

TOWARDS A SWIMMABLE BIRRARUNG FIELDS OF ACTION FOR SYSTEMIC TRANSFORMATION

February 2024



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About Regen Melbourne

Regen Melbourne is an engine for collaboration, in service to the regeneration of our city. Founded in the wake of the Black Summer fires and in the midst of COVID-19 lockdowns, our co-created social infrastructure is designed to raise our collective ambitions and deepen our systemic impact.

Regen Melbourne acknowledges the traditional custodians of Greater Melbourne, the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung, Bunurong and Boon Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation. We pay our deep respect to Elders, past and present, and we acknowledge their living connections to land and waterways, including Birrarung Yarra River and Nairn Port Phillip Bay.

CONTEXT: SYSTEMIC PROBLEMS NEED SYSTEMIC SOLUTIONS

Despite the many strengths of our beautiful city, we are facing a web of social and environmental challenges including climate impacts, housing access, inequality, food security, insecure work, loneliness and declining trust. We can all remember the smoke that covered Melbourne during the Black Summer in early 2020, and the unequal way different parts of this city suffered during the COVID-19 pandemic. We live in an era of systemic, interconnected challenges.

Systemic problems need systemic solutions. **This requires coherent action by alliances of unusual actors, from business, non-profit, government, universities and the general public. Single actors don't solve systems problems.**

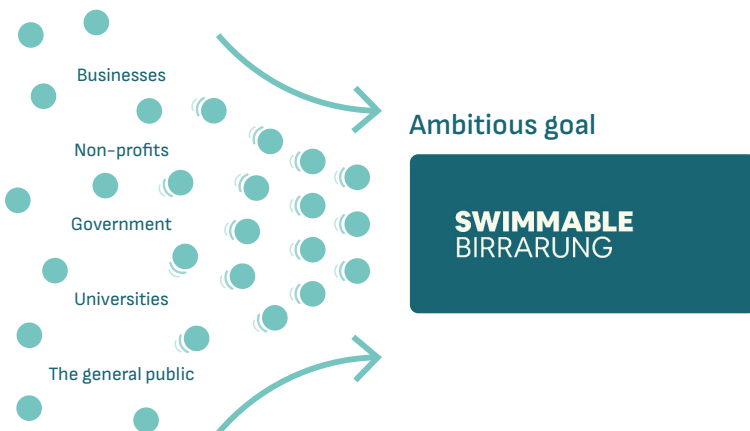
In this context, there is no more important transformational, collective project for our city than bringing back a healthy, thriving Birrarung | Yarra River.

In the context of the climate and biodiversity emergency, a regenerated Birrarung is a powerful mitigator of down-side risks like biodiversity loss, flooding risk, water supply management, urban heat, economic loss (tourism downturns) and land value loss. Of course, a regenerated Birrarung will also provide endless systemic upsides like urban cooling, biodiversity gains, enhanced public physician and mental health, increased tourism and economic activity, water security, and cultural (re) connection and healing.

As the life force of our city, it is the responsibility of us all to care for and regenerate our river. Over the last two years, hundreds of people and dozens of organisations have begun convening around this Swimmable Birrarung initiative. Building off a long history of care for this river, we have created a clear orientation, began organising more effectively, and built a set of collective insights. Together, we are now co-creating a portfolio of tangible projects (or leverage points) designed to accelerate the transformation of the river system.

This report is both an update on the journey to this point, and it is also a warm invitation for us all to get involved using our skills, our experiences and our knowledge in service of the Birrarung | Yarra River.

All content in this report builds on the contributions of many individuals and multiple organisations we've been working with over two years. All credit belongs to alliance partners working on this initiative. Regen Melbourne takes full responsibility for any errors or misrepresentations within.



2 SOIL: AN EVOLVING METHODOLOGY FOR SYSTEMIC TRANSFORMATION

We know that **in order to swim in the Birrarung a significant transformation of social, cultural, ecological, economic and political systems is required.** And for this to happen we need an ecosystem working in service to a shared goal, rather than a disparate set of single solutions.

