



Our Achievements 2022

25
years of
catchment
health



We acknowledge and pay our respects to the Traditional Owners of the region, the Gunaikurnai, the Bunurong, the Boonwurrung and the Wurundjeri Peoples, their rich culture and spiritual connection to Country. We also acknowledge Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander People's responsibility to care for Country and pay respects to Elders, past, present and emerging.



Reflections from the Chair

This was a special year as we reflected on our 25th anniversary as a stable, mature, and efficient organisation in one of Australia's most diverse natural resource regions.

We are proud to continue to achieve meaningful results for the environment. Our efficient and adaptive approach allowed us to quickly plan and implement programs that improve and protect the region's wonderful natural assets together with our valued partners.

One key highlight of the year was delivering a remarkable flood recovery program arising from the significant storm and flood event that hit the region in June 2021.

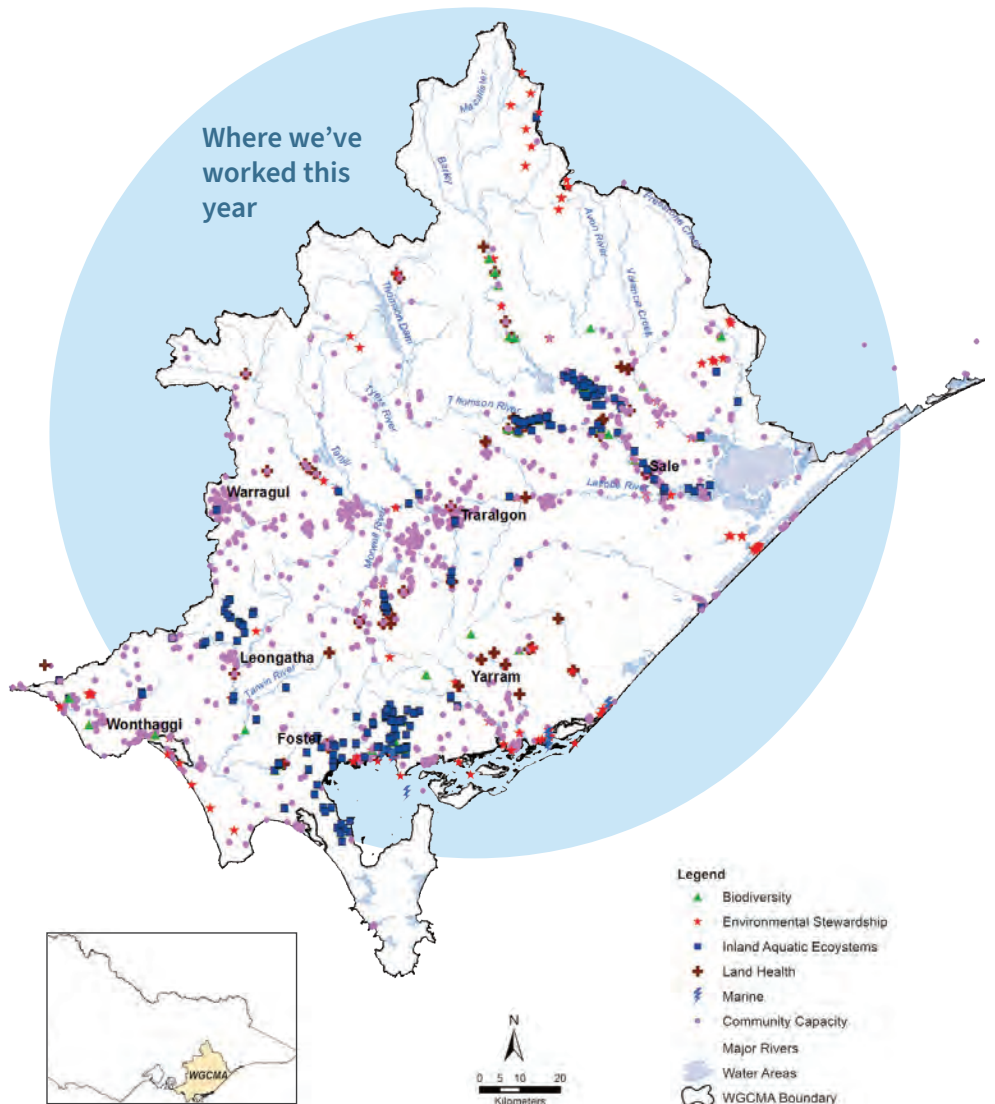
We also maintained momentum and focussed on the strategic directions outlined in our annual action plan, delivering 95% of identified actions. Other major milestones were the launch of West Gippsland's fourth Regional Catchment Strategy (RCS) and progressing the delivery of the Regional Waterway Strategy.

