

# Imagine the Yarra: How community, legislation and land use planning is shaping the future of an iconic waterway

Karen White<sup>1</sup> and Hannah Pexton<sup>2</sup>

1 Melbourne Water, 990 La Trobe Street, Docklands, 3008. [Karen.white@melbournewater.com.au](mailto:Karen.white@melbournewater.com.au),

2 Melbourne Water, 990 La Trobe Street, Docklands, 3008. [Hannah.pexton@melbournewater.com.au](mailto:Hannah.pexton@melbournewater.com.au)

## Key Points

- Against a backdrop of a growing Melbourne population and climate change, the community have called for the health and amenity of the Yarra River to be improved and protected for the future
- New legislation and an overarching strategic plan for the river will put the waterway at the centre of planning by harmonising activities and aligning decision-making.
- An extensive and rigorous engagement process was designed to facilitate the development of a 50 year community vision for the Yarra River.
- Putting the vision in the hands of the community has created a powerful legacy for generations to come

## Abstract

The Yarra River and its lands are the lifeblood of Greater Melbourne, a magnificent natural asset flowing through more than 200km of valleys, agricultural land, and suburbs into the heart of the Melbourne CBD. Known as Birrarung to the Wurundjeri, the river is central to the history and culture of Traditional Owners. The Yarra is an iconic symbol of Victoria, providing 70% of Melbourne's drinking water and boasting 2,450 hectares of urban parklands and green open spaces.

We are now at a turning point in the river's history. With future challenges of climate change and population growth imminent on the horizon, it is crucial the health and amenity of the Yarra is improved and protected for generations to come.

In recognition of this, the Victorian State Government appointed the Yarra Ministerial Advisory Committee in 2015 to provide independent advice to government on the key issues and opportunities for the river. The government released the Yarra River Action Plan in response to the advice and central to the action plan were requirements to strengthen legislation, combine land use and waterway planning to provide a future blueprint for the Yarra and above all, ensure community is at the heart of the process.

This paper will describe how the combined strength of the Yarra River Protection (*Wilip-gin Birrarung murrong*) Act 2017 and collaboration with the community to develop a 50 year vision is shaping the future of this iconic waterway.

## Keywords

Yarra River, vision, community, traditional owners, strategic plan

## Introduction

The Yarra River and its lands are a superb natural asset emerging from the near-pristine forests of Mt Baw Baw and flowing through more than 200km of valleys, agricultural land and suburbs into the heart of the Melbourne CBD (Figure 1). The Yarra is an iconic symbol of Victoria and plays an integral role in supporting

