

Merri Creek and Environs Strategy 2009-2014

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Merri Creek Management Committee

February 2009

Full copies of the Strategy are available in hardcopy or on CD from MCMC or on www.mcmc.org.au.
Merri Creek Management Committee, 2 Lee St, Brunswick East 3057.

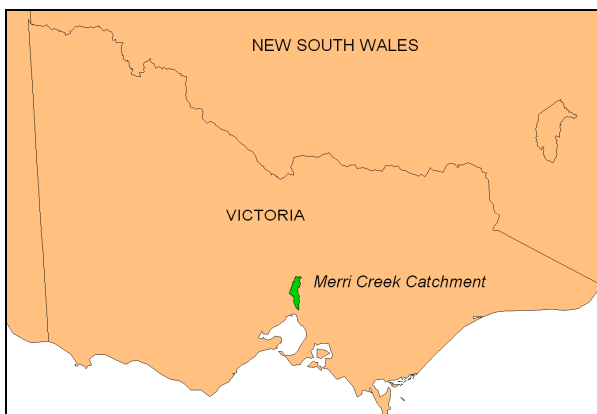
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Introduction

Merri Creek is a tributary of the Yarra River and flows south from the Great Dividing Range through rural lands and the northern suburbs of Melbourne, Victoria.

The Merri Creek and Environs Strategy (MCES) is a document intended to give direction to managers of the waterway corridors of the Merri catchment. While the title indicates it has a strategic intent, it also captures some important, often site-specific actions, which underpin its strategic direction. This new version of the strategy includes numerous changes resulting from the incorporation of many goals, objectives, targets and actions from the Port Phillip and Western Port Regional Catchment Strategy 2004-2009. It also responds to Melbourne Water's request not to be assigned responsibility for any actions in the Strategy, and their reliance instead on their own planning for strategic direction. Melbourne Water broadly supports the intent of the MCES.

The principal users of the MCES are the members of Merri Creek Management Committee (MCMC), being the Cities of Darebin, Hume, Moreland, Whittlesea and Yarra, the Mitchell Shire, and Friends of Merri Creek, Friends of Wallan Creek and Friends of Aitken Creek, as well as MCMC itself.

