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Review of the Murrumbidgee River Corridor Management Plan 1998

The Canberra Ornithologists Group (COG) wishes to provide some comments in response to the Review of the Murrumbidgee River Corridor (MRC) Management Plan 1998.

The Canberra Ornithologists Group (COG) is a volunteer-based community group with around 400 members, with a mission that includes the conservation of native birds and their habitats. COG plays an active role in advocating for the protection of native vegetation as bird habitat, and for the mitigation of threats to and impacts on native birds.

The Review of the MRC Management Plan 1998 indicates a primary focus of the plan is “whether the overall management objectives were achieved, and to identify issues that might need to be considered in developing a new Plan for the Corridor.” Further, the YourSay website states, “your views will inform the development of a new reserve management plan that will guide the conservation and protection of the natural and cultural values of the Corridor while continuing to provide opportunities for nature-based recreational activities.”

1. Were overall management objectives in 1998 Plan met?

As the Review Paper notes, a key challenge in determining whether the overall management objectives of the 1998 Plan were achieved is “the absence of a systematic, integrated approach for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of management effectiveness” and only limited information on biodiversity and other natural values in the 1998 Plan.

- It would seem that there has been a mix of steps forwards and steps backwards over the 23 years life of this Plan. The impacts of the 2003 bushfires and climate change need to be considered in this context.

2. Key Features of a new Plan

It is important to note that the new Reserve Management Plan will be a legal instrument under the *Nature Conservation Act 2014*. The key purpose of the Act is to: “make provision for the protection, conservation, enhancement and management of nature in the ACT”.

Overall, the Review Paper appears to identify/canvass most of the main issues for consideration in a new Plan. It is important, however, that there is a strategic vision for the MRC which properly

considers its relationship with a large city nearby, and the resultant impacts and management challenges – such a strategic vision remains to be articulated.

COG broadly supports the recommendations in the Review Paper of the 1998 Plan as outlined in Section 4.3 [page 22]. The overall outcome COG wants is a new Plan that is clear and succinct, derives from a strategic vision, is evidence-based, is able to document measurable outcomes from management actions, and is a useful tool for land managers to guide management decisions in the MRC.

COG's key recommendations for a new Plan are listed in the Attachment.

Two key features of a new Plan, needed to address crucial gaps in the 1998 Plan, are a clear articulation of:

- Adequate and comprehensive baseline data on biodiversity values, and
- A systematic, integrated approach for ongoing monitoring and evaluation, including timely public reporting on delivery of management actions in Operational Plans.

In addition, principles/issues that COG considers need to be of high priority in developing a new Plan for the MRC include:

- Conservation as the primary and first objective of the Management Plan. The Plan needs to outline very clearly the management actions and inputs to conserve, protect and enhance the natural and cultural values of the MRC.
- Articulation in the Plan of all the potential threats to biodiversity values and the consequent management approaches and actions to reduce impacts of those threats.
- Recreation only to be low-impact and within constraints of giving first priority to conservation.
- The important role of citizen science in biodiversity data collection and monitoring systems, including the important role of the community in undertaking on-ground Landcare work.

However, a very live issue is the threat to the MRC of urban development on the western edge of Canberra. Objective 8 of the 1998 Plan is: "to maintain a corridor of open rural and natural land on the western edge of Canberra, and to give clear definition to the transition from the urban landscape to the rugged forested landscape of the mountainous skyline to the west of the city". To date this has largely been met. This Objective should be maintained in the new Plan.

The current Western Edge Investigation (WIA) is looking at the potential for further urban expansion/development to the west of urban Canberra as far as the river corridor. Connectivity and corridors, particularly the Murrumbidgee River corridor to Molonglo River, have been identified by the community as critically important in the WIA.

COG will make commentary on the suitability of future urban development via the current planning processes, however COG does consider that the new MRC management plan should not pave the way for any such development at this time. No decisions have yet been made on the Western Edge Investigation, and it is understood it will be many years before such decisions will be made. However, the new Plan should retain Objective 8, and include considerations and actions within the scope of the new Plan relevant to the landscape scale context of the MRC, such as landscape connectivity.