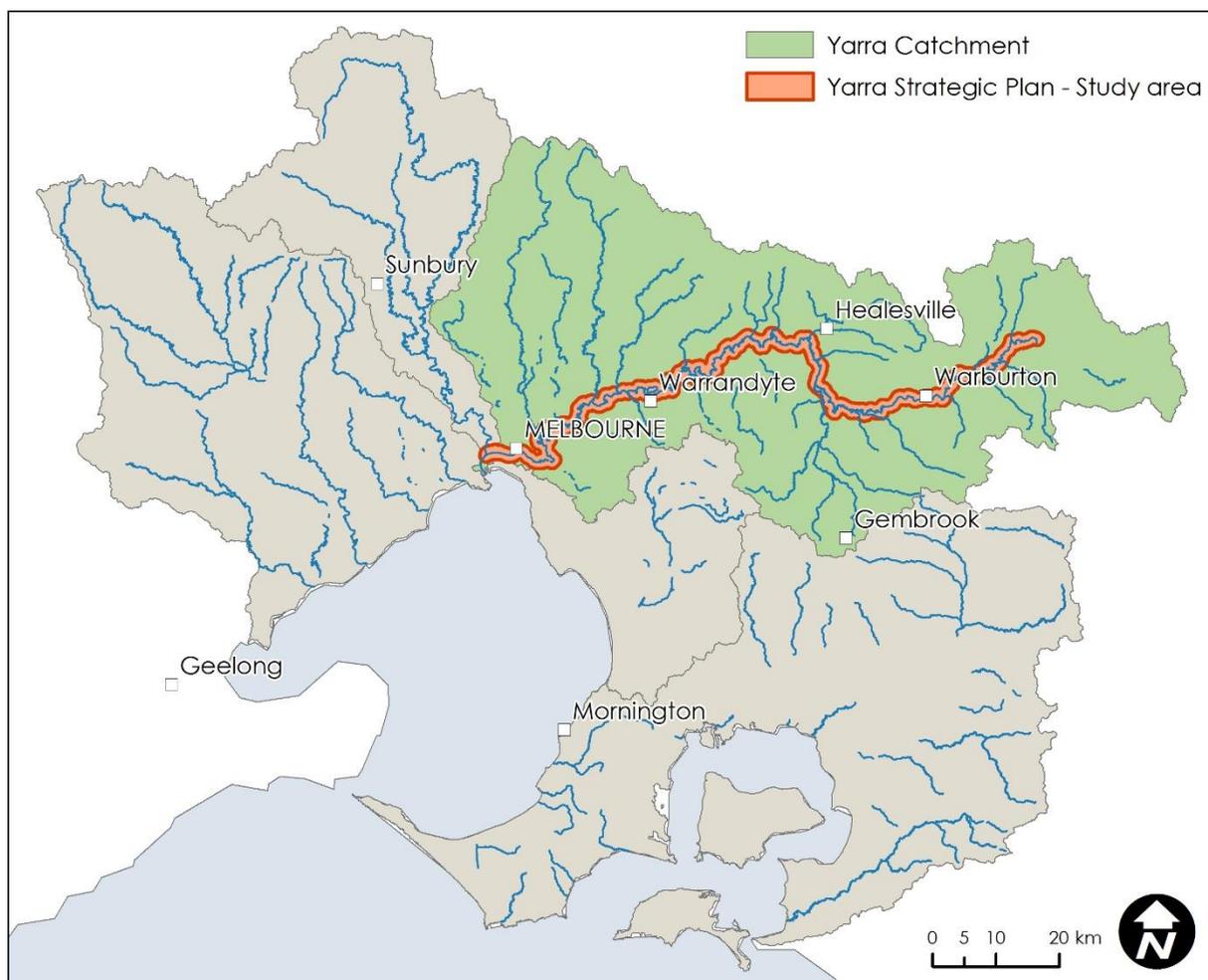
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Melbourne's liveability status. Known as Birrarung (shadows of the mist) to the Wurundjeri, the river is a life source and central to the history and culture of Traditional Owners.

Over the years, community attitudes to the uses and values of the Yarra River have changed. Post settlement, the Yarra was a dumping ground for an emerging city, a waterway that Melbourne literally turned its back on. James Goudie, a Scottish traveler visiting Melbourne in 1893 remarked that the Yarra is "*the filthiest piece of water I ever had the misfortune to be afloat on*" (Clode, 2006, p51). Big investments in Melbourne's sewerage infrastructure marked the beginning in turning the Yarra's fortunes around although it wasn't until the 1970s, when environmental and planning controls were introduced that the improvement in the health of the Yarra River really began to progress.

Community attitudes have also reached a turning point, as highlighted by the The Age 'Give the Yarra a go' campaign in 1980 which aimed to restore the river to the people. If Mr Goudie were to return to Melbourne today, he would find a 'rediscovered' river, with the city reorienting itself to face the river and a community concerned about the health and future amenity of the waterway. This concern is based on the increased demand for high density development on the Yarra banks in the inner suburbs, expansion of hard surfaces increasing stormwater runoff to the waterway and increased pressure on biodiversity and iconic fauna such as the platypus. Environmental advocates have now turned their attention to a different issue, arguing we are in danger of loving the Yarra River to death.



**Figure 1. Yarra River and catchment**

## **A case for change**

The river's history is now at a turning point with Melbourne's population predicted to grow to more than 8 million over the next 50 years (DELWP 2017a). This will occur against a backdrop of climate change with declining rainfall, longer periods of drought and higher temperatures (Grose, M. et al., 2015). With these challenges imminent on the horizon, it is crucial the health and amenity of the Yarra is improved and protected for generations to come.

In recognition of this, the Victorian State Government appointed the Yarra River Protection Ministerial Advisory Committee (Yarra MAC) in 2015 to provide independent advice to government on the key issues and opportunities for the Yarra River. The Yarra MAC spent 9 months engaging with the community on perceptions and values, consulting with stakeholders on current planning and management arrangements for the Yarra River to develop recommendations to the government on how to best care for and manage the waterway and its lands for future generations.

