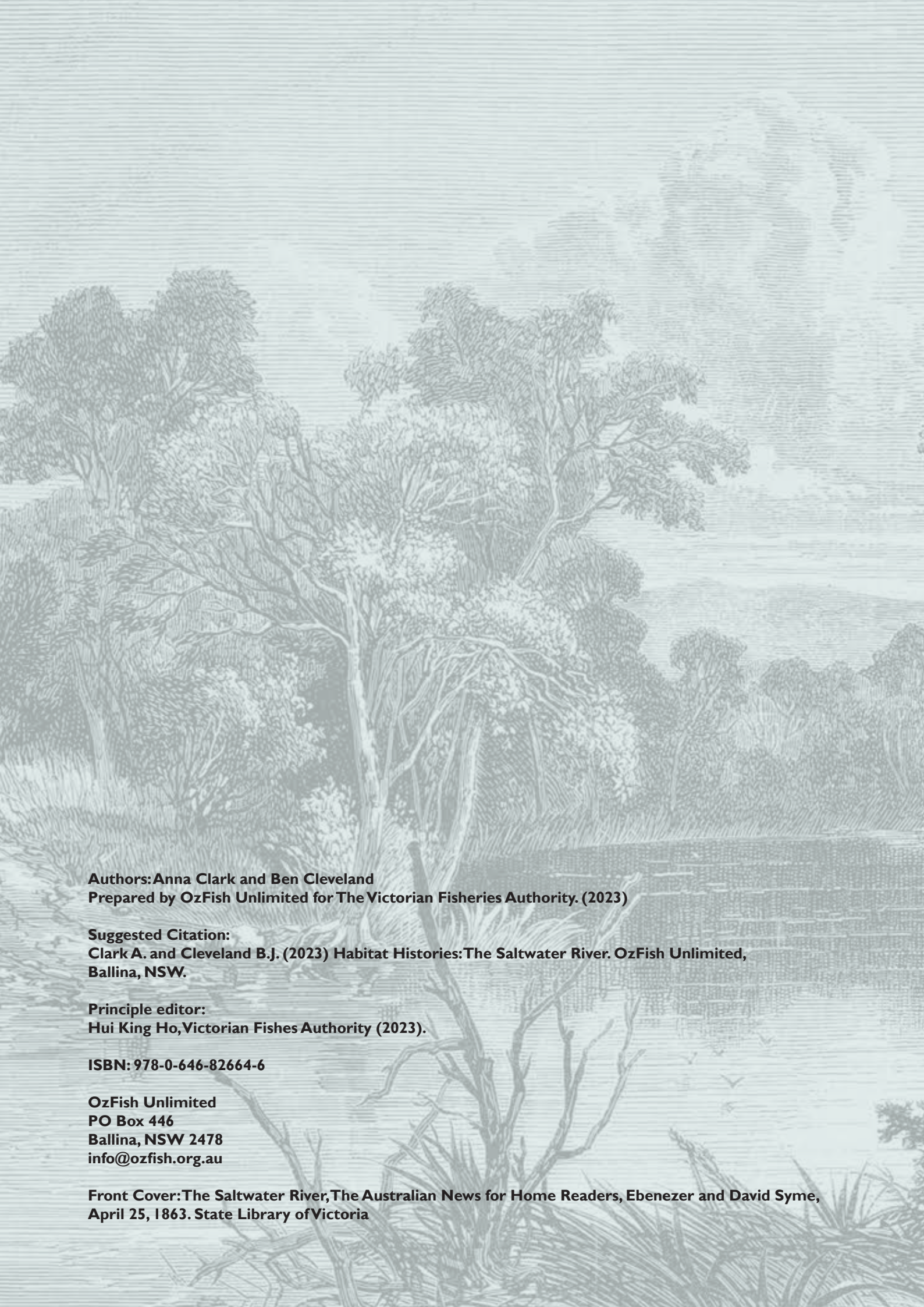
Habitat Histories-
The Saltwater River

Anna Clark and Ben Cleveland



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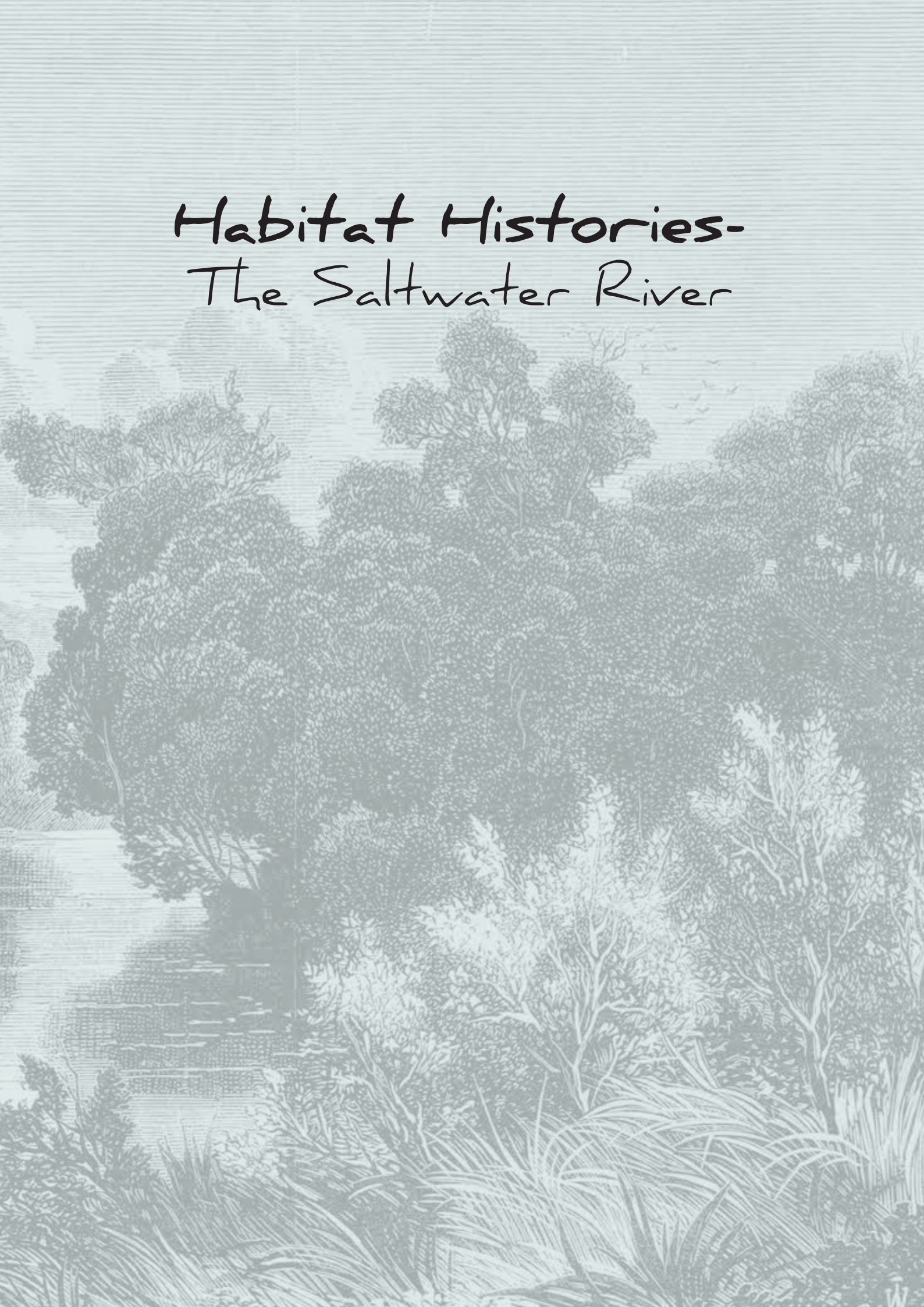

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We are the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people and the Maribyrnong River is our Country. In the Woiwurrung language, we call the Maribyrnong River Mirring-gnay-bir-nong. This area is represented by the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation as the Registered Aboriginal Party for the Maribyrnong River and its watershed.

Our land use and living areas of the region were extensive and sustained over time. This is attested to in our archaeological record; the artefacts scatters, stone quarries, scarred trees and hearths, which all now form an extensive record of registered Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Places. These are tangible features which connect us to the lifeways of our ancestors in this significant place. The banks of the Maribyrnong River and its tributaries also hold our sacred ancestral remains.

The Mirring-gnay-bir-nong catchment was rich with ecological resources required for hunting and harvesting, economy and production of material culture. From the river, we harvested aquatic food and weaving plants. We fished for Short Finned Eels, called Yuk in Woiwurrung, from spring to early autumn and inter-clan gatherings were also held at this time. Eel traps made from rock were installed for eel fishing and large earth ovens for cooking.

