



IMAGINE
THE YARRA

DRAFT YARRA STRATEGIC PLAN

PUBLIC CONSULTATION

SUBMISSION COVER SHEET

Submission Number:	YSP22
Name (Individual/Organisation):	Trust for Nature
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TRUST FOR NATURE

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Yarra River Strategic Plan

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this review.

Who we are and how our organisation interacts with the YRSP

Trust for Nature is Victoria's dedicated private land conservation agency. Our goal is to protect and restore places in Victoria where wildlife and native plants can thrive, using statutory, in-perpetuity covenants pursuant to the *Victorian Conservation Trust Act 1972*. We do this for the benefit of future generations by working now with private landholders, volunteers, government agencies and others with similar vision.

Trust for Nature occupies a unique role within Victoria's natural resource management sector for the following reasons.

- It operates statewide and is Victoria's primary authority for biodiversity and natural resource management conservation on private land.
- It has helped protect more than 100,000 hectares of important habitat on private land, principally by entering into voluntary legal agreements on title with more than 1400 committed landowners.
- It has prepared a Statewide Conservation Plan for all private land in Victoria which underpins its conservation work and provides an integrated framework for planning and operations across Victoria.

We note that the Yarra River Strategic Plan (YSP) applies to both public and private land: while Trust for Nature's statutory conservation objectives and functions relate only to private land, the realities of land tenure and conservation planning in Victoria requires that strategic approach to conservation in Victoria encompasses both land tenures. The Trust's expertise on conservation issues across the State thus assists with input into all statewide conservation issues. It is in this context that we provide a response to this review.

General comments and proposed amendments

- Trust for Nature welcomes the Yarra River Protection (Wilip-gin Birrarung murrong) Act 2017 (the Act) and the development of an overarching strategy to support this.
- The current state and trajectory of the Yarra River, notably its ecology, is stagnant or in decline.¹ The Trust believes YSP has a critical role in reversing these trajectories and that this fact should be included expressly in its Introduction or Recitals.
- We feel that the YSP in its current form reads more like a high-level statement of policy, and would be greatly improved if it introduced 'SMART' (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely) goals to ensure impact and accountability. For example, in our view the

¹ Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability *State of the Yarra and its Parklands Report (2018)*, <https://www.ces.vic.gov.au/reports/state-yarra-and-its-parklands-2018/environmental-health>

YSP's 10 performance objectives are too broad and lack specificity, including clear target setting measures.

- We believe that the Yarra Strategic Plan Area should be revised and extended to include the river's tributaries. This can be achieved via section 15 of the Act which allows the Minister to declare this land as being within the YSP area. A declaration of this kind could identify, regenerate and protect areas that are key to supporting the health of the river corridor.

Connectivity and the role of conservation covenants in achieving the YSP

An essential precondition for health of the Yarra River corridor is ecological connectivity, and the YSP will be a critical tool in improving connectivity across the catchment (performance objective 1). Of particular importance is the river corridor and floodplain from the lower rural reach downstream, which is substantially modified and cleared, and where there are a high proportion of private landowners with titles that extend into the riparian zone.

Trust for Nature's Statewide Conservation Plan for Private Land in Victoria (2013) identifies the Yarra River catchment as one of twelve focal landscapes for nature conservation on private land in Victoria, based on analyses of biodiversity information from government datasets. Given this assessment of the statewide importance of the Yarra River catchment for biodiversity on private land, the prevalence of private land within the study area, and the rate of human development, the Trust encourages the development of strategic, long-term approaches to biodiversity conservation on private land. These should include protection of existing terrestrial and aquatic habitat values, as well as protection of cleared land which would provide strategic habitat links and new habitat if restored

Trust for Nature **conservation covenants** will be a very useful tool for achieving long-term protection and enabling habitat restoration, and should be explicitly identified as a tool for achieving YSP priorities in this context. In particular they ensure permanent protection of priority patches of remnant habitat on private land, underpinned by the Trust's stewardship program, which ensures that land management requirements and restrictions are upheld into the future. While some landholders will always be willing to enter into covenants voluntarily, many will need to be incentivised to do so.

Incentives can take a range of forms but include **per hectare payments** to private landholders via government incentive schemes, which can be a very effective way to support the uptake of conservation covenants. The current 'Plains for Wanderers' project in North Central Victoria offers a one-off covenanting payment of \$500-\$1000 p/ha, and has allowed the Trust to protect 587.83ha of known Plains-wanderer habitat over the past three years. Grasslands under covenant are actively managed by private landholders and supported through Trust for Nature's stewardship program.² This approach could be replicated in targeted parts of the lower rural reach.

The Trust has also developed a '**farm covenant**' that may be useful in this landscape. It provides permanent protection alongside continued primary production activities with a conservation / biodiversity focus. Different land uses (eg grazing vs revegetation vs cropping) can be identified using different 'tiers', which are managed accordingly. Private incentive options such as branding and carbon offsetting are being explored and could provide incentives to landholders to take up farm covenants. Further information about this approach is available on request.

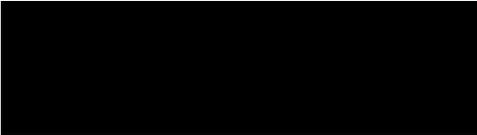
Trust for Nature covenants are also very well placed to support **green infrastructure** projects, which may be considered in the YSP implementation phase. The Catskills watershed project in New York

² This program should be distinguished from the State Government's 'Bush Tender' program which was not effective due to the 5 year grazing exclusion clause.

State provides a leading example of how farmers, water infrastructure providers and conservationists can achieve best practice outcomes for all parties using in-perpetuity protections.³

Thank you for considering our submission. Please don't hesitate to be in touch if you would like to discuss anything further.

Kind regards,



³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/18/nyregion/new-york-city-water-filtration.html>