

# My Victorian Waterway

Social research to understand the community's connection  
to Victorian waterways





Barwon (Parwan) River, Balyang Sanctuary, Geelong

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# Introduction



Lal Lal Falls, Moorabool (Murrabul) River West Branch

## Why does the community like to visit Victoria's waterways?

## What do we know about waterway health?

## What do Victorians envision for the future of our waterways?

In 2022, the My Victorian Waterway survey was conducted by Quantum Market Research for the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, to investigate the Victorian community's connection to our rivers, lakes, streams, creeks, floodplains, wetlands, estuaries, water storages or reservoirs (known collectively as '*waterways*').

This study builds upon [social research undertaken in 2009-2010](#), which was designed to provide baseline data on how Victorians use waterways, as well as their values and aspirations for waterway management.

The objectives of this study were similar to those of the previous research, adjusted to reflect new research priorities.

This purpose of this study was to:

- Better understand community uses, expectations and attitudes towards waterways
- Inform the design of a new Victorian Waterway Management Strategy by understanding community aspirations and concerns in relation to waterway management, including the development of a new community vision for Victoria's waterways.
- Support future government investment decisions by understanding how waterways are used, and why they are valued by users.

- Identify how the water sector can improve future communications and community engagement by better understanding current levels of knowledge about what makes a waterway healthy.

The *My Victorian Waterway survey* ran for five weeks in March/April 2022. A total of 6,240 online surveys were completed. The design of the data collection approach ensured the sample was sizeable and representative of the adult Victorian population in terms of age, gender and location, including representation across all regions of the state.

The survey gathered a wealth of information about current waterway usage, attitudes and understandings about waterway health, current knowledge and language used by the community, and aspirations for the future.

The story told by participants paints a clear picture of the great importance and value of healthy waterways for all Victorians and future generations. The data from the *My Victorian Waterway survey* can be used to help shape water-sector policy, guide investments and inform waterway programs and community engagement by the Victorian Government and other partners.

# How do Victorians use waterways?

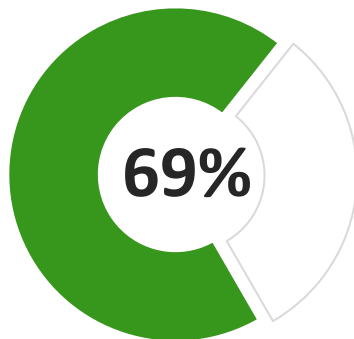
69% of respondents said they visit a waterway at least once a month, most frequently seeking relaxation or peace.

The state has over 85,000 kilometres of rivers, 13,000 natural wetlands and over 120 estuaries\*, and this survey shows that Victorians are visiting them regularly for a wide variety of experiences and activities.

7 in 10 respondents visit a waterway at least monthly, most frequently to find relaxation and peace. Other common uses are for various activities and fun, a space for exercise, a place to engage with nature, experience personal mental health benefits, and for family and social connections. For those living in the Melbourne region, waterways are particularly valuable in providing an urban escape.

Commercial users make up nearly a quarter of the sample, showing that waterways are important to economic activity in Victoria, particularly tourism, commercial fishing and agricultural industries.

## Percentage of sample visiting waterways at least once a month



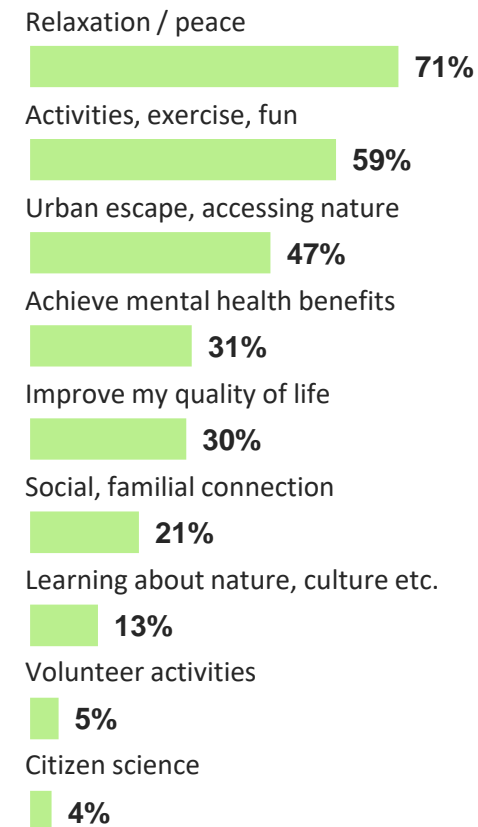
*“Sitting, relaxing, meditating and enjoying the views. Observing native wildlife”*