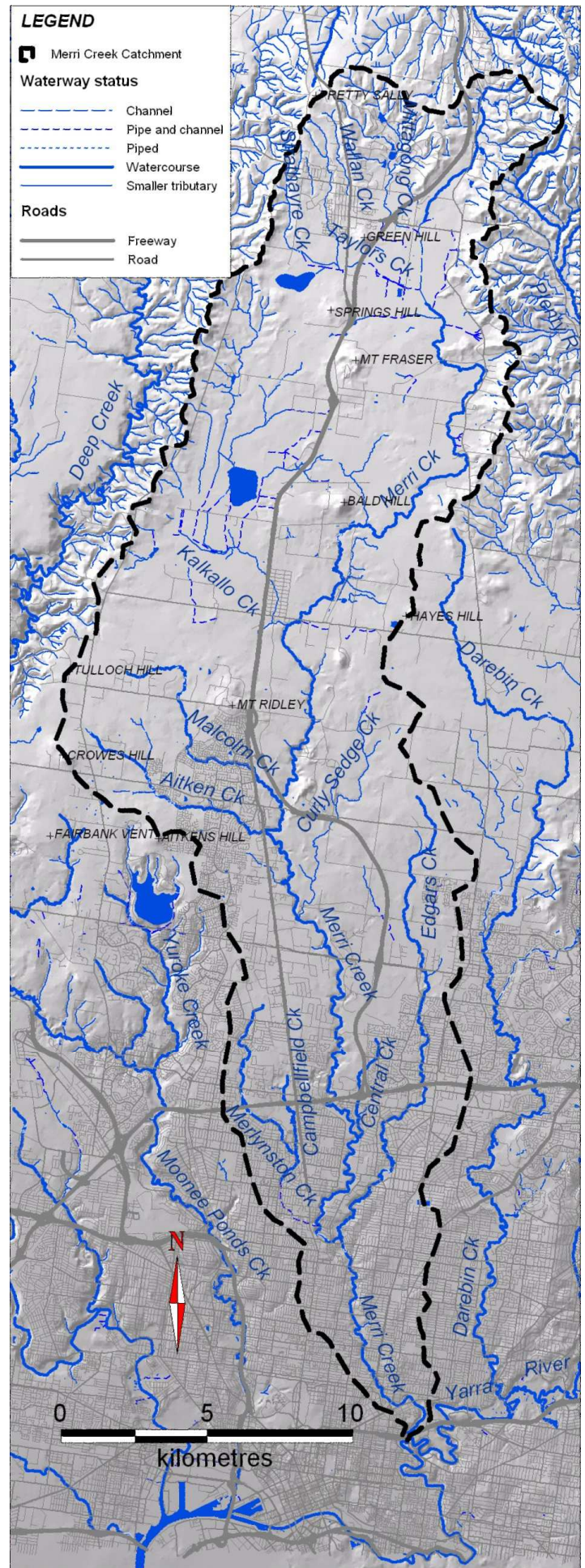


Map 1 - The location of the Merri catchment

Merri Creek Management Committee

Merri Creek Management Committee Inc. (MCMC) is an environmental coordination and management agency formed in 1989 to achieve a shared vision for the waterway corridors of the Merri catchment. Its members include all municipalities in the catchment: Darebin, Hume, Moreland, Whittlesea, Yarra and Mitchell, plus the Friends of Merri Creek and the Friends of Wallan Creek. Representatives of these member groups form the Committee of Management that guides MCMC's activities.

MCMC's primary aim is to ensure the preservation of natural and cultural heritage, and the ecologically sensitive restoration, development and maintenance of the Merri Creek and tributaries, their corridors and associated ecological communities. It employs specialist staff to achieve this aim.



Map 2 - The Merri catchment and its waterways

Overarching Goals for Merri Catchment

Water goal

Sustainable water use and healthy waterways, wetlands, estuaries, coasts and bays

Land goal

Healthy land used appropriately and productively

Biodiversity goal

Healthy and enduring ecosystems with a diversity of habitats and native species

People goal

The community valuing, understanding and celebrating the region's catchment assets and working to achieve sustainability

The overarching goals for the Merri Creek and Environs Strategy are drawn from the Port Phillip and Westernport Regional Catchment Strategy 2004-2009.

Each chapter of the strategy includes background, discusses catchment issues, and identifies objectives, targets and actions relating to the targets. Where appropriate objectives have been drawn from the Regional Catchment Strategy, but other objectives come from relevant State legislation, or have been developed for the Merri Creek and Environs Strategy.

Vision for the Merri catchment waterway corridors

To achieve healthy living streams flowing through attractive environments which provide habitat for native animals and are valued by the community as peaceful, passive open space havens. To protect the natural and cultural features of the Merri catchment waterway corridors through sensitive management which will provide a lasting benefit for the community.



Central Creek Grassland

Part A - Land

Section 1 – Cultural Heritage and Visual Character

Chapter 1.1 - Aboriginal Heritage identifies that the Merri Creek waterway corridors are very important sites for Aboriginal Heritage. It describes protection available for the sites, especially in the light of the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006.

Objectives for Aboriginal Heritage are derived from the Aboriginal Heritage Act:

- *Recognise, protect and conserve Aboriginal cultural heritage in the catchment in ways that are based on respect for Aboriginal knowledge and cultural and traditional practices.*
- *Recognise Aboriginal people as the primary guardians, keepers and knowledge holders of Aboriginal cultural heritage.*
- *Accord appropriate status to Aboriginal people with traditional or familial links with Aboriginal cultural heritage in protecting that heritage.*
- *Promote the management of Aboriginal cultural heritage as an integral part of land and natural resource management.*
- *Promote public awareness and understanding of Aboriginal cultural heritage in the catchment.*

The actions provide for protection of identified sites of Aboriginal heritage significance, compliance with the Aboriginal Heritage Act, development of a protocol for dealing with planning applications affecting known sites and areas of sensitivity, further survey work along unsurveyed tributaries, community information, extending the Merri Creek Environmental Significance Overlay to include areas of Aboriginal Heritage significance, as well as specific on-ground actions to manage sites.

Chapter 1.2 - Historical Heritage summarises what is known of the post-contact non-Aboriginal heritage of Merri Creek and its tributaries.