Regen Melbourne’s approach to systemic transformation has been influenced by a diverse set of best-practice methodologies and frameworks from around the world, including doughnut economics, collective impact, challenge-led innovation, anchor collaboratives, community wealth building, systems thinking and open innovation processes. Although our work remains necessarily messy and non-linear, discrete phases of work can be identified that provide a clearer understanding of our roles in systemic change.

The SOIL model for systemic transformation was developed in 2023 and described these phases of work as we embark on large scale, collective and ambitious projects for our city:

Sensemaking

S

Involves hyper-relational pattern spotting of emerging energy and activity, coming from engaged organisations and individuals working to solve our major social and ecological concerns.

The opportunity here is to create a shared and ambitious collective orientation: a swimmable Birrarung.

Ambitious goal

SWIMMABLE BIRRARUNG

Organising

O

As a shared goal is established, we see how an existing ecosystem of actors is already connected and engaged with one another. This phase involves identifying the gaps or barriers across silos and sectors, which are in need of new collaborations, partnerships and ways of working to realise the transformative potential.

The opportunity here is to get an alliance of actors in powerful formation towards the ambitious orientation: fields of action.

Individual actors



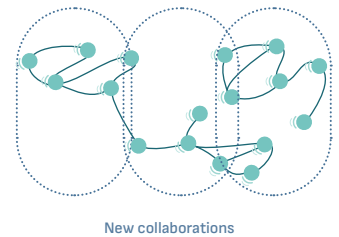
Fields of action

Insights

I

The sensemaking and organising phases generate significant insights that iteratively inform the roles and direction taken towards the shared goal. These organic insights are complemented by the power of research to ensure attunement to existing and emerging knowledge. This ensures our collective work is powered by the deep knowledge held across the city.

The opportunity here is to tilt knowledge systems towards the ambitious orientation, and close the gap between wisdom and action: founding insights.



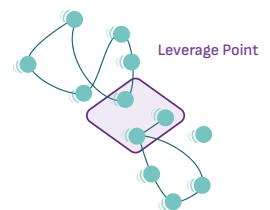
New collaborations

Leverage Points

L

After working below the surface (in the soil), we can begin to explore which existing and potential projects might unlock systemic transformation. This phase involves collectively assessing which projects are (or could be) powerful leverage points for systems change and focusing our efforts on building a dedicated portfolio of interventions.

The opportunity here is to present and drive a tangible portfolio of projects that together generate tangible and systemic impact: in co-design and development.



Leverage Point

3 STORY SO FAR

Early in 2022, it became clear that any conversation about Melbourne's overall regeneration needed to include the regeneration of the life-force that is the Birrarung | Yarra river. Regen Melbourne began a pilot program, convening a core group of alliance members around the regeneration of the Birrarung. These members were: Yarra Riverkeeper, Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation, Boonwurrung Land and Sea Council, Yarra Pools, Swinburne University, and Regeneration Projects.

This core group of partners convened public forums and private roundtables, integrated research, delivered a project incubator, visited and engaged with international swimmable cities and co-created the collective vision for a diverse series of swimming places; a swimmable corridor between Dights Falls and Nairn / Port Phillip Bay.

Our work so far has taken place in the context of a history of dedicated work in service to our river system. This includes, but is of course not limited to:

- The custodianship and care for the Birrarung by Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung, Bunurong and Boon Wurrung traditional owners for millenia;
- The establishment of Yarra River Keepers Association to advocate for the long-term improvements to river health (2004);
- The activation of Yarra Pools to catalyse a community movement for a more accessible and swimmable Birrarung (2014);
- The creation and passing of the Wilip-gin Birrarung murrun Act in the Victorian Parliament, providing a voice for the river and the establishment of a new statutory body, the Birrarung Council (2017); and
- The creation and release of the Burndap Birrarung burndap umarkoo (Yarra Strategic Plan), including a 50 year community vision (2020);

Internationally, there are also cities pursuing swimmable urban rivers, including Paris, Zurich, Sydney, Brisbane, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Helsinki, Berlin, Edmonton, Boston, New York and many others.



DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Collectively created during the sensemaking phase, with input from a variety of experts, these design principles continue to guide our work:

1.

Systems approach to regeneration

Holistic and systemic development, enabled by cross-sector collaboration, creating long-lasting net benefits for the environment. We work in partnership with existing river restoration and management organisations. We believe in the principle that any intervention on the river needs to have net positive gain for culture and the environment.

4.

A State of Wellbeing

Swimmable Birrarung is an expression of Victoria's culture of nature-based wellbeing and acts as a nature-based response to mental health challenges.

2.

Joy and Playfulness

Activations and interventions are centred on life in its glorious diversity.

5.

Reflective of Melbourne's Identity

This work builds upon our heritage of urban swimming and positions community connection, ecological restoration and economic pragmatism on equal footing. We showcase Melbourne's strength as an internationally recognised design city by creating a corridor of iconic, aesthetic and functional swimming places.

3.

One River, One Experience

Birrarung will be respected as a single living entity, and swimming locations connected as one experience.

6.

Our Context & the Climate Emergency

Our work with the waterways acknowledges the climate and biodiversity crisis. Activations will work with the natural environment to both mitigate and adapt to the changing climate.

4 FIELDS OF ACTION

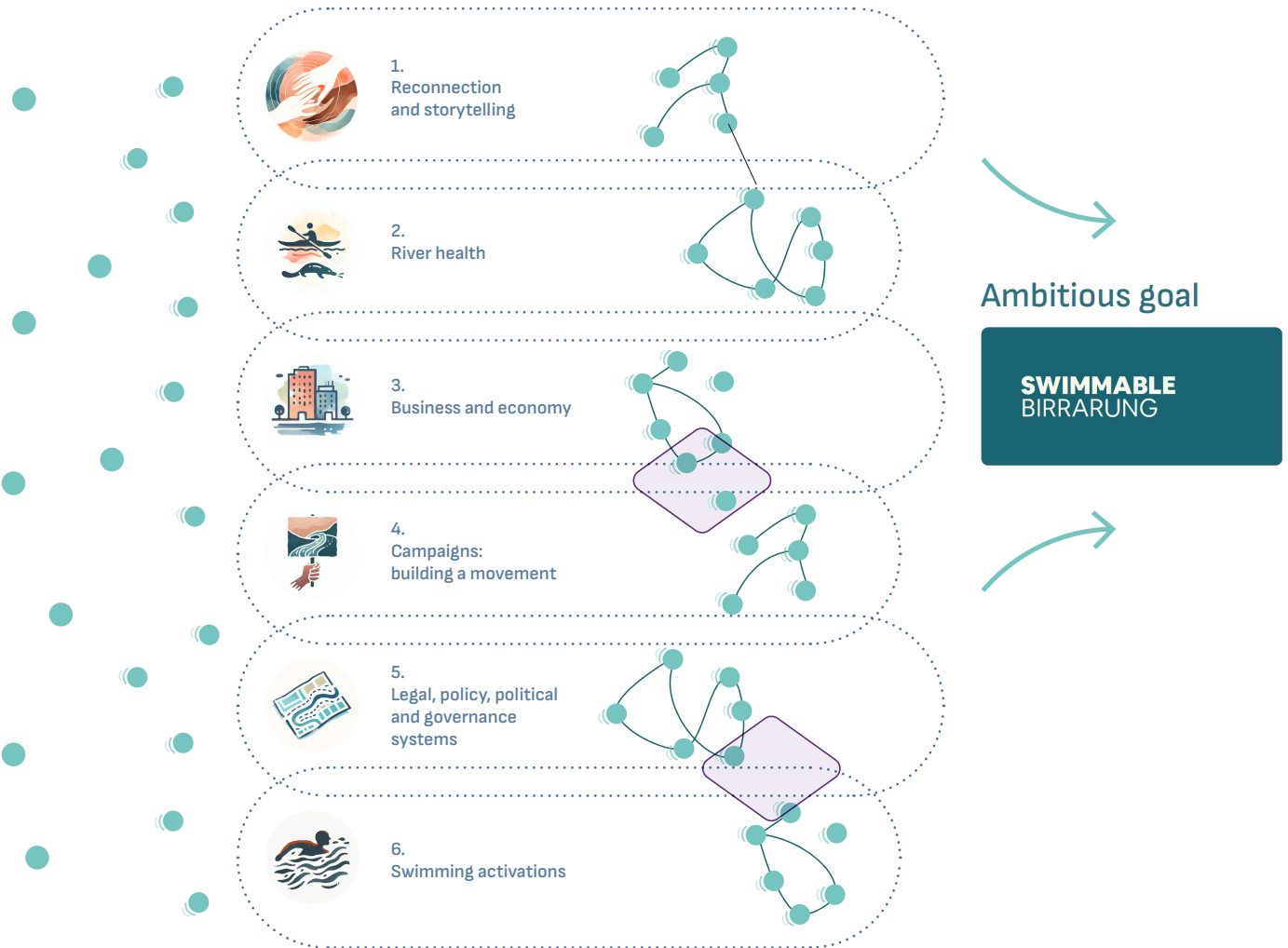
With the alignment behind an ambitious orientation, to make the lower reaches of the Birrarung Yarra River swimmable again, our work has turned to bringing a broad alliance of organisations into formation behind this goal.