Our ancestor's sustainability managed their cultural landscape of Mirring-gnay-bir-nong. We must continue to follow Bunjil's law; that is the land management practises that promote ecological diversity and healthy Country. Cool burning in late summer to early autumn was applied to ensure the seasonal regeneration of grasslands. The application of cool burning cycles was underpinned by culturally prescribed responsibilities to care for, protect and manage Country. The soils in the region were manually turned to grow murnong and other tuber or root-based vegetables. The nearby tree canopies of eucalypts, casuarinas, and acacia species provided the bark, resins and wood required for our canoes, willams (dwellings), tarnuks (containers), axe handles, digging sticks and other tools, utensils and weapons. We sourced a plethora of other plant and animal species for fibre for jewellery, baskets and nets, and pelts and sinews for clothing. Food and manufactured items were gifted, traded and exchanged with neighbouring and distant peoples. Healthy Country also contained the habitats for creation ancestor and culturally related species. It contained our ceremonial and dancing areas.

The pastoral and agricultural potential of Melbourne's western region was realised by the early colonial settlers to the Port Phillip District. Colonial settler occupation resulted in significant alterations to the environment. Our traditional land management practices, including the use of fire, were actively discouraged, and the ground cover of shrubs, orchids and grasslands were diminished by livestock. This period is marked by frontier conflict with devastating consequences for our clans. Despite the enclosure of our traditional estates, our ancestors resisted and accommodated this rapid environmental and social change. They developed a hybrid economy with the colonial settlers to supplement traditional subsistence practice. This continued until 1863, after which time the Coranderrk Aboriginal Reserve was established and all Woiwurrung people were encouraged to move onto the reserve.

We maintain our traditional custodial relationship with Mirring-gnay-bir-nong. We hold the generationally conferred responsibilities in caring for Mirring-gnay-bir-nong to ensure the seasonal maintenance of the right ecology and restoration of our Country. The Narrap Rangers of the Corporation work with local and state government within the catchment, delivering important environmental and natural resources management work, and in this way maintain cultural obligations of caring for Country. The recent Victorian Government Waterways of the West Action Plan also recognises the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people as the Voice of the Living Entity for the Maribyrnong River and all waterways of the Melbourne's western region.

Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung
Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation

Wurundjeri
Woi-wurrung

Cultural Heritage
Aboriginal Corporation

Victorian Fisheries Authority Foreword

People that fish, at least the ones I know, have a deep connection to nature and love rivers that give up their fishy secrets. Growing up in Footscray, the Maribyrnong River was a magical place for me. It's where I caught my first fish, an eel on a piece of salami. It's where my young sister and I caught yellow eye mullet when the scallop boats came in, and where I took my son to catch his first fish.

Fast forward 40 years and, as a fishery manager, I'm now working with like-minded people to revive the Maribyrnong River's native fishery.

To achieve this, we need to understand its original fish habitat condition, much of which has sadly been lost. This historical picture of the Maribyrnong River will help shape our recovery effort.

This story is about how the Maribyrnong river was, how it once ran wild, and how it has changed. You will glimpse the Indigenous connections to the river and the river's passage through early settlement, industrialisation and modern times. All the while, reflecting on its worth, not through a commercial or residential lens, but through the eyes of recreational fishers who love the river for itself. From historical newspaper articles, through piscatorial societies and angling clubs, fishers have long stood up to protect the environmental values of the Maribyrnong river. By committing their licence fees to this project, anglers are again pressing for the recovery of this wonderful river.

We hope you enjoy this river's story through time. If it evokes sentiment of what the river has lost and what we might find again by working together, then we will be pleased. If it inspires you to get involved and help the river recover, that's fantastic. If it motivates you to dust of your old fishing rod and take your kids for a fish, then the circle is complete.

Anthony Forster
Manager Inland Fisheries
Victorian Fisheries Authority

Preface

The Saltwater River, or more commonly known Maribyrnong River, has a had a tumultuous but unheralded history. It has often been in the shadow of the Yarra, which flows through the heart of the city and whose banks were selected for settlement in part due to its continual fresh water supply flowing from the ranges in the Northern Upper catchment. However, Melbourne's western waterway, our "other river", is a hidden gem with some incredible stories to be told.

This report has been prepared as part the of the broader Maribyrnong River Native Fish Revival Project (See Appendix 1). The Victorian Fisheries Authority, with the support of anglers, Melbourne Water, Parks Victoria, and Local Governments, are working together to rebuild the river's native fish population.

Utilizing historical records from newspaper articles, old fishing reports, and workshops to gather local historical knowledge, including from Traditional Owners, this report explores how, through fishing, community connections to the river have changed over time, and it traces some of the influential moments through history that have had major impacts on the river's habitat and inhabitants.

From incredible hauls of Bream and Mullet to stinking toxic water and major fish kills, as well as the battles for protection and rejuvenation, this report highlights some of the unique stories connected to greater Melbourne's "Other River" and its inhabitants. In addition to a standard reference section, you'll see that several of our sources have also been reproduced in the digital appendices (with a # symbol, for guidance), in order to give readers the opportunity to do some historical digging of their own!

We hope you enjoy stepping back to days gone by, and in doing so, look towards the "piscatorial possibilities" for the Maribyrnong in the future.

Tight Lines,

Anna and Ben

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The Authors would like particularly like to thank Martin Corkill of the Essendon Angling Club, who has been a strong advocate for the project and without his constant support the project would not have been possible.

Artwork by Sofia Sabbagh (2021)

The Saltwater River

Surrounded by heavy industry and urbanization, it's difficult to imagine the Maribyrnong as it once was. But the clues are there. It might be a glimpse of some reeds by a river bend as you're crossing a bridge in the inner west, or the sight of cliffs reaching down into deep eddies. Maybe it's the sound of tree-branches brushing across the water, or the tide changes twice a day reminding us this is a salt-water river.

For the *Woi-wurrung* of the Kulin nation, that saltiness was the Maribyrnong's defining characteristic. The estuarine movement of water shaped the whole river system and helped create diverse habitat for wildlife, which in turn sustained communities for thousands of years. It also provided its first English name.

At its mouth, the Maribyrnong opened into *Nairm* (Port Phillip Bay), and was flanked by a series of rich wetlands, especially around the junction with *Birrarung* (Yarra River). Shellfish grew along the tidal banks, providing important food and habitat for finfish, while the marshland and lagoons also teemed with wildlife (Doyle, 2017; Rhodes et al., 1999). Indigenous oral histories reveal longstanding fishing and eeling practices in Kulin waterways, and the harvesting of *murnong* (yam daisies) on adjacent grasslands (Briggs, 2008).

Those stories passed down through Kulin nations, as well as the remnant vegetation that still exists along parts of the Maribyrnong, help us imagine the river as it once was. In addition to the river's environmental archive and Indigenous oral histories are the detailed descriptions of the 'Saltwater River' in early colonial accounts. These sources put onto paper the words and maps of a river system which had been sung, walked and paddled until then.

As the archaeologist Gary Presland explains, the system of wetlands towards the mouth contained a profusion of birdlife, reptiles, eels and fish. Floods regularly flushed the brackish water, pouring nutrients through the whole system and sustaining its natural cycles. Citing Albert Mattingley's 1916 account of the West Melbourne swamp, Presland re-imagines a place of natural abundance: birds of all descriptions waded in the shallows or navigated across the water; underneath, large populations of 'eels', 'trout', and 'perch' 'inhabited its waters' (cit. Presland, 2002, p. 28; Presland, 2004, p. 120).

Aboriginal people fishing and camping on Merri Creek. 1864 Charles Troedel. Source: State Library of Victoria

The significance of the river wetlands of the Maribyrnong and Yarra is evidenced by how they were shared by various clans of the Kulin nation, many gathering regularly 'in their hundreds' prior to European colonization (Presland, 2014, p. 618). Accounts from colonial figures also emphasise the importance of these river systems well into the nineteenth century (Eidelsen, 2014). In 1840, the Aboriginal Protector G.A. Robinson sketched and described Aboriginal men wading ankle deep through the marshes and spearing eels by the kilogram (Presland, 2002, p. 28).

Further upriver, the water narrowed into a deep channel and was flanked by grasslands on one side and steep cliffs on the other. We can recognize many of those landscape features today, where the plains and overhangs like those at Avondale Heights and Braybrook were described in those terms exactly in the early nineteenth century.

A healthy fish habitat. Bream Creek. 1872 E. Lee. Source: State Library of Victoria

Joseph Gellibrand's memorandum of a trip to Port Phillip in early 1836 noted the extensive grasslands that characterised the Maribyrnong, as well as Aboriginal land management through cultural burning (cit. in Bride, 1898, p. 290). The surveyor and explorer John Helder Wedge similarly described the country between the Maribyrnong and the Bay as 'open and partakes more of the nature of downs' (Wedge, 1836, p. 424).

In 1863, the Melbourne *Leader* also painted a picture that's tantalisingly recognisable, where 'rich alluvial flats' on one side (natural grasslands) and 'precipitous' cliff banks on the other framed the tidal river (#4). Closer to the water, trees such as river red gums and she-oaks grew along the banks, providing important shade and riparian vegetation for birds and animals. But it's under the water where the old trunks of these fallen trees, pushed down the river by regular flooding, created gnarled bare limbs that twisted into a protective maze for juvenile fish.