The objective is drawn from the Planning and Environment Act:

- *To conserve and enhance those buildings, areas or other places which are of scientific, aesthetic, architectural or historical interest, or otherwise of special cultural value.*

Actions include having sites listed in Heritage Overlays, the Victorian Heritage Register, and the National Heritage Register, providing community information and interpretation, and further work to survey tributaries and update existing studies.

Chapter 1.3 - Visual Character describes the visual character of Merri Creek, and discusses threats to the visual character and opportunities for its improvement.

Objectives are drawn from the State Planning Policy Framework and from the Merri Creek Environmental Significance Overlay:

- *To protect and enhance the natural and visual character of the waterway corridors.*
- *To protect sites and features of high landscape value.*
- *To ensure development responds to its context and reinforces special characteristics of local environment and place by emphasising the underlying natural landscape character.*
- *To create a peaceful, passive open space quality in the creek parkland and valley.*

Actions include improvements to the visual character by improved design and built form, screen planting, relocation of powerlines, improvement of drain outfalls, control of rubbish dumping, limiting creek crossings, protecting escarpments, using basalt rocks in creek works in basalt areas, planting indigenous plants, deterring inappropriate artwork, removing graffiti, preventing encroachments, and carrying out a new landscape study.

Section 2 – Natural Heritage and Land Management

This section considers the biodiversity, geodiversity and land management issues of Merri Creek and its tributaries. Three broad reaches are then examined - the headwaters to Craigieburn, Craigieburn to Mahoneys Road, and Mahoneys Road to the Yarra River.

Chapter 2.1 - Biodiversity summarises biodiversity planning in the catchment and the biodiversity assets within. Most of the types of remnant vegetation present have a very high priority for protection, restoration, and revegetation. Threatened species management is discussed, as well as reservation, protection, and the establishment of habitat corridors.

Objectives are drawn from the Port Phillip and Westernport Regional Catchment Strategy:

- *Achieve a net gain in the quantity and quality of indigenous vegetation.*
- *Maintain the diversity of indigenous habitats and species in terrestrial and aquatic environments.*
- *Achieve sustainable populations of indigenous flora and fauna species.*
- *Improve the connectivity and long-term security of indigenous habitats and species.*
- *Encourage intelligent use of introduced flora and fauna species with minimal impacts on indigenous habitats and species.*

Actions include the preparation of a biodiversity plan for the catchment followed by municipal biodiversity plans incorporating revegetation plans, application of

the Native Vegetation Clearance Controls, education programs about and monitoring and enforcement of the native vegetation clearing controls, encouraging the use of local native species and the control of environmental weeds, additional planning scheme protection needed to protect native vegetation, re-publishing *Plants of the Merri Merri*, encouraging the use of covenants to protect remnant vegetation, advocating for the reservation of remnant vegetation areas with high priority ecological vegetation classes, and monitoring of rare species and reserve management.

Chapter 2.2 - Geodiversity discusses the geology and the many sites of geological significance along the waterways and more generally in the catchment. It outlines studies to date and identifies a lack of site protection.

An objective has been developed for the Strategy:

- *Sites of geological or geomorphological significance are identified, protected and used for interpretation of the catchment's geological history.*

Actions are to protect sites through their inclusion in planning controls, commissioning new study of sites, especially on tributaries, creating educational material, and providing information on sites to Councils.

Chapter 2.3 – Land Management discusses pest plant and animal control, as well as salinity and erosion management. Pest plants are a major problem in the catchment. Foxes, rabbits, feral cats and straying domestic dogs and cats are identified as problem pest animals. Salinity and erosion in the upper catchment are identified as issues to be managed.

Objectives for land management are derived from the Port Phillip and Western Port Regional Catchment Strategy:

- *Protect and improve the health of land.*
- *Ensure sensitively located and functional urban and urban-rural fringe areas with minimal impacts on the catchment's biodiversity, water resources and heritage values.*
- *Match rural land-use, development and management to land capability and minimise impacts on the catchment's biodiversity, water resources and heritage values.*
- *Provide a high-quality network of parks and open space across urban and rural areas managed for community and environmental benefit.*

Actions include planning for pest control, and undertaking it, educating others about pest control and encouraging them to control pests on their own land, monitoring pest species and where appropriate developing local laws. Other actions are to assist with pest research, undertake training, coordination of pest control programs, encouraging uptake among private landowners of Melbourne Water's River Frontage Management Program, and undertaking further research into salinity in the catchment.