We continued to see the benefits of connecting rivers through measures such as fishways and adding environmental water infrastructure.

Together with our partners, we achieved 1,247 ha of weed control, 44 ha of revegetation and vegetation enhancement and 2,357 ha set to benefit from whole farm, irrigation and soil erosion management plans.

We're extremely proud of what is just a snapshot of our achievements as we deliver programs and initiatives funded by the Victorian and Australian governments. You can also follow our story at www.wgcm.vic.gov.au

Mikaela Power
Chair

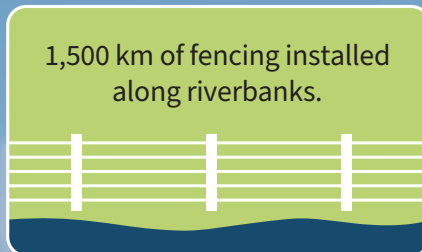


25 years of catchment health

OVER THE 25-YEAR JOURNEY



Partnered and supported Landcare to help to transform the landscape and improve the environmental values of the catchment and community.



1,500 km of fencing installed along riverbanks.

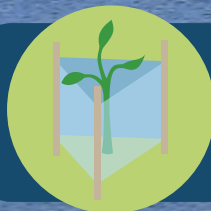


Held 1,200 community events with over 26,000 participants, who have all contributed to improving the outcomes for waterways and the environment in West Gippsland.

760,000 ha of weeds have been removed.



Worked closely with Traditional Owners towards self-determination and Traditional Owners leading the planning and management of Country in line with their cultural obligations to care for Country for cultural, environmental and economic benefit.



More than 325,000 trees have been planted.

Image: Members of our Water Team at Merriman Creek Estuary.

“As we celebrate 25 years, we’re reflecting on past successes while looking towards a future of working together for catchment health.”

Martin Fuller, WGCMA CEO





Protecting waterways

Working with private and public land managers to protect waterways is our key role. By fencing, revegetating, and controlling weeds we can reduce sediment and nutrients in waterways, increase resilience, improve bed and bank stability and help prevent flood damage. In turn, this contributes to improving overall waterway health.

We continued to focus funds and efforts onto our highest priority waterways including the flagship Thomson River and our successful headwater willow control program continued in the far upper reaches of the Thomson, Macalister, Aberfeldy, Albert, Agnes rivers and Middle, Valencia and Freestone Creeks.

We delivered water for the environment to improve river and wetland health and support native plants, fish and wildlife. Due to the higher-than-average rainfall and high flows, 18.5 GL of water for the environment was released into the Thomson, Macalister and Latrobe rivers.

Fish surveys found higher numbers of migratory fish above the Thomson River Fishway than previously surveyed, which is an early indication of the success of this exciting project.

Project partners

Australian Government, Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA), Gippsland Lakes Coordinating Committee (GLCC), landholders and Landcare networks, Parks Victoria, Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLaWAC), Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation (BLCAC), GippsDairy, Victorian Environmental Water Holder (VEWH), local Angling Clubs

Funding

Victorian Government – Victorian Water Program Investment Framework, Regional Riparian Action Plan, GLCC, Australian Government National Landcare Program

Waterway achievements

Works focussed on creating valuable wildlife habitat and building waterway resilience.

