

A new model for net gain in the Birrarung

The Birrarung Council is seeking to stimulate discussion and understanding about the concept of net gain.

Net gain is an approach that seeks to leave the environment in a measurably better state than it is currently. Although the term “net gain” is used in the Yarra River Protection (Wilip-gin Birrarung murrong) Act 2017 (the Act), it is not defined and is not well understood.

The Council believes the goals in the Act, and the 50 year Community and Traditional Owner aspirations for the Birrarung, require a net gain model that is:

- future focused
- restorative
- based on the whole interconnected ecological system
- based on a notion of landscape as being the cultural landscape for which First Peoples are custodians, as well as the ecological dimension
- comprised of social and cultural as well as physical landscape goals.

The Council view is that notions of ‘net gain’ which merely provide some compensation (or off setting) for environmental harms fail to capture the real intent of a true net gain approach and its potential for achieving positive change.

In developing a proposed model of net gain for the Birrarung, the Council has considered three main approaches:

- scientific and technical methods, typically using quantitative measures of ‘gain’
- models of ecological restoration which seek recovery of ecological systems, and use qualitative as well as quantitative measures of gain
- cultural understanding of gain, with measurable improvement in the healing and proper care of Country, under Traditional Owner auspices, as well as improved connection to Country.

The Council strongly believes that what is required is a more developed approach to net gain, which draws on all three approaches but is built upon restorative ecology principles. It is envisaging a model which has the following important features:

- it has a clear articulation of the future state sought, which sets out in detail the restored environment we aim for and includes ecological, social and cultural dimensions
- it requires a clear and detailed plan of how we get to our future state, complete with targets, indicators and measures across scientific, social and cultural domains
- it will design a detailed program of works to drive us along the pathways of change
- it will use physical and social sciences, and Indigenous culture and understanding, to help progress us to our goals.

The Council believes the goals in the Act and the community and Traditional Owner visions for the River can only be achieved if true net gain principles, as embodied in such a model, are applied. More detail can be found in the Birrarung Council net gain summary report. This work has been supported by a comprehensive report commissioned by the Council from expert consultants.