Six collectively designed fields of action were established and activated in 2023. These capture the areas that require deep exploration of the current landscape, the identification of key systemic barriers and the design of opportunities for transformation. Each field of action includes a unique formation of organisations with subject-matter expertise and a desire to serve the regeneration of the Birrarung.

Actors

Fields of action

Collaborations



Fields of action initiate and sustain the systemic action required to bring a cross-sector of actors together. They act as nested landscapes for collaboration.



Leverage points emerge as new, or amplified, projects to accelerate movement towards the goal (and/or) learn about the challenges in the system more deeply

Field of action 1: Reconnection and storytelling

Recognising that the regeneration of the Birrarung is dependent on our reconnection to Country and each other.

Reconciliation is an ongoing and vital part of the regeneration of the Birrarung. This field of action builds on the Treaty process underway in Victoria, the work already done through the Burndap Birraung burndap umarkoo (Yarra Strategic Plan) to recognise the continual custodianship of the waterways by the traditional owners, and the importance of the Birrarung as a cultural site. This field of action celebrates and connects aspects of the river's cultural history including a focus on how we can leverage the power of the arts to tell diverse river stories as a way to shift hearts and minds and reorient our city towards the waterway.

This field of action recognises that to regenerate the Birrarung we need to shift the dominant, extractive mindsets towards a paradigm of relationship with and care of the river.

