

How conservationists brought Melbourne's Merri Creek back from pollution, neglect and weeds

May 7 2024, by Judy Bush



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

I met with a friend for a walk beside Merri Creek, in inner Melbourne. She had lived in the area for a few years, and as we walked beside the

creek, past trees, native grasses, a small wetland echoing with frog calls, I talked about how it had looked before we started the site's restoration around 25 years ago. She stopped in her tracks, astonished. "But I thought it had always been like this!" she said.

As we grapple with bad environmental news every day, we need to tell stories of ecological restoration—to speak of what's possible, and also what's not.

Merri Creek is not particularly long—just 70km. But because it threads through Australia's largest city, linking the ecosystems of the Great Dividing Range with those of Port Philip Bay, it provides habitat of [regional significance](#).

The creek's headwaters lie in the Great Dividing Range near Wallan. It flows through Melbourne's northern suburbs to join Birrarung/Yarra River just upstream from Dights Falls in the inner city. Its waters flow between rocky escarpment walls, through basalt plains clothed in native grasslands, and across a rocky creek bed.

From fishing grounds to industrial sewer

This is Wurundjeri Country. The region's Traditional Custodians, the [Wurundjeri](#), have cared for this Country for millennia, and their Custodianship continues. At the time of colonization, the waterway was rich with biodiversity—woodlands, grasslands, billabongs and wetlands. The landscape was a cultural artifact, created and maintained by burning, digging, tending and harvesting.

Colonization saw displacement, dispossession and disruption to Wurundjeri methods. As Melbourne grew, the [creek's fate worsened](#). Factories along its path dumped waste directly into its waters, while the sealed surfaces of the city caused flash flooding and washed litter into

the water.

By the 1970s, the creek was [weed-infested, polluted and threatened](#) with further destruction from proposals to extend freeways and build culverts. Plans to connect the Hume Highway to the Eastern Freeway at Dights Falls would have completely obliterated the creek.

The beginning of restoration

It was these proposals that led people and communities to seek first to protect and then to [restore the creek](#).

At first, these efforts were small. Friends groups and local citizen groups formed along the creek. In 1976, they came together with eight local councils to form the Merri Creek Coordinating Committee.

As interest and activity along the creek grew, the individual friends groups came together in 1989 to form [Friends of Merri Creek](#), while the coordinating committee resolved to establish the [Merri Creek Management Committee](#) as an incorporated association of councils, the Friends of Merri Creek, Melbourne Water and the Victorian Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

This coordinated approach gave the committee more resources, allowing it to employ a revegetation team and focus on ecological restoration. This was pioneering work in Australia.

The team worked to remove weeds such as prickly pear, African boxthorn, Chilean needle grass and serrated tussock, replacing them with tubestock grown from locally collected seeds and cuttings of [native grasses](#), wildflowers, shrubs and trees.

Some areas along the creek required more drastic action, such as

earthworks to restore the creek bank's profile where rubbish dumping and building waste had destroyed the creek's form.

Volunteers and workers worked to restore wetlands away from the main channel to create habitat for pollution-sensitive frogs and aquatic insects such as damselflies. These creatures cannot survive the still-polluted water of Merri Creek's main channel.

Much restoration work relied on [community involvement](#), with planting days organized up and down the creek so local residents could contribute to its restoration.

Today, the members of the committee are the six local governments covering its catchment, Friends of Merri Creek and the [Wallan Environment Group](#).

Why has this partnership endured?

Efforts to restore Merri Creek have been largely successful—and have [gone the distance](#). Why? There are several important reasons, as I have explored [in my research](#).

For one, the management committee and the friends groups work in partnership, and often take complementary roles in protecting and advocating for the creek.

As volunteers, the Friends of Merri Creek take an active and vocal role in organizing on-ground volunteer activities, monitoring biodiversity to contribute to citizen science efforts and acting politically by advocating and writing submissions to planning and decision-making processes.

As an incorporated association, Merri Creek Management Committee employs skilled professionals such as the revegetation team, works with

governments and agencies, and undertakes strategic planning and research.

Both the committee and the Friends have built links with the Wurundjeri's Narrap [natural resources team](#), as part of efforts to [center care for Country](#). They have both worked to build [local connections](#) and a sense of stewardship for communities near the creek, through community organizing and collective action such as on-ground activities, planning and advocacy.

The result is palpable. If you go for a walk along Merri Creek these days, it's hard to reconcile the reality now with its former life as an industrial sewer.

Frogs, birds, snakes, eels and insects are returning to the creek and the newly created wetlands. It's even possible to glimpse a [swamp wallaby](#), 5km from the heart of Melbourne. Locals show their love of the creek through [painting, poetry and daily visits](#).

Job done? Not quite. There are always threats, ranging from design and construction of new suburbs in the creek's northern reaches to inner-suburban dense development close to its banks. Floods bring litter and weed seeds directly into the creek's environment. And industrial pollution flowing down drains or illegal clearing of vegetation require us to maintain active stewardship. Pollution in the creek's sediments, including heavy metals, means true restoration is a long-term endeavor.

Merri Creek is a peaceful place, an exciting place, a meditative place, a thriving place, a cultural place connecting to Wurundjeri custodianship and continuing care for Country, a place full of life, wonder and joy.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: How conservationists brought Melbourne's Merri Creek back from pollution, neglect and weeds (2024, May 7) retrieved 11 July 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2024-05-conservationists-brought-melbourne-merri-creek.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.