COG would like to see in the Plan an explicit statement there will not be urban development west of the Murrumbidgee River. Discussion of urban development west of the river started in the 1970s, yet has always been dismissed on environmental grounds – in particular to protect the MRC.

3. Key Birds Issues

COG considers that key birds issues for the MRC should be listed in a new Plan, with effective management strategies, including targeted habitat and habitat connectivity enhancements.

COG notes that, in the 1998 Management Plan, the main birds issues were identified as (page 22):

1. Honeyeater migration across and along the corridor (various sites identified).
2. Nesting sites for birds of prey (in relatively undisturbed cliff areas).
3. Winter roost area for substantial population of Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoo.
4. Nesting sites for Rainbow Bee-eater.

Issues 1, 2 and 4 continue to be important birds issues.

Honeyeater Migration

The MRC continues to be an important gathering location and key route/corridor for the annual migration of honeyeaters out of the ACT in the autumn (principally, Yellow-faced & White-naped Honeyeaters, but also significant numbers of Red Wattlebirds). Many thousands of honeyeaters mass together and move during autumn from the higher ranges/country in a general west to east direction, following various land features, especially the river systems, and exit east from the river corridor.

Although not well documented, it is believed that the patterns of honeyeater migration have changed over the last couple of decades.

- It is thought that urban development in Tuggeranong close to the river (which replaced open grasslands and scattered trees) has altered the migration patterns, and limited Point Hut Crossing as a significant gathering point for movement south and east; historically, Point Hut Crossing had been a major meeting and movement/exit point for honeyeaters from the MRC.
- The bushfires in 2003, which impacted the river corridor and in the Weston Creek area, are also thought to have resulted in changed migration patterns (due to tree/vegetation loss, as well as expanded urbanisation), and had a major impact on changing honeyeater migration in the urban space.
- The COG 2003 honeyeater survey indicated that Angle Crossing was the major site for honeyeater movement at that time, and noted that birds passing through the MRC probably came from not only the mountain ranges nearby, but also from further afield.
- Again in 2020, there have been major bushfires of significant intensity, altering habitats across a wide area of the high country of the region (e.g. Kosciuszko NP, Tumut area), likely sources of some of the honeyeater populations which move east and use the MRC.
- It would be valuable to collect contemporary bird data about the honeyeater migration to inform the Plan and implement appropriate management actions.

The availability of tree cover along the Murrumbidgee River is a particular issue; honeyeaters prefer to migrate making short distance flights between trees and other vegetation cover, and only cross extensive open areas when forced to do so. [Other bird species also prefer to use cover when moving around - see below under habitat improvements.]

The 1998 Management Plan (page 23) indicated the Parks Service would monitor honeyeater migration patterns and plant trees and shrubs (for shelter of honeyeaters through relatively open areas) in strategic locations, e.g. near Point Hut Crossing. It is not clear if this action was undertaken, although various tree plantings in different places are mentioned in the Review Paper. COG has not undertaken honeyeater migration surveys since 2003.

- Re-vegetation with trees and shrubs at key strategic nodes along the Murrumbidgee River is likely to assist honeyeater migration and an exit from the corridor, as well as benefit a range of other birds using the MRC (especially woodland birds, both resident and migratory); strategic linkages to/functional connectivity with vegetated corridors and habitat patches beyond the river corridor should be considered in this context.

Birds of prey nesting sites and movement corridors

The nesting sites of disturbance-sensitive species such as Peregrine Falcon (e.g. Red Rocks Gorge, Shepherd's Lookout) should continue to be a focus for protection, by non-disclosure of exact nesting locations and restricted recreational activity (e.g. rock climbing) in the breeding season.

White-bellied Sea-eagles are recorded flying along the Murrumbidgee River, and the MRC is believed to be an important route between Lake Burrenjuck and Googong Dam for this species and possibly other raptors. There are at least two known Wedge-tailed Eagle breeding sites in the corridor, another species with sensitivity to nest site disturbance.