Those early sources help us take an imaginative leap back in time to when the Maribyrnong's waterways were a natural bounty. But it's not just a matter of 'fishful thinking'. They also give us clues about what we might focus on today in terms of habitat restoration: because all along the river there were fish, and people who fished them. One of the earliest written accounts of those varied fishing practices comes in 1803 from James Flemming, an ex-convict gardener and botanist who travelled with the surveyor Charles Grimes, who described travelling up the Maribyrnong until his party were blocked by a Kulin fish trap: 'We went up the river till we came to rocks; could not get the boat over; crossed it at a place the natives had made for catching fish' (Flemming, 1879). Colonists were also struck by the skill of Kulin fishermen, who stood in their canoes and speared fish in the water. 'The latter method was often employed at night, when the fish could be attracted to the surface by holding a lighted brand over the water', Presland (2002, p. 28) explains.

Those sources reveal not only the sophistication and skill of Indigenous fishing practices in managing and harvesting their fisheries, but also a river system that was teeming with fish, bird and animal life — hence the its name *Mirring-gnay-bir-nong*.

Indigenous fishing practices are unsurprising given the quantities of fish described by the Melbourne *Leader* in 1863: 'Of course, the fish to be found in it are all of the saltwater species. These consist chiefly of bream and mullet the latter kind being particularly plentiful' (#4). And at the turn of the twentieth century, crowds of anglers were lining the banks of the Maribyrnong for the annual bream run (Dunn, 1991). Although the Kulin fish traps noted by Flemming reveals knowledge of its fisheries centuries earlier.

In fact, archaeological records show occupation for at least 17,000 years, with excavated tools and human remains that point to continuous human habitation by Aboriginal people stretching back into Deep Time (Rhodes et al., 1999). But that ongoing occupation of the Maribyrnong shouldn't confer a sense of stasis. There has always been change in water levels, climate and culture.

The presence of five thousand-year-old fossils of dolphins, sharks and shellfish in Aberfeldie Park suggests a time when the water level was much higher and the climate warmer (Anderson, 1984, p. 56). Looking back further, Henry Haydon's 1846 travelogue of his time in Australia relates an account of Kulin history dating back to the ice age, when Port Phillip Bay comprised the lower reaches of the Yarra river surrounded by vast river plains and wetlands:

> There is a tradition amongst the natives of this part of the country, that the whole space now occupied by the bay of Port Phillip was once dry land, and that the sea overstepping its natural boundary burst through the part of the coast now forming the entrance to the harbour and flooded the whole country and drowned great numbers of people (Haydon, 1846, p. 8).

His description is confirmed by Indigenous oral testimony of this drastic event thousands of years ago (Briggs, 2008; Dunn and Reid, 2016). Such sources don't diminish the cleavages wrought by colonization, but the transformations it brought must be seen in a longer history of environmental and cultural change.

By drawing on the knowledge of Traditional Owners, archaeological and historical studies, as well as the river itself as an environmental archive, those glimpses of what the Maribyrnong was and what it *might be* become a little firmer. We read the river system today with scientific data, with historical and archeological methods, and with acts of imagination that peel back the layers of this place (Doyle, 2017, p. 11).

Saltwater River at Bulla & Rocks below "Glenara". 1901
Mark James Daniel.
Source: State Library of Victoria

The Salty Sister

While several early colonial impressions of the Maribyrnong river-lands noted its extensive flora and wildlife, many read *Woi-wurrung* Country as barren and treeless. When James Flemming recorded his trip up the river with Charles Grimes in 1803, he described how their party 'Saw many swans, pelicans, and ducks' during their exploratory trip, yet the land flanking the river seemed poor. There were 'No trees for many miles', he explained. The 'land very bad, and very few trees, and appeared so to the mountains, which appeared clothed with timber' (Flemming, 1879).

In fact, far from being impoverished, those grasslands revealed extensive systems of Kulin agriculture. Diverse perennials such as Kangaroo grass spread across the plains and responded quickly to firestick farming. Tussock grasses and native orchids grew into some of the wetter gullies towards the river, and were also managed by Indigenous agriculture (Rhodes, et al., 1999, pp. 20-21).

Keilor on the Saltwater River, Messrs. Watson and Hunter's station, ca.1845
George Alexander Gilbert.
Source: State Library of Victoria

This was an intricate system of grasslands management, as Bruce Pascoe has described in *Dark Emu*, which promoted regular new growth and maintained hunting grounds (Pascoe, 2013). Firestick farming the landscape kept the plains clear of larger, scrubbier vegetation, enabling easy access through Country and encouraging the regular regrowth of native grasses that fed larger mammals (Gammage, 2011).

In time, far from appearing barren, those plains also became the focus of acquisitive colonists. The mid-1800s was a period of rapid colonial expansion in south eastern Australia. Remember those old school maps showing the dotted lines of explorers' journeys snaking across the continent? Those parties, usually sponsored by colonial governments, were on the search for grasslands for the growing pastoral industry. And the Maribyrnong was no exception.

Take a look at John Batman's journal from his expedition in 1835, where he describes his approach to the river:

> Four miles further I came upon the banks of the river, which appeared open on both sides, well-grassed, and deeper than at the place where I landed from the boat. In travelling further up we passed over several rich flats, about a mile wide, by two or three miles long, destitute of trees, and covered knee-deep with grass, from which hundreds of tons of good hay might be made. The land was of the best description, equal to anything in the world, nor does it appear subject to being flooded. For twenty-six miles we continued following the course of this river, and found on both sides of it, as far as the eye could stretch, fine open plains, with a few trees of the oak species (cit. Bonwick, 1883, p. 184)

With its undulating grassy plains, the Maribyrnong catchment was now prime real estate rather than 'land very bad'. Elsewhere, Batman was even more explicit: 'as far as the eye could see we saw nothing but grassy plains, of good soil, with plenty of grass, well adapted either for sheep or agricultural purposes' (cit. Bonwick, 1883, p. 183).

And that's what exactly they did. Within five years, introduced grazing exploded on grasslands which had been patiently tended by Kulin people for hundreds of generations. Forty thousand sheep arrived from Tasmania to the Maribyrnong plains in 1836; five years later, their number had grown to over 100,000. And by the 1840s, that agricultural industry supported hundreds of European immigrants, first in grazing and later in the allied killing and boiling-down works (Rhodes, et al., 1999, p. 23).

Scene on the Upper Yarra, Near Fernshaw. 1872
E. Lee. Source: State Library of Victoria

Along with that pastoral expansion came increasingly detailed observations of the Maribyrnong's natural systems, including its biodiversity, climate, rainfall and waterways. Successful agriculture required such attentiveness so it's partly from those colonial records that we can glean how the river, its banks, and surrounding ecosystems functioned.

On the plains, we see the dominance of kangaroo grass and fringing casuarina woodlands around the western edge of the river near the junction with the Yarra. Patchy stretches of native box and gum trees dotted their way from the surrounding ranges down-river towards the coast, and the steeper gullies were populated by denser, scrubbier species like banksias, bottlebrushes and acacias (Daniels, 2014, p. 145; Rhodes, et al., 1999; p. 22; Lack, 1991, p.3).

Joseph Gellibrand, the Attorney General to the colony, described some of that country in some detail in February 1836:

> The scenery from the settlement to the ford on the Saltwater River is most beautiful, and some of the spots quite enchanting. The grass had been burnt about a month previously, and was then quite green and beautiful; the land is very rich, and consists of a succession of gentle hills and dales; and the first view of the Saltwater River and its windings is beautiful beyond description … The land was then quite flat, and rather rocky; and from the ford to the station on the Exe, a distance of fourteen miles, and, in fact, up to Geelong Harbour, consisted of open plains, with a thin coat of grass, and exposed to the cold winds (cit. in Bride, 1898, p. 290).

It's writing that evokes a dynamic landscape, constantly changing and filled with movement, rather than a place that's empty or barren.

The river itself was also closely observed by the incoming pastoralists. Joseph Solomon owned a property along the Maribyrnong, and his description in 1836 reveals a river system abundant with wildlife above and below the water:

> The river teemed with fish in the season and, like the swamp which then existed near the site of Maidstone, was covered with wild fowl. Though not in very large numbers, plover, quail, snipe, native companions, turkey and, occasionally, a flock of emus were found on the plains. Cockatoos, parrots and pigeons, with many kinds of smaller birds, lived in the trees and shrub. At night the weird cry of the curlew could be heard (cit. Rhodes, et al., 1999, p. 22).

Animals were attracted by the relatively dense habitat along and in the river. On the wetlands, trees and scrub such as callistemon, tea tree, and banksia grew thickly; the riverbanks were lined with great stands of river red gum, creating vegetation and vital habitat above and below the water (Anderson, 1984, pp. 25-29; Rhodes, et al., 1999, pp. 20-21; Lack, 1991, p.3). The journalist Edmund Finn (1888, p. 497) described dolphins travelling up the Yarra as far as Richmond, and the dominance and majesty of the river red gum across Melbourne: 'Large trees, like lines of foliaged sentinels, guarded both sides, and their branches protruded so far riverwise as to more than half shadow the stream.'

That natural bounty would soon form an important feature of colonial Melbourne, as it built over the layers of an older civilization: firestick farming was replaced with domesticated grazing; Indigenous middens were burnt into lime for mortar; forests were cut down for firewood; and the river's fish-traps were repurposed into grazier's fords. Soon, colonial fishing practices would also begin impacting the river system.

