2. Values of the Middle Yarra River Corridor
“The Middle 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

¹ Melbourne Water, Healthy Waterways Strategy, 2013

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:

- Environment & Biodiversity
- Character & Amenity
- 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.

“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.”

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE
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 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.
2.4 Topography

The changing topography of the Yarra River corridor is a defining feature of its character. This map illustrates how land rises gradually up from the river flats in the west to the high ground in Warrandyte at the east of the study area. A number of natural geological and geomorphological features occur throughout the Middle Yarra River corridor, particularly where urbanisation has not intruded to the river banks. As the river winds its way through Melbourne its highly vegetated naturalistic landscape corridor forms a backdrop to surrounding suburbs, helping to define the identity of the northern and north-eastern suburbs of Melbourne.
2.5 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 information1.

The Middle Yarra River corridor falls within the Highlands – Southern Fall Bioregion. The dominant ecological vegetation classes include Riparian Scrubs or Swampy Scrubs and Woodlands along the river corridor, and Dry Forests surrounding the river on both the low and high altitudes. The lower reaches to the west of the study area are dominated by Riverine Grass Woodlands and Plains Woodland and Forests. These are illustrated on the map on the following page.

A large proportion of the study area contains vegetation classes classified as endangered or vulnerable, as shown on the map on page 21. Over 600 flora species have been recorded along the river corridor, including four of National significance2.

While Riparian plant communities are adapted to respond to natural disruptions from flooding and erosion, ongoing effort is required to balance destructive impacts from the surrounding city, including invasions of weeds, litter, urban development, and wear from recreational activities.

These vegetation communities provide habitat for an extensive variety of reptile, fish, amphibian, and mammal species. Over 230 fauna species have been recorded within the Middle Yarra River corridor, including 11 of National significance3. The river itself is home to significant fauna species including the threatened Australian grayling and Australian mudfish, while vegetation communities along the river provide habitat for birds, including six species of migratory birds of international importance. Other animals that live along the banks include echidnas, platypus, koalas, possums, sugar gliders, kangaroos and bats.

2 Yarra Valley Parklands Management Plan, 2002
3 Yarra Valley Parklands Management Plan, 2002
LEGEND
- Dry Forests - Exposed and/or lower altitude
- Dry Forests - Sheltered and/or higher altitude
- Riparian Scrubs or Swampy Scrubs and Woodlands
- Riparian Forests or Woodlands
- Plains Woodlands and Forests
- Riverine Grassy Woodlands and Forests
- Herb-rich Woodlands
- Wetlands

MIDDLE YARRA RIVER CORRIDOR STUDY
ECOLOGICAL VEGETATION CLASSES

Map source: Department of Environment and Primary Industries, 2007
MIDDLE YARRA RIVER CORRIDOR STUDY
CONSERVATION OF STATUS OF ECOLOGICAL VEGETATION CLASSES

LEGEND
- Endangered
- Vulnerable
- Least Concern

Map source: Department of Environment and Primary Industries, 2007
2.6 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 Ivanhoe, Bulleen, Viewbank, Templestowe, Heidelberg, Lower Plenty, Eltham and Waratahyte.

The Middle Yarra River corridor contains a variety of natural and modified landscapes, including bush, open pastoral land, rivers, billabongs and floodplains. While parts of the study area are dominated by natural 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 rural area will be shaped by its surrounding rural landscapes.

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

Within the Middle Yarra River corridor, these variations in character are described by the six ‘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.

2.7 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 Middle 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 cultural 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 Diamond 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 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 Flemming, 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 a number of homesteads, estates and architecturally significant buildings dating back to 1839. Most notably, Viewbank Homestead in Viewbank (circa 1839), Char tinville in Ivanhoe (circa 1840), Ponto ville Homestead in Templestowe (circa 1843), Banyule Homestead in Heidelberg (circa 1846) and the Mount Eagle and Glenard Estates designed by Walter Burley Griffin in 1914 and 1915, respectively.

In addition, the study area contains a number of more modern places of heritage significance including Naughton House and Rifle Factory in Warrandyte (circa 1946) and Snelleman House in East Ivanhoe (circa 1954). Sites such as Petty’s Orchard and the Pound Bend Tunnel also provide an important reflection of the area’s history and past land uses.

The history and significance of the Middle Yarra River corridor also has strong associations with the visual arts – the river and its surrounding landscapes providing the main source of inspiration for Australian impressionist ‘Heidelberg School’ artists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, whose works were mostly painted in the Heidelberg area. Particular sites of significance include the Montsalvat artist’s colony in Eltham (circa 1934) and Heide II Park & Art Gallery in Bulleen (circa 1965), which continue to attract visitors from Victoria, interstate and overseas.

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

The Yarra River, between Warburton and Warrandyte is listed as a Victorian Heritage River, under the Heritage Rivers Act 1992. There is strong support among the community for this listing to be extended further west into the study area.

Information Sources:

Arthur Streeton’s ‘Still glides the stream and shall forever glide’, painted in 1890. Streeton has captured the Yarra River below Eaglemont as it slowly meanders through the river flats. Beyond the river is the Bolin Bolin Billabong and distant mountains.
2.8 Open Space, Recreation & Access

The Middle Yarra River corridor is one of the most visited areas of regional open space in Melbourne, attracting over one million visits per year¹. 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 Middle Yarra River open space corridor is readily accessible to a large proportion of Melbourne’s population, particularly for those located in the inner northern and eastern suburbs. Furthermore, wider metropolitan access to the southern section of the corridor has been improved in recent years, with the development of Eastlink and its associated bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure.

The Middle Yarra River corridor comprises a series of regionally significant parks and reserves that extend along the Yarra River for approximately 16km, from Ivanhoe to Warrandyte. 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 study area for 18 kilometres from Burke Road in Ivanhoe to the confluence of the Mullum Mullum Creek with the Yarra River in Templestowe. From this point on, it continues as the Mullum Mullum Trail to Park Road in Donvale and will connect to the Eastlink Trail in 2017. This linear trail network connects the Middle 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 terminates at Tikalara Park in Templestowe. From this point on, the valuable seclusion of sections of the corridor, and environmental constraints, may warrant no further development of formal trails along the Yarra River if an alternative road reserve route is available.

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 Birrarung Park. The middle section of the corridor is primarily being utilised as a linear park, which occasionally opens out to substantial areas of parkland (e.g. Westerfolds Park) available for informal active and passive recreation. Further upstream the Main Yarra Trail terminates and public access to the open space corridor becomes more limited due to the presence of private property, golf courses or public institutions. As a result, some sections of the corridor are accessible only via the river itself (by non-motorised water craft such as canoes or kayaks due to its shallow depth). This contributes to the highly valued sense of isolation and seclusion in these parts.

A number of recreational facilities such as barbeques, picnic shelters, fishing jetties, viewing platforms and boardwalks are provided at various locations along the rivers banks. Increasing investment in public facilities, including recreation and tourism facilities (e.g. Heide Gallery in Bulleen, wetlands in Heidelberg, boardwalk infrastructure along the Main Yarra Trail etc.), 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.

¹ Yarra Valley Parklands Management Plan, 2002
2.9 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;
- High, solid fencing or gates; and
- 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; and
- 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, bushfires, vegetation protection and management, litter, and control of environmental weeds and pests.

In some places fencing provides a poor interface with the Yarra River corridor and views from the Main Yarra Trail.