The Yarra MAC proposed a new governance framework to protect the river comprising the following seven elements:

1. Objectives to underpin the governance reforms.
2. Recognition of the importance of the Yarra River and its parklands in all relevant state policies.
3. A community vision that clearly outlines long term expectations for the entire length of the river.
4. An integrated, overarching strategic plan for the river to give effect to the community vision and provide direction to (and harmonise) activities and decision-making in Yarra corridor
5. Improved institutional arrangements with clear accountabilities for all aspects of management **with the inclusion of Traditional Owners and community participation.**
6. Legislation to provide statutory backing and longevity to the overarching strategic planning framework
7. Clear funding and infrastructure delivery arrangements. (DELWP 2016, p26 )

The government released the Yarra River Action Plan in February 2017 in response to the Yarra MAC (Figure 2). The action plan committed to strengthen legislation, combine land use and waterway planning to provide a future blueprint for the Yarra and above all, ensure community is at the heart of the process (DELWP 2017b). The Action Plan nominated Melbourne Water as the lead agency for the development of a 50 year Community Vision for the Yarra and the overarching Yarra Strategic Plan.

## **Planning for the future**

In December 2017 a landmark piece of legislation came into effect to protect the Yarra River for future generations: the Yarra River Protection (Wilip-gin Birrarung Murrong) Act 2017. In an Australian first, the Yarra River Protection (Wilip-gin Birrarung Murrong) Act 2017 identified the Yarra River and the many hundreds of parcels of public land it flows through as one living, integrated natural entity for protection and improvement.

To underline the importance of the public parklands and open spaces along the Yarra River within metropolitan Melbourne, the Act identifies them collectively as the Greater Yarra Urban Parklands. It is also the first Act in Victoria to use the language of Traditional Owners, Wurundjeri Tribe, in its title (Wilip-gin Birrarung Murrong – Keep the Yarra Alive), and one of the first in Australia to include Traditional Owner language in the legislation. Woi-wurrung language is used in recognition of Traditional Owners' custodianship of the river and connection to the lands through which the river flows.

The Yarra River Protection (Wilip-gin Birrarung murrong) Act 2017 sets out the purpose and requirements for the preparation of the Yarra Strategic Plan and the community vision. The purpose of the Yarra Strategic Plan is to coordinate and harmonise the many existing plans, regulations and investment programs for the river. It

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will give effect to the community vision for the Yarra and its landscape, providing an overarching spatial and management context for localised planning along the river corridor. The scope of the Yarra Strategic Plan is land within 1km from either bank of the waterway and it excludes the Upper Yarra Reservoir (due to it being a closed catchment) and the port of Melbourne area.

Melbourne Water have established, and now facilitates the Yarra Collaboration Committee (YCC) to co-design the Yarra Strategic Plan. The YCC includes representation from key state and local government agencies directly involved in the management and protection of the Yarra River and the Wurundjeri Tribe Council. The YCC provides strategic advice on the development and implementation of the YSP, ensuring it can foster strong partnerships and effective coordination of services, and communicate and champion the plan among stakeholder groups and organisations.



Figure 2. Timeline of events

## A community vision for the Yarra

As outlined in the Yarra River Protection (Wilip-gin Birrarung murrn) Act 2017, the Yarra Strategic Plan must include a long-term community vision for the Yarra River, which identifies community values, priorities and preferences in relation to that land, including preferences for future land uses, protection and development.

Building upon the conversations begun by the Yarra MAC process, Melbourne Water designed an engagement approach to develop a 50-year vision for each of the Yarra River's four reaches (upper rural, lower rural, suburban and inner-city) and an overarching vision for the whole river.

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The engagement approach was designed to:

- celebrate the role, knowledge and cultural practices of the Yarra River Traditional Owners
- celebrate the community's connection to the Yarra River and its social value
- deliver inclusive, accessible and genuine engagement
- educate the community on the complexities of the planning and management of the Yarra River
- ensure the visions reflect the broader community's aspirations and values for the Yarra River
- ensure the visions were collaboratively written and championed by the community.

## Broad engagement

Broad community engagement ran from September to November 2017, with an extensive program of activities to find out what people value about the Yarra River. This included drop-in events, a library program, social research, focus groups and an online engagement website – [imaginetheyarra.com.au](http://imaginetheyarra.com.au) (Figure 3)

## 50 Year Community Vision for the Yarra



Figure 3. Summary of engagement for development of the Yarra Community Vision

This phase was designed to capture the breadth of the community's views on the Yarra as well as targeting hard-to-reach groups. Over 2500 submissions were received during the engagement period. These submissions were analysed by an independent research company who formulated a report to feed into phase two engagement. At the completion of phase one the project website was updated to outline the next steps in the process.