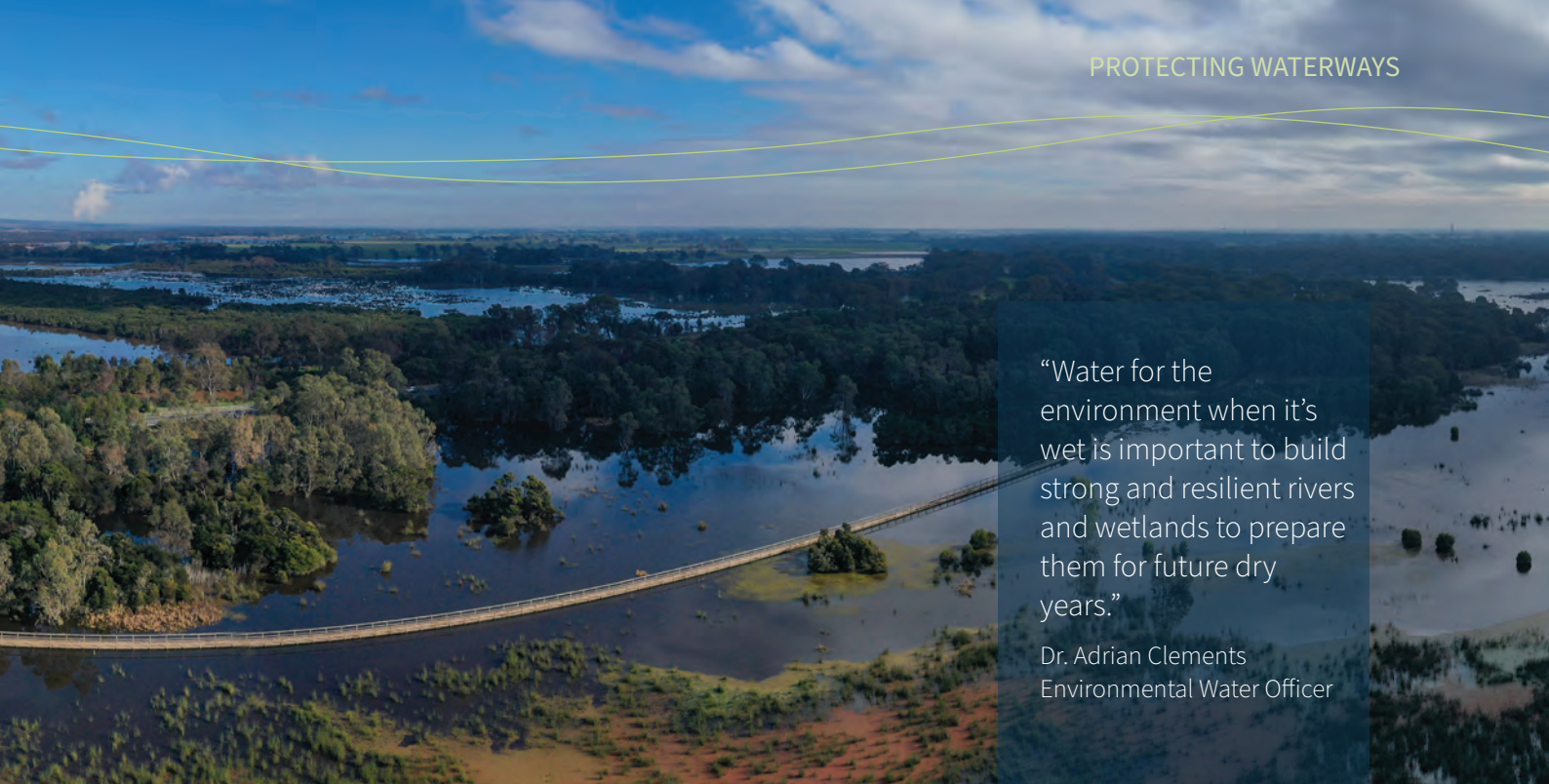
Fenced 27 km of priority waterways



Removed 38 ha of willows

Stabilised riverbeds and banks at 44 sites





“Water for the environment when it’s wet is important to build strong and resilient rivers and wetlands to prepare them for future dry years.”

Dr. Adrian Clements
Environmental Water Officer

2021-22 CATCHMENT STORY

Thanks to nature for watering the environment

Delivering water for the environment into West Gippsland’s catchments is a team effort. In 2021-2022, Mother Nature also played a hand with floods and high rainfalls allowing natural flows to do their thing – and the wetlands and wildlife are thriving.

“We’re delighted with the natural river flows and their positive impacts along the river course down into the lower Latrobe wetlands,” said WGCMA Environmental Water Resource Officer Dr. Adrian Clements.

“We manage water for the environment within a bigger picture of keeping things going in dry times so the environment can have a ‘boom cycle’ when nature delivers rains.

Over past years we’ve been managing water releases through drought and fire seasons. In this past wet year, we continued to plan for environmental flows on key waterways and simply adjusted them to suit the rainfall conditions.”

The recent freshwater flush has revived the rivers and floodplains and gave lower wetland areas a freshen up for native plants and animals.

