



The Hon. Lisa Neville, Minister for Water

25 March 2020

Re: Port Phillip EcoCentre comments on DRAFT Yarra Strategic Plan

Dear Minister Neville,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the DRAFT Yarra Strategic Plan (the Plan). Port Phillip EcoCentre (PPEC) is a not-for-profit organisation with a strong focus on empowering local communities to engage in environmental stewardship where they live; and has had an enduring interest in water quality issues in the Yarra River (the River). Since 1999, our educators and scientists have coordinated over 250,000 hours of environmental volunteering, and one million hours of teaching and learning projects about Melbourne's ecology. Urban waterways have been a major focus of our educational programs, citizen science, and cross-sector project partnerships over many years.

It is entirely appropriate that the Plan has been devised by a Yarra Collaboration Committee comprised of the Traditional Owners, representatives of 8 local government areas located along the course of the river; alongside the various government agencies that have key roles in practical management or planning controls for the River and its catchments. Maintaining strong positive relationships between these organisations will ultimately determine the success of the Plan.

We wholeheartedly endorse the aims to achieve a healthy, beautiful, culturally diverse river providing high quality parklands for Melbourne's growing population, maintaining Melbourne's status of one of the world's most liveable cities. However, we wish to draw attention to factors that are not included in the Plan which we believe will be fundamental to achieve the vision for the River.

Our comments are founded in extensive engagement over many years waterways health issues:

- Since 2008, we are licensed members of the international Waterkeeper Alliance (Waterkeeper.org)
- From 2009 to 2011, PPEC was represented on the Community Liaison Group convened by Port of Melbourne Corporation to engage in issues associated with Shipping Channel Deepening;
- Since 2015, in partnership with Yarra Riverkeeper Association, we've conducted monthly riverine trawls to measure and analyse microplastic pollution in the Yarra and Maribyrnong Rivers;
 - Our team participated in more than 12 workshops to co-design Melbourne Water's 'Healthy Waterways Strategy' and currently sit on their Waterways and Drainage Customer Council;
 - Since 2018 we've worked with Scouts Victoria to conduct street litter audits at diverse locations in all catchments around the Bay, including the Yarra catchment.

In relation to plastic pollution, the most recent report on our microplastics study¹ found that an estimated 1.4 billion litter items are generated by the Yarra and Maribyrnong Rivers annually. We are conscious of the fact that much of this litter is dropped in streets throughout the suburbs; and that street litter can ultimately make its way via the stormwater drains to creeks and rivers to Port Phillip Bay.

¹ Port Phillip EcoCentre. Microplastics in the Maribyrnong and Yarra Rivers, Melbourne Australia. May 2018

We note that of the more than \$80 million of investment in the Yarra River corridor for 2019/20² the majority is committed to improved infrastructure, including trails. \$7.3 million (less than the \$8 million committed to 2 major events) is committed to projects that will enhance water health and biodiversity.

All of these enhancements are *within the river corridor*; and no specific actions are flagged in the Plan for community education and law enforcement programs necessary to reduce threats to river health from its wider catchment areas. The Plan identifies *litter, sewerage, pollution, urban development and invasive species* as major threats³ to the River. We contend that **these threats are substantially sourced from land management areas excluded from the Plan**, ie the sub-catchments of the Yarra that are situated outside of the Yarra corridor, and the Port of Melbourne land and riverbed in the Lower Yarra.

We note that there is no reference to addressing these threats in the *10 year Performance Objectives*⁴, nor in *The scope of the Yarra Strategic Plan*⁵, nor the *Purpose and structure of the Plan*⁶.

We believe that local community networks are crucial to community education; and that the capacity of local Councils to educate their citizens on water quality threats will ultimately be crucial to achieving river health and biodiversity protection. While members of the Yarra Collaboration Committee are “committed” to the Plan, there is no indication this will translate to increased investment in community engagement *beyond the corridor*. **Caring for the waterway requires caring for the catchment.**

Consequently, accumulated river silts in the Lower Yarra sediments will continue to receive contaminants from the wider catchments, and ultimately be dredged and dumped in Port Phillip Bay. Exclusion of the Port of Melbourne and catchment areas situated beyond the Yarra corridor will ultimately diminish the health of the River and the Bay.

Underpinning this Plan, we strongly endorse the central involvement of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people in the development and delivery of the strategies; and the proposal to establish the Birrarung Rangers program⁷ to provide traineeships Aboriginal people in conservation, habitat restoration and land management within the Yarra corridor. We commend the words of Aunty Di Kerr⁸ – “*Under Wurundjeri lore, it is the responsibility of everyone living on Country to protect the water and the land.*”

Additional to (and interconnected with) our points, we support the points in submissions to this consultation made by Environmental Justice Australia and Yarra Riverkeeper Association.

In conclusion, the Yarra Strategic Plan will undoubtedly achieve success towards the wellbeing of Melburnians through improved amenity in the Yarra corridor. However, **(1) additional provisions for wider community awareness programs, (2) environmental regulation, (3) investment beyond the river corridor and (4) strong specific measurable Performance Objectives will be required to address the major threats to waterways health.**

Yours sincerely,


April Seymore
Executive Officer

² P. 16 DRAFT Yarra Strategic Plan

³ P. 12 Draft Yarra Strategic Plan

⁴ P. 12 Draft Yarra Strategic Plan

⁵ P. 13 Draft Yarra Strategic Plan

⁶ P. 13 Draft Yarra Strategic Plan

⁷ P. 18 Draft Yarra Strategic Plan

⁸ P. 6 Executive Summary, Draft Yarra Strategic Plan