Nesting sites for Rainbow Bee-eaters

Rainbow Bee-eaters are now protected under Commonwealth and ACT legislation relating to migratory species. River systems with sandy beaches and erosion gullies are favoured nesting sites for this species, which needs deep sandy soils to excavate their nest holes. Key breeding sites along the MRC could be identified and appropriate management actions taken as needed (e.g. signage if near/accessible from recreation nodes).

Roost sites for Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoo

Concerning issue 3, a roost site for Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoo, it seems likely this reference in the 1998 Management Plan came from the November 1986 report of COG bird surveys in the MRC (commissioned by the National Capital Development Commission); the casuarina (River She-oak) stand at the confluence of the Cotter and Murrumbidgee Rivers was described as a traditional winter roost.

- While details are not well documented, it is believed this roost was probably associated with the nearby pine forests (Pierces Creek) which provided food resources (at least in the 1980s and 90s).
- Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoo numbers in the local area, and their movement patterns in recent decades, appear to have been influenced/alterd by bushfires and the loss of the pine forests (food sources), particularly in the Lower Cotter and Stromlo area. There is no contemporary data on roost sites in the MRC.
- There appears to be insufficient current evidence to warrant retaining roost sites for Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoo as a separate key birds issue in the Management Plan.

Woodland Birds Issues

COG suggests that habitat and connectivity improvements for woodland birds, especially small woodland birds, should be a key birds issue for a new Plan, replacing issue 3 (Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoo roost sites) above.

- COG has recently undertaken an analysis of its ACT woodland survey data from 1998 to 2019 (the survey sites are mostly peri-urban woodlands, but include a few rural sites).
- The analysis shows there has been a significant decline in woodland-dependent birds, small woodland birds and canopy feeders.
- The long-term decliners include threatened species such as Hooded Robin and Brown Treecreeper, small breeding groups of which now occur now only in rural areas remote from urbanisation, as well as a range of small woodland birds, both resident and migratory. A report is available on the COG website (<http://canberrabirds.org.au/conservation-2/woodland-birds/cog-woodland-bird-monitoring-project/>).

It is well recognised that actions are needed to assist in reversing the declines in woodland birds in the ACT. Improvements in habitat and habitat linkages are needed, especially for threatened species.

It is known from regular bird surveys COG has undertaken in the last decade on the Monaro, south of Canberra, that there are populations of woodland bird species surviving in rural and more remote areas, species which around Canberra are now in low abundance and known to be declining. There is potential, using the MRC, for birds to move along the river seeking suitable new territories, and to establish breeding populations in suitable habitats, including beyond the river corridor.

Careful consideration should be given to suitable sites in the MRC for habitat enhancement/improvements. One possible site for investigation is Huntly in the Western Investigation Area; this may have potential for vegetation restoration/nodes for woodland and other birds (upper slopes of the inner corridor on the eastern side of the river) and connectivity corridors to the east. Huntly was one of the sites surveyed in the 1986 bird survey for the National Capital Development Commission, and potential for habitat improvement was mentioned in that report.

Birds Monitoring Surveys/Programs

There is a need for monitoring/data collection programs (including collection of birds data) to guide/inform evidence-based management decisions and actions under a new Plan.

At a minimum, this is suggested for monitoring of the four key birds issues (listed above) and to guide strategic habitat restoration/connectivity improvements for birds (and other biodiversity):

- Given the lack of contemporary data, a baseline bird survey could be undertaken initially, e.g. seasonal surveys over 12 months, including honeyeater migration surveys for numbers, patterns of movement and key exit points from the MRC.
- Key sites could then be identified for both honeyeater migration and for woodland birds, with monitoring points to ensure repeatable surveys are possible over time, and data can be analysed for trends.
- Bird monitoring surveys should occur periodically, and baseline surveys should be undertaken before major vegetation enhancements/rehabilitation.

4. Habitat Connectivity

River systems are important functional corridors for movement of birds and other biodiversity, especially a major river like the Murrumbidgee River. The connections beyond the river corridor to the broader landscape are also very important.