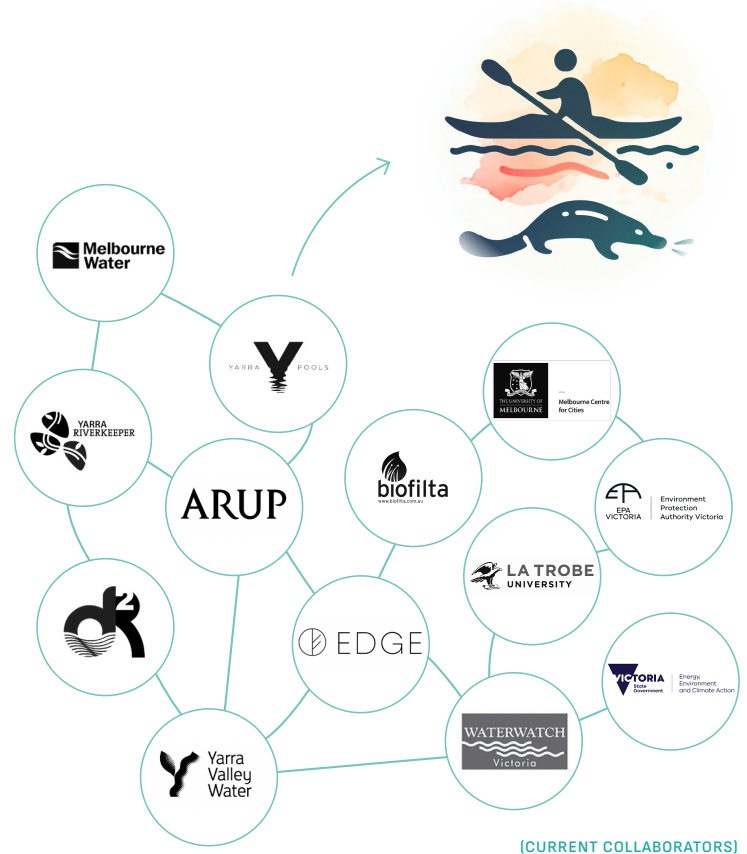


Field of action 2: River health

Weaving technological and ecological interventions to improve the health of the river

This field of action encompasses the wide range of emerging solutions, innovation, and data sources which tell us about health as well as time honoured technologies and ecological interventions which enhance river health. While technical and ecological challenges are often the domain of water authorities and technical experts, we recognise that the city's broader relationship with the river's health will be critical in the journey to regeneration.

This field of action is buoyed by decades of water quality improvement already undertaken across the Birrarung, the delivery of the Wilip-gin Birrarung murrn Act 2017 (Yarra Protection Act), the establishment of the Birrarung Council, and the backdrop of climate action already being driven by citizens across the city.

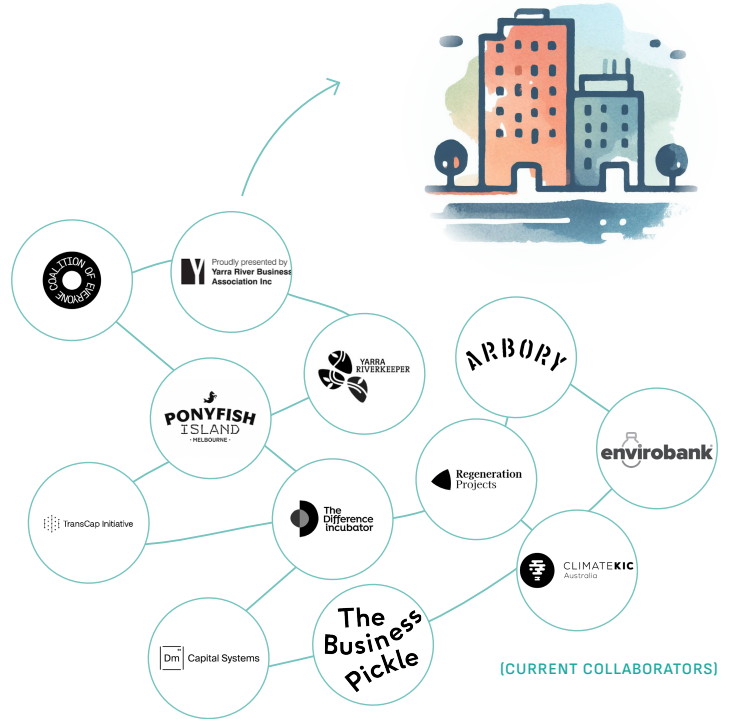


Field of action 3: Business and economy

Harnessing the power of business and the next economy for the regeneration of the Birrarung

Already a hub for enterprise, the Birrarung presents a golden opportunity for the emergence of a deep and reciprocal relationship between business and nature. This field of action recognises that the river isn't a commercial asset, and in order to move towards a thriving waterway we must ensure that activities are not, and are not perceived to be, commercialising the lifeblood of the city.

This field of action builds on the significant economic paradigm shifts that are already underway, including the growth of B-Corporations and social enterprises across Greater Melbourne. It builds on the rich philanthropic heritage in Melbourne and asks how we can be more systemic and transformative in resourcing the regeneration of the Birrarung?



Field of action 4: Campaigns: building a movement

Creating a citywide movement towards a Swimmable Birrarung through mass-participation and public activations

This field of action recognises the untapped power and potential in the people of Melbourne, and seeks to explore what could be possible with multiple actors and multiple solutions working in service to a swimmable river. This field of action builds on the identity of Melbourne as a design-led city. It builds on our thriving creative sector, our festival culture and the fact that our city has embraced significant change in the past, including the transformation of our laneways into a thriving part of our cultural identity.