Angling Match at Raleigh's Punt, Saltwater River. 1866
Unknown. Source: State Library of Victoria

Fishing in the Maribyrnong

The Pursuit of the Piscatorial Art

If the early years of Melbourne's colonization were characterized by a sense of optimism and agricultural opportunism, that sentiment was accelerated by the 1850s goldrushes which prompted rapid colonial expansion. Like an inkblot spreading across a napkin, colonization seeped across the Port Phillip district, on land and sea. Stock populations exploded, the city grew exponentially, and its non-Indigenous population swelled. Out on the water, fishing communities like those at Fisherman's Bend, formed a nascent but productive fin- and shell-fishery, harvesting the rivers and the bay by targeting flathead, snapper, barracouta and oysters (Lynch, 1966; Ford & Hamer, 2016; Doyle, 2017).

Yet it quickly became clear that the Maribyrnong river was a special and delicate place, and commercial methods simply wouldn't translate in such a limited fishery.

Within a generation, some colonial fishers began to agitate for the river's protection. They argued commercial netting was damaging fish stocks and that the government needed to legislate for sustainability. We can see such concern in sources like as this newspaper article from the *Age*, which described 'the practice of some individuals at the Saltwater River, in catching in their nets whole shoals of the finny tribe, and then leaving them to rot on the banks' as a 'shameful waste and wholesale destruction' (#1).

This letter to the *Argus* in 1859 from an avid fisher with the hopeful moniker of 'Bream', also sought to highlight the damage of a few reckless netters active along Melbourne's rivers:

> Sir, - As a very enthusiastic disciple of Isaac Walton, I beg to crave your assistance. I do not know if you are aware that four, or five people, residents of Footscray, are in the habit of daily netting both the Saltwater River and the Yarra Yarra. The result is, that the lovers of angling in Melbourne cannot now get a single fish worthy of the name, whereas formerly they could have speedily filled their baskets. The streams are not so numerous in this dry country that an angler can have his favourite place in the north, east, south, or west and it grieves him bitterly to find the Yarra, &c. netted so remorselessly that not a fish of any size can be found. A few mullet, infinitesimally small bream and tittle bats, are the only fish to be caught now (#2).

View on the Saltwater River, ca.1880
Fred Kruger. Source: State Library of Victoria

It's a tension between recreational and commercial fishers that sounds eerily familiar today, nearly two hundred years later. But it also reveals just how connected early Melbourne fishers were to the Maribyrnong and it highlights how those historical feelings of affection and connectedness to place might be harnessed in contemporary campaigns for habitat restoration.

The following year, Sir Henry Barkly, the Governor of Victoria, responded with an Act 'for the preservation of fish in the lakes and rivers of the colony of Victoria' that banned netting on the Yarra and Saltwater rivers, and threatened that anyone found guilty 'shall forfeit such net, and also such sum, not exceeding £10, as the convicting justice shall think fit' (#3).

That legislation confirmed the Maribyrnong as an important natural resource for Melbourne's increasingly urbanized citizens. We might even call it the city's first 'rec-fishing haven' a hundred and sixty years before governments suggested the same for Port Phillip Bay. With protection from netting, the river thrived as a fishing location that locals increasingly depended on for their leisure. As the city's urbanization continued in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, outdoor past-times such as fishing became even more important.

In response, publishing and media activity devoted to reporting and promoting recreational fishing along the Maribyrnong sprung up: newspaper columns doled out fishing tips, condition updates and recorded notable catches. What shines through in this writing are the thrills of fishing and a genuine affection for the river itself.

Similar to the stocking programs of today, trout were stocked into many of Victoria's waterways as part of developing Victoria's recreational fisheries including the upper reaches of the Maribyrnong.
Man holding fish and fishing rod, ca.1930
Charles Edward Boyles.
Source: State Library of Victoria

The Yarra - Near the junction of the Saltwater River. 1865
Walter Hart. Source: State Library of Victoria

Take this lovely column from the *Leader* in 1863, which describes fishing on the Maribyrnong in terms that would enthuse even today's most finnicky fishing connoisseur:

> The Saltwater River, above Raleigh's Punt, presents some of the finest bits of landscape to be found anywhere in Australia. Here, on a Saturday afternoon, the 'lovers of the piscatorial art' while away, a many pleasant hour away.
>
> The Saltwater River for a distance of several miles inland is more properly an arm of the sea than a river, the tide rises and falls in it as it does in the bay, and the water, particularly at high tide, is not only brackish, but positively salt. Of course, the fish to be found in it are all of the saltwater species.
>
> These consist chiefly of bream and mullet the latter kind being particularly plentiful (#4).

Meanwhile, tackle shops and boat hire facilities also capitalized on this growing past-time. Several notable Australian fishing guides and travelogues were published in Australia in the late nineteenth century. 'The favourite sport, bar racing, in the Australian capitals is unquestionably angling', extolled the visiting Italian writer Frederic G. Aflolo, in his 1896 Australian compendium. 'The Australians resemble in this their predecessors in the land', he wrote, with a nod to Indigenous fishing practices; 'they are very skilful fishermen' (Aflolo, 1896, pp. 201-202).

Fishing columnists took their job seriously, reporting competitions and recording catches, as well as offering hints and tips for their readers. Those columns reveal some whopping catches in the Maribyrnong, as well as impressive levels of public interest in fishing there. Take this column from *Australian News for Home Readers* in 1865:

> The bend of the Yarra, at the Junction, is a noted fishing rendezvous. The finny denizens of the spot chiefly sought after are bream and mullet, which abound, and are esteemed a delicacy. Bream are also plentiful in the Saltwater, where they are sometimes found weighing from 10 to 12 lb. So generally is this neighbourhood resorted to by anglers on half holidays, that enterprising local fishermen provide punts for the accommodation of metropolitan piscators, and the arrangement is found to be productive of mutual advantage. Angling expeditions, though, sometimes result in disappointment, for at certain seasons of the year nothing will be taken from the Saltwater but young sharks, a very poor substitute for bream, notwithstanding that epicureans affect to relish them (#5).

The sheer size of the mentioned Bream presents more questions than answers, possibly being a case of mistaken identity with a local Snapper, known to frequent the lower reaches, even today.

Fishing at Gellibrand Ford. 1894 Australasian.
Source: State Library of Victoria

An article from the *Australasian* in 1893 described the most successful bream fishing for a competition being 'almost in the fresh water' and at dusk, when 'the fish commenced to bite freely'. Another reported a bream of at least four and a quarter pounds taken from the Saltwater River, along with eight others each over two pounds (#6). And tips on how they were best caught included this advice: 'They take the shrimp very well, still the worm is the most enticing bait. Choose the up water, if possible, for choice of tide; it answers well just at present, although not always, as a set rule' (#9).

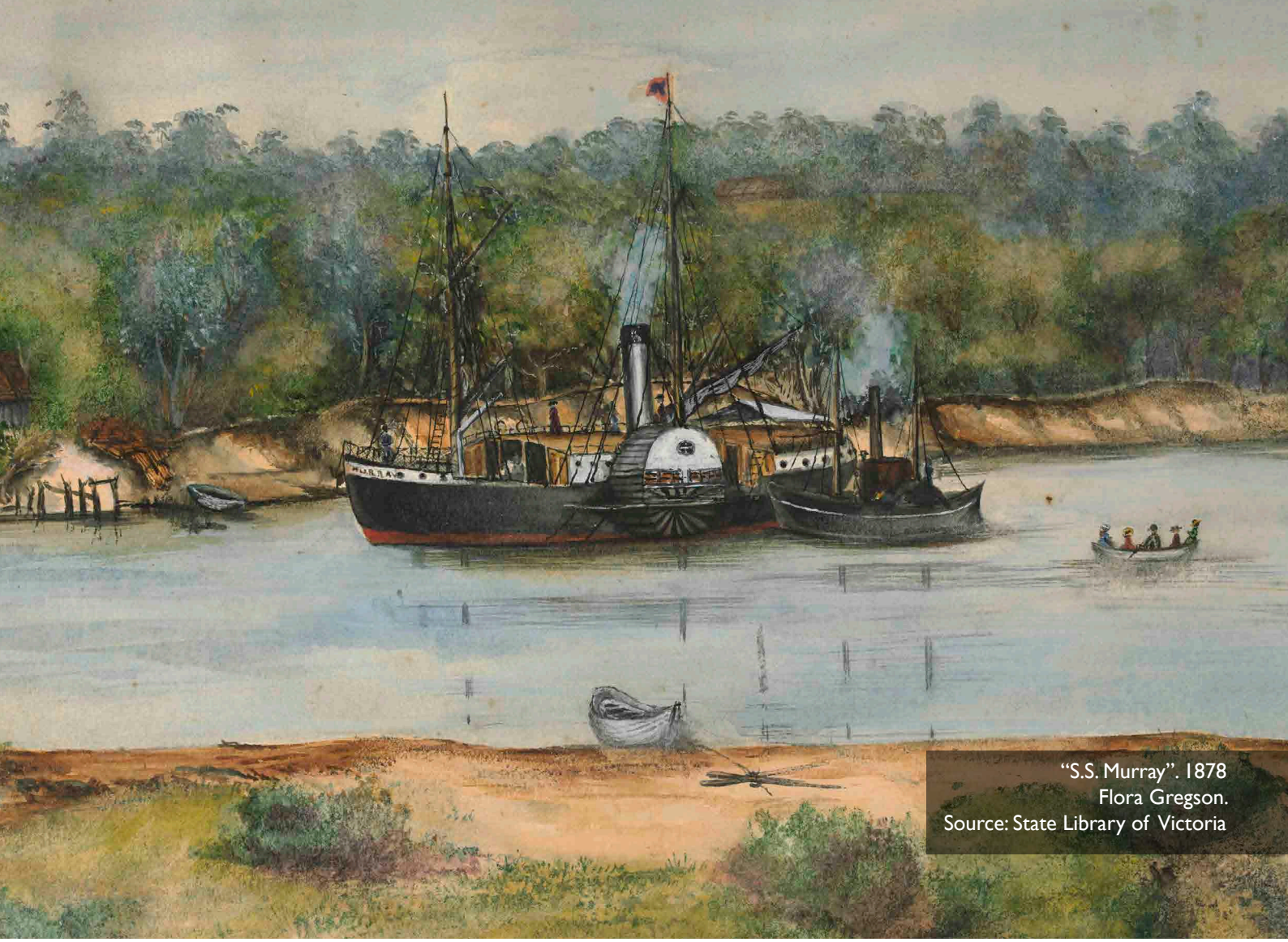
Regular columns for the *Sportsman*, gave updates on fishing locations, conditions and technique. This one from 1884 was typical:

> Fishing since my last report to you has been really good. It is already well known among the majority of anglers that the bream are now located from the Maribyrnong Bridge to the Butts Paddock, and some fine fish among them, which have been caught up to 3lb. weight. One party, last Friday week, had 30 fish, 23 of them over 1lb. weight, up to 3lb. taken with shrimps. Large baskets of good fish would be recorded with the worm only for the endless numbers of small bream which abound to steal the bait off instantly it gets to the bottom. January, as a rule, is not a good month for large baskets of bream, so that this season is an exception to toe rule, and, from the state of the water and the weather we are having, it may be expected to continue good all the month. Fine mullet still at Williamstown, Sandridge, and the stone wall (#17).

Meanwhile, an 1897 report on a 'Ladies' day on the Saltwater River' hosted by the Victorian Fish Protection Society and Anglers' Club shows that even historically, fishing was far more than a male-only pursuit (#22).

The columns give us clues as to *who* was fishing and *why*. It also gives us the first detailed insights into the Maribyrnong fishery at the turn of the twentieth century. They're not simply talking vaguely about 'great quantities of fish', but providing data on numbers, weights, species and locations information that could assist fisheries research to determine what a healthy waterway might look like in terms of stocking.

In fact, these sources also point to early attempts at managing the river as a sustainable fishery, including stocking with native fish such as Estuary Perch (also known as Gippsland Perch). Whilst the Saltwater River is within their natural range, this species tends to congregate together and was probably heavily impacted by the fishing practices of the day, especially illegal netting.



"S.S. Murray". 1878
Flora Gregson.
Source: State Library of Victoria

Yet multiple reports from 1867 describe the efforts of Captain Darby and the Gippsland Steam Company's S.S. Murray to translocate adult Gippsland perch to the waters of the Yarra and Saltwater rivers:

> Thanks to the unostentatious exertions of Captain Alfred Darby and the officers of the Gippsland Steam Navigation Company's S.S. Murray, the waters of the Yarra and Saltwater rivers are likely to be soon enriched by the presence of the delicious Gippsland perch. We have more than once lately had occasion to mention the fact that those perch have been brought here by Captain Darby, and it seems that he liberated the fourth batch on Saturday last, at his old place, viz., the corner of the Yarra and Saltwater. A capital tank for the purpose of carrying the fish, is provided on board the Murray, and the ship's water-hose being turned into it, the donkey-hose is kept gently at work, so that the water is always fresh for the fish. The present is thought a capital time for transportation, for in the lakes and creeks of Gippsland, the fish are spawning fast, and those brought here are full of roe. When the young fish are seen, Captain Darby will take means to bring them along in hundreds, when he can only get the parent fish in tens. The lakes are now flooded, and the entrance worse than usual, because of the silt washed down by the rivers (#7).

Whilst their efforts may not have been sufficient to restore the native population, the importance of fishery management and intervention offer fascinating historical context for the current large-scale stocking programs to rebuild native fish populations across Victoria (Appendix 1).

Despite those efforts, and the success of the Saltwater fishery, there was concern about the impact of recreational fishers on the river even then, as this 1870 article from the *Australasian* reveals. While it had been 'the best season for bream fishing that has been experienced for several years, and consequently, everyone who can muster a rod has betaken himself to the Saltwater River in pursuit of his favourite amusement', there had been reports of disturbances and poor behaviour: 'We are sorry to hear, however; that great injury has been sustained by Mr. Petty and other riparian proprietors, owing to the lighting of fires, the leaving about of glass bottles, and the bringing dogs to the water side' (#8).

For the most part, however, the Maribyrnong was a fishing destination not to be missed. 'The Saltwater River has a world-wide reputation for Bream. Near the bridge, at Maribyrnong, are several boat proprietors, who cater especially for anglers', fishing writer James Champley described in his Australian angling guidebook, before giving some detailed advice about the best time to fish. 'The Bream season in the Saltwater River fluctuates usually from the beginning of October to the end of March is the best time, and, like other rivers, in the warm weather, fish may be found at any part, even right up to the fresh water' (Champley, c1910, p. 82). 'Marvelous Melbourne' was full of fishing fun.

Fishing from the pier, ca.1875
John Henry Harvey.
Source: State Library of Victoria

Right profile caricature of a man standing in shallow water, trousers rolled up and wearing a bowler hat, holding a fishing rod with a worm and frog on the end, ca.1890
Augustus Baker Pierce.
Source: State Library of Victoria

The Mighty Bream

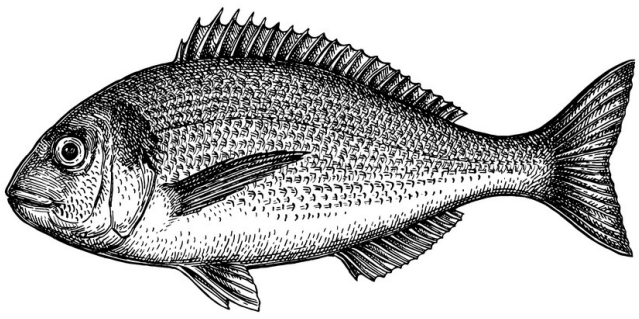
Of all its charms, it was the mighty bream that fed the Maribyrnong's fishing frenzy. Until the first decades of the twentieth century, the river was a calling card for bream fishers. The constant publication of newspaper reports, fishing columns and impressive competition results demonstrate the scale of this recreational fishery. Here was an apparently thriving fish population and a community who loved catching them.

Take this one, from the *Australasian* in 1865, which reported a ripping catch near Raleigh's Punt the 'largest fish that has been taken for some time, in either the Yarra or Saltwater Rivers'. The size of the catch caused 'quite a commotion amongst anglers', the paper reported: 'The monster weighed no less than four and a quarter pounds, and it is said to be the largest fish ever taken in the Saltwater River. Besides this big one, he landed no less than eight, all over two pounds weight, and some smaller-sized ones, but all good fish (#6).

Even as Melbourne's population and fishing demand increased at the turn of the twentieth century, catches remained similarly impressive. 'The Rod' columnist in the *Sportsman* reported fantastic week on the river in March 1882: 'I caught and hooked some of the largest bream I have had on a rod for the last two of three years. The bream are up in large numbers, and of a very large class' (#9).

Regular columns by 'S.A.C.' for the *Sportsman*, also confirm the resilience and popularity of Maribyrnong river bream: 'Anglers will be glad to know that there is some good fishing to be obtained', he wrote in November 1883:

> As we have had no floods, the rivers and creeks are in excellent condition. The bream are now well up the Saltwater River, and have been biting now, off and on, for the last three weeks, until just recently, just below the powder magazine. In the Butts paddock and sandbank a number have been captured from two and a half to three pounds weight (#13).



A month later, conditions were just as conducive to big catches:

> As I mentioned in the last issue when advising anglers to try the river this week, I went up the river myself, and found the water in excellent condition, und the fish well on the feed. I secured a good basket of bream, 32 fish, weighing 12 ½ lb., 2 of which turned the scales at 3lb. Next came ¾ lb and ½ lb fish; the rest were small. As I dropped on the fish, I did not care about shifting, no doubt I should have got larger fish further up, say bulldog, or even higher. My place of operation was the centre of the Horseshoe Bend, with sandworms (#15).

Even poor catches, like this one reported in the *Sportsman* in March 1882, now read like some sort of fishing fantasy: 'Bream fishing last week in the Saltwater River was not up to the average. Good baskets were confined to only two. Mr Thomas succeeded in getting 30 lb. weight, none of the fish being under 1 lb.' (#10).

And to think that was a bad week!

