

Plenty Gorge Park MASTER PLAN October 2018



Acknowledgement of Country

Plenty Gorge Park is within the Country of the *Wurundjeri* people. Parks Victoria on behalf of the Victorian Government acknowledges the significance of Plenty Gorge to the *Wurundjeri* people and seeks to reflect the views, interests and aspirations of the Traditional Owners in using and managing the park.

Report contributors

The project team wishes to acknowledge the input and assistance of the following:

- Parks Victoria - Project Working Group and Project Control Group members.
- Consultants who helped prepare the draft report: Land Design Partnership and HM Leisure Planning.
- Authors of the many background reports on the park.
- *Wurundjeri*, community and stakeholder group representatives who gave their time and knowledge during various the engagement phases.

About this document

This document is a master plan prepared by Parks Victoria to guide future directions for Plenty Gorge Park.

The master plan conveys a long-term vision for the park and provides a framework to improve leisure and recreation opportunities, whilst protecting and celebrating the park's natural and cultural values. It identifies potential site enrichment opportunities and locations for these based on community and stakeholder engagement and investigation of the park's features.

The master plan has considered directions from the previous Plenty Gorge Park Master Plan (1994) as well as a number of existing concept plans and precinct plans for various areas within the park. Directions that are considered relevant to the current and future use of the park are incorporated into this document.

As a planning document, the master plan is not intended to provide detailed design or definition of specific uses that industry and/or the community might ultimately realise. The scale of plans and diagrams used in this report reflect this strategic intent.

The master plan provides a sound basis for future detailed design and implementation of the actions required to achieve the vision for Plenty Gorge Park. The plan's recommendations will be implemented and staged over time as funding and resources become available.

Revision	Status	Date
A	Draft	13 November 2017
B	Final Draft	17 August 2018
C	Final	17 October 2018

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Minister's Foreword

Victoria's natural environment is one of the most unique in the world. Our natural environment also plays an increasingly important role in contributing to the health and wellbeing of Victorians.

Some of the most diverse ecosystems in Victoria exist in metropolitan environments, none more so than in my own community in Melbourne's North.

Plenty Gorge Park offers our local community stunning landscape views and an abundance of native wildlife. The park is also a significant refuge for threatened species and has the greatest diversity of flora and fauna habitats of all parks in the Greater Melbourne area.

The 1,350-hectare park extends along the Plenty River from Mernda to Bundoora and provides recreational opportunities for Melbourne's rapidly urbanising north-eastern growth corridor. Formerly a rural setting, the park is now surrounded by urban development, with sustained growth predicted over the next 20 years.

As one of Melbourne's fastest growing residential pockets, it is important that our community has access to open space and recreational opportunities for our growing community.

The *Plenty Gorge Park Master Plan* has been developed by Parks Victoria, in consultation with our local community and Traditional Owners, to guide the future management of this large, metropolitan park.

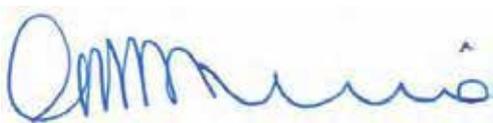
The plan will ensure the park meets the increasing needs of the growing community it services, while continuing to protect the park's unique natural and cultural values. It does this by outlining a framework to improve community access to the park and enhancing the visitor experience, while ensuring the protection of the park's environmental, historical and cultural values.

The plan promotes active collaboration with Traditional Owners, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, and strengthens community participation in recreational activities.

The *Plenty Gorge Park Master Plan* will ensure that both locals and visitors alike can enjoy the physical benefits of a healthy natural environment.

As our community grows, it is important to have access to outdoor, nature-based experiences for everyone to enjoy.

I look forward to seeing the transformation of Plenty Gorge Park.



The Hon Lily D'Ambrosio MP
Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change
Member for Mill Park





Welcome to Our Country

The Wurundjeri people are intimately connected with the area known as Plenty Gorge and as the Traditional Owners this has been true for over 40,000 years.

Plenty Gorge is of great significance to the Wurundjeri people with many artefact scatters and scarred trees located in the area which testify to the importance of the site prior to colonial settlement, and which now serve to help connect Wurundjeri descendants to their Ancestors, and their cultural heritage.

Despite many hardships faced by Wurundjeri people due to colonisation, contemporary culture has adapted to continue in an urban environment and to preserve the rich cultural heritage of their forebears.

We have strong spiritual ties to the country of our Ancestors. We continue to access and care for cultural places across our Country. Country is central to our sense of belonging; the natural world is a cultural world. We have a special connection to our Country and the health of waterways and land remains central to our cultural aspirations and the health and well being of our people.

Caring for country is still a cultural responsibility that remains central to the cultural heritage of the Wurundjeri people who continue to play a role in preserving their natural and cultural landscapes. Wurunderi is happy to support the Plenty Gorge Master Plan, which aims to support the conservation of the natural and cultural landscapes of the area.

~ Wurundjeri Tribe Land and Compensation Cultural Heritage Council Incorporated

Executive summary

Vision

Plenty Gorge Park will provide diverse visitor experiences, reflect community interests and cherish the heritage and nature within the unique geological setting of Plenty Gorge.

About Plenty Gorge Park

Located 20km north of Melbourne, Plenty Gorge Park extends 11km along the Plenty River from Mernda to Bundoora. The action of the river over time on the local geology has led to the dramatic landforms found throughout the gorge, which make the park popular for nature-based recreational activities.

Plenty Gorge Park is the most species rich area in the Greater Melbourne region and is home to many plants and animals including many species of state and national significance.

The park is a gem for cultural heritage values, specifically from the Traditional Owners, the *Wurundjeri* People, and in more recent times from European settlement, agriculture and mining.

Why a master plan?

Plenty Gorge Park is located in a metropolitan growth area consisting of 500,000 residents, projected to increase to over 700,000 in the next 15-20 years.

The Plenty Gorge Park Master Plan provides guidance on improving the park to meet the open space needs of this rapidly growing community.

The plan highlights opportunities to increase community appreciation of the park's significant values, to provide better visitor experiences and to make it easier for visitors to get into and around the park. It will also help protect and conserve the park's natural and cultural values through community education and participation programs.

Implementation

The report's implementation approach (Section 4.0 Implementation) outlines 'priority recommendations' and indicative timeframes and actions of implementation. Preliminary cost planning completed as part of the development of this project estimates these costs at approximately \$86 million comprising the following order of costs:

High Priority List:	\$38.8 M
Medium and Low Priority Items	\$42.2 M

The costs include design fees, preliminary planning assessments, Cultural Heritage planning, Traditional Owner Engagement, management and operation planning.

Benefits

The overarching benefits of implementing key recommendations presented in the Plenty Gorge Master Plan include:

- Opportunities for physical activity and nature-based experiences
- Enhanced community connectivity via improved trails, crossings and entries
- Increased community awareness, involvement and stewardship of park values
- Improved social, health and wellbeing outcomes
- Celebration and protection of cultural, environmental and geological assets
- Appropriate provision of park management and visitor programs or activities
- Support and development of existing and future prospect commercial opportunities to enhance the experience, activation and management of the park.
- Strengthening the partnerships with other authorities and service providers for the management of the park.

Key Objectives

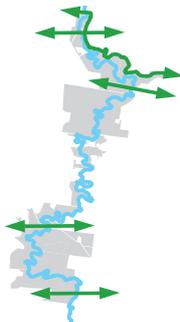
The master plan outlines three key objectives and associated site recommendations for government and community to achieve the vision for Plenty Gorge Park. Of all recommendations outlined in the plan, the following are considered priorities.