Finally, this field of action builds on the deep love we have for our city and for the Birrarung.



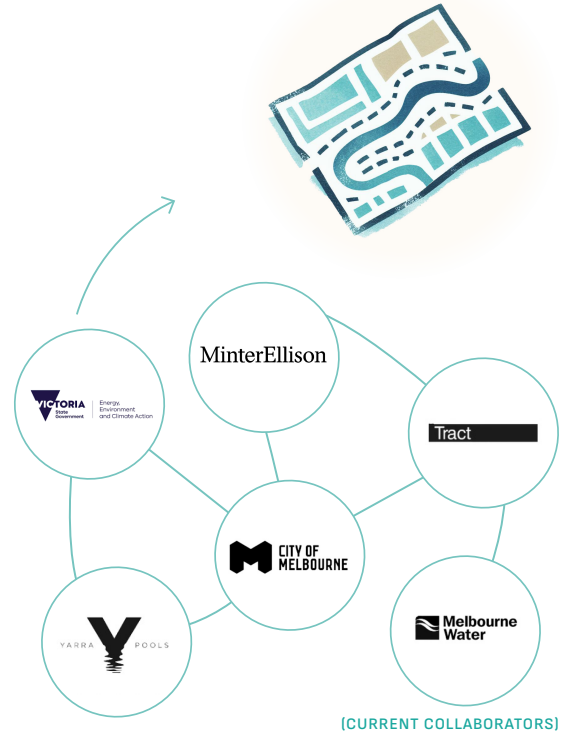
Field of action 5:

Legal, policy, political and governance systems

Delving into the shifts needed within institutions in order to unblock structural barriers to regeneration

This field of action explores the levers in policy, legal, political and governance systems which will need to act in service to our goal. Here we explore how the current incentives and dominant way of working need to shift in order to centre Birrarung as the life-force of Greater Melbourne. We are curious about what macro conditions need to shift in order to materially recognise the mutual value available from a swimmable Birrarung.

This field of action recognises the sustained advocacy and stewardship from community groups already underway, and works to unlock routes for greater distributed and collective governance. This field of action recognises the international swimmable cities movement and its lessons, case studies and leverage points, including international examples of nature centred governance and the rights of nature (forests, rivers, species).



(CURRENT COLLABORATORS)

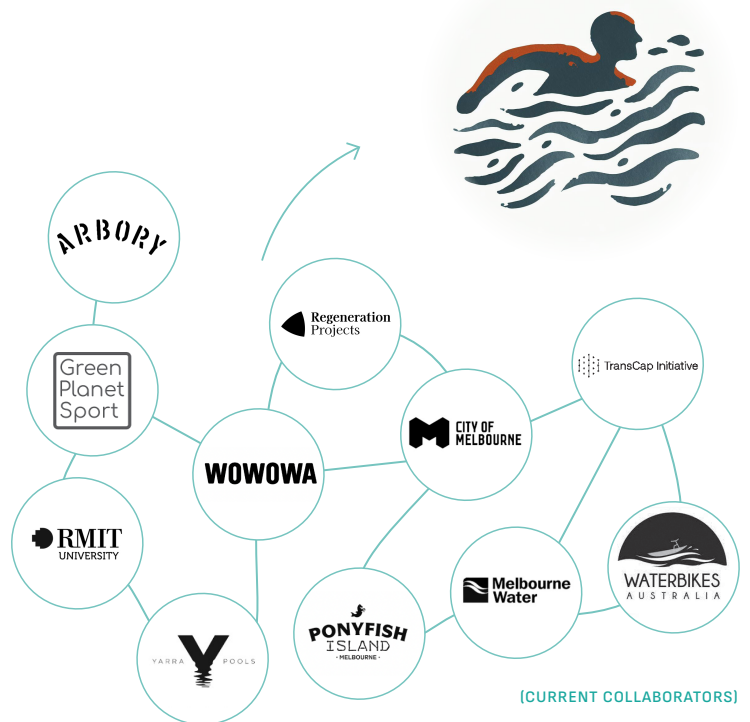
Field of action 6:

Swimming activations

Focusing on the design and development of tangible swimming activations between Dights Falls and Port Phillip Bay

This field of actions recognises that sometimes you have to see it (or swim it) to believe it. We also recognise that moving from idea to action is a galvanising way to build momentum and surface hidden barriers and unrealised opportunities.