The year of 2022 marked twelve years since the environmental water entitlement for the lower Latrobe wetlands was created. One decade on, the positive effects of this dedicated entitlement are spectacularly on show with all wetlands fresher providing habitat for wildlife to live and breed including the extremely rare Australasian Bittern and Growling Grass Frog. The community has also enjoyed walking and birdwatching in the thriving wetland areas.

Upstream, it is a combination of environmental flows and connecting the river through initiatives like fishways that help migratory fish to undertake their natural migratory movements and keep the river healthy. Annual sampling in the upper reaches of the Thomson River with Arthur Rylah Institute saw good numbers and distribution of tumpang, eels, Australian smelt and young blackfish.

“The highlight was seeing the juvenile blackfish,” said Dr Stephanie Suter, WGCMA Environmental Water Resource Officer.

“The baby was estimated to be three to four months old, which is exciting as it indicates successful fish breeding in the system. It also helps us plan and prioritise flows for river connectivity and fish migration.”

If 2023 is wet or dry is unknown – what is for sure is that water for the environment will continue to flow across West Gippsland’s key catchments benefitting rivers, wetlands, wildlife and the community.

Image: Durt-Yowan (Latrobe River) flooding and feeding the Lower Latrobe Wetlands at Swing Bridge near Sale.



Planning and involving

Under the Catchment and Land Protection and Water Acts, our key role is to provide strategic direction in how the region's natural resources are managed. Working with community and stakeholders, plans and strategies provide direct funding and future works and allow communities to have a voice and share in how their local waterways are managed.

A highlight of the year was launching the West Gippsland Regional Catchment Strategy 4 (RCS) with community and agency partners to achieve our vision of *catchment health Gippsland's wealth*.

The RCS is supported by detailed documents, including the Regional Waterway Strategy, West Gippsland Floodplain Management Plan, Ramsar Management Plans and Gunaikurnai Whole of Country Plan.

Planning achievements

Delivery of the Regional Waterway Strategy advanced. We're proud of the role we have played in delivering on this statewide commitment of \$222 million over four years for waterway health and integrated catchment management.

Project partners

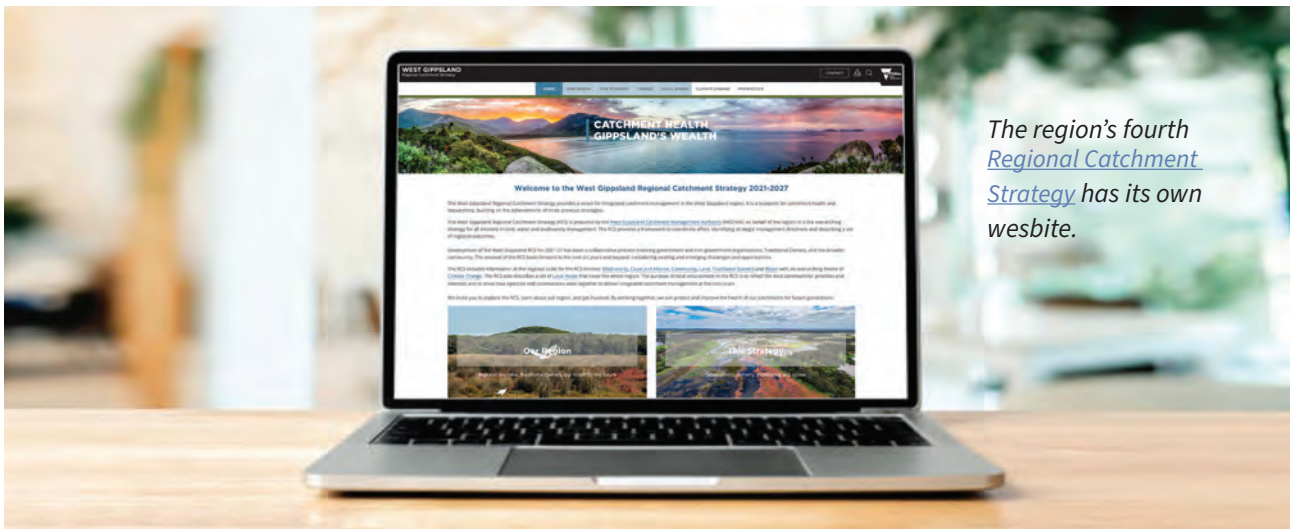
Australian Government, Victorian Government, local government, regional agencies - DEECA, DJPR, Parks Victoria, local communities, Landcare and community groups, landholders, GLaWAC, BLCAC, industry – Gipps Dairy, HVP, Trust for Nature

Funding

Victorian Government – Victorian Water Programs Investment Framework

Australian Government National Landcare Program

Above: Our team and Community Engagement Network members on a site visit at Corner Inlet.



