



## Creating a better future for our river life

More than 30,000 kilometres of Victoria's publicly-owned land abuts streams, creeks and rivers, providing invaluable habitat for a wide range of native species including fish, frogs, birds and insects.

These areas, known as riparian land, are of critical importance to the health of our waterways and the many forms of life found there.

Yet so far the conservation aims of policies governing the use of Victoria's river frontages have not translated into on-ground action, despite protection and restoration of riparian vegetation being promoted in a number of ways.

### Damage caused by stock

Riparian land is valued for human uses such as agriculture and recreation, but as a result it has been degraded in many places.

Uncontrolled access of stock, particularly cattle, continues to be the major threat facing riparian plant health across the state.

Investigations by catchment management authorities indicate that fenced stream frontages are in significantly better condition than those left unfenced, reflecting the impact of stock access.

In 1992 the Land Conservation Council recommended changes in how government agencies manage public land to deliver environmental benefits. But because of government failure to implement these recommendations, there has been no shift from the "default" use (stock grazing) of Crown land water frontages abutting private property to a conservation focus.

In 2008 the LCC's successor, the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC), used its River Red Gum Forests Investigation to recommend stronger protection for Crown land water frontages in its study area by phasing out domestic stock grazing over a five-year period.

Further, a key recommendation of the 2008 State of the Environment Report was that "the Victorian Government should consider progressively extending VEAC



Cattle grazing is the greatest threat facing our riparian land.

recommendations on phasing out uncontrolled grazing of domestic stock on Crown land water frontages to the rest of Victoria, beginning with the 2009 licence renewal process".

### Valuing our riverside lands

Many people and communities are aware of the significance of healthy riparian areas for a range of environmental and recreational values, including:

- Healthy riparian zones are crucial for river health.
- Riparian areas are species-rich systems, critical to maintaining in-stream biota and ecosystems. They also form bioregional and local habitat links. Loss of connectivity (fragmentation) reduces the capacity of species to disperse through the landscape.
- Riparian zones harbour distinctive species. Protecting riparian vegetation in reserves increases the number of species protected on a regional basis.
- Riparian vegetation in good condition supports the resilience of aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems, allowing recovery from disturbance and maintaining biodiversity. Removing riparian vegetation can result in severe erosion that changes stream ecosystems and aids weed invasion.
- In some landscapes, Crown frontages represent

continued next page...

Banner photo: Murray Cod, Gunther Schmida; Brolga, Chris Tzaros; Spoonbill in breeding season, Arthur Mostead.



Uncontrolled domestic stock such as cattle love to wallow along stream banks and waterways.

a significant proportion of all remaining remnant vegetation.

- Intact riparian vegetation is a source of wood for in-stream habitat. Many fish and other species need fallen branches as habitat.
- Riparian vegetation provides habitat for platypus, water rats, frogs and water birds, as well as the terrestrial adult stages of macro-invertebrates.
- Well-managed riparian frontages can add significant market value to rural properties.

### Threats to life on the river

The threats to riparian health, particularly from cattle access to rivers, are immense:

- Domestic stock, particularly cattle, favour riparian frontages, and if uncontrolled prefer to spend much of their time along stream banks and in the water.
- Uncontrolled stock access results in erosion and loss of riparian vegetation.
- Trampling and grazing of river and wetland banks destabilises the banks, as bare soil and compacted tracks make them prone to erosion.
- Uncontrolled stock access to streams favours the introduction and spread of exotic plants, inhibition of native vegetation, lack of regeneration of native vegetation, loss of the buffering effect of riparian vegetation, and the unwanted addition of nutrients through dung and urine.
- Degraded riparian vegetation reduces the amount of habitat available for insect-eating birds and insect parasites that protect agricultural land and crops from damage.
- In-stream pressures on water quality include stock access, addition of sediments and release of nutrients, river regulation and extraction of water, and the impact of invasive species such as carp and willow.
- Stock effluent pollutes fresh water, destroys fish-breeding cycles and encourages the proliferation of disease organisms and algae. Water quality is impaired for downstream users and stock. Salt loads in streams may be increased.

### The solutions are clear

In 2004, just 14 per cent of riverside land across Victoria was found to have riparian vegetation in good condition. To turn this situation around the solutions are clear:

- Existing grazing licences for publicly-owned river frontages should be changed to Conservation Licences to preserve and restore our waterways.
- High conservation value riparian areas, especially those adjacent to existing parks, should be added to the park estate.
- The government must provide financial support, such as fencing programs, to landholders who protect river frontages and adjacent private land.

### VNPA takes action

The current five-year licences for riparian land in Victoria come up for renewal in October 2009.

This is a unique opportunity to improve the condition of rivers and streams and their adjoining land, in line with existing government policies

The aim is to amend existing licences and modify new licence conditions, creating a riparian "Conservation Licence", and also to support riparian conservation programs.

The VNPA will be leading the charge on this important issue, working with other key groups and calling on the State Government for action.

This project aims to develop policy and increase community recognition of the unique values of the more than 30,000km of waterways in Victoria, the threats to them, and management solutions.

### Please support us

Your support and help as this campaign unfolds will be invaluable. If action is not taken now, we will see the continual degradation of these public river frontages for another five years until the next renewal of licences.

To keep up to date with the campaign visit the VNPA website's riparian page, [www.riparianland.vnpa.org.au](http://www.riparianland.vnpa.org.au). You can also get involved by contacting VNPA campaigner Nick Roberts. His email address is [gveg@mcmmedia.com.au](mailto:gveg@mcmmedia.com.au). Nick will be happy to supply more information or accept help with this campaign.