Even into the twentieth century, the Maribyrnong sustained impressive catches and regular fishing commentary. This catch report from the *Weekly Times* in 1909 is something we could only dream of today: 'E. Fisher, 40 bream, 22lb; R. King, 34 bream, 16lb; T. Grant, 34 bream, 11b'. 'Indeed, it is questionable if any other stream in the State is fished as keenly and persistently', noted W. James (#32), in a comprehensive article on catching Bream.

Although the presence of fish didn't mean they'd always produce an easy catch. Sometimes it was their fickleness, and the joy of the chase, that made the mighty bream such good sport, James continued:


ANGLING.

SPLENDID SPORT IN THE SALT-WATER RIVER.

Bream fishing at Horseshoe Bend, Saltwater River. 1894 Australasian. Source: State Library of Victoria

> It is one thing, however, to know of a stream where bream are to be got; it is another to get them. As a matter of fact bream fishing is something of a snare it is not as easy as it appears; as many have discovered to their chagrin. The fish take finding, and as they are generally on the move, it is easy to lose the run of them. He who gives you the information that he 'Got 'em at the Snag, yesterday on mussel,' often unwittingly puts you astray. After spending a profitless day without perhaps a 'touch' to reward you, it is exasperating to hear that the fish were elsewhere, and some lucky, individual got good bream on shrimp. Sticking at it, however, in the end generally brings consolation, and a decent bag of these fine sporting fish is something to be pleased with.

In time, however, the pressures of a rapidly industrialising city did put pressure on the river, showing that its bounty and complexity were also fragile. There is a beautiful story about a legendary giant bream, 'Old Tom', published in the *Australasian* in 1895 (Appendix 2), which heralded some of those early warnings. In it, the writer imagines the last days of a heroic and ancient bream, who dies in a fish kill induced by unseasonably hot weather and a polluted waterway.

'Old Tom had some strange adventures in his time', 'Topjoint' advised. 'He had been hooked and played at least ten times in a day, but somehow or other had always got away that is, if you could believe the yarns the fishermen told, for it was always a five pound fish that they had hooked and lost.' After a near miss, 'Old Tom' sought the solace of a quiet eddy up river, but 'He became quite exhausted by the time he reached Gellibrand's Crossing, where he stopped to take a rest his last rest.'

An entertaining read for fishers, it's also a story that sounded the alarm about the future of this unique urban fishery.

Two boats on the Saltwater (i.e. Maribyrnong) River, ca. 1906
Arthur Fox. Source: State Library of Victoria

Habitat, History, Health & Hope

The jewel of recreation, lost to industry

Given the rapid expansion of Melbourne's population and industry in the nineteenth century, it's perhaps surprising that fishing on the Maribyrnong was so successful and productive for so long. In truth, it's less a story of the river's resilience, but the increments of change it faced. The Maribyrnong story is a classic case of what fisheries biologist Daniel Pauly (1995) famously defined as 'shifting baseline syndrome': where each generation remembers what fisheries were like at the beginning of their own lifetimes, so that, incrementally, the baseline of that ecosystem subtly changes over time.

Given that, it's worthwhile tracing some of those incremental shifts so that we can see longer patterns of environmental change.

Prompted by the establishment of a grazing industry along those sweeping, windy grasslands, associated industries of abattoirs and boiling down works were built next the river from the 1840s. It was an ideal location, with easy access to the livestock and to nascent transport routes steaming in and out of the colony (Vines, 1989, p. 19). But the river's accessibility was also its cost. Of the 4,000 tons of blood produced by Melbourne's abattoirs and slaughterhouses each year during 1870-71, for example, more than half flowed into the Saltwater River (Lack, 1991, p. 96).

In time, more industries also located themselves along the river and formed an industrial enclave. The location, with its accessibility to river-transport and discharge, as well as its olfactory distance from the city, enabled the concentration of noxious, foul-smelling industries. West Melbourne became known as 'Worst Smellbourne', 'Stinkopolis' and the 'Cologne of Australia' (Lack, 1991, p. 99; Eco-Museum 4, p.4). As Vines (1989, p. 28) describes, 'Indeed, the river location was chosen for its value as a convenient drain'.

While fish were still being caught in the late nineteenth century by eager anglers on the weekend, during the week they were sometimes seen dying from a lack of oxygen, and there were reports of fish up-river, gasping for air (Lack, 1991, p. 96). The Footscray *Independent* newspaper offered this bleak account of a boat trip up the Maribyrnong in 1887:

> The water was black and stinking, the banks covered with inky slime, with a most odious stench, bubbles of gas were constantly rising with a rotten affluvia, and some small fish that had found their way into the putrid waters were swimming, dead or dying on the surface (cit. Lack, 1991, p. 99).

Reports of mysterious fish-kills increased in the news, like this one in the *Bendigo Advertiser* in 1890:

> It is understood that the analysis of the fish found dead in the Saltwater river so mysteriously, has disclosed no traces of poison, and the supposition now is that either they were the victim of an epidemic, or that a charge of dynamite was exploded in the river…. (#19).

Melbourne meat processing works, Saltwater. 1872 unknown.
Source: State Library of Victoria

In response, local fishers voiced their concerns about the decline of their much-loved Maribyrnong. They lobbied local members and the media to take action as the river's health declined before their eyes. In 1892, the Age reported that a deputation from the Victorian Anglers and Fish Protection Society had notified the Department of Lands about excessive pollution which was destroying fish populations (#20).

Fishers have always been passionate regarding river health, particularly in the Maribyrnong, and the apparent destruction of an almost sacred bream fishing waterway became a topic of strong protest. The local Victorian Fish Protection Branch was established in 1893, a precursor to the Essendon Fish Protection Society and Anglers' Club (formed in 1903) that has been an advocate for river health for over 100 years and is a partner in the Native Fish Revival Project. With a common interest in the river's health and its improvement, the Anglers' Club worked closely with the Essendon River League (formed in 1906) in agitating for pollution controls and river clean-ups (Vines, 1989, pp. 37-38).

In the contest between industry and angling, economic growth and expansion held sway. Over a thousand people worked in the Ordnance Factory alone in 1917 (Vines, 1989, p. 39). Fish populations continued to decline, and catches decreased or became downright dangerous, as this report from the *Herald* in 1911 (#29) details:

> Within the past few weeks some large haul of bream and mullet have been reported, but the condition of the fish has in many instances rendered them unfit for consumption. The flesh is described, as being soft and flabby, yielding to the pressure of the fingers when being taken from the hook. When opened the inside is described as 'black as pitch,' and a general flabbiness of the organ is apparent.

Answering a fishing query from a reader in 1910, one *Argus* columnist advised against fishing in the Maribyrnong: 'I would not recommend the Saltwater river for a fishing tour. Bream are scarce, though occasionally a fair bag is got' (#28).

And with each fish-kill, each effluent release, each stand of trees cleared, the river continued to decline. It was slow, but also sure. By the mid twentieth century, that sense of loss had become apparent: 'Thirty or forty years ago the Maribyrnong had the name of the best bream water in the State', lamented the *Sunshine Advocate* in 1937 (#44).

Men washing wool, and buildings on the riverbank, ca.1880 Charles Nettleton. Source: State Library of Victoria

Maribyrnong River Beautification

For those at frontline of the river's decline over the course of the twentieth century, it was clear that urgent action was needed to reduce pollution.