This field of action builds on the success of all other fields of action and focuses on the design and development of tangible swimming activations between Dights Falls and Nairm/Port Phillip Bay. Instead of isolated activities, the swimming activities act as interconnected experiences, as a "swimmable corridor" which provide net benefit to the environment and are a stepping stone to the holistic regeneration of our waterways. This field of action builds on and links together activities across the Birrarung and beyond, like Yarra Pools, the floating wetlands and wellness centres across the Victorian Bathing Trail.



(CURRENT COLLABORATORS)

5 INSIGHTS

As this alliance of partners have moved from sense-making to organising towards a Swimmable Birrarung, key insights have both been identified and new knowledge has emerged. The core insights collected here are the culmination of patterns spotted over the last two years of convening, of learning alongside actors who have worked in expert spaces such as waterways, urban transitions, community organising for decades, and from listening to elders who hold stories of the Birrarung through millennia. Within each, and between them all, are innumerable knowledge flows and insights already existing and constantly emerging in the field.

Insight 1:

We all have a stake in the Birrarung | Yarra River

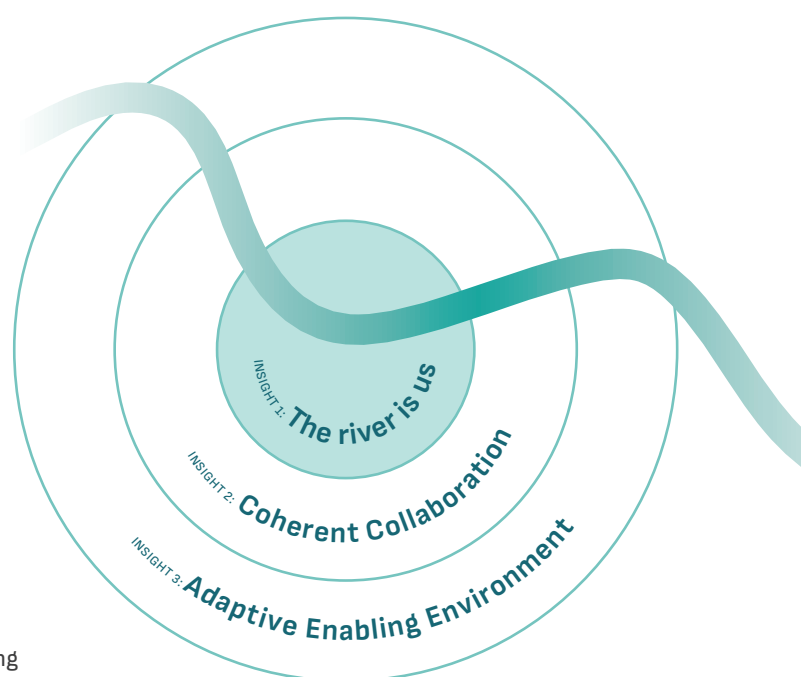
The Birrarung is the lifeblood of Melbourne; all life has a stake in its survival and thriving. And the stakes are high

The Birrarung has sustained life for tens of thousands of years. Over millennia it has flowed through Country, occasionally swelling beyond its banks to nourish surrounding land with essential nutrients from its upper reaches. This nourished land has provided fertile soil for growing food and a rich and diverse habitat for a third of Victoria's wildlife. The river has been integral to the formation of Melbourne as a city, sustaining human life by providing a source of freshwater. The Birrarung supplies 70% of Melbourne's drinking water as well as supports local economies (food, wine region etc). And, this lifeblood, like many waterways across the world is under strain. The Birrarung, since colonisation, has suffered from over-extraction and significant inflow of pollution (litter, stormwater, urban and agricultural runoff, industrial waste).