*“We try to explore Vic while exercising... we look up waterfalls or lakes with tracks”*

*“Swimming and kayaking”*

*“My wife and I take the grandkids to a picnic and to enjoy the environment”*

## Experiences sought when visiting waterways



## Commercial users

22%



of respondents work in a commercial business on or beside a waterway

7% Tourism

7% Commercial fishing

6% Agriculture

5% Extractive industries

4% Exercise/training

3% Timber harvesting

\* 2010 My Victorian Waterway report Base: Panel sample (n=5,006) applies throughout report

# What type of waterway do people most like to visit? Why?

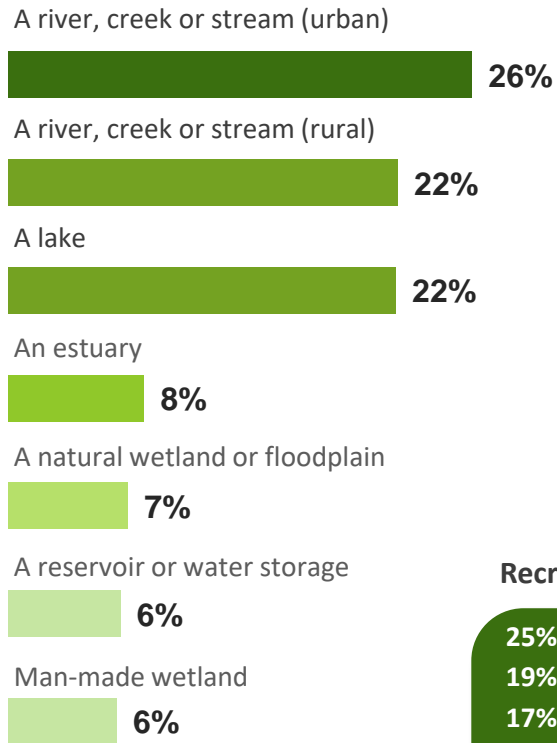
*Rivers, creeks, streams and lakes are the most commonly visited waterways, largely due to residential proximity.*

When asked about the waterway in Victoria they most like to visit, 47% of respondents said that the reason they visit is because it is 'closest to where I live'. Following this, 32% of people responded that the waterway is 'best for what I want to do'.

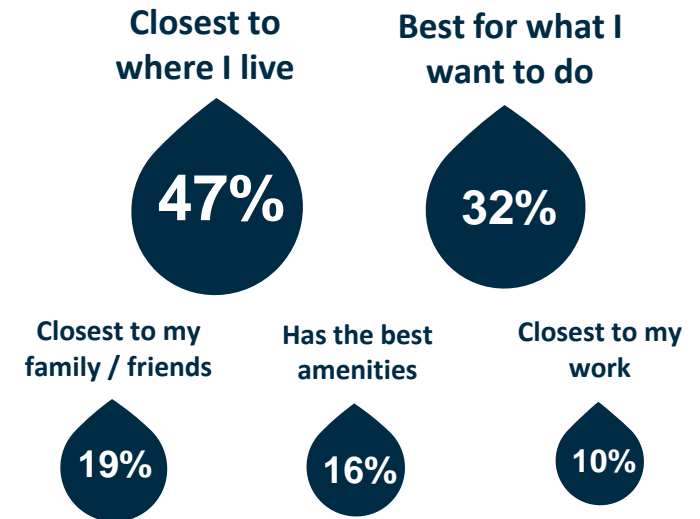
Rivers, creeks, streams and lakes are the most common types of waterways visited.