Objective 1 Improve access and connections

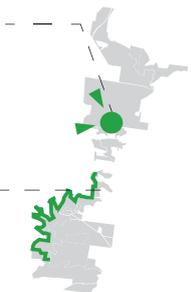
Complete the 21km Plenty River Trail to link visitor sites and to provide important walking and cycling access between northern and southern ends of the park. Provide safe access across Gorge Road. Ensure connections with the proposed Mernda and Hawkstowe Stations.



Provide bridges across Plenty River to connect communities east and west of the park and provide views of the gorge. Investigate utilising existing northern and southern pipe track bridges as pedestrian crossings. Create a shared trail from the proposed Mernda Station to Yarrambat.



Provide a new main park entrance at Hawkstowe to provide clearer and easier access to Le Page Homestead and picnic area.

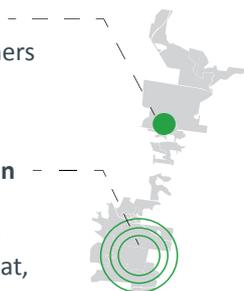


Review the existing wildlife protection fence to allow suitable public access, but protect flora and fauna.

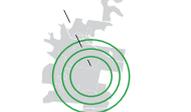


Objective 2 Increase park awareness and involvement

Improve Nioka Bush Camp and increase use by the Traditional Owners and various community and school groups.



Develop and implement a mountain bike trail plan in collaboration with local groups to rationalise trails and protect significant vegetation, habitat, and cultural values.



Prepare a wayfinding and interpretation strategy to interpret park values and provide signage and directions into and around the park.



Develop a community participant program to encourage community stewardship, education and involvement in conserving park values, including school, cultural and volunteer activities.



Provide permanent orienteering courses in collaboration with orienteering groups.



Objective 3 Enhance special places and experiences

Develop a habitat management strategy to ensure ongoing biodiversity, conservation and sustainable wildlife and vegetation management.

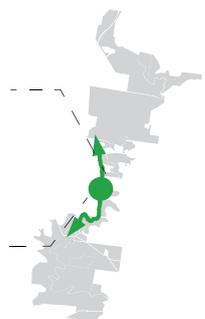
Update Hawkstowe Picnic Area to be the key site for community activities and events, including improved facilities, playground and new park entrance.

Develop a new Yellow Gum Recreation Area off Goldsworthy Lane as a new visitor site in the east including picnic facilities, amenities block, parking and trails. Downgrade Blue Lake visitor facilities.



Upgrade Tanunda Wetlands Precinct as a new visitor site with a low-key picnic area, nature trails and parking.

Investigate use of land north of Gorge Road for trail access and activities such as rock climbing, upon completion of land acquisition.



Enhance Middle Gorge as the prime location to view the gorge with improved lookouts, access and visitor facilities.

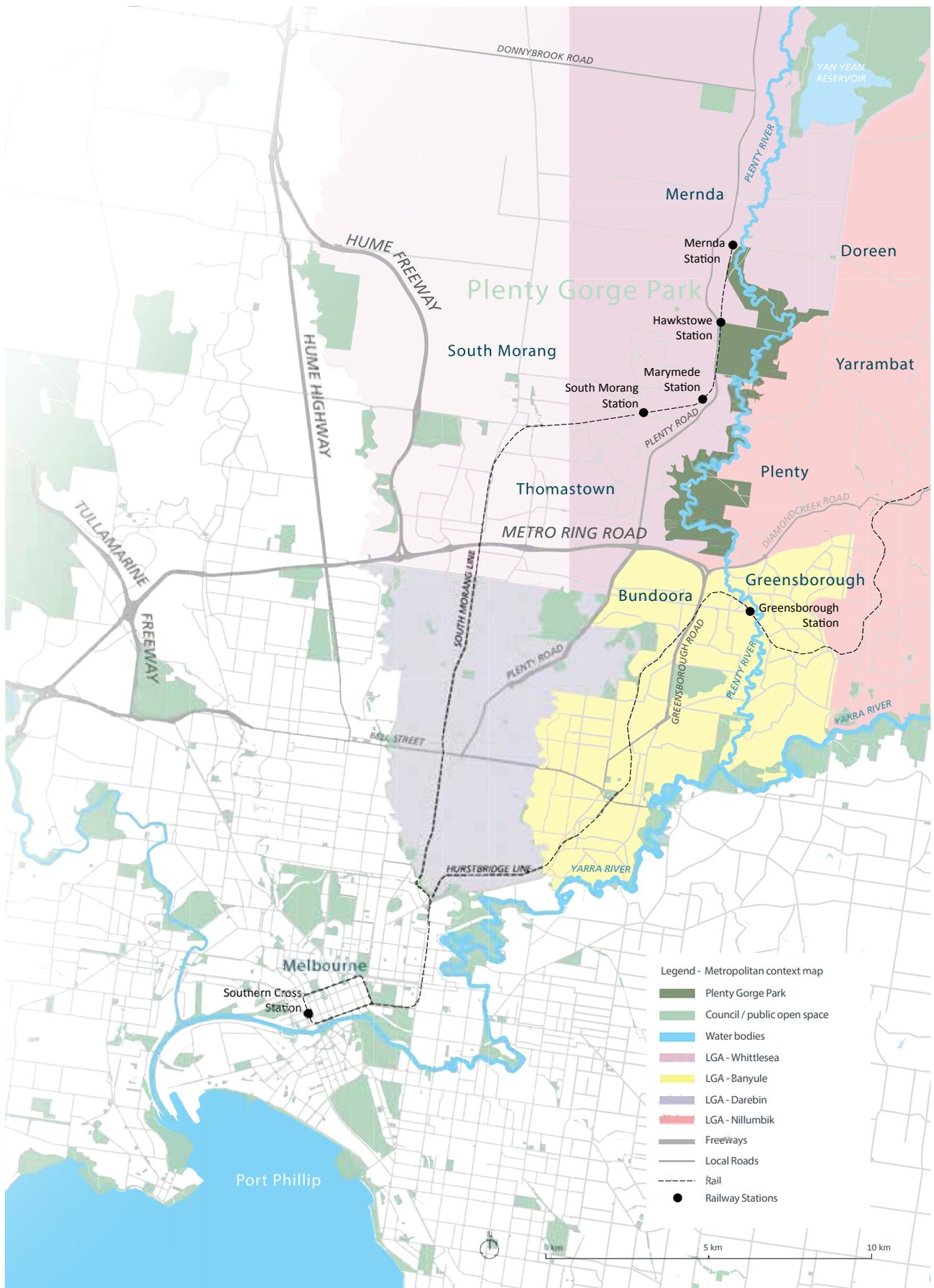


Figure 1: Metropolitan context plan

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Study area and context

Plenty Gorge Park is within the Traditional Lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. Parks Victoria acknowledges the significance of the site for the Traditional Owners and supports their opportunity to express connection to Country.

Plenty Gorge Park offers a wide range of natural, cultural, historic, and recreation experiences only 20 km from the Melbourne CBD (refer Figure 1). Located in South Morang, this regional park forms part of the Melbourne Metropolitan Park network.

Out of the 1,350 Ha reserved land for the park, currently 1,250 Ha is secured in public ownership.

The park has a strong north-south orientation and extends 11km along the Plenty River - from the northern boundary along Bridge Inn Road at Mernda to the southern boundary near the Metropolitan Ring Road at Bundoora and Greensborough.