It will be important to have a well targeted approach to ensure there are functional corridors for a range of birds and other biodiversity, particularly across the lands between the Murrumbidgee and Molonglo Rivers.

- The 1986 bird survey report, although dated, may provide useful information (considered together with contemporary data) to inform possible sites for targeted habitat refuges and connectivity improvements for birds.

Conserving and enhancing habitat links through the regional landscape, and maintaining a corridor of open rural and natural land on the western edge of Canberra, were two of the management objectives of the 1998 Management Plan. COG agrees these should continue to be objectives in a new Plan, and indeed should be prominent in a new Plan. Habitat connectivity from the river corridor will be particularly important, should there be further urban expansion in the future.

5. Habitat Improvements

Detailed Action Plans for various ecological communities have been produced since the 1998 MRC Management Plan, e.g. aquatic and riparian, lowland grassy woodland, natural temperate grassland. These set a broad framework for a new MRC Plan. COG agrees with the Review Paper (page 5), that it is critical for a new Plan to incorporate directions and actions from these strategies, and for appropriate mechanisms to be established for evaluating management effectiveness.

The Review Paper (pages 8-9) refers to vegetation in surveys in 2009, showing riparian and valley slope vegetation being in 'moderate to low' condition, with high cover and abundance of weed species. The need for protection and enhancement of remnant vegetation and investment in weeds management are also noted. The value of riparian vegetation is also noted in the Review Paper as important for woodland birds, particularly for movement and to provide refuge areas.

A strategic and well-targeted habitat restoration program for the MRC would be a positive. Restoration/re-vegetation could be developed around strategic nodes or refuge areas, to improve bird and other fauna habitats and their linkages to woodland patches near riverine areas, as well as providing stopping and resting zones for migrating honeyeaters and other birds. Consideration could be given to some areas with potential to improve habitat quality, as restricted zones for only passive recreational activity (bird study, quiet walking).

Such actions would be consistent with the key issues identified in the Review Paper, and with the conservation principles and guidelines in Section 4 of the ACT Aquatic and Riparian Conservation Strategy and Action Plans (2018), particularly those referring to the importance of refuges to maintain biodiversity (4.5.16/4.5.17), prioritising areas for rehabilitation (4.5.2), and maintaining and improving connectivity (4.5.3/4.5.4).

Outcomes/principles from the ACT urban habitat and connectivity project (Conservation Research & Evaluation, EPSDD) may inform habitat improvements/connectivity actions, such as patch size, tree spacing, and minimum corridor width.

There are references to improving the habitat for woodland birds at various locations in the 1986 National Capital Development Commission report of bird surveys in the MRC. This survey was intended to provide information on the value for birds of the habitats in the corridor, and to inform planning proposals for the corridor. This is still a valid objective overall. Two sites mentioned for

possible habitat improvement in the 1986 report could be investigated as habitat improvement nodes:

- (a) Huntly (part of the WIA), vegetation restoration/improvement of grazing land on upper slopes of the inner corridor on the eastern side to improve the area as habitat for birds.
 - Connectivity enhancement across that area to the Molonglo River will be important for birds (and other biodiversity).
- (b) Lanyon Woolshed ('Riverside' in 1986 report), potential for node for woodland birds – area between Point Hut and Tharwa.

Restoration Plan for Riparian Vegetation

An important issue for birds using the MRC is riparian vegetation, to provide shelter, food and habitat connections. The need for restoration/rehabilitation is acknowledged in the 1998 Plan and in the Riparian Action Plan.

Riverine casuarina habitat is very important for a variety of birds, especially where mistletoes have established on casuarina trees. This can provide food resources for honeyeaters, particularly the rare Painted Honeyeater which is recorded from time to time (e.g. recent records from Stoney Creek NR and Woodstock NR).

- Important riparian areas could be identified and prioritised for rehabilitation, including areas where casuarina trees are thinly distributed, in low density or in poor condition due to impacts from bushfires, and where connectivity to the wider landscape can be enhanced.