The recreational activity that is most frequently undertaken by visitors is exercise (walking, hiking etc.). Enjoying the scenery, native flora and fauna, and 'just passing through' are also among the most common activities – highlighting the value of waterways and their habitats as a place to connect with nature and the surrounding environment.

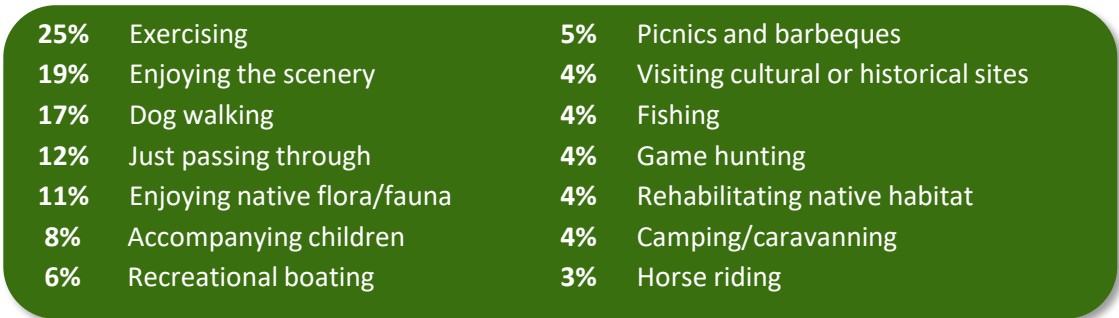
## Type of waterways you most like to visit



## Reason to visit the waterway you most like to visit



## Recreational activities undertaken most frequently (% weekly or more)



# How can recreation on/beside waterways be improved?

*Investment in toilets, walking tracks and visitor facilities are top priority for most respondents. Polluted waters and a lack of essential amenities are identified as the most common issues impacting waterway use.*

We wanted to know what issues are being faced by the community when seeking to visit a waterway. The most common response was that they experienced ‘no issues’. Following that, the biggest issues for users were pollution or dirty waterways, or a lack of essential amenities.

When asked directly about the amenities and facilities they wish to see future recreation investments focused on, toilets, walking tracks, picnic/BBQ/visitor facilities, and seating areas were among the top – with almost half of all respondents selecting at least one. These findings provide an insight into what facilities are most wanted by the community and what facilities are currently under-resourced in certain regions. This information will be used to guide decision making but will not necessarily guarantee specific investment.

**What amenities/facilities would you choose to be the focus of future investments/resources for the waterway you most like to visit? (max. 5)**

57%	Toilets
51%	Walking tracks
43%	Picnic/BBQ/visitor facilities
42%	Seating areas
37%	Parking
21%	Dog walking areas
15%	On-site interpretation signs/info boards
15%	Camping facilities
14%	Bike trails
13%	Exercise equipment
12%	Facilities that support community and cultural events
12%	Fishing facilities
8%	Boat facilities
8%	Sporting facilities

**Have any of the following impacted your access to a waterway you want to visit? (multiple responses were available)**



Base: Panel sample (n=5006)

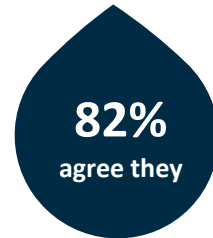
# How does the community care and contribute to waterway health?

*Mindful attitudes and proactive behaviours seem to be driven by a sense of personal care and responsibility towards Victorian waterways*

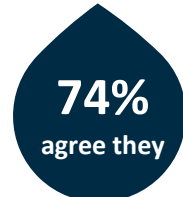
The survey findings reveal that most people care about the health of our waterways (82%), and feel they have a personal responsibility to do the right thing to care and protect them (74%).