The suburbs around the park such as University Hill, Mill Park, South Morang, Mernda and Doreen have undergone rapid and significant urban growth in the last 10-20 years.

Around 170,000 visitors per year visit the park for its spectacular landscape views, diverse picnic settings, recreational opportunities, cultural heritage features and native flora-fauna species.

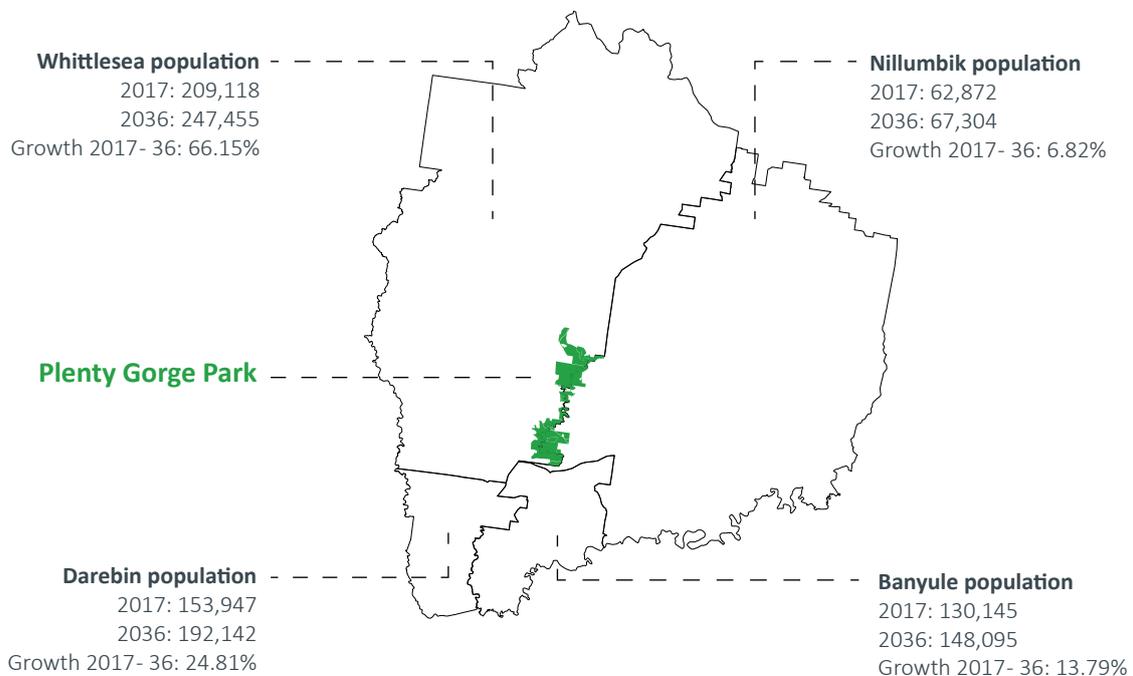


Figure 2: Population growth by Council, forecast.id.com.au

1.2 Surrounding open space

Plenty Gorge Park forms part of the existing network of metropolitan parks within Melbourne. This network supports and contributes significantly to Melbourne's liveability.

Metropolitan parks help meet the open space needs of growing communities in a manner distinct from council managed local and district parks, by providing leisure and recreation opportunities within large-scale, semi-natural landscape settings.

Review of available open space surrounding the park (refer Figures 1 & 3) indicates that such resources are limited for the growing local communities.

The majority of surrounding municipal open space is located west and north-east of Plenty Gorge Park, and largely consists of local and neighbourhood parks as part of recent subdivisions.

East of Plenty Gorge Park the majority of land is in private ownership as part of larger subdivision blocks; therefore, public open space is minimal. The exception is the adjoining Yarrambat Park, which is a Council owned district open space.

1.3 Why is a master plan needed?

Given the rapid urban growth around Plenty Gorge Park, there is increasing need for access to nature based experiences and quality open space for leisure and recreation.

Updating the previous 1994 master plan for Plenty Gorge Park provides an opportunity to refresh the vision for the park to ensure it remains relevant in light of these urban changes. It also provides a framework for potential future partnerships and investment in the appropriate provision of facilities across the park.

The master plan provides an implementation framework for priority works and programs required to bring the park up to an acceptable contemporary standard. The master plan will help inform Parks Victoria's 'Critical Built Assets Program' which prioritises asset and facilities replacement and renewal across the state.

In addition, the master plan identifies a number of minor works and changes to park activities and programs which can be implemented through ongoing partnerships, management and maintenance practices.