2021-22 CATCHMENT STORY

Everyone lives in a catchment

West Gippsland is a special region with precious environments, diverse waterways and coastlines. We're proud to play a part in meeting the future challenges for water in this region through the fourth Regional Catchment Strategy – essentially a 'blueprint' for catchment health and care for the next five years.

Available online at a dedicated website, the strategy covers challenges at a local scale under the themes of Biodiversity, Coast and Marine, Community, Land, Traditional Owners and Water – all with an overarching theme of Climate Change.

Martin Fuller, CEO of WGCMA said: "We were delighted to prepare this strategy on behalf of West Gippsland. It reflects many voices because it is the result of a genuine collaboration between government and non-government organisations, Traditional Owners and broader community."

The key areas of Bunurong Coastal, Corner Inlet and Nooramunga, Gippsland Coastal Plains, Gippsland Lakes and Hinterland, Great Dividing Range and Foothills, Latrobe, Strzelecki and Wilsons Promontory demonstrate the region's diversity.

"The strong focus on localities and things that matter at a local scale ensures it will be very effective in helping shape and guide efforts to protect and improve our wonderful natural resources and features for years to come," said Martin.

Medium and long term outcomes in the plan align to the key themes and reflect the wide consultation undertaken to express the desires of Traditional Owners, community and stakeholders.

Key long term outcomes include:

- Increasing native and coastal vegetation.
- Preventing species decline.
- Embedding climate-adapted decision making.
- Reducing sediments.
- Maintaining wetlands.
- Retaining the ecological character of Corner Inlet and the Gippsland Lakes.
- Empowering Traditional Owners to care and manage land and sea Country.
- Maintaining a secure and reliable supply of water for environmental, social, traditional owner and economic values.
- Reducing and managing existing and future flood risks.

"Effectively, everyone in West Gippsland lives in a catchment, so this strategy is for everyone," Martin concluded. <https://westgippsland.rcs.vic.gov.au>



"Effectively, everyone in West Gippsland lives in a catchment, so this Regional Catchment Strategy is for everyone,"

Martin Fuller
CEO of WGCMA

Image: Screw Creek Estuary



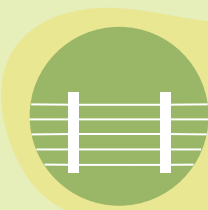
Caring for coasts

Where the rivers run into the sea, West Gippsland’s marine and coastal environment extends from San Remo in the west to opposite Lakes Entrance in the east. The area features the precious Ramsar-listed wetlands of Corner Inlet, Nooramunga and the Gippsland Lakes, several marine protected areas including the newly established Yallock-Bulluk Marine and Coastal Park and over 20 estuaries.

Much of the region’s 623 km of coastline is protected by coastal reserve, marine reserves and Wilsons Promontory National Park, however, however there are significant stretches where agriculture and urban development exist close to the coast and to important lakes and estuaries.

Coastal achievements

Works flowed from upstream and down to protect the coast and its wildlife.



Fenced over 4 km and revegetated 18 ha to protect waterways in Corner Inlet.

Collaborated with stakeholders to identify a Powlett Estuary Alternative Land Management opportunity, including potential to expand the newly created Yallock Bulluk Marine and Coastal Park.

Protected and enhanced 468 ha of precious saltmarsh habitat.



Treated 681 ha of Spartina weed across Corner, Shallow and Andersons inlets to increase saltmarsh and improve wildlife habitat.



Worked with stakeholders around the long-term management of the Merriman Creek estuary.

Works focussed on increasing critical breeding habitat, improving biodiversity and protecting, enhancing and improving the management and understanding of estuaries.



“It’s a careful balance. Estuary closures are natural events that provide many environmental benefits. However, they also pose risks to surrounding assets by inundating farmland, cultural assets, roads and recreational infrastructure.”

Callum Edwards
Coastal Waterways Officer

Project partners

Australian Government, Victorian Government, Landcare networks, Parks Victoria, Local Government, GLaWAC, BLCAC, Trust for Nature, Birdlife Australia, volunteers, local fishers and farmers

Funding

Australian Government National Landcare Program, Australian Government Fisheries Habitat Restoration Program, Victorian Landcare Grants

Above: Mangroves at Corner Inlet.

