Warringal Conservation Society

SUBMISSION TO DRAFT 10-YEAR YARRA STRATEGIC PLAN

Warringal Conservation Society (WCS) is a local community group which has been advocating for the green spaces of the City of Banyule for 50 years. Our special areas of focus are Banyule Flats and Warringal Parklands where, with the help of Banyule Council's Bush Management Team, we have been restoring and maintaining habitat since 1970. Native wildlife has returned and re-established. It is our firm belief that marsupials such as kangaroo, swamp wallaby and wombat and the monotreme echidna all repopulated via the Yarra Valley corridor.

WCS recognises that the Yarra River, Birrurung, is the physical and spiritual focus of our region. Members of WCS have participated throughout the community consultations over the drafting of the Yarra Strategic Plan, the 50-year Community Vision and the Healthy Waterways Strategy; and we are gratified to read this comprehensive draft document which sets out a whole of Yarra approach to forward planning. It includes all the elements that the Society wishes to see, such as:

Cultural Flows as described by the Wurrundjeri Woi-wurrung

Performance Objective 1: A healthy river and lands

- Restoration of the Middle Yarra Billabongs and wetlands
- The improvement of biodiversity by enhancement of terrestrial and aquatic habitat in the Yarra catchment
- The improvement of water quality

Performance Objective 2: A culturally diverse river corridor

- Creation of interpretive and educational material for five named sites (P52) having shared values for Traditional Owners and post-1843 cultures; in particular for WCS, Bolin Bolin Billabong

Performance Objective 3: Quality Parklands for a Growing City

- WCS' commitment to Banyule Flats and Warringal Parklands for 50 years has given us a first -hand view of the importance of open space and parkland for people's health and mental wellbeing

- The Yarra River links numerous parklands by trails and together provide a unique sense of place – suburban, urban and rural

Performance Objective 4: Protecting the Natural Beauty of the Yarra River corridor

- WCS believes this objective is imperative in order to preserve cultural spirit and natural form of the river. Any development must be complementary to the local reach of the river, and with minimum setbacks from the river banks

The strategic plan notes that "All actions are subject to funding." Dedicated long term funding will be required for the stated objectives to be achieved, and an appropriate funding mechanism should be included as part of the Yarra Strategic Plan.

THE SUBURBAN REACH

The North East Link project (NELP) is one of four existing projects listed for this reach (P94). The draft Yarra Strategic Plan document does not indicate any concern for impacts this tollway may have on the Yarra River where it crosses in Heidelberg (Banksia Street). WCS believes that there will be considerable loss of habitat, possible subsidence due to tunnelling, stormwater runoff reducing water quality and impacts on aquatic life. The Yarra River Protection (Wilip-gin Birrurung murron) Act 2017 must be upheld for all development but infrastructure projects are exempt. The Society believes that the progress of major projects impacting the Yarra River must be monitored.

Having closely followed the NELP development, WCS has grave concerns also for Banyule Flats. The proximity of tunnels may cause lowering of the water table and/or water drawdown, leading to tree death and impacts to Banyule Swamp and wetland area. Due to the reference design model being used for the NELP, there is no defined plan for the management of road runoff and the prospect of water quality offset strategies have been raised. These issues have the potential to compromise Banyule Swamp and the surrounding parkland, a site recognised as being of State Significance for its ecological and conservation values (Practical Ecology 2017).

The Yarra River corridor is also likely to be affected by the relocation of sporting facilities displaced by the NELP.

The fact that major projects do not have to comply with the Yarra River Protection Act greatly reduces its value. It is hoped that the Birrarung Council will be closely watching NELP going forward.

Between the Banyule Swamp and the Yarra River is the oxbow-shaped Banyule Billabong. This used to be a curve in the river, now isolated. Until about 10 years ago this billabong filled at roughly five-year intervals when the Yarra River was in flood. For some years this has not occurred, due to highly regulated water flows by the river catchment authority, Melbourne Water, and prolonged drought.

Expanding on Performance Objective 1 noted previously, it is the paramount wish of this Society that some of the many billabongs of the Middle Yarra Valley be restored, namely Burke Road, Bolin Bolin, Banyule and Willsmere Billabongs. Historically they were drained, filled in or the river straightened to create cattle pasture. It is estimated that the Yarra flows of today are reduced to one third of their original volume, due to upstream dams and the impacts of drought. The ecosystem of the Yarra cannot remain healthy in such a regulated system. Cultural and environmental flows could recreate healthy billabongs and wetlands. The restoration would be of enormous public interest and the resulting habitat for wildlife could be world class.

Stormwater management strategies to reduce litter and contaminants entering the Yarra are also an important component of Performance Objective 1 that WCS would like to see prioritised. Awareness campaigns for litter, pesticides and chemicals are of some value, but must be accompanied by appropriate regulation, penalties and rigorous enforcement. The responsible government agencies must be adequately funded and resourced to fulfil their educational and regulatory roles.

Performance Objective 4: Protecting the natural beauty of the Yarra River corridor, has some elements that may be inconsistent with its stated aims. Action 1 addresses improving access and viewing locations, but increased accessibility may detract from the inherent natural beauty of the river. Measuring success by the number of sites with improved access is a simplistic approach that does not capture that value of less disturbed reaches of the Yarra. The importance of less accessible parts of the Yarra River corridor that are havens for wildlife and meet the needs of more intrepid users should be recognised in the plan.

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Reference:

Practical Ecology 2017, Warringal Parklands and Banyule Flats Ecological and Conservation Values Assessment.