The catchment, section by section

Chapter 2.4 – Headwaters to Craigieburn outlines some of the key natural features of the reach including the now largely drained Hernes Swamp, Camoola Swamp, the Bald Hill grassland, the Kalkallo to Craigieburn section of Merri Creek, (including the Summerhill Road area where Platypus was last seen on Merri Creek), and the Mickleham-Mt. Ridley grassland site to the west of the middle catchment.



Looking southeast across Wallan and the upper Merri catchment

Actions include:

- Working with other agencies to coordinate protection of sites (including grasslands, grassy woodlands and swamps) as well as their habitat links, and to implement land protection programs.
- Strategic and statutory planning to protect sites especially Red Gums and Grasslands and to prevent rock removal.
- Strategic planning for Hernes Swamp and Bald Hill Grassland.
- Promotion of programs such as rate rebate schemes, Landcare, Land for Wildlife, Conservation Covenants, and supporting private landowners to conserve remnant vegetation.
- Habitat corridor development and revegetation.
- Implementation of local biodiversity plans.

Chapter 2.5 – Craigieburn to Mahoneys Road This reach possesses some significant grassland remnants including the nationally significant Craigieburn grassland. Also described within this reach are the Cooper Street grassland, the Barry Road to Horne Street sub-reach including Galada Tamboore (formerly the Campbellfield Retarding Basin), Horne Street to Mahoneys Road, and the Edgars Creek headwaters.



Galada Tamboore

The actions include:

- Finalising concept plans for and implementing the proposed Merri Creek Park, and detailed management planning for the park.

- Developing an action plan to protect sites and habitat links.
- Reserving open space along waterways, and consolidating public ownership.
- Screen plantings.
- Vehicle access control and anti-rubbish dumping measures.
- Implementing site plans.
- Working with Melbourne Water to improve sediment control and improve water quality in the vicinity of the Campbellfield Landfill site.
- Preserve and expand opportunities for open space provision, flora and fauna conservation and habitat links between sites.
- Preparation of a Merri waterways open space manual.
- Training for Council and MCMC staff.
- Improving habitat values on tributaries.

Chapter 2.6 – Mahoneys Road to Yarra River deals with the most urbanised section of the catchment. The chapter discusses the highly fragmented land ownership, and identifies opportunities to consolidate the open space corridor. It describes how successful the program to revegetate this section has been. In this section planning centres around open space nodes and links, and existing node plans are listed and priorities for future plans discussed. Other improvements highlighted include screening, biodiversity preservation and revegetation.



Looking south from Blyth Street along Merri Creek

Actions include

- Developing specified node plans, and continuing the implementation and updating of existing plans.
- Conducting regular reviews of land ownership and zoning opportunities to consolidate open space corridors
- Developing access arrangements where land is not clearly open space.
- Developing a fire management plan.
- Preparing a Merri waterways open space manual.
- Training for Council and MCMC staff.

Part B – Water



Merri Creek south of Blyth Street, Brunswick East as a flood recedes

Section 3 – Surface waters, Creeks and Wetlands

This section focuses on water within the catchment. The roles and responsibilities of agencies involved and the concept of water-sensitive urban design are described.

Chapter 3.1 – Drainage, Waterway and Floodplain Management starts by describing the morphology of the Merri Creek and its tributaries and swamps. It describes the need for willow and other woody weed control, and the constraints on native vegetation management. The flooding history of the Merri Creek is described, along with Melbourne Water's role in preparing drainage schemes to provide for drainage needs in a comprehensive fashion, and the need for water-sensitive urban design as part of urban planning down to the individual lot level.

Objectives are derived from the Port Phillip and Westernport Regional Catchment Strategy:

- *Protect and improve the environmental health and social and economic values of waterways and wetlands.*
- *Management of water resources to minimise risks to natural ecosystems, public land, private assets and public safety.*

The chapter contains few actions, since most responsibilities are Melbourne Water's, and Melbourne Water is not one of the participants in the Merri Creek and Environs Strategy. The actions are control of development within the flood zone, reporting on Council stormwater management plans and their refinement, and assessing the incidence of and controlling woody weeds.

Chapter 3.2 – Water Quality describes legislation and policy related to water including the Victorian River Health Strategy and the State Environment Protection Policy Waters of Victoria. Water quality studies of Merri waterways are summarised, and significant faecal and heavy metal contamination identified as issues. Changes in water quality along Merri Creek tend to be related to changes in land use, and these are described and opportunities for improvement identified. Litter is also identified as a significant issue.