2021-22 CATCHMENT STORY

Managing the balance of estuaries

The stunning Powlett River/Kugerungmome estuary in South Gippsland is significant and ever-changing. Listed as a wetland of national significance, it is home to many rare and endangered plant and animal species including saltmarsh and coastal woodland vegetation, estuary perch, silver trevally, hooded plover, eastern great egret and orange-bellied parrot.

After a wet year, 2022 brought dry conditions across South Gippsland. This resulted in low river flows that allowed the ocean to build a sandbar at the estuary mouth causing the Powlett River to close to Bass Strait in February 2022. This natural process helps maintain the health of the wetland that surrounds the estuary.

“It’s very important to let this natural process occur, otherwise the integrity of the surrounding wetland and the species it supports maybe jeopardised,” said Callum Edwards WGCMA Coastal Waterways Officer.

“There is a flow on effect when the river mouth closes. Algae begins to grow which provides food for insects and fish. The calm waters then turn into a fish nursery and with the increase in fish and insects – birds flock to the wetlands to feed.”

“The environmental benefits of the estuary mouth closing cannot be overstated and if the mouth does open naturally, particularly as a result of increased water level height and freshwater river flows, it will trigger fish migration upstream and out to sea,” Callum explained.

The WGCMA is responsible for monitoring the closure conditions, carrying out the risk assessment and making the decision whether to artificially open the estuary or not.

In June 2022, after extensive monitoring and a thorough risk and feasibility assessment process involving WGCMA, Parks Victoria, Regional Roads Victoria, and Bass Coast Shire Council, the decision was made to artificially open the Powlett once again to the sea.

“It’s a careful balance. Estuary closures are natural events that provide many environmental benefits. However, they also pose risks to surrounding assets by inundating farmland, cultural assets, roads and recreational infrastructure.

Ultimately, we are committed to supporting the environmental benefits of natural water cycles and improving the condition of these valuable estuaries in the long term,” concluded Callum.



Image: Powlett River / Kugerungmome flowing into Bass Strait just after being artificially opened in June 2022.



Enhancing biodiversity

West Gippsland is a wonderland of large and diverse areas of high biodiversity value featuring many national and marine national parks, Ramsar sites and endangered and threatened ecological communities. The region also faces a range of biodiversity challenges including fragmentation of remnant vegetation, reduced extent and condition of biodiversity, threats from invasive plants and animals and urban development.

Significant biodiversity projects this year included protecting the precious Alpine Peatlands community, Biodiversity Response Planning projects at Dutson Downs and Bunurong coast, and the Corner Inlet Connections project. We also supported Biodiversity 2037 and initiatives undertaken by partners including Landcare, local government, Parks Victoria and DEECA.

“Working to protect an area as important and beautiful as Corner Inlet is a privilege and one we can’t do alone. The partnerships and connections created by this project will ensure we are giving it our best shot with the winners being the environment and wildlife.”

Tanya Cowell
Waterways Project Officer

Biodiversity achievements

We worked with partners and community to improve water quality and enhance wildlife habitat.



Protected the Alpine Peatlands community from high priority threats including willow and weed removal and development of fire management plans.

Treated 529 ha for fox control in Corner Inlet.



Targeted pest species at Dutson Downs including foxes and deer.



Targeted pest control works on 243 ha at Dutson Downs contributing to a total area of 14,468 ha.



Project partners

Victorian Government, Australian Government, Greening Australia, Trust for Nature, Landcare networks, local government, Parks Victoria, DEECA, GLaWAC, BLCAC

Funding

Australian Government National Landcare Program, State Government – Biodiversity Response Plan (BRP), Victorian Landcare Grants

Above: Mt Baw Baw.

2021-22 CATCHMENT STORY

Expanding Corner Inlet's seagrass meadows

Corner Inlet is a precious area for West Gippsland. Home to Southern Australia's only extensive seagrass meadow and the world's most southerly population of White Mangroves. Along with as well the unique intertidal mudflats and barrier islands west of 90 Mile Beach, it is also a crucial refuge for migratory birds, fish and rich with cultural heritage.

These outstanding biodiversity values are recognised in the site being an internationally renowned Ramsar wetland and home to Corner Inlet and Nooramunga Marine and Coastal parks.