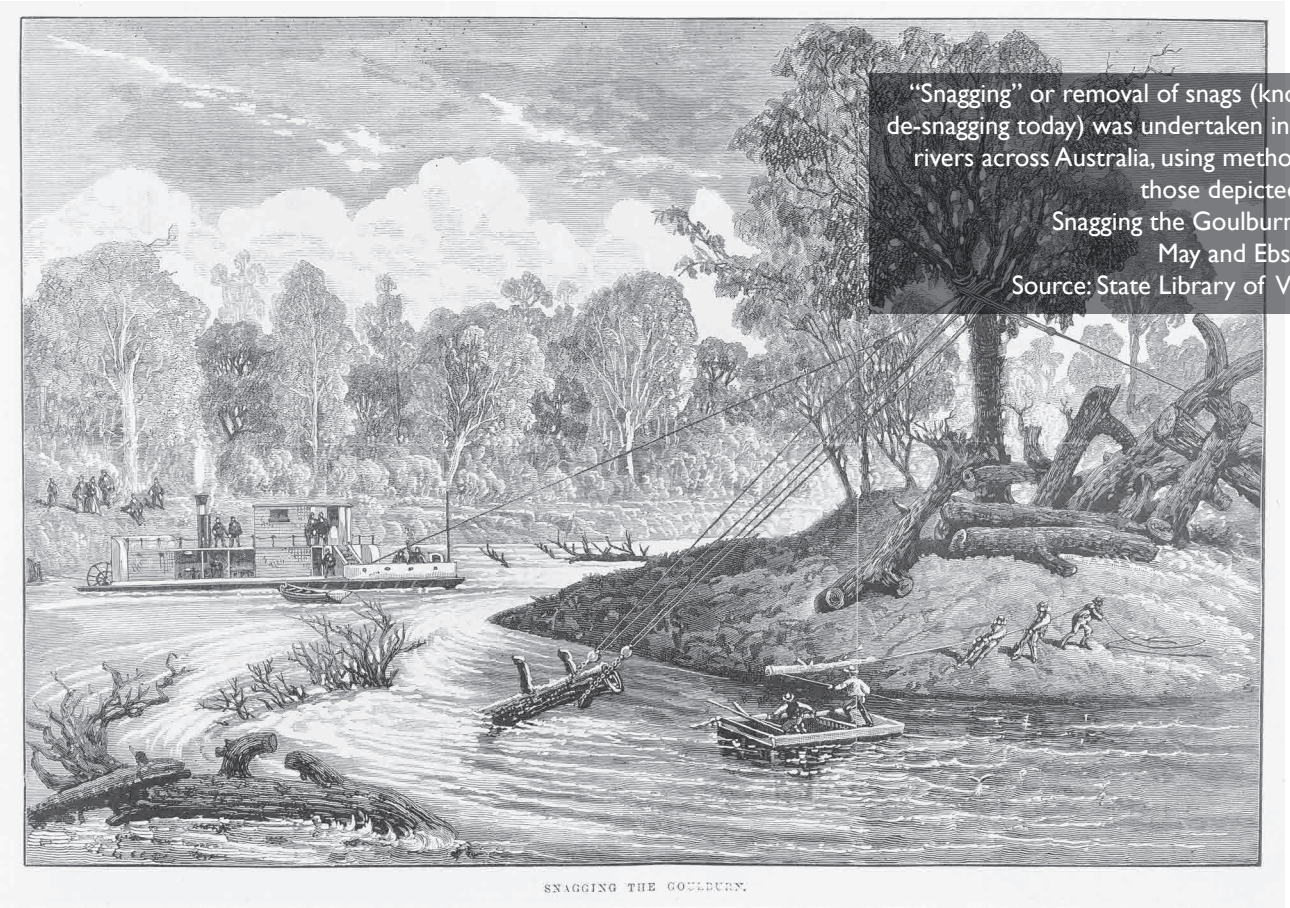
Much of that effort related to 'cleaning up' the effluent and the mess. In 1933 the *Age* reported complaints to the Braybrook Shire Council of mud deposits 'under water along the sides of the river were heavily charged with putrid matter, and the stream had become so polluted that fish had died in thousands' (#42). The suggested response from the council president was the removal of obstructions by explosives, allowing the tide to flow freely 'and it would then have a greater range of cleansing power'. Later that year, the Essendon River League demanded action after 'an acid substance which was released into the river a few weeks ago took the varnish off many of the newly renovated pleasure boats on the river' and also killed fish (#43).

Another serious fish kill in 1949 (#45) prompted demands to improve local drainage to prevent factory waste being dumped into the river. It was now clear that the factories were killing the very resource that had attracted them there in the first place.

Action did take place: mud build-up was dredged, drainage and tidal banks were improved, and the snags and gravel that caught rubbish and hindered tidal flow were removed. Those sandbanks where huge bream catches had been reported in the 1800s were now being dredged in a desperate attempt to clean the river.

In 1914, a local newspaper reported the presence of barges on the river removing a sandbank near Holmes Road (beside the Essendon Rowing Club). An 'enormous quantity of sand has been removed and has been deposited on the bank near the Maribyrnong reserve', it explained. 'A lot more has to be got out yet and when this has been accomplished a great improvement will have been made.' Others asked whether the barges might also be used to get rid of some large snags in the river while they were out doing work (#31).

The work was part of a longer-term beautification scheme, according to the *Age,* which described in detail the elements of the project:



"Snagging" or removal of snags (known as de-snagging today) was undertaken in major rivers across Australia, using methods like those depicted here.
Snagging the Goulburn, 1879
May and Ebsworth.
Source: State Library of Victoria

> The entrance to the river, at which the beautification scheme of Essendon River League commences, have been removed to a position nearer to the banks, and a new pathway, fifteen feet in width formed. The cliff at the reserve has been trimmed down and planted with various creeping vegetation. The water face of the pathway has been sheet with bluestone boulders, and will, in the near future be planted with flowering shrubs. On the river side of the path another rockery is provided, and seats have been placed under the trees on the top of the hill. In addition to this, the government has carried out a lot of dredging work in the river, and many dangerous snags have been removed (#33).

Plans to improve the river lasted decades. Well into the 1920 and 1930s, large public works continued the efforts of snag and silt removal, as well as embankment works that lay the banks of the Maribyrnong with bluestone to regulate flow up and down the river (#37; #38).

Yet there were unintended costs to that 'beautification': in moving towards order and neatness, the river shifted away from its historical mosaic of swamps, overhanging trees, stumps and snags—the very basis of its successful fishery. Local fishers had been stewards of the river, but the effort to clean up the Maribyrnong sometimes compounded the misery of its environmental degradation.

With their habitat increasingly removed, cleared and trimmed, the mighty bream had fewer places to lurk.

Rejuvenation and Recovery

Slowly the pressure of heavy industry retreated from the river. Increased environmental protections and better drainage restricted the more noxious flows into the Maribyrnong. When access to the river was no longer essential for industry, and proximity to Melbourne city increased the land value of Maribyrnong real estate, many factories sold up and moved further out. That structural change was complemented by changing attitudes in urban centres, which saw the river as an environmental resource rather than an effluent dump. By the 1970s there were increasing efforts to clean up the Maribyrnong, including one plan to make it swimmable by 1980 (*Herald*, 17/4/73).

Despite that, there was evidence that the river was still heavily polluted. 'River "is among the world's filthiest"', read one headline in the *Sun* in 1973 (*Sun*, 16/4/73). 'An oily film carrying a frothy detergent downstream. And worst of all a foul stench pervading the air for miles', reported follow-up piece the next day. After a hundred years 'Smellbourne' was still a reality for much of the Maribyrnong.

Fish Passage, Brimbank Park. 2019
Ben Cleveland

> Yet there were persistent attempts to shift industry away from the river, and also to think about river remediation in historical terms where swamps, overhanging vegetation and snags might be part of the solution, rather than something to be 'cleaned up'. In 1985, the Advocate reported plans for the 'extensive planting of trees, and plants' and the restoration of 'marshes to attract back wildlife' (*Advocate*, 13/2/85).

By the 1990s, that sentiment for native bush regeneration along the banks of the river had become the mantra for its restoration (*Times* 23/9/98; *Mail* 17/7/99). Much of this changing attitude was facilitated by the work of local councils (Mooney Valley, Hume, Maribyrnong City Council, Brimbank and Melbourne) and government agencies (Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works, Melbourne Water and the Environment Protection Authority and Parks Victoria) as well as a committed group of local volunteers from grassroots community organizations like angling clubs (Essendon Fish Protection Society & Anglers Club, Footscray Angling Club), historical societies (Footscray Historical Society) and bush regeneration groups (Friends of Maribyrnong Valley, Newells Paddock and Steels Creek).

All are driven by a desire to step back in time along the river. Because, despite the years of damage, there were always the keen beans who never forgot the Maribyrnong was once a special fishing place. And those memories of being on the river are critical in the ways we might approach habitat restoration today.

Improving Environments for Everyone

The Maribyrnong River Native Fish Revival Project will rebuild native fish populations and recreational fishing in this unique waterway. Efforts will include improving fish habitat in areas mentioned in this report, installing woody fish habitat, bringing the return of those "hiding places" for some of our favorite target recreational species. Bringing back the Maribyrnong's natural bounty will also be assisted by large-scale stocking of estuary perch fingerlings, building an exciting, healthy future fishery. A review of existing recreational fishing access and riverside platforms will also provide a better understanding of the current fishing opportunities. Meanwhile, the construction of new launching facilities will support the return of the Maribyrnong as a fishing destination.

The Maribyrnong holds a special place in the long history of the west and captures the imagination of everyone who at some stage has stood on its banks, with or without a rod. Fittingly, the improvement and rejuvenation of the rivers' fish habitat will be also beneficial to the wider community, not just those wetting a line. From bird watching, to rowing, and those enjoying a simple stroll along the banks, many in our community have a strong connection to its waters. Better fish habitat and the associated environmental improvements will help to strengthen those connections for generations to come.

As a final note, a comment from one of our younger lovers of the piscatorial pastime highlights the importance of this fantastic project, rejuvenating for today and the future:

"I'm 9 and I like fishing at the Maribyrnong.
I like catching Bream".

Kayak Bream Fishing in the Maribyrnong. 2020
Dale Baxter.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Maribyrnong Native Fish Revival Project

(Online Resource - www.vfa.vic.gov.au/maribyrnongrevival)

Project Overview

Our wonderful Maribyrnong River flows through the heart of the western suburbs of Melbourne fringed by a growing population of more than 2 million people. Over the last 150 years, the river has changed because of dredging, de-snagging, removal of steam-side vegetation, installation of weirs and fords, urban runoff, point source pollution, flood mitigation and bank stabilization works. While it remains an important recreational fishery to many, its fish population has been held back by a lack of fish habitat.

The Victorian Fisheries Authority, with the support of anglers, Melbourne Water, Parks Victoria and Local Governments, are working together to rebuild the river's native fish population and create exciting new recreational fisheries for families and their children to enjoy for generations to come.

The project will focus on the mid to upper estuarine reaches of the Maribyrnong River between Flemington Racecourse and Avondale Heights.