The objective is taken from the Port Phillip and Western Port Regional Catchment Strategy:

- *Improve water quality in catchment waterways, aquifers, and wetlands, and consequently estuaries, bays and seas.*

Actions include implementation of water-sensitive urban design, working with Melbourne Water to restore wetlands, construct litter and toxicant traps and investigate removal of contaminated sediments, working with the Environment Protection Authority and Yarra Valley Water, hosting Waterwatch, and a labelling program for drains entering the Merri Waterways to facilitate pollution reporting.



A polluted stormwater drain north of Blyth Street Brunswick East

Chapter 3.3 – Waterway Ecosystem outlines the conditions required for stream health, and describes what is known of aquatic mammals, frogs, reptiles, birds and plants in the Merri waterways. The factors which have caused waterway ecosystem degradation are described, in particular changes to stream form, farming and urbanisation, the role of riparian vegetation and weeds, and stream flow.

The objective is derived from the Regional Catchment Strategy:

- *Protect and improve the environmental health and social and economic values of waterways and wetlands.*

Actions include investigation of environmental flow requirements, platypus and native fish reintroduction, recording native fish populations, impacts on stream life and human health from heavy metals, assessing the potential to improve habitat at Coburg Lake, and installing a fish ladder at Edwardes Lake.



A Racali (Water Rat) feeding platform with evidence of clam shells

Part C – Community



A snake information day at Central Creek Grassland

Section 4 – Recreation, Trails, Safety, Community Involvement & Education

This section deals with the importance of the waterway open space for people.

Chapter 4.1 – Community Involvement and Education highlights the role the community has had and continues to have in Merri waterways, and shows how important it is to continue and enhance that involvement.

Two Objectives are drawn from the Regional Catchment Strategy and the third created for this strategy:

- *To increase the capacity and participation of people and organisations in catchment management.*
- *To reduce the overall impact of the regional community on catchment assets.*
- *To encourage community custodianship and interest in the Creek Corridors.*

The actions include developing community liaison and participation in events, supporting Friends groups, developing recreation and education programs, including for people of non-English-speaking background (NESB) and schools, working with the CMA to support Landcare groups in the rural parts of the catchment, providing community information about facilities and open space, seeking representation from Aboriginal and NESB groups, involving the community in planning and restoring waterway open space, providing interpretation, undertaking an oral history program, surveys of creek users, and preparing a community engagement strategy.

Chapter 4.2 – Recreation describes how Merri waterways are used for recreation, what features are important, and looks at areas for improvement.

One objective is derived from the Regional Catchment Strategy and the second is developed for this strategy:

- *Provide a high quality network of parks and open space across urban and rural areas managed for community and environmental benefit.*
- *Provide passive recreation, education and information facilities along Creek corridors.*

Actions include continued development of creek-side open space for passive recreation, promoting the

creeks through events and interpretation, conducting programs utilising the waterways passive open spaces including for users not normally catered for, developing sportsground perimeters as passive open space, developing facilities and providing access, managing 'wild and informal' bush play, providing water-based recreation, enforcing, monitoring and reviewing pet control, and continuing to build linear parkland north along Merri Creek and along tributaries.

Chapter 4.3 – Trails and Access describes the history and planning of shared paths in the catchment, and improvements needed, especially in the light of the Merri Creek Trail Review. It considers other paths, signage and guides for the paths, walking routes and access.

One objective is drawn from the Regional Catchment Strategy, and the second developed for this strategy:

- *Provide a high quality network of parks and open space across urban and rural areas managed for community and environmental benefit.*
- *Provide recreational cycling and walking trails along Creek corridors.*

Actions include publishing a map of the Merri Creek and its open space, preparing a signage strategy and improved signage, making access improvements including for disabled people, investigating walking/trekking trails, extending the shared path to Craigieburn, establishing links to other trails and important facilities, improving the standard of the Merri Creek Trail, improving paths along tributaries, and implementing the Merri Creek Trail Review.

Chapter 4.4 – Public Safety examines a number of known and perceived hazards which may be encountered by people using the waterway open space. Strategies to control the hazards are discussed.