It's a joint effort to care for the site and the five-year Corner Inlet Connections program, funded by the Australian Government, brings key partners together to tackle critical threats impacting the inlet and improve biodiversity.

"This was our fourth year of working together to tackle the highest priority threats in a unified way," said Waterways Project Officer Tanya Cowell of the five year project.

"Traditional Owners' work on Country and training activities continued to be an important feature of this project with training, weed control and planting activities."

"This year we are proud to have partnered with Trust for Nature to deliver 2.5 km of fencing and 405 ha of high threat weed control. Another key highlight was 109 ha of exceptional quality habitat being covenanted."

"Together with Parks Victoria and private landholders, we treated *Spartina* across the entire site (68,000 ha). This air and land operation was a crucial step in helping us manage this invasive weed."

Beach nesting birds such as Hooded Plovers were also given a hand across the year with project partners BirdLife Australia surveying hotspot island locations across Corner Inlet to track the success of fledglings.

Four islands were also monitored for foxes to inform two fox shooting and trapping campaigns on Dream Island.

"It is critical that the Dream Island fox population is managed to protect vulnerable beach nesting bird populations," said Tanya.

Working with the landholders was also a priority with 23 landholders coming along to sessions to increase their awareness and knowledge of improved land management practices (saltmarsh, riparian) and ensure they are compliant with their management obligations.

"Working to protect an area as important and beautiful as Corner Inlet is a privilege and we can't do alone. The partnerships and connections created by this project will ensure we are giving it our best shot with the winners being the environment and wildlife," Tanya concluded.



Image: Vulnerable Hooded Plovers.



Supporting sustainable agriculture

Working with and supporting farmers is fundamental for productive and sustainable farming systems, achieving healthy waterways and increasing and connecting native vegetation cover. We continued to undertake activities to address threats to land health, with a focus on the Macalister Irrigation District (MID) and Corner Inlet.

We worked with partners to help develop soil management plans, demonstration sites, management programs, whole farm plans and on-ground activities designed to retain nutrients on farm and encourage water use efficiency.

These activities are complemented by the waterway health program, environmental stewardship, and community capacity to support natural resource management outcomes and tackle the effects of a changing climate together.

The renewal of the Lake Wellington Land and Water Management Plan was finalised in 2019-20 and provides a ten-year vision for sustainable irrigation and water management in the Lake Wellington catchment.

This year the Sustainable Irrigation Program delivered 34 new or updated irrigation farm plans which will influence 2,357 ha in the Macalister Irrigation District. There was one on-farm irrigation efficiency project (or spray irrigation) completed covering an area of 27 ha, providing estimated water savings of over 54 ML each year.

Agriculture achievements

Sustainable farming practice and innovations mean healthier waterways:



Implemented one on-farm irrigation efficiency project over 27 ha with savings of 54 ML per year.



Delivered 34 irrigation farm plans to influence 2,357 ha in the MID to reduce nutrient loss to the Ramsar-listed Gippsland Lakes.



Engaged 30 farmers to have a farm nutrient plan developed to improve 49 ha.

Worked with South Gippsland Landcare and Bass Coast Landcare networks to establish dung beetle nurseries.



“Once complete, the program will restore six ha of seagrass and protect 12 ha of rivers using a whole of catchment approach – showing that what happens upstream flows down to benefit the sea through improved water quality and increased fish habitat.”

Matt Bowler
Project Delivery Manager

Project partners

Australian Government, Landholders, Landcare networks, Southern Rural Water, DEECA, Agriculture Victoria, Dairy Australia, GippsDairy

Funding

Australian Government National Landcare Program, State Government Victorian Water Programs Investment Framework – Sustainable Irrigation Program

Above: Dairy farmers in the Macalister Irrigation District (MID).

2021-22 CATCHMENT STORY

Protection works keep flowing into Corner Inlet

One more step to protect Corner Inlet's fish and seagrass has been taken with 1.9 km of fencing completed along Lamont Creek – a tributary that flows into the Agnes River and into Corner Inlet.

The works in partnership with the landholder link with 1.6 km of fencing previously completed by WGCMA.

Matt Bowler, WGCMA Project Delivery Manager said: "It may seem unusual that works on a tributary are part of a Fisheries Habitat Restoration, but catchments are connected and protecting areas upstream improve water quality along the whole river course and into the sea.

"This is part of a larger project to fence off 75 ha of saltmarsh, mangrove and swamp scrub habitat adjoining the Corner Inlet Ramsar site – a haven for birds, fish and other wildlife."