Aerial view of Plenty Gorge Park. Source: James Lauritz Photography

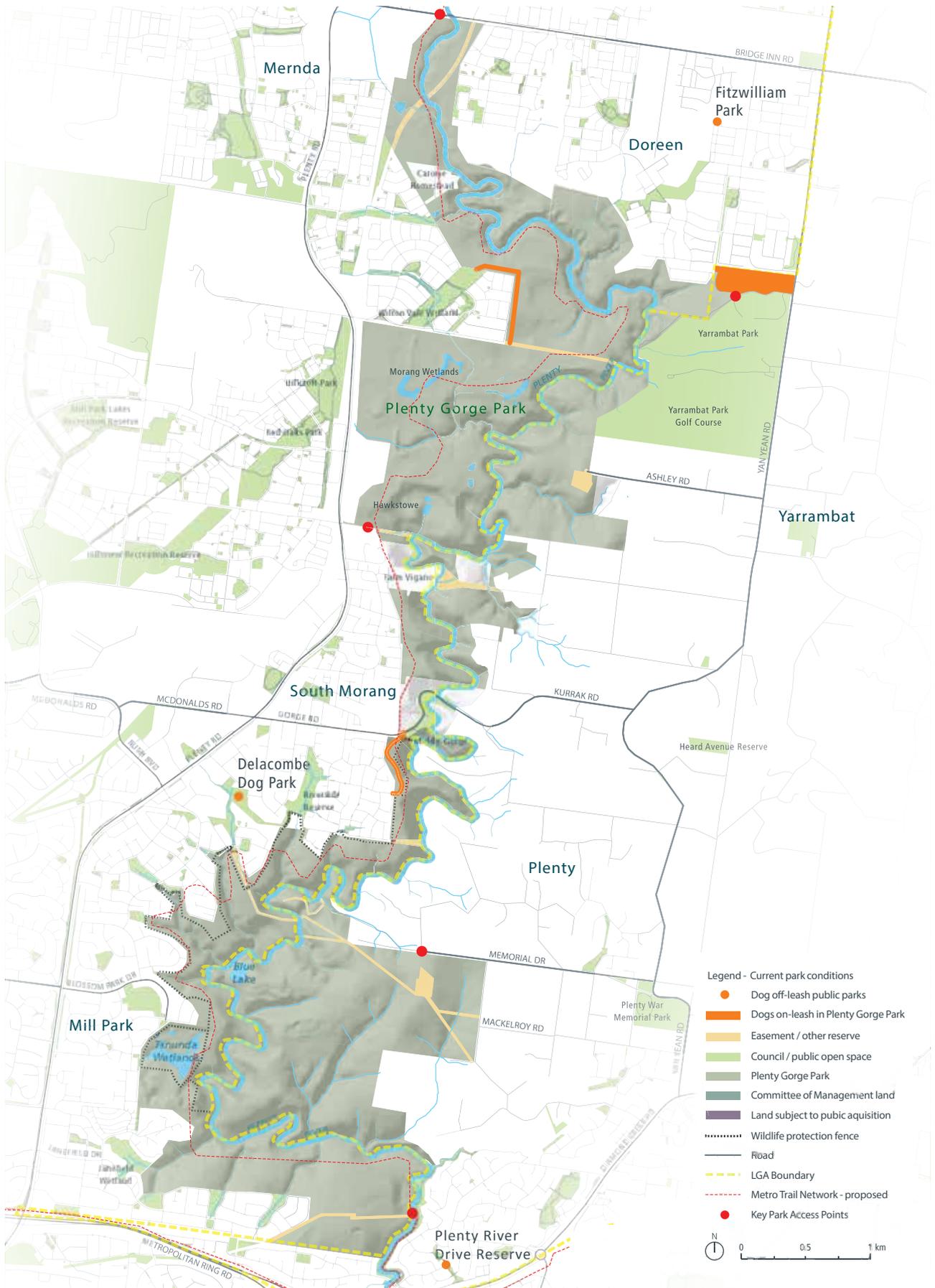


Figure 3: Existing features of Plenty Gorge Park and adjoining public open space

2.0 Existing features and uses

2.1 Existing uses

2.1.1 Access and connections

One of the key challenges for Plenty Gorge Park relates to a lack of awareness about the park and improving how the park can be better connected with surrounding communities. To be effective in attracting visitors to the park, the entry points need to be obvious, easily accessed and closely connected to key visitor sites.

There is also a need to develop a holistic wayfinding and interpretation strategy to provide information about the park's values and to assist visitors in finding their way into and through the park.

The existing visitor experience at Plenty Gorge Park is generally provided at key visitor sites scattered across the park, including Yarrambat Picnic Area, Hawkstowe Picnic Area, Middle Gorge and Yellow Gum Recreation Area.

These key visitor sites generally operate independently of each other as stand-alone spaces rather than linked components of a unified park. There is a need to link these as a series of connected visitor sites, by completing the remaining sections of the main Plenty River Trail.

In addition, secondary trails that provide access to features within the park, such as the Plenty River, should be reviewed and rationalised to ensure trails can be maintained sustainably and to minimise impact in ecologically sensitive areas.

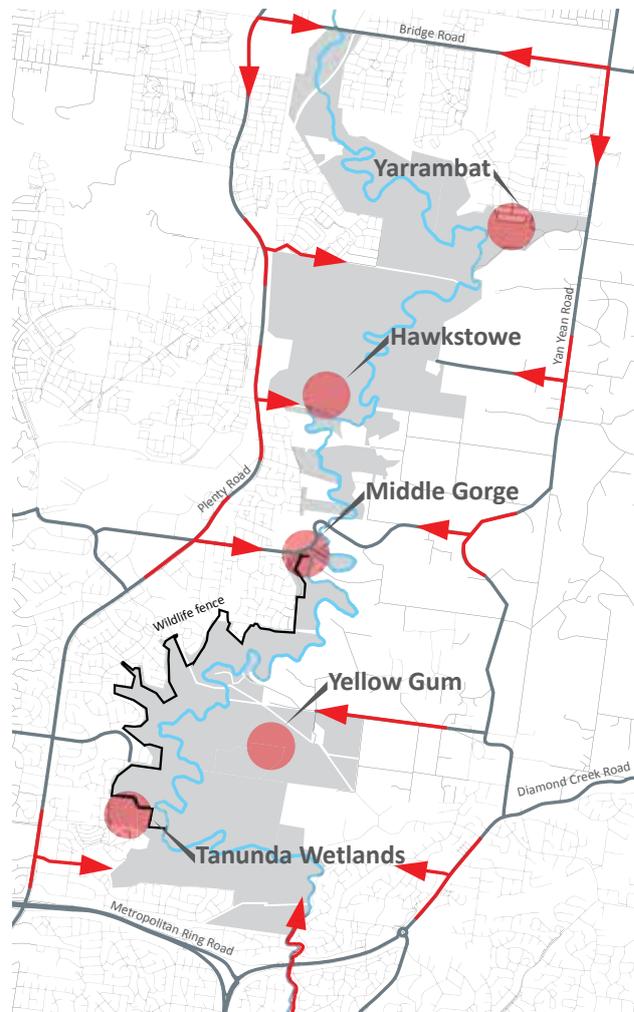


Figure 4: Park access and visitor sites



Hawkstowe Picnic Area. Source: Bill Pitt



Yarrambat Park event. Source: Bill Pitt

2.1.2 Visitor use and facilities

Plenty Gorge Park provides numerous leisure and recreational opportunities for the local and broader Melbourne communities, for example:

- Picnic areas and facilities including shelters, barbecues, public toilets and playgrounds.
- Use of historical homesteads and associated farm buildings for restaurants, community use or visitor centres.
- Open spaces for temporary community events, festivals and other larger group gatherings.
- Walking and nature based activities, such as bird watching, nature appreciation and observing the local fauna.
- Dog walking which is currently limited to select locations for dog on-lead only, in order to protect significant flora and fauna.
- Trail running which attracts participants from all over Melbourne for organised competitions, generally in the southern section of the park.
- Orienteering utilising existing trails within the park.
- Mountain bike riding, generally located in the southern section of the park (refer Figure 5).

Around 50km of unauthorised mountain bike tracks have been constructed in the park's south, resulting in significant impacts to the landscape and native vegetation. Collaboration with mountain bike groups should encourage riding on well-planned, marked and maintained trails while discouraging the creation of new tracks or close existing tracks of threat to high environmental and cultural value areas.



Trail running. Source: Rapid Ascent

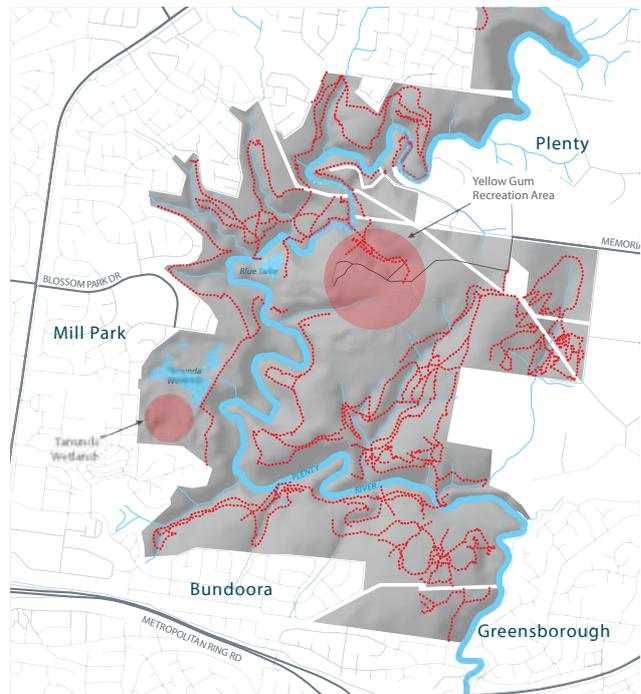


Figure 5: Unauthorised mountain bike tracks in south of park

The master plan aims to encourage active lifestyles in nature, whilst balancing sustainable visitor access and protecting conservation areas. This includes improving information and interpretation about the park's values, encouraging park participation and stewardship, and involving the community in activities, events and volunteer programs.



Mountain biking. Source: Plenty Gorge MTB

2.2 Natural values

2.2.1 Geology

The Plenty River defines a particularly significant geomorphological feature - the confluence of two distinct and vast bioregions - the Highlands (Southern Fall) and the Victorian Volcanic Plain.

