

# We should spend less on freeways - and more on our waterways

By **Bruce Lindsay**

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Out on Stony Creek in inner-western Melbourne the best endeavours of local community, councils and public agencies led to the protection of a small corridor of public land and waterway, considerable restoration works and no shortage of goodwill.

A part of nature was sustained in the urban and industrial landscape. One major industrial fire and its aftermath put paid to that. As *The Age* reported recently, the creek is all but sterilised. Nature may well come back, but it will again face the insurmountable obstacles of being a local waterway that essentially functions as a drain – as all Melbourne’s creeks do.



Illustration Matt Davidson MATT DAVIDSON

Since the fire, further pollution spills have affected Stony Creek from adjacent industrial premises. There’s not a lot of space for nature here. How do we get Stony Creek from flat-lining to a semblance of ecological health?



Members of Friends of Stony Creek say their creek continues to be contaminated by industrial chemical spills.  
JUSTIN MCMANUS

There are creeks and waterways all over urban Melbourne. Many have friends groups looking after them, doing important restoration works, lobbying and liaising with governments to keep these places protected and maintain some semblance of nature in the metropolis. They are among the most important green spaces left.

Because Melbourne sits at the intersection of mountains, plains and the coast, these waterways are very diverse. The Yarra is a typical temperate river, albeit once flowing into a large delta. Stony Creek and the western creeks are remnant seasonal waterways of what were once grassland plains, highly dependent on groundwater systems.

The proportion of land that is "green space" is significantly lower in the west than for Melbourne as a whole. There is no shortage of evidence of the importance of nature, including waterways, to human health, wellbeing and community in cities. A growing literature on "green infrastructure" backs this proposition.

Thousands of kilometres of rivers, wetlands and creeks form the backbone of natural spaces across Melbourne, a fact widely understood by local communities who use and experience those places every day. In short, Melbourne's waterways provide an essential, public good – nature. Proximity to nature is a justice issue, too. Healthy, repaired waterways are a part of that justice.

The pressures and threats on Stony Creek are faced by all the other waterways in Melbourne's west, and elsewhere, to some degree.

Factories and houses are built to the edge of some waterways. Many have disappeared entirely into underground drains. Small creek reserves, with remnant bush, survive in the suburbs, often left to locals to defend from encroaching development. Stormwater run-off impairs the health and fundamentally changes the flows of waterways.

Contemporary urban planning bolts waterway protections onto new suburbs or the refitting of older ones. Water-sensitive development provides for nice water features in local landscapes. Overwhelmingly, however, waterways remain incidental in the urban landscape, if not simply drains then as local "amenity".

Waterways are not viewed at the core of development models. They could provide the base for recovery of biodiversity, or a project of rewilding places – and people. This is what we need.

Across the other side of Melbourne from Stony Creek, the state government is planning to spend \$16 billion on the North East Link freeway project. It will enable continued growth in the circulation and flow of cars and trucks around and through Melbourne. It will involve compulsory acquisition of houses, take out parklands along the Yarra River, and no doubt cause inconvenience. This is, apparently, what infrastructure is supposed to look like.

Projects such as the North East Link are the product of special laws and massive public financing. The Major Transport Projects Facilitation Act fast-tracks these projects, once "declared" as such by the state government. Public subsidy is no obstacle. This is the state functioning as a vast construction contractor. It is a different form of public good: infrastructure for the circulation of commodities and people.

The much-vaunted Yarra River Protection Act, which was intended to establish a new approach to urban waterway protection in Melbourne, provides a measure of the respective influence of rivers and roads, of "green" and "grey" infrastructure: North East Link as a declared project is exempt from the effect of the Yarra act. Roads trump rivers.

The question is: can we not reorient the infrastructure model to protection and restoration of waterways? Environmental Justice Australia, a non-profit legal practice, has produced proposals for laws that would establish a major projects authority for "green infrastructure", focused on waterways in Melbourne's west.

Freeways and waterways are not incompatible. But the legal privilege and financing of infrastructure is a question of priorities and perspectives and, for the sake of healthy communities and places, we need to give far greater priority to the city's green infrastructure.

The model of infrastructure laws and funding for freeways can potentially provide a model for protection, repair and restoration of urban waterways. We need to turn urban streams back into functioning ecosystems.

If it is necessary to acquire land along waterways, drive innovation in building and engineering standards, and use public finance to enable a restoration economy, then we should do it. It will cost less than millions of tonnes of concrete and provide infinitely more wellbeing for the people of Melbourne.

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