What we'll be doing

The project will rebuild native fish population and improve recreational fishing by improving fish habitat, fish stocking and angler access, including 7 key elements:

1. Fish population and fish habitat surveys.
2. Investigate opportunities to construct a new boat ramp on the Maribyrnong River.
3. Large-scale stocking of native estuary perch fingerlings.
4. Recreational water users' study.
5. A review of existing recreational fishing access and riverside platforms.
6. Installation of secure woody fish habitat.
7. Study of early history of fishing along the Maribyrnong River.

Old Tom

Source: 1895. Old Tom – A Story of the Saltwater River. *The Australasian*. 14 September, p.19

A STORY OF THE SALTWATER RIVER.
BY TOPJOINT.

It is sad story, and one that will commend itself to the sympathy of all true sportsmen. Who, amongst the numberless anglers of the Saltwater River during the last quarter of a century, have not made the acquaintance of Old Tom? Old Tom knew every bend, nook, and corner of the river from the stone wall at the mouth up to Solomon's Ford, as well as every fisherman who dipped his line into the water. Perhaps it will be as well to explain who Old Tom is. Old Tom is a fine plump bream of some 4 ½lb. in weight. Amongst his kind he was looked upon as the only reliable authority of the river. If any knotty point bad to be unravelled, the disputants in the case immediately went off to find Old Tom. He took things very leisurely at the finish, merely going up and down the river with the tide, passing the time of day to his acquaintances as he met them. Old Tom had some strange adventures in his time. He had been hooked and played at least ten times in a day, but somehow or other bad always got away-that is, if you could believe the yarns the fishermen told, for it was always a five-pound fish that they had hooked and lost. Tom was the only one of that size in the river, so it must have been he.

Old Tom was doing his usual patrol one autumn afternoon. The day had been a Scorcher, and as he went under the Maribyrnong-bridge the water seemed a little cooler than out in the sun. He stopped in his progress and giving his tail an upward movement went to the bottom, where he found a school of Bream trying to make themselves comfortable. "Hello!" said a small fish; "Here's Old Tom. What's the matter, Master, you seem out of breath?" "So, will you, Sonny, if you ever live to be as old as I am, after a swim on such a day as this."

Some of the younger fish moved away from behind the pile in order that Tom might get in the eddy and cool himself, for they knew that when Old Tom bad recovered from his long swim he would start to tell yarns. He only wanted drawing out, so one venturesome Bream of good size, said "It was nearly a case with me yesterday afternoon, Master. I waygoing down the river when I saw such a funny thing crawling about the ground. I went close up to it, and I saw it was good to eat. I made a dash for it. Oh, Lord! Something stuck in my mouth which hurt me. Off I went as hard as I could go, which' was not very fast, for I was tight held. I knew I was hard hooked, so I acted on the advice you always give us, Master I got into the middle of the stream, and off I went. I must have gone a mile or more when I commenced to get knocked up. I stopped to take a rest. I thought of your dodge just then, Tom, and put up my back and cut the line across it."

"Sonny," said Old Tom, who was waiting for an opening to get a word in," how far did you say you towed that boat?" "About a mile". "Look here, young 'un, you've been listening to some of those fishermen telling yarns, that's what you've been doing. Now that you have started the subject," continued Old Tom, as he rubbed his back against the pile," I may as well tell you boys what happened to me one night. You see that scar under my dorsal. Well, that came there in a remarkable way. It was one of those lovely nights that we all admired a nice drizzling rain, and just warm enough to bring a stray fly or a grasshopper to the water to have a drink, so that you can suck them down before they know where they are. I was coming up past the racecourse I know it was the racecourse, because there were a lot of broken bottles lying about with as jolly a lot of fellows as you'd ever wish to meet.

We were as full of fun as we were full of food. All of a sudden, two or three of us saw a nice big shrimp drop into the water. I could give 'em all a start in those days. I -was first there and got the shrimp. Then I thought my head was coming off. I fancied some of the other fellows were having a lark with me at first-a sort of tug of war as they all danced round me asking me if I'd seen a ghost. It wasn't fun to me, I can tell you. Things were getting serious. I could feel I was being dragged to the top of the water, so waited my time and sailed gently on the top to try and make out what it was all about. Oh, my goodness! I nearly fainted when I heard a voice say, Put the lantern over here and let's have a look at him. He's a beauty, a five-pounder at the least.' How he guessed my weight I don't know, old Tom added, parenthetically. "However, I was going to die game, so I made another bolt for it, I must have run about fifty yards. I knew there was a good, old stump of a tree close handy; and what was my delight I could see it within two feet of me. How I did think of-that old song, 'Thou Art so Near, and Yet so Far,' I was fearfully giddy. I tried the back-cut with my dorsal; but it was no good. It only grated like wire, and made my blood run cold. All my mates gathered round as I was leaving, wanting to know if I had any messages for my parents.

The next thing that happened me was that I felt myself floundering in the mud. and then grasped round the waist by two big hands, while my jaw underwent the painful operation of hook extraction. How they did praise me! Said I was the biggest fish ever caught in the river. 'How long do you think it took me to land him, Bill?' the one that caught me said. 'About 10 minutes,' said Bill. But if anyone asks you, say an hour.' This was too much for me. I went off in a dead faint. How long I was in that state I don't know. The night had turned Gold, and a cool wind had revived me, as' lying on the grass.

Bill and his mate felt the cold, too. They were wrapped up in their coats, and seemed rather sleepy, so I imagined from the smell of spirits. The minutes seemed like weeks to me in my present condition. I tried to flop into the water, but it was no use, I was too far away. I lay there almost exhausted for what seemed an age, when all of a sudden, a creepy sensation stole over me. I could hear a light step on the dry grass, and soon I felt a gnawing at my back a Water Rat was toting me alive!" Old Tom's listeners gave a convulsive shudder at the thought; he himself had not forgotten it, for he commenced to perspire freely, and it was some two or three minutes before he could continue. " Here was a predicament to be in," said Tom. "I was to be either eaten alive or dried-up ashore. I kept flopping about and turning somersaults, but at last the Rat sat on my tail. That settled me. He then proceeded to devour me. While he was busy making a meal off me whizz went something. The noise frightened the Rat, but as he ran to the water, he dragged me with him, and left me touching it. I soon learned the cause of the whizzing noise, for up jumped the two men from their dozing. One seized his rod, and from the bending and creaking of it I knew that another of my friends was coming to an untimely end. I could hear Bill and his mate exulting over their good luck in killing another of our race, while I, at the same time, was thinking of the best way to get back into the water. My opportunity came sooner than I thought. Bill's companion Jack, as he called him-rushed to the end of the bank with a landing net, and as he did so wallop he slipped into the water. That brought the tide up to where I was, and what with his scrambling and splashing I had plenty of room to get back into that place which we all love so dear. How Jack fared I didn't stop to see. I made straight for the old stump, where I knew I'd have a safe home."

"But how did your back get on?" chipped in a Mullet, who had joined the party. "Hallo, my young Coxcomb," replied Old Tom, "what brings you up here so early?" "Well, the fact of the matter is, you can't live in the bay now. They are filling it up with all the slush and rubbish you can think of. It's enough to stifle you. One must have fresh air." "Quite true," said Tom, "and if things don't improve in this river, I'm sure it will be the death of us all." "But you haven't told us how your back got better yet, Tom," someone said. "Oh, yes: I forgot. When you mention slush and filth it always reminds me of that beastly place near Solomon's Ford. That place will be the death of me, I know. You want to know how my back got better. Well you may ask. As I was saying, I made for the stump. It was just breaking day when an Eel came along, as full as a tick, from the piggeries-another beastly place. Says he, 'What's the trouble, Tom?' 'Met with an accident,' says I. I told him all my troubles. He looked at my back. 'Is that all?' says, the Eel. 'I'll soon fix that up. Keep still for a moment, and I'll rub some of my famous ointment on it for you.' I kept as quiet as I could under the circumstances while be rubbed several times across the sore. The pain soon went away. I stopped under the stump tor a week, the Eel coming every morning at daybreak to repeat the performance. I soon got well, and once more returned to the gay and festive scene. So, my advice to all of you is- If ever you meet with a similar fate, look up an Eel and go under a course of massage under him, and if he doesn't.."

At that moment there was a loud splash, followed by a still louder one. which quickly dispersed the pleasant family gathering to the four winds. The cause of it all was merely some people swimming their Newfoundland dogs. The splashing of the dogs in the river upset Old Tom, who in his fright swam up the stream against the tide. He became quite exhausted by the time he reached Gellibrand's Crossing, where he stopped to take a rest.. his last rest.

"The hot weather of the last few days and the continual pollution of the Saltwater River are again responsible for the destruction of a large number of fish. Amongst the fish found dead along the banks of the river was a bream weighing fully 4½lb. weight, with a peculiar-shaped back, giving one the idea that it had met with an accident at some time or another."-News Item.

Appendix 3. Transcribed Historical Articles

For full transcribed historical articles (pdf download) please visit vfa.vic.gov.au/maribyrnongrevival

Sources

The authors and editor wish to note that some of historical sources cited in this book contain terms or views that were acceptable within mainstream Australian culture when they were written - but are no longer considered appropriate. We cite these sources in the original as a record of the past, and also to learn how views may change over time.

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