The distinct nature of these landforms is clearly visible within the park and is demonstrated by the varied landforms east and west of the Plenty River. The terrain east of the river is rolling with clearly defined hills and valleys, whilst that to the west is flat to gently undulating.

The shallow nature of the river valley in the parks north provides opportunities for visitors to access and interact with the waterway.

The deeply incised nature of the river valley downstream of Doreen, and particularly south of Gorge Road, means access to the river is more challenging. Yet this landscape provides dramatic views and opportunities for various recreational uses such as rock climbing, orienteering and mountain bike riding.

Interpretation and education of the parks geomorphology together with the distinct bioregions east and west of the river is an important consideration for the master plan.

Further background information on the parks geology can be found on page 54 in appendix b of this master plan.



Site geology. Source: Bill Pitt

2.2.2 Flora and fauna

Plenty Gorge Park has the greatest diversity of habitats of all parks in the Greater Melbourne area and is recognised as one of Melbourne's most important refuges for threatened flora and fauna species (Parks Victoria 2010).

Of the 631 native flora species recorded in the park, there are several listed as vulnerable or endangered. This includes 4 species listed under the national Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (EPBC), 2 species under the state Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act (FFG), and 20 recorded as Victorian Rare and Threatened (VROT) species (Parks Victoria 2010).

Of the 262 native fauna species recorded in the park, 11 species are listed under the international migratory bird agreement (JAMBA / CAMBA), 4 under the national EPBC Act, 19 under the state FFG Act, and 39 are VROT species.

Flora and fauna protection is a key focus of education and management for Plenty Gorge Park. One aspect of this is the existing wildlife protection fence along the south-west edge of the park (refer Figure 3, p.11). The purpose of this fence is largely to limit intrusion of weeds and pests in order to protect native fauna. While the fence has been effective in these measures, there is a need to investigate alternative approaches for protection, whilst still allowing suitable access for park visitors.

Further background information on the parks flora and fauna can be found on page 56 - 59 in appendix c and d of this master plan.



Native wildlife. Source: Bill Pitt

2.2.3 Landscape types

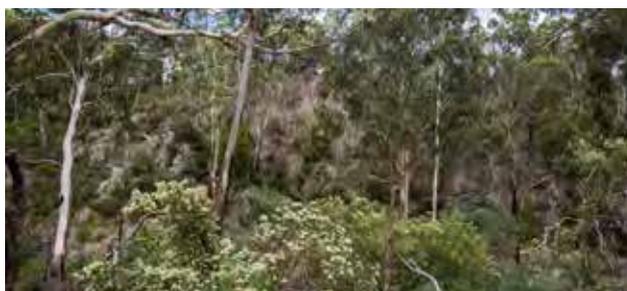
There are a number of features within Plenty Gorge Park that provide a range of visitor experiences. A summary of different landscape types found throughout the park is outlined below.

Gorge and river

The Plenty River has formed dramatic geological features throughout the length of the gorge. In the park's north, the river flows through a relatively shallow valley. However, approximately two kilometres downstream of Mernda, the landscape is a deep and steep-sided gorge offering spectacular views, but limited access for visitors.



Plenty gorge and river. Source: Bill Pitt



Woodland vegetation. Source: Vanessa Bluett

Woodland

This comprises the wooded slopes and plateau areas of the park, including areas of high conservation value. There is a sense of 'wild' and enclosure provided by the trees and understory plantings.



Morang Wetlands. Source: Vanessa Bluett

Wetland

There are several wetland areas within the park, notably Morang Wetlands and Tanunda Wetlands. These areas conserve biodiversity values and provide habitat for wetland flora and fauna. They provide a more open character than the gorge and woodland areas.

Pasture

The grassy pasture areas lend themselves to community gathering areas as they are relatively flat and have an open character, allowing for long views across the park.



Yarrambat Park event. Source: Bill Pitt

Parkland

The parkland areas provide community gathering spaces for both leisure and events. They generally have modified landscapes with exotic plantings that provide a visual point of difference to the remainder of the park.



Hawkstowe picnic area Source: Vanessa Bluett

2.3 Cultural and heritage values

2.3.1 Traditional Owners

The Plenty Valley is part of the territory of the Wurundjeri-willam, a clan of the Woiwurung language group.

Plenty Gorge would have been significant to indigenous communities as *'a resource-rich environment at the interface of the open woodland of the basaltic plain to the west, and the forested undulating sedimentary terrain of the eastern side. The Plenty River and its gorge would also have been the source of raw materials, food and perennial fresh water'* (Ellender 1991).

There are significant opportunities for Wurundjeri to express their connection to Country and share their knowledge and stories, through various interpretation, education and event opportunities at the park.

It is important for Wurundjeri to be involved in ongoing park planning and management to ensure protection of natural and cultural assets. Also, given that all of the park has cultural sensitivity, the Office of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria principles should be applied when considering any future works in the park.

2.3.2 Post Contact Heritage

The earliest European settlement in Plenty Gorge Park dates back to the late 1830s, when pastoral squatters used large tracts of land for sheep and cattle (Ellender 1991). Subsequent land practices, including gold mining, the construction of Yan Yean Reservoir, agriculture (wheat and fruit), and quarrying have had a significant impact on the landscape.

A number of remnant buildings and structures remain within the park, reflecting early European use of the area. These include: Carome Homestead (1864), LePage Homestead (1850's), Farm Vigano, Yan Yean aqueduct, Stuchbery Farm, and various former mill buildings and quarries (Hicks 1998 and Ellender 1991).

These buildings and structures play an important role in interpreting the impacts and effects of colonisation in the area and add value to the character of Plenty Gorge Park. It is important to conserve and protect these heritage listed assets and continue partnerships with the Committees of Management, Heritage Victoria and local heritage groups.



Scarred tree. Source: Garry French



Le Page Homestead. Source: Bill Pitt

2.4 Bushfire

2.4.1 Bushfire Management

The Plenty Gorge Park provides a unique setting with steep terrain and a river running along the middle of it. Analysis and modelling of bushfire risk in 2017 showed that in a landscape-wide scale context, Plenty Gorge Park is not of a high bushfire risk, but rather has more localised bushfire risks.

There is a high level of community sensitivity around the potential bushfire risk within the park and how this may impact the rapidly growing surrounding communities. Providing accurate information and education to the local community and visitors on the potential fire risk and about current fire management planning, preparation and response relating to the park, will provide clearer understanding of bushfire risk management.

The work with other emergency service agencies, local councils and the community with respect to bushfire prevention, response and recovery will continue and be an essential factor in the park management. In addition, ongoing bushfire preparedness activities and an integrated approach to bushfire and emergency management will continue to effectively manage the risk and respond to fire related emergencies.

It is important the planning and implementation of any opportunities outlined in this master plan consider the influence and impact of fire risk.



Plenty River gorge. Source: Parks Victoria

2.5 Engagement

2.5.1 Preliminary and Draft Master Plan engagement

Engagement with the community, Traditional Owners, park staff and stakeholders was conducted during the preliminary and draft master plan phases of the projects development. This included engagement via a number of forums, such as:

- One to one interviews with key stakeholders, such as Wurundjeri, Whittlesea Council, Nillumbik Council and Melbourne Water representatives.
- Meetings with Parks Victoria staff and park rangers.
- Development of a dedicated project Facebook webpage for the issues identification stage.
- Use of an interactive online 'Crowdspot' mapping and feedback page.
- An online survey regarding the concept plan, which received 127 responses.
- A community engagement day seeking feedback on the early concept plan, held at two separate venues near the park.
- Two community events hosted to collect information and feedback on the draft master plan.
- Community consultation regarding the concept plan, held at the Thomas Mill Heritage Victoria Dig Day.