Provided they have direction and guidance, 71% of respondents said they would do their bit to keep waterways healthy.

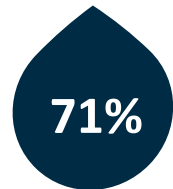
The health of waterways is seen as a priority for a lot of people, particularly rural residents. Given this, it is promising to see that 45% of respondents have *already* been involved in a volunteer environmental or conservation effort, in one way or another. Furthermore, 52% of respondents said they *were interested* in volunteering to support the rehabilitation and maintenance of waterways and their habitats.



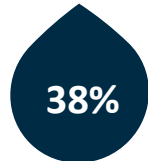
**Personally care about waterway health**



**Have a personal responsibility to do the right thing for waterways**



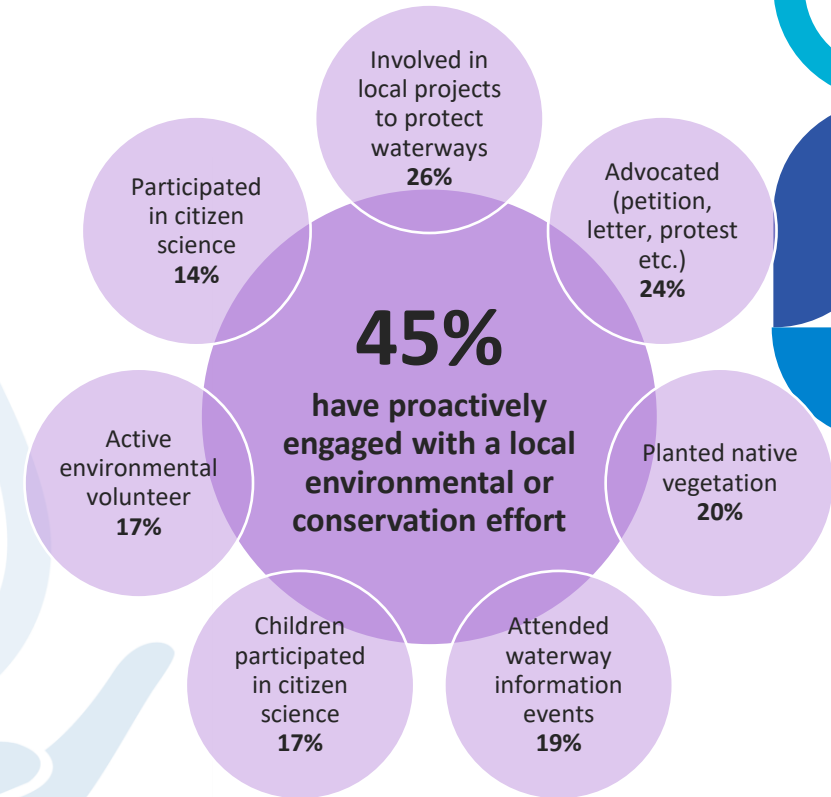
**Would do their bit, if they had advice on keeping waterways healthy**



**Have tried to encourage others to change harmful practices/activities**



**The health of waterways is not a critical issue for me**  
(10% for rural residents)



Base: Panel sample (n=5,006)

# What Victorians know about waterway health

Overall, the people that were surveyed told us they have at least a general understanding about waterway health, with only 1 out of 5 describing their knowledge as low.

**24%**

of people surveyed rated they have good or high knowledge of [how waterway health can be improved](#).  
**21%** said they have little knowledge.

**26%**

of people surveyed rated they have good or high knowledge of [the factors that make a waterway healthy](#).  
**20%** said they have little knowledge.

When asked if they believe statements about waterway health were true or false, we saw that some topics were better understood than others (see figure below). The respondents were more evenly divided on the truthfulness of statements about topics that tend to balance different social, environmental and economic values – this was the trend across the sample, regardless of whether they rated their knowledge as high or low.

