- Large areas of hard paved surfaces, including driveways and car parking areas
- Proliferation of weeds.

Other Threats

A number of other threats are relevant to the study area, but are more appropriately addressed at a whole of catchment level or through another policy mechanism, and as such are not addressed in detail in this report. These threats include issues relating to water quality, flooding, erosion, vegetation protection and management, litter, and control of environmental weeds and pests.