Protecting the Yarra River (Burrarung): Geography Teachers’ Association of Victoria Submission

The Geography Teachers’ Association of Victoria is the peak organisation for geographical education in Victoria with membership in most secondary schools and a growing presence in primary schools, responsible for the professional learning and development of teachers in physical, environmental and human geography along with geospatial technologies. The GTAV was delighted to accept the invitation to participate in the Industry and Peak Body Workshops for the opportunity to additionally respond to the Discussion Paper.

The workshops were well managed, provided a range of quality information and data about the Yarra River Discussion Paper and allowed all participants to present and discuss their views. Geography teachers were also invited to attend the three community consultations. Capire and the GTAV are planning consultation forums in two schools with senior classes of geography students. These are the people who will experience the greatest benefits from the development and implementation of a sound management plan for the Yarra so it is important to have their input.

The Discussion Paper is an outstanding document covering the history, context, attributes, management approaches and proposed management options of the Yarra. We doubt anyone could disagree with the stated goals of a healthy river, a liveable city, a culturally diverse landscape and sustainable development and modern governance including traditional ownership stewardship and community in the management. Our addition to these goals would be to include an explicit school and community education component to ensure the final management Plan and Model is sustainable regarding future community expectations and the vagaries of future changing political landscapes that could disrupt this plan in the same way as the previous well intentioned plans.

As geographers we recognise the vital importance of the Yarra corridor precinct in many ways and to so many users and uses, and also examining the river in the three reaches identified in the workshops. This is important to local communities and local interest groups.

We however advocate a stronger whole of geographical catchment approach to management which includes this Yarra corridor as a focal point and integral part, but still just as a part of the much wider geographical basin boundary that includes interactions and inputs from different land uses, geographies, environments and drainage patterns. Management considerations, regulations and governance should also extend out of the catchment to include climate change impacts and the development of the first climate resilient river strategy.

The workshops and community consultations highlighted the importance of the community increasing its understanding of river catchments and associated environmental, development and planning issues so that everyone can have an informed opinion to ensure sustainability in management.

At the workshops, we spoke about the new mandatory Victorian Curriculum in Geography where from 2017 all Year 5/6 students will learn the geography of Floods and Bushfires, Year 7 students will study units on Water and Liveability, Year 8 Landscapes and Landforms, Year 9 Biomes and Food Security and Year 10 Environmental Change and Management. All of these should include Yarra River Catchment components to develop future citizens who will understand the need to continue to protect the Yarra and indeed other river systems and environments.

This year saw the introduction of four new VCE Geography units. It is clear that the Yarra River could be used for fieldwork and as a case study for Year 11 Unit 1 Hazards and Disasters, Unit 2 Tourism along with the Year 12 Unit 3 Changing Land Use e.g. in urban and rural areas affecting pollution and drainage issues and Changing Land Cover e.g. logging or fire in catchment areas.

This is why it is essential to include and provide ample funding for community and student education as a vital component of the final Management Model selected. The GTAV is willing and able to assist with this process.