

FRIENDS OF THE MARIBYRNONG VALLEY

NEWSLETTER SPRING 2006

TO DAM IT OR NOT

The proposed Arundel dam has caused controversy and concern, especially of recent months. It has been at the forefront of the Lib's election platform. Labor has scorned it as not addressing the problems. What is the truth and what might be the consequences? At the November meeting of the FMV managing committee, this subject received much debate. A number of opinions and suspicions were aired but conclusions were not hard and fast largely through the complexity of the whole situation.

The Maribyrnong has always been a river of variable flow; often throughout summer, flow in some reaches has been nil. It is important to realise that in the original state, when there is no effective flow, the profile of the river bed has been sufficient to retain permanent habitats i.e the "chain of ponds" so that populations of native fish like the pigmy perch, grayling and galaxias, tadpoles, platypus and the invertebrates would be preserved. This situation has been degraded in many stretches through damming, erosion, woody weeds like willows and poplars, grazing, and 'development'. Nothing is as it was. The best that can be hoped for is that when artificially controlled flows, as has been done by releasing water from Rosslynne reservoir, these requirements are seen as high priority and given a fair proportion of available resources against the rampant demands of horticulture and domestic and commercial interests.

Traditionally, on those occasions when there has been significant high rainfall in the upper catchments around Mount Macedon, flows in the Maribyrnong have been sufficient to burst its banks and flood surrounding low-lying land. Except for the minor portion of water in these floods that is retained by dams and reservoirs, the rest causes nuisance flooding in the lower reaches including Maribyrnong township, Newmarket, Kensington and Flemington. Urban development has allowed for most of the original floodplains to be elevated with fill or protected from flooding by levees or bund walls so that they could be utilized for other than their prime function - to accommodate floodwater.

Upstream, seasonal high water-flows have served several vital functions in streams including washing excess sediment from the streambeds, transporting juvenile fish to the sea and flushing stale and fertilizer-contaminated water away. It is likely that controlled 'environmental' flows might never fully achieve these functions.

A report prepared for Port Phillip and Westernport Catchment Management Authority in 2002 reviewed "Maribyrnong River Flow Rehabilitation Plan: Management options For Ameliorating Flow Stress (Heron, Doeg and Sovitlis, 2002) made recommendations regarding the sound environmental management of the Maribyrnong River, including the release of water from Rosslynne to augment flows. However since then we have had a further four years of global warming, with consistently reduced rainfall and higher evaporation rates. Concurrently, urbanization has placed further demands on water supplies so that even before summer is with us we have stage 2 water restrictions in the city and more stringent conditions in the upper catchment. Recent legislation to cease releasing environmental flows from Rosslynne Reservoir into Jacksons Creek will exacerbate the problem. If predictions of continuing patterns of less than historical average rainfall and higher temperatures - for us, all a part of the global warming phenomenon - then the river is not sustainable even in its present state.

How then does the proposed Arundel Dam fit into this discussion? If the dam was constructed, stormwater that historically has caused economic disaster by flooding homes and commercial premises on the lower river flats before being wasted to the sea would be retained between Arundel and Organ Pipes National Park. It could then be pumped upstream to Rosslynne, to be available to assist supplies to the growing towns of Gisbourne, Woodend and Sunbury, to provide those "environmental" flows that are necessary for the health of the river and to maintain a flow that when sufficient can be extracted by the horticulturalists.

Naturally, a rigorous environmental impact study would have to be carried out and all stakeholders consulted. Concerns include whether the underlying substructure will allow the retention of freshwater, the impact on Organ Pipes National Park and the migration of fish upstream.

How long it will be before the proposed Arundel dam is filled or at even partly filled is a moot point. Reduced and sporadic rainfall means that it could be some years before this happens. The longer the drought persists, the drier the underground aquifers become and the less water actually comes down the river. We might wait for years. Possibly before that time, various downstream authorities would be wanting to capitalize on the floodplain that is no longer flood-prone and develop it. Clear regulations would have to be in place to deter this.

Given the increasing need for water by the upper catchment towns, the need for maintenance of environmentally sustaining flows in the river and the greater susceptibility of the lower reaches to flooding, we believe the Arundel Dam proposal is worthy of serious consideration.

THE REST OF THE NEWSLETTER

FMV UPDATES

The committee has undertaken two major update tasks. One is to produce a new edition of the Birds of the Maribyrnong Valley, the other to make an updated version of our educational video "The Other River" in DVD format. Anyone wishing to contribute to either project would be welcomed; contact Maelor or John for the Bird Book and Peter for the video.

END-OF-YEAR OUTING

This year we are taking a trip on Peter's stalwart river cruiser the Blackbird. We will take a trip up OUR other river, the Yarra, hopefully stopping at Herring Island to walk round and going further, as far as time and tide will allow. Enlightened commentary too of course. Note the date; Friday 24 November.

Meet 6.15pm to depart 6.30pm prompt. Bring your own supper and a plate of something hand round too. Hot drinks available on the boat but BYO beer wine and soft drinks. \$10 per adult will be charged to cover boat costs. There are only 30 places so book ASAP, Maelor (W) 93662555, (H) 93741902.

I will hope to catch up with you all on the cruise, but if I don't see you before the festive season editor wishes members and all maribyrnongophiles a pleasant Christmas and a very environmental '07.
John.