Project works also include revegetating and restoring eight ha of Swamp Scrub and Saltmarsh communities in Bennison estuary to buffer the existing remnant vegetation and substantial intertidal mudflats and seagrass beds within the estuary. Local anglers have joined the team, working with landholders to demonstrate the results of the restoration efforts and to share their knowledge of the fish and natural values they are protecting.

"Once complete, the program will restore six ha of seagrass and protect 12 ha of rivers using a whole of catchment approach – showing that what happens upstream flows down to benefit the sea through improved water quality and increased fish habitat.

"Now the section of Lamont Creek has been protected from stock through fencing, the team will plant over 5,000 trees to improve riverbank health and create wildlife habitat.

"Positive steps upstream flow downstream into the Agnes and then on into Corner Inlet," said Matt Bowler."

This project supported by WGCMA, through funding from the Australian Government's National Landcare Program.



Image: The revegetated and fenced banks of the Agnes River as it runs into Corner Inlet.



Our partners

Woven through everything we do is partnerships and engagement – with Traditional Owners, community, individuals, other organisations and government. These are integral to the success of our projects and vital to the ongoing environmental health of the region.

The region has a long and proud history of a committed and motivated grassroots community that has delivered best practice natural resource management. Five Landcare networks support 52 Landcare groups along with over 55 community groups such as ‘friends of’ or foreshore committees of management.

Partnership achievements

Together with our partners we achieved great outcomes for the environment.

We completed 83 Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Register and Information System (ACHRIS) checks with 39 within the GLaWAC Registered Aboriginal Party (RAP) area, 33 in the BLCAC RAP area and 11 in the undetermined area of the catchment.

Renewed our Irrigator Reference Group and recruited new members.

✓ Held a range of Landcare and community events and field days.

Renewed and re-launched our Community Engagement Network with the expansion of the group to 25 members.



Established and renewed Environmental Water Advisory Groups for the Macalister, Thomson and Latrobe rivers to help inform the Seasonal Watering Plans and Management Plans for these environmental water entitlements.

“Essential to the project has been consultation with Traditional Owners and key project partners, Bunurong Land Council from the outset. The Land Council gave permission for the Bunurong language name of Kugerungmome to be used alongside Powlett River and has created a painting that symbolises the river and its story, to be used in communications across the project.”

Mandy Leggett
Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Officer

Project partners

Australian Government, State Government, Landcare networks and other community groups, GLaWAC, BLCAC, Trust for Nature, Parks Victoria, BirdLife Australia, local schools

Funding

Australian Government National Landcare Program, State Government Victorian Water Programs Investment Framework, Victorian Landcare Grants

Above: Bunurong Land Council's On Country NRM team with the Kugerungmome painting that tells the story of the river.

2021-22 CATCHMENT STORY

People Power for the Powlett

The Powlett River/Kugerungmome Partnerships Project is the latest example of how many hands can make light work for the environment.

It brings stakeholders together to work on projects for mutual benefit to the overall catchment.

Paula Camenzuli, Natural Resource Management Strategic Planner for WGCMA said: “What we are trying to achieve is to have a holistic, integrated view of the entire Powlett catchment from the southern slopes of the Strzelecki Ranges to the estuary, where it meets Bass Strait in Kilcunda.”

The three-year initiative integrates activities such as weed removal, fencing, revegetation, fox control, community education and land covenants. Combined, they help to improve the health of the river and its tributaries, create habitat and corridors for wildlife, and increase biodiversity.

“Essential to the project has been consultation with Traditional Owners and key project partners, Bunurong Land Council from the outset,” said WGCMA Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Officer, Mandy Leggett.

“The Land Council gave us permission for the Bunurong language name of Kugerungmome to be used alongside Powlett River and has created a painting that symbolises the river and its story, to be used in communications across the project,” Mandy said.

Other local project partners include Bass Coast Landcare Network, Parks Victoria, Trust for Nature, BirdLife Australia, landholders and community groups.

Rivers connect places, communities and people. The integrated nature of the initiative uses the passion people have for their local area and the power of connections to expand the reach and impact that could not be achieved with single agencies working in isolation.

This project is supported by WGCMA through funding from the Victorian Government’s *Our Catchments, Our Communities* Program.

*Image: Powlett River/
Kugerungmome Partnerships
Project members at their annual
catchup in February 2022.*





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