6. Threats

Overall it is recommended that the new Plan clearly articulate threats to the values of the MRC, and clearly outline the management actions to mitigate those. Some threats are identified here along with brief comments.

Climate Change

The new Plan will need to address climate change as a key threat, and a major overarching focus of the Plan should be to build ecosystems resilience. Large-scale connectivity approaches are important to mitigate the impacts of climate change, and the landscape-scale context of the MRC is a critical consideration.

Measures will be needed to build more resilient ecosystems and to provide refuge areas for biodiversity from the extremes of climate impacts. Issues relevant to the MRC to assist with this include: establishing larger areas of undisturbed habitat/patches, restoring areas strategically near to riverine vegetation and undisturbed/intact habitat, providing adequate buffers for areas of ecological value (to buffer urban and other edge effects), and minimizing threats such as weeds, pest animals and recreational pressures.

Urban Development

A key threat to the MRC is urban expansion/development. To the north, the urban edge impacts of Ginninderry need to be monitored and appropriate management continue to be put in place. The new Plan needs to explicitly rule out any urban development in the river corridor (such as the proposed development of suburb Thompson in 2016).

Discussion of urban development west of the Murrumbidgee River started in the 1970s, and has always been dismissed on environmental grounds, in particular to protect the MRC. COG would like

to see the new Plan reflect the need to retain the western side of the MRC in its natural state/as natural habitats, to best protect the values of the MRC.

While there is currently a Western Edge Investigation (land west of Mt Stromlo) underway, it is important not to assume that urban development will proceed. The Review Paper notes in several places the potential Western Edge development as an issue for the new Plan, for example at:

- 3.1.2 – Western Edge development planning and assessment processes and impact mitigation.
- 3.2.2 – Urban expansion adjacent to the Corridor.
- 3.3.2 – Visual impact on the Corridor of the proposed Western Edge development.
- 3.8.2 – Visual impact of the proposed Western Edge development.

The new Plan should stand on its own in terms of the best biodiversity conservation outcomes, and how best to protect the values of the river corridor.

Weeds and Pest Animals

The new Plan needs to clearly highlight the threats to the MRC of various pest plants and animals. Initial works to address these should be prioritised with ongoing maintenance to keep pests in check. The area should also be a focus of the new rapid response weed team. An ongoing issue with the budget for pests is the stop-start nature of weed and feral animal controls. Effectively this often undermines the actual expenditure, as initial on-ground outcomes are then lost without ongoing control measures.

A clear plan needs to be made to remove all deer from the River Corridor as they are impacting on re-vegetation areas, and will compromise future re-vegetation efforts.

7. Recreation – Nature-Based Recreation

The YourSay website states: the new reserve management plan “will guide the conservation and protection of the natural and cultural values of the Corridor while continuing to provide opportunities for nature-based recreational activities.”

COG has concerns about how Reserve Management Plans will balance the proper protection of environmental values in reserves, and recreation. Recreational use is seemingly a priority of comparable weight to natural values in the above statement for the new Plan. Management actions need to prioritise protection of the environmental values which the reserves were created to protect.

The Review Paper (page 13) also acknowledges that: “Several initiatives are underway to set the strategic direction for nature-based tourism in the ACT, including development of a Nature-based Tourism Strategy for the Territory and a Landscape Classification System (LCS) for PCS-managed reserves”. As these initiatives are ‘underway’, at this point it is unclear whether they will assist in ensuring that biodiversity values and ecological systems are not compromised by ‘nature-based recreation or tourism’.

The tourism aspect is a particular concern unless very well managed. Already ACT reserves are in danger of being over-used by people. With the Canberra population continuing to grow, there is increasing demand for more and various recreational outlets/facilities for the health and well-being of citizens. More Canberrans are seeking recreational opportunities within natural areas and green strips, and there have been noticeable increases in numbers of people using sensitive woodland reserves, for example, Mulligan’s Flat and Goorooyaroo, and Callum Brae. Some Nature Reserves

have been very heavily used for recreation, and as a consequence their environmental values have been eroded (e.g. by bikes on O'Connor & Bruce Ridges). These pressures exist with respect to the current population, let alone influxes of tourists.