The survey tested different waterway terminologies with respondents, in order to gauge how well they have an awareness and understanding of the terms and their meaning. ‘Water quality’, ‘waterways’ and ‘wetlands’ were terms that over half of the sample had a strong understanding of. ‘Riparian’, ‘waterway amenity’, ‘waterway connectivity’, and ‘fish passage’ were among the words with the lowest level of understanding. Most respondents had a vague understanding of ‘catchment’ and ‘estuary’.

These findings help us understand what language to use when discussing waterway health issues with Victorians and where helpful explanations may be needed.

<b>74%</b>	Believe that planting plants along a waterway’s bank improves the health of the waterway	<b>62%</b>	Believe that stormwater from cities and towns decreases the water quality in our waterways
<b>52%</b>	Believe that you can tell by looking at the colour if a waterway is healthy or not	<b>47%</b>	Believe that carp are unhealthy for waterways
<b>40%</b>	Believe that a lot of different insects near a waterway is a sign of good health	<b>39%</b>	Believe that grazing animals beside a waterway can impact it’s health

*“Lots of ducks, swans and fish”*

*“Fast flowing water with plenty of bugs”*

*“It has cool, clear water with no smells – gentle banks with deep rooted plants to hold the soil”*

What have you seen at your local waterway that has shaped your view of its health?

*“Humans have interfered and disrupted the wetland’s natural cycle”*

*“Invasive species have been introduced causing harm”*





# What factors of waterway health should be focused on?

Respondents believe that addressing pollution, maintaining natural flows and water resources, and protecting habitat should be top priorities.

## What are the most important things needed to keep waterways healthy?

Addressing pollution / litter

66%

Ensuring enough water / restoring natural water flows

43%

Ensuring vegetation is healthy / protected

37%

Restoring underwater habitat

36%

Removing barriers to enable aquatic life to migrate

32%

Planting more trees alongside waterways

20%

Removing weeds

18%

Improving waterway access

16%

*"...the real issue is people believe someone else will pick it up"*

*"...dumping and depositing of refuse in recreational areas should have more deterrents, like forceful assistance in cleaning such areas under a community order etc."*

*"Our climate is changing, our continent is getting dryer and we need to find ways of ensuring our streams are able to flow regularly from water that is stored in dams or reservoirs"*

*"The throw away mentality"*

*"The main problem is that we don't appreciate the importance of waterways in providing for the environment... We need to take a far broader view of how waterways encompass cultural values, social values, environmental values etc."*

*"These values can't be measured in dollars"*

These findings tell us that the community has great concern about the extent and environmental impact of pollution and litter. In addition to tackling pollution and litter by way of on-ground management activities, the respondents also believed that a key challenge is in shifting attitudes and behaviours in society to prevent this becoming an issue in the future.

When expanding on these challenges, respondents suggested the issue could be due to indifference, a lack of awareness, limited forethought, and inadequate action by the public, industry and government/management agencies. This study shows a strong yearning for action to be taken to foster change around how **all** Victorians think about, and subsequently act on, the protection of our environment.

Ensuring we have enough water to meet future needs was also seen as a key challenge. 75% of the sample agree that they are willing to cut back on water use and agree that we could all be doing more to support healthier waterways. As seen in the 'Attitudes and understandings' section of this report, there is a large amount of people wanting to do the right thing to care for waterways and will continue to encourage those around them to follow.



# What does this vision really mean for the community?

Looking at the survey open responses, a clear picture can be formed of what exactly is in mind when thinking about a healthy waterway future.

## Clean / clear / fresh water

39%

## Thriving aquatic life / flora and fauna

21%

## Rivers / creeks / streams / canal

13%

## No rubbish / waste

11%

## Free flowing water / not stagnant / filtered

10%

## No pollution / chemicals / pesticides

7%

## Well kept / maintained / managed / protected

5%

## Access for recreational activities

4%

Coded verbatim responses

### Clean water

*"Clear running water able to see the vegetation and possibly see fish in the deep, no sign of any pollution or plastic rubbish"*  
*"looks clean and is free of rubbish and litter"*  
*"Water must be very clean, and people can use it in daily life."*  
*"Clean water, no plastics or debris and well-maintained areas around the waterway"*