Refer to Key Issues - Section 3.4 for a summary of feedback received, which helped inform the content in this report.



Draft Master Plan consultation session. Source: Parks Victoria

3.0 Master plan

3.1 Vision

Plenty Gorge Park will provide diverse visitor experiences, reflect community interests and cherish the heritage and nature within the unique geological setting of Plenty Gorge.

3.2 Guiding Principles

A set of guiding principles has been developed to provide the framework to progress the vision for Plenty Gorge Park. These guiding principles will guide future management decisions and the development of visitor facilities. The principles are outlined under the following themes derived from Parks Victoria's strategic 'Shaping our Future' report.

Conserving Victoria's special places

- Celebrate the park's cultural heritage values through interpretation, education, partnerships and protection of significant features.
- Protect and enhance the park's rich biodiversity by carefully locating park activities, conservation of flora and fauna, and ongoing management of key threats such as weeds, pests or inappropriate uses.
- Enrich the park's waterways by protecting sensitive areas, limiting pollution or degradation, and providing appropriate access.
- Highlight the unique geological features of Plenty Gorge through interpretation, accessible view points, and activities that value and protect the natural features.

Connecting people and parks

- Improve access into and around the park to better connect local communities and key visitor sites.
- Offer diverse nature-based visitor experiences which provide equitable opportunity, enable conservation objectives and appeal to diverse leisure or recreational interests.
- Encourage community interaction and care for the park by involving Traditional Owners, partners, user groups, local communities and volunteers.

Providing benefits beyond park boundaries

- Respond to the communities' interests and needs regarding urban growth and declining open space provision.
- Increase awareness of the park, including recreational opportunities and important natural and cultural values, via ongoing marketing, education, signage, improved entries and connections to communities facilities beyond the park.
- Promote the park's economic and well-being benefits and facilitate suitable commercial activity where it contributes to a better visitor experience.
- Provide appropriate park management activities with positive community outcomes, such as careful fire management, enhanced downstream water quality, protection of wildlife, and safe community access.

3.3 Master plan structure

The master plan outlines future opportunities for Plenty Gorge Park and will guide its future development. It was prepared based on background documents, site analysis and engagement outcomes. The Vision, Guiding Principles and Objectives provide the overarching direction for the park, whilst the actions to achieve these are outlined under Recommendations and the Implementation Plan.

The master plan is made up of the following sections:

Key issues

Provides a summary of the key issues for the park that the master plan should address.

Key objectives

The key objectives aim to provide general directions for the park.

Visitor experiences

The visitor experience icons illustrate and describe the desired experience for each visitor site.

Park areas and sites

The park is broken into four 'Park Areas' each which include a number of 'Sites'. Detailed plans are provided for each Park area for more specific site detail and Site recommendations.

General recommendations

Includes recommendations applicable to the entire site.

Site recommendations

Includes specific site recommendations with 'codes' to help locate on the Park Area's detailed plan.

Implementation plan

This section outlines an order of 'Priority Initiatives' for implementation. It also lists some 'Immediate Opportunities' which are low cost initiatives, but feasible to implement in the short term.

3.4 Key issues

The following Key Issues were identified in background documents, site analysis and early discussions with community and stakeholders (refer to Section 2.4):

- Community awareness about the park and its values is relatively low. This highlights the need to increase knowledge and appreciation of the park, better connect surrounding communities, and improve visitor access and wayfinding into and around the park.
- Visitors cannot travel the full length of the park as the main trail is incomplete and disjointed. Also, the internal trail network needs improvement to cater for different types of use such as walking, mountain biking and orienteering.
- The site's significant environmental, cultural and heritage values should be better celebrated and protected.
- Illegal access by motorised vehicles and illegal rubbish dumping are having an impact on park values. There is a need for a more co-ordinated approach to enforcement regarding these issues.
- Evidence suggests that the native kangaroo population is significantly increasing. There is a need to monitor and assess the current numbers to manage any potential impacts.
- There are limited opportunities to view, access and cross the Plenty River and gorge, which are the park's main features.
- Existing visitor sites and attractions could be enhanced and better utilised (e.g Hawkstowe Picnic Area, Carome Homestead, and Yellow Gum Recreation Area). In particular, there is a need to prepare and cater for increased visitor use of the park, as a result of the rapidly growing surrounding communities.
- Mountain biking should be encouraged on designated, authorised and environmentally sustainable tracks only, as there are significant environmental and safety risks with inappropriate riding and unauthorised track creation. This includes cultural heritage impacts, removal of native vegetation without a permit (refer 2016 Native Vegetation Clearing Regulations), soil erosion and inadvertent spread of weeds or pathogens. Where required, unauthorised tracks should be rehabilitated to stabilise soil and regenerate habitat for wildlife and native flora.