One objective is from the Regional Catchment Strategy, and the second developed for this strategy:

- *Provide a high quality network of parks and open space across urban and rural areas managed for community and environmental benefit.*
- *Create a safe environment and a perception of safety along creek corridors.*

Actions include implementing a Merri Watch program, promoting a positive interface between development and waterway open space, constructing facilities to standards, focussing use at major open space nodes, researching data on safety in open space, undertaking discussions with the Police, appointment of a ranger, minimising lighting impacts on biodiversity, involving the community in open space design, providing signage to safe areas, phones, etc, investigating unsafe bicycle use, increasing By-Law surveillance and improving dog on-lead signage.

Part D – Planning and Management



An extract from the planning scheme at Cooper Street Epping

This part of the Strategy deals with issues of planning and management coordination, and monitoring and review of the Strategy.

Chapter 5.1 – Planning describes different levels of planning that affect the Merri waterways, including planning schemes, urban growth planning, Green Wedge Plans, catchment planning, employment precinct planning, the Development Guidelines for Merri Creek, open space management planning, and statutory planning, and the opportunities these levels of planning provide.

Objectives are drawn from the Regional Catchment Strategy:

- *Ensure sensitively located and functional urban and urban-rural fringe areas with minimal impacts on the catchment's biodiversity, water resources and heritage values.*
- *Match rural land-use, development and management to land capability and minimise impacts on the catchment's biodiversity, water resources and heritage values.*
- *Provide a high quality network of parks and open space across urban and rural areas managed for community and environmental benefit.*

Actions include considering waterway issues in strategic growth planning, addressing zoning anomalies, making the Merri Creek Development Guidelines available and incorporating them in the Environment Significance Overlay, preparing developer guidelines for industrial areas, reviewing the Cooper St Precinct Strategy, preparing a Merri Waterways Plan, introducing public acquisition overlays, preparing a developer contribution discussion paper, conducting reviews of land ownership and zoning, extending the Environmental Significance Overlay further along Merri Creek and its tributaries, and aligning local government strategies with the Regional Catchment Strategy.

Chapter 5.2 – Management Coordination traces the evolution of **coordination** structures for Merri Creek and the development of the Merri Creek Management Committee (MCMC) and Friends of Merri Creek (FOMC), and outlines the role of the Catchment Management Authority. Management coordination principles are then listed.

Objectives are derived from the Regional Catchment Strategy:

- *Enhance Merri catchment and regional planning, coordination, monitoring and reporting.*
- *Increase the capacity and participation of people and organisations in catchment management.*

Actions include reviewing MCMC, preparation and circulation of MCMC annual reports, establishing the frequency of management coordination reviews, resource sharing, inter-catchment coordination, and continuing community involvement in management coordination.

Chapter 6.1 – Implementation discusses the need for participating agencies to delegate responsibility for achieving actions amongst their staff and contractors and create works plans to deliver actions. It highlights the role of MCMC's Merri Creek and Environs Strategy Implementation Subcommittee in facilitating implementation of the strategy.

The objective is adapted from the Regional Catchment Strategy:

- *Enhance catchment planning, coordination, resource allocation, monitoring and reporting.*

Actions include developing yearly priority activity plans to assist implementation of Strategy actions by major stakeholders and so that budget bids might be prepared accordingly, participation in the Merri Creek and Environs Strategy Implementation Subcommittee by sending a representative to meetings, and Councils adopting the Merri Creek and Environs Strategy as a Council document.

Chapter 6.2 – Monitoring and review procedures considers how to monitor progress of the Strategy and renew it after the current strategy becomes dated.

Objectives for the chapter are drawn from the Regional Catchment Strategy:

- *Adequate, appropriate, efficient and cost effective monitoring of catchment assets, ecosystem processes, trends, risks, implementation of actions and outputs.*
- *Timely, rigorous and cost effective evaluation of catchment management planning and implementation.*
- *Timely, tailored, efficient and cost effective reporting on catchment assets, ecosystem processes, trends, risks, catchment management planning and implementation.*

Actions include convening the Merri Creek and Environs Strategy Subcommittee, preparing reviewed versions of the Merri Creek and Environs Strategy every 5 years, and publishing the document as an interactive website.

To see the full document, visit MCMC's website at www.mcmc.org.au/mces, visit a library or municipal office in the catchment, or phone up MCMC on 9380 8199 and ask for a copy.