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### **Yarra Community Assembly**

In November 2017 Melbourne Water kicked off the next phase of engagement by seeking expressions of interest for the Yarra River Community Assembly. From over 300 applications, 24 people were selected using a randomised process, with six drawn from each of the four reaches of the river. The process of selecting the community members was undertaken by an independent consultant to ensure transparency and avoid bias. The selected assembly members were evenly spread across the four reaches and represented diversity in age, gender, culture, vocation and connection to the Yarra River. The primary objective of this group was to take the findings from the phase one engagement and write community visions that represented the views of the broader community. This placed the decision of what was included in the visions into the hands of the community assembly through a collaborative process.

Significant effort was made to improve the capacity of the community assembly members in understanding the complexity of the Yarra River, its management and its uses. As well as hearing from subject matter experts and Traditional Owners, the group reviewed and reflected on the findings of phase one engagement to ensure they acted as agents for the broader community.

The Yarra River Community Assembly was supported by the following activities:

- Introductory workshop – designed to introduce assembly members to the project, each other and the project team. Participants were provided with educational resources and took part in cultural awareness training with a Wurundjeri Elder.
- Private online portal – set-up for assembly members to learn about the project and the Yarra River. The portal provided the assembly with the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the outcomes from the phase one engagement, and their role in writing the community visions. Participants were also able to shape how they engaged by posing questions and discussing topics with other assembly members. Melbourne Water responded to assembly member's requests for technical information.
- Expert speaker session - To support the learning of assembly members, several technical speakers were asked to share their knowledge and expertise with the assembly. A series of short visual presentations focusing on heritage, resilience, urban planning, economic benefit, environmental health, transport and climate change were recorded for the assembly to view.

The community assembly met in February 2018 to develop a 50-year vision for the whole river and one for each of its four reaches. Over two days, community members heard from experts and Traditional Owners, learning about the history of the Yarra, its cultural significance, how it is used and managed and the biggest threats to its future. The assembly explored the outcomes of phase one engagement to understand the desires of the broader community. The assembly then wrote the 50 year vision to provide the building blocks for how the river and its lands are used and managed in future, to ensure the Yarra remains a proud part of Victoria's identity (Figure 4).

The Yarra River Community Assembly members were informed of the governance process required to sign off on their visions from the outset. The assembly have remained highly engaged throughout the vision endorsement process and presented the community vision to the various governance groups prior to Ministerial approval.

The robust process undertaken to develop the vision has meant the vision was endorsed without change. The vision was released in May 2018 by Minister for Water, Minister for Planning and Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change in a ceremony with Wurundjeri Elders by the Yarra River

## Yarra River 50-year Community Vision

Our Yarra River, Birrarung, is recognised around the world as an iconic example of a nurturing relationship between a river and its community.

Flowing from source to sea, it is the resilient lifeblood of past, present and future generations of Victorians. It connects and enriches our flourishing city, suburbs, regions and beyond.

Our Yarra River, Birrarung, its essential role in our lives and its rich history, are respected, understood and protected. It has cared for us for thousands of years and will for thousands to come. The vital and continued role of Traditional Owners as custodians of the River, and its role in their culture, is recognised and celebrated.

Our Yarra River, Birrarung and its diverse surrounding landscapes provide a place of refuge, recreation, learning and livelihood. It brings communities together and supports sustainable local economies. Its clean waters and connected network of thriving green spaces nurture biodiversity, and deepen the relationship between people and nature.

Our Yarra River, Birrarung is respected as a sacred natural living entity and everyone takes responsibility for its care. Its health and integrity are paramount and uncompromised.

What is good for the Yarra is good for all.



Figure 4. Members of the Yarra River Community Assembly and the community vision

### Engagement Assessment

The significant engagement undertaken with the Yarra River Community Assembly provided an excellent opportunity to gather evaluation data, both prior to and post participation. The evaluation framework focused on three key areas: trust and confidence in decision makers, civic participation, and content knowledge (**Error! Reference source not found.**).

**Trust and confidence in decision makers** - The participants trust and confidence in decision makers achieved the most significant growth across all key performance areas, particularly trust that the outcomes would be honoured, and that Melbourne Water and the State Government supported community involvement in decision making. This is an important outcome for the process and a strength of the collaborative style of engagement.

**Civic participation** – Baseline data illustrated relatively high skill and confidence levels of participants when it came to engaging in civic decision making. The growth in skills and confidence was relatively low as a result; however assembly members did note an increase in their confidence in other participants. This was reinforced by comments that they were impressed when the group reached a consensus. Participants also commented that they had learnt new skills for working as part of a group.

