

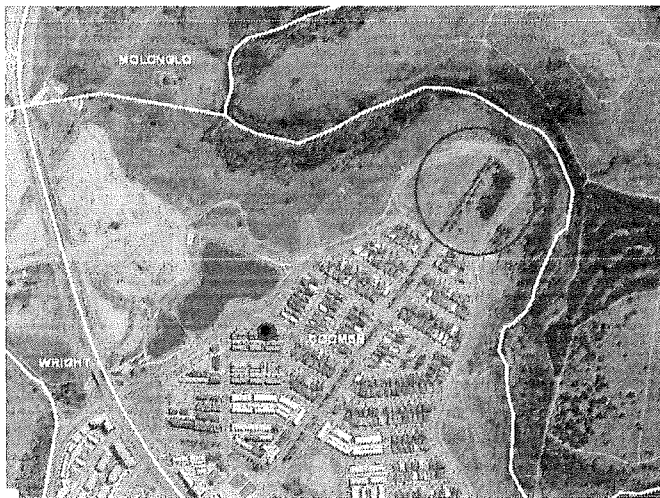
Draft Variation 360 – Molonglo River Reserve: changes to public land reserve overlay boundaries and minor zone adjustment

Presentation from John Hutchison

June 12 2019

I wish to talk about the area known as the Coombs Peninsula, shown on the map below by a circle. I appear as a private citizen, who lives about 600m away from the peninsula, in a spot overlooking Holdens Creek Pond and the currently-under-development North Coombs.

I was invited to attend today following a brief submission I made in April 2019. In my submission I noted that you had previously received a submission from Karen Collins, arguing that boundaries of the reserve should be increased in the vicinity of the peninsula. She was particularly concerned with platypus habitat protection and bushfire risks. The concerns she raised were dismissed.



I submit that an opportunity exists to make a major enhancement of the Molonglo River Reserve by the inclusion of the Coombs Peninsula into