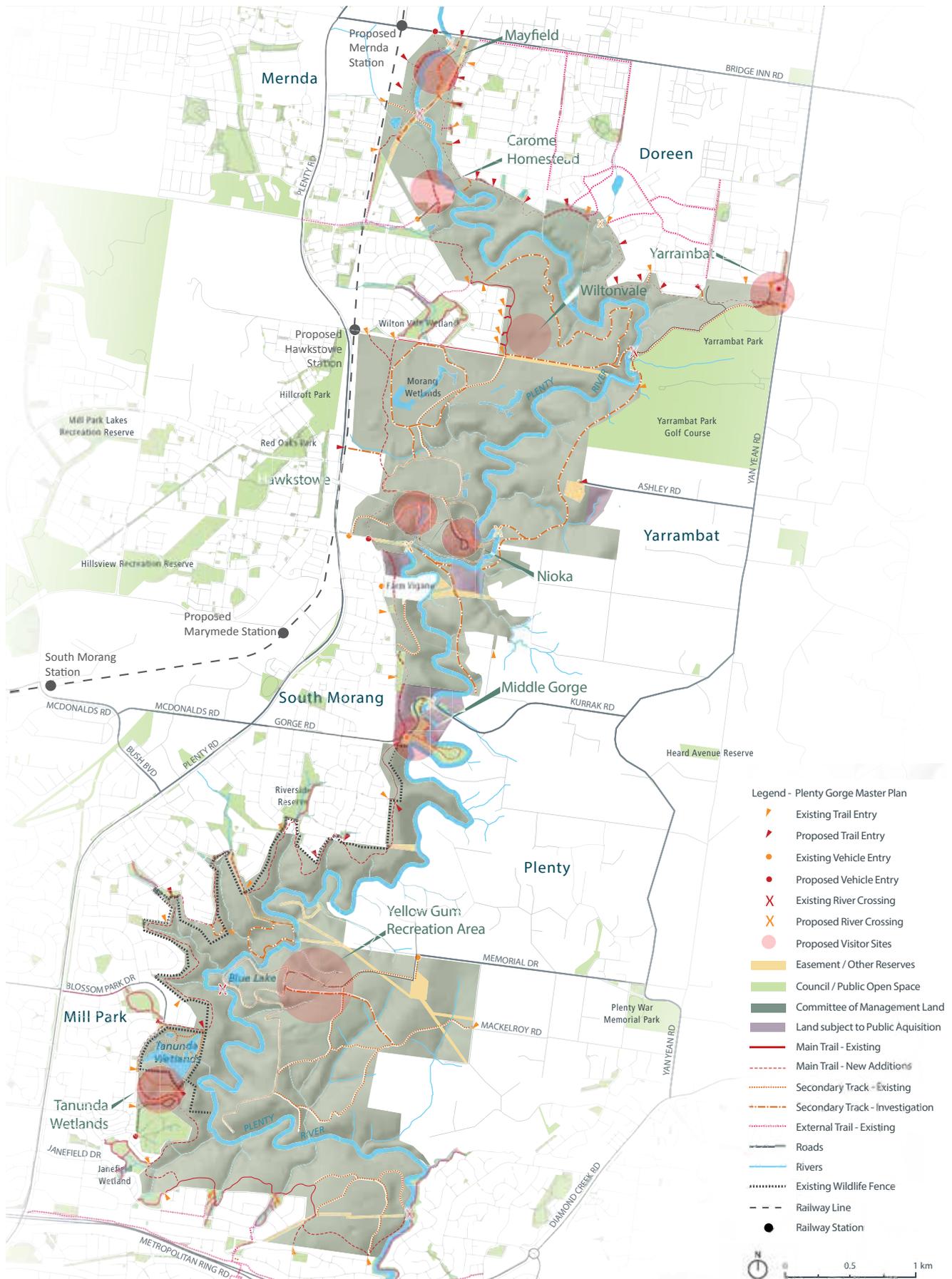


Figure 6: Plenty Gorge Park Master Plan

3.5 Plenty Gorge Park Master Plan

Key objectives

The following key objectives provide general directions for the park, in keeping with the Vision and Guiding Principles and in response to early discussions with community and stakeholders (Section 2.5).

Objective 1

Improve access and connections

Complete the 21km Plenty River Trail

to link visitor sites and to provide important walking and cycling access between northern and southern ends of the park. Provide safe access across Gorge Road. Ensure connections with the proposed Mernda and Hawkstowe Stations.

Improve the internal trail network to better connect with the Plenty River Trail, park entries, features, lookouts and visitor sites. Offer diverse circulation routes for various interests and abilities, including recreation, contemplation, interpretation, and linking or loop trails.

Provide bridge access across Plenty River to connect communities east and west of the park and provide views of the gorge. Investigate utilising existing northern and southern pipe track bridges as pedestrian crossings. Create a shared trail from the proposed Mernda Station to Yarrambat.

Provide a new main park entry at Hawkstowe to improve access and wayfinding to Le Page Homestead and picnic area. Also improve other park entries to make them more inviting and attractive, to better connect the community with the park, and to make it easier to find and access the park via clear signage and directions.

Review the existing wildlife protection fence and gate locations, to allow suitable visitor access into significant areas of the park, whilst continuing to protect wildlife from cats and dogs.

Objective 2

Increase park awareness and involvement

Improve Nioka Bush Camp and increase use by Traditional Owners and various community and school groups.

Develop and implement a mountain bike trail plan in collaboration with local groups to rationalise trails and protect significant vegetation, habitat and cultural values.

Prepare a Wayfinding and Interpretation Strategy to interpret park values and provide signage and directions into and around the park.

Develop a community participation program to encourage community stewardship, education and involvement in conserving park values, including school and volunteer activities.

Provide permanent orienteering courses in collaboration with orienteering groups.

Objective 3

Enhance special places and experiences

Develop a habitat management strategy to ensure ongoing biodiversity, conservation and sustainable wildlife and vegetation management.

Update Hawkstowe Picnic Area to be the key site in the park's west for community activities and events, including improved facilities, playground and new park entrance. Ensure conservation of Morang Wetlands and better utilise the Nioka Bush Camp for education based groups.

Develop a new Yellow Gum Recreation Area as the key visitor site in the east by planning a new trailhead at the Goldworth Lane property and downgrading facilities at Blue Lake.

Upgrade Tanunda Wetlands Precinct as a new visitor site with a low-key picnic area, nature trails and parking.

Investigate use of land north of Gorge Road for trail access and activities such as rock climbing, upon completion of land acquisition.

Enhance Middle Gorge as the prime location to view the gorge with improved lookouts, access and visitor facilities.

3.6 Visitor experiences

The visitor experience is a complex relationship between individuals, the natural and cultural environments and the opportunities provided in the park for visitors. Parks Victoria manages and seeks to protect landscape settings, presents recreation opportunities and provides facilities and services to support visitors. The following visitor experience icons illustrate and describe the desired experience for each of the various visitor sites.

3.6.1 Landscape experience

Any future works in the park should be mindful of the following landscape experiences and seek to emphasise and enhance the park's unique natural and cultural values.

Space



Where the park landscape conveys a sense of open space this should be valued and retained.

Isolation



Plenty Gorge Park creates a sense of isolation and remoteness in spite of its proximity to local residential communities and Melbourne's CBD. This is a highly valued quality in what is a rapidly developing area.

Discovery



There are numerous opportunities for exploration and discovery in this landscape which should be encouraged and enhanced.

Interaction



The largely untamed natural park environment allows visitors to interact with a natural landscape through activities such as camping, conservation programs, mountain biking, walking, orienteering and rock climbing.

Views / outlook



The landform of the Plenty River and gorge offers opportunities for viewing points across scenic landscapes and vistas.

Stories



There are multiple layers and stories within the landscape which can be interpreted to reveal the wealth of natural, cultural and heritage values.

3.6.2 Recreation experience

The following recreation experiences have potential to attract visitors to the park, prompt return visits and increase community participation and stewardship of the park.

Dogs on lead



Visitors are able to walk their dogs on lead in many areas of the park; however dogs are not permitted in certain high conservation areas.

Social activity



A number of visitor areas encourage, social gatherings, including barbecues and picnics. Connecting these uses to other areas of the park would provide more diverse experiences.

Nature based sports



The park's natural qualities attract participants in a range of nature based activities such as mountain biking, orienteering, trail running and rock climbing. Parks Victoria is working with user groups including mountain biking, orienteering and rock climbing to develop sustainable use opportunities.

Wildlife



Many visitors to the park enjoy bird watching, spotting the kangaroos, or other wildlife. Plenty Gorge park offers a unique experience to interact with wildlife in an area relatively close to Melbourne's CBD.

Cultural activity



A number of the visitor sites have capacity to host events and activities such as arts festivals, cultural gatherings and festivals, heritage activities, demonstrations, weddings and other social gatherings.

Camping



Nioka Bush Camp provides for a bush camping experience in an area close to Melbourne. The camp offers the accommodation options of camp sites or bunk rooms in the hall.

Trails



There are a number of trails, both sealed paths and unsealed tracks, suitable for walking, jogging, trail running and cycling. The proposed Plenty River Trail will provide a connecting pedestrian and bicycle link along the full length of the park.



3.7 Key park recommendations

To achieve the Vision, Principles and Objectives the following table outlines general recommendations that are applicable to the entire park. Each recommendation shows the indicative priority and a ‘code’ to help locate the action on the Park Area’s detail plan.