Significant progress has been made in recent times in returning the Birrarung to health. And yet, there is still a long way to go until we have a thriving waterway through the centre of our city. Given our rising and interconnected challenges, led by the climate emergency, we cannot assume that our current, iterative approaches to sustaining the river will be enough. We are grossly underestimating our rising risks while also not accounting for the diverse value to be realised from a regenerated waterway.

For us to thrive as people in this place, we need to transform our relationship and approach to the Birrarung. Government, business, civil society and households all have a role to play. Our entire economy has a stake in the future of the river as we shift from extractive models to regenerative models where economic progress does not lead to environmental compromise.

Our lives are intertwined with the river; a thriving river means a thriving city and people. A healthy river means a healthy Port Phillip Bay and a healthy ecosystem.



Insight 2:

A Swimmable Birrarung requires a connected, coherent and collaborative system of actors, which is not currently the case

Our current collaborative practice is not sufficient for the scale and complexity of this challenge

The Birrarung is an integrated living entity from source to sea. Our river doesn't know or respect human constructs, organisational forms, geographic boundaries, government departments or jurisdictions. As such, our responses to this challenge must not be limited by traditional constraints to collaboration. By centering the regeneration of this river system, we can move towards a connected and coherent system of actors.

The Burndap Birrarung burndap umarkoo, Yarra Strategic Plan, offers a collaborative approach and formal framework to improving the health and wellbeing of the river. Yet, current incentive structures across layers of our economy make working collaboratively costly, inefficient and insufficient for the scale of transformation required. As a result, Burndap Birrarung burndap umarkoo is not yet translating into shared strategic objectives, accountabilities or collective responsibilities. We're not yet seeing a diverse and coherent group of actors collaborating in service to the river. Although an obvious challenge, this also remains a significant opportunity; connecting and creating coherence across a system of actors working in service to the river can accelerate the changes we need - at the scale we need them.

Insight 3:

A Swimmable Birrarung requires a transformed enabling environment around the river system

Our challenge goes beyond simply better collaboration; shifting systems requires fundamental changes in

There is no shortage of passion, love, care and expertise working in service to the Birrarung. Almost everyone from community, business, civil society, government, sporting clubs and education groups along the river express their deep love of the waterway. And most intuitively understand the need for better collaborative practice. And yet, despite this positive energy towards regeneration, actors along the river express frustration, tiredness and despair at the lack of progress.

It is clear that our city has the capacity and desire to transform the river. We now need an economic, political and cultural environment that enables this work to come alive; transformational work cannot be successful without a shift in fundamental enabling conditions. **Four key enabling environments** have been identified that require significant systemic change:

- **Knowledge flows:** how research and knowledge are developed, valued and disseminated needs to shift in a way that centres the river system.
- **Capital flows:** how capital moves along and through the river system needs to shift away from single-point, single-asset intervention and towards multidimensional, systemic portfolios that value coherent and decentralised experimentation.
- **Policy making:** complex governance overlays have been designed to overcome the multi-jurisdictional nature of the Birrarung. Further work is required to develop policy practices and responses to an integrated living entity in order to realise the potential of Burndap Birrarung burndap umarkoo, the Yarra Strategic Plan. Long term political buy-in is also required to match the complexity and scale of this challenge.
- **Storytelling:** without social and cultural reconnection with the Birrarung as the life-force of Greater Melbourne, the potential of this work will not be realised.

There are of course many other enabling conditions, these are just the beginning. And while we continue work on transforming these enabling conditions we also need to just keep moving. The river continues to flow. The work continues.

WHERE TO NEXT

After two years of Regen Melbourne convening organisations in the Swimmable Birrarung initiative, and after decades (and millenia) of existing work in service to a thriving waterway, we are now identifying leverage points and co-designing a portfolio of projects.

This portfolio of tangible projects will act as acupressure points to tilt this complex ecosystem towards regeneration, the intent being to move beyond single projects and towards systemic portfolios.

Get in touch: charity@regen.melbourne