### Thriving aquatic life

*"Natural-flowing waterway with plenty of wildlife (fish, yabbies, platypus, birds, etc.)"*  
*"...it should show signs of life, both animal and plant"*  
*"trees growing on the edge with the sound of frogs"*  
*"fish and other aquatic animals surviving there, reeds and plants healthy"*

### Rivers/creeks/streams/canal

*"The creek near my home"*  
*"A large river or lake"*  
*"a creek or lake where sailing can go on"*

### No rubbish/waste

*"No litter in or surrounding the waterway and bins in close proximity to encourage correct disposal of waste."*  
*"Tidy... not full of rubbish, easy to navigate, allows people to use it wisely"*

### Free flowing water/not stagnant/filtered

*"flowing freely without being stagnant, doesn't have chemicals etc. in them"*  
*"slow meandering water flowing by that is crystal clear and... fresh aromas that go along with it."*  
*"Clear flowing water over rocks and sand"*

### No pollution/chemicals/pesticides

*"A protected waterway that has prevention controls"*  
*"Clean to drink and bathe in, and well managed in a way that it can not be easily polluted"*  
*"They should also be free of industrial and household pollutants"*

### Well kept/maintained/managed/protected

*"Clean water, well maintained plants. No litter. It is strictly regulated by the government."*  
*"Proper filter services. Constant checks on the parameters of the water to make sure it is safe for animals."*  
*"They maintain our catchments and ensure the delicate balancing act between the needs of citizens and business needs."*

### Access for recreational activities

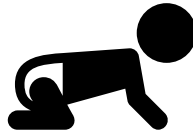
*"A recreational place where a balanced biodiversity area is as close to its actual habitat"*  
*"an exciting canoe ride"*  
*"Walking tracks and reserved land nature spaces"*

# How does having healthy, thriving waterways benefit the community?



81%

agree that **taking care of the environment will help everyone have a better quality of life**



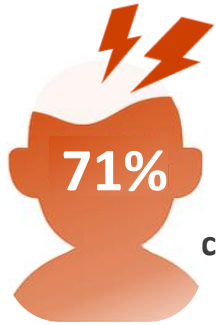
83%

believe waterways need to meet **the needs of future generations**



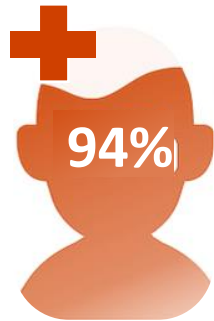
84%

believe waterways should be as healthy as possible in order to continue **providing for community needs**



71%

agree that feeling connected to nature and waterways helps them **deal with everyday stress**



94%

**almost all** agree that waterways nurture their own health and wellbeing



Fishing at Barwon (Parwan) Heads estuary

The importance of keeping our waterways healthy to facilitate social, cultural and environmental connections, improve everyone's quality of life, and to provide for future generations is evident and strong in the Victorian community.

## Using survey data to improve waterway management

It is clear from the 2022 *My Victorian Waterway* survey that many Victorians care for and have strong local connections with the state's rivers, lakes, streams, creeks, floodplains, wetlands, estuaries, water storages and reservoirs. These values, aspirations and visions provide a firm foundation for ensuring the ongoing protection of our waterways.

In addition to the previous 2010 *My Victorian Waterway* survey, this study can be used as a benchmark to build upon in the future, measuring community usage, behaviours, attitudes, perceptions and values over time.

The data from the survey, including specific regional sub-analyses (not included in this report), can help inform the future development of water-sector policy, strategy, and community education and engagement by government and waterway managers across the state.

The My Victorian Waterway study was commissioned by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (Victorian Government). The study was developed and implemented by Quantum Market Research.

Images: Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning



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*We acknowledge and respect Victorian Traditional Owners as the original custodians of Victoria's land and waters, their unique ability to care for Country and deep spiritual connection to it.*