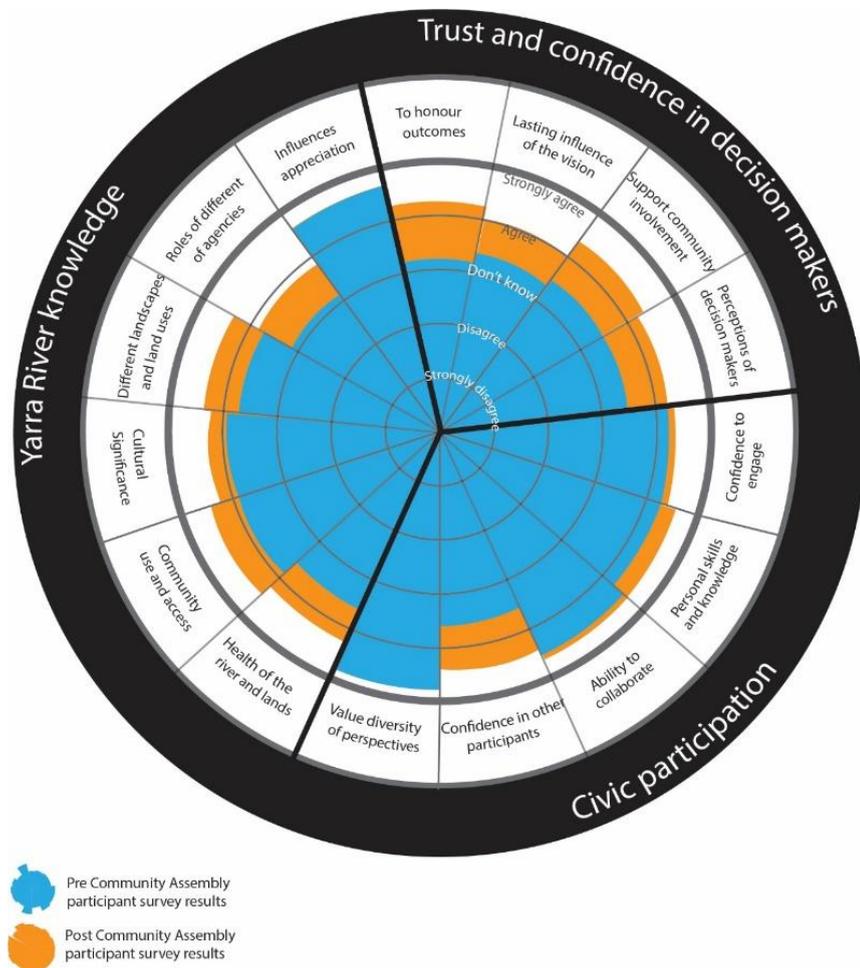


Figure 5. Evaluation of vision process by community assembly members

**Content knowledge** – Participants reported their knowledge had relatively consistent growth, however qualitative data suggests a greater growth than indicated, particularly in terms of the cultural significance of the river. It is likely participants would have benefited from time to reflect and amend their original answer to better illustrate their growth in knowledge.

**Additional evaluation outcomes** - Overall, participants said the Yarra River Community Assembly met their expectations because consensus was achieved, the process was well organised, facilitated and was genuine and a diverse range of people were included and able to provide input.

Participants expressed that they had gained a lot through their participation including greater knowledge and appreciation of other people’s perspectives of the river, with a focus on the insights into Wurundjeri culture. When asked whether they would encourage others to take part in a similar collaborative decision-making process, participants overwhelmingly said they would recommend people take the opportunity.

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## Conclusions

The Yarra River Protection (*Wilip-gin Birrarung murrong*) Act 2017 provides statutory backing for a community vision, arguably the first piece of legislation in Australia to put community and traditional owners at the center of determining the future direction for a natural asset.

Twenty – four community members were randomly selected from over 300 registered people to form the Yarra River Community Assembly. The primary objective of this group was to take the findings from extensive community engagement and write a 50 year community vision for the Yarra that represented the views of the broader community. This placed the decision of what was included in the vision into the hands of the community assembly through a collaborative process.

The success of the process was highlighted by two things; 1) the evaluation of the process by assembly participants showed that trust and confidence in decision makers increased, particularly trust that the outcomes would be honoured, and that Melbourne Water and the State Government supported community involvement in decision making and 2) the vision written by the community assembly was endorsed by the government with no changes. This is an important outcome for the process and a strength of the collaborative style of engagement. Putting the vision in the hands of the community has created a powerful legacy for generations to come

It is through the combined strength of the Yarra River Protection (*Wilip-gin Birrarung murrong*) Act 2017, and collaboration with the community to develop a 50 year vision that is shaping the future of this iconic waterway. The next challenge will be to develop the Yarra Strategic Plan to give effect to the vision and legislation.

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