8. Governance

It is again important to note that the new Reserve Management Plan will be a legal instrument under the *Nature Conservation Act 2014*. The key purpose of the Act is to: "make provision for the protection, conservation, enhancement and management of nature in the ACT".

At present there is no real public accountability for management of reserves. There is no requirement to monitor or report on effectiveness. The only requirement is for the custodian to report to the Minister about implementation of a reserve management plan at least once every five years. However, there is no requirement that this report be publicly available.

Monitoring and reporting should be regular (at least every five years) and publicly accessible, and reviews should include public consultation.

Reserve management plans are to be reviewed every ten years (although this time frame may be extended). It is arguable that this timeframe is too long. However, the 23-year gap between the current MRC Management Plan and the start of the process for a new Plan is not optimum. The 2011 Commissioner's Investigation into Canberra Nature Park recommended as a high priority the need for operational plans to deliver on Management Plans, and COG recommends that clear operational plans are developed for the new MRC Management Plan.

The Recommendations of the Legislative Assembly Committee on Planning, Transport and City Services in relation to the recent Canberra Nature Park Draft Reserve Management Plan are relevant in relation to governance matters, including monitoring and reporting, and the need for operational plans.

COG can be contacted on cogoffice@canberrabirds.org.au.

Yours sincerely



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Attachment

Key COG Recommendations for a new Plan

1. A new Management Plan should be a program for action, that has clear, concise and measurable propositions, goals and actions, and can be effectively implemented, monitored and reported on.
 - a. This should include an operational plan for the MRC. Recommendations of the Legislative Assembly Committee on Planning, Transport and City Services in relation to the Canberra Nature Park Draft Reserve Management Plan are relevant.
2. The new Plan must acknowledge the priority of protection of biodiversity values, and any recreation proposals must align with protection of these biodiversity values.
3. The Plan should clearly identify threats to the natural and cultural values of the MRC, and outline associated management actions to address these.
 - a. Climate change should be included as a threat, with a major focus of the Plan on building ecosystem resilience, and appropriate actions should be integrated into the plan/operational plans.
4. Four contemporary issues for birds should be listed as key issues/priorities in a new Plan with some explanation/commentary for each, and the management actions proposed.
 - a. Honeyeater migration across and along the corridor - habitat enhancement issues and migration exit points.
 - b. Protection of nesting sites for birds of prey (including in relatively undisturbed cliff areas).
 - c. Protection of nesting sites for Rainbow Bee-eaters (deep sandy banks), and
 - d. Enhancing habitats, connectivity and refuge areas for woodland birds.
5. A new Plan should include appropriate monitoring/data collection programs (including collection of bird data) to guide/inform evidence-based management decisions and actions.
 - a. There should be regular reporting on biodiversity monitoring programs (at least every 5 years - this could be part of State of Environment reporting).
6. A new Plan should prioritise a strategic vegetation/habitat restoration/rehabilitation plan/program.
 - a. The elements of this Plan could be prioritised, in response to key bird issues.
 - b. Key nodes for habitat restoration/enhancement for birds could be identified, and habitat enhancements (plantings of trees and shrubs, weeds work).
 - c. Consideration of the Angle Crossing area as a potential site for enhancement for honeyeater movement (this needs to be informed by contemporary bird survey data; the 1986 MRC bird survey report could be a useful source for potential sites).
 - d. Actions to improve habitat and connectivity in the MRC for woodland birds, especially small woodland birds that are known from long-term studies to be declining in the ACT.
 - e. The aim should be to achieve good-quality habitat patches and woodland habitat nodes as refuge areas, and functional connections to the wider landscape.
7. There should be a plan for strategic enhancement of casuarina (River She-oak) habitat, a very important habitat for birds and other biodiversity, with links to key habitat nodes (including woodland patches) and connectivity across the wider landscape.