Recommendations		Priority
PRT	<p>Plenty River Trail</p> <p>Construct the new sections of the Plenty River Trail (in accordance with the Plenty River Trail project documentation). When complete, the proposed 21km length shared-use trail will link all visitor sites west of the river and provide important walking and cycling access between the northern and southern ends of the park. A total of 17.4km has yet to be built to connect the 3.6km of existing trail.</p>	High
WAY	<p>Wayfinding and Interpretation Strategy</p> <p>Develop a strategy that outlines key wayfinding points, required signage and directions into and around the park. Develop for interpretation and celebration of the site’s important park features, including environmental sensitivity, biodiversity, significance, heritage assets and cultural values. Incorporate digital methods and new technology and ensure materials proposed are consistent throughout the park.</p>	High
PAR	<p>Community Participation Program</p> <p>Develop programs in line with the Parks Victoria Learning in Nature Strategy to provide opportunities to increase awareness of the park, such as on-going marketing, education, park promotion, and community stewardship and activation programs.</p>	High
ENT	<p>Entrances</p> <p>Improve existing park entries and provide new entries where required, to improve access into the park and better connect to surrounding communities. Entries should reflect the landscape character of the Park Area and provide clear signage or directions to key visitor sites.</p>	High
HMS	<p>Habitat Management Strategy</p> <p>Develop and implement a strategy to ensure ongoing biodiversity, conservation and sustainable wildlife and vegetation management. In addition to ongoing protection of existing significant habitat areas, the strategy will focus on significantly altered landscapes of recently acquired land. It shall outline priorities, timeframes, monitoring, resources, revegetation, fire management, weed and pest control. It shall focus on impacts of overgrazing and persistence and welfare of kangaroo populations in the park.</p>	High
WPF	<p>Wildlife Protection Fence</p> <p>Review the existing wildlife protection fence and gate locations, to allow suitable visitor access into significant areas of the park, whilst continuing to protect wildlife from cats and dogs.</p>	Medium
INF	<p>New Infrastructure</p> <p>Any new public infrastructure that requires use of or development of park land (e.g. stormwater drains, rail works, communication towers), should avoid negative park impacts and provide positive public realm, environmental, and social benefit outcomes for the park as compensation for the community.</p>	Ongoing

3.8 Specific recommendations

To achieve the Vision, Principles, and Objectives the following pages outline specific Site Recommendations within each Park Area. Each recommendation shows indicative priority and costs, and a code to help locate on the Park Area's detailed plan.

3.8.1 Commercial partnerships

There are a number of existing commercial enterprises associated with the park.

The master plan supports the initiative of considering other commercial opportunities that complement and support park activities and management. This is to be built on a series of partnerships and agreements for various uses within the park. The master plan will be a key reference document against which commercial prospects, partnerships and agreements will be considered for proposals.

3.8.2 Dogs in the park

Dog walking is an important activity for many adjoining neighbours and wider community of the park. However, to protect important natural and cultural values there are currently no off-lead areas within the park, and in high conservation areas dogs are not permitted. Refer to Figure 7.

Ensure dog on lead areas and areas where dogs are not permitted are clearly signposted. Permit dogs on lead along shared user trails in designated areas of the park.

Investigate the opportunity for a fenced dog off-lead area within a suitable location of the park and which coincides with Council's dog off-lead plans.

3.8.3 Kangaroo Management

Kangaroos and other native fauna are a key attraction as part of the park's wider visitor experience. There is evidence to suggest that the native kangaroo population is increasing and may be close to capacity for both the park and the surrounding region to sustain. This should be a consideration in the design and development of visitor services and programs which may displace or impact on native species.

Conduct a program to monitor the density of kangaroos within the park.

3.8.4 Park Compliance

Compliance issues including unauthorised motor vehicle access and rubbish dumping are having a widespread impact on both the native environment and, the overall visitor offer. Design of the specific park precincts and visitor sites must consider how people use and interact with the parks visitor services and infrastructure.

Develop a compliance plan to identify specific risks and hotspots within the park and prioritise enforcement activities. Allocate the required resources for the enforcement of regulations regarding illegal and damaging activities.



Tanunda Wetlands. Source: Bill Pitt

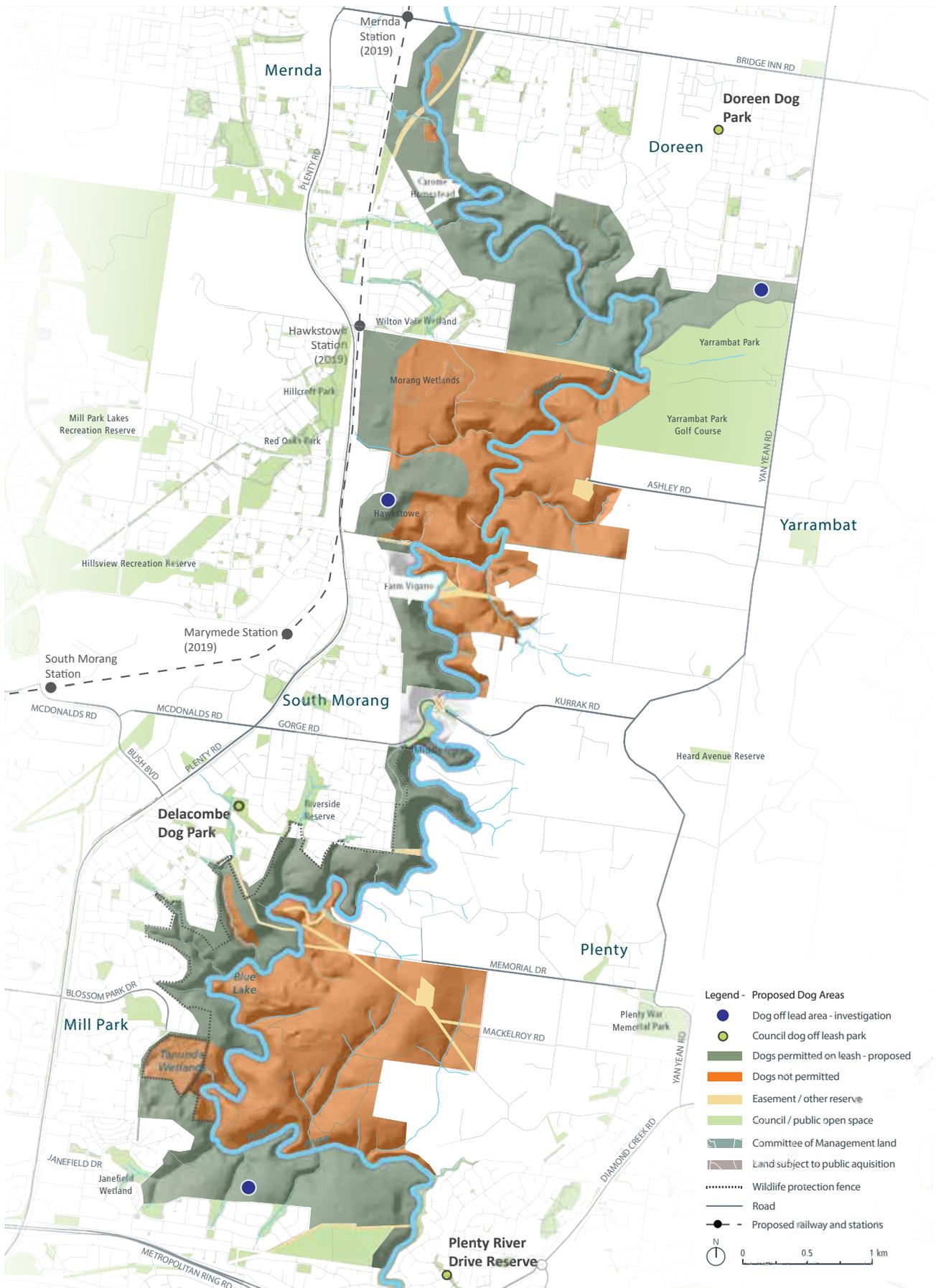


Figure 7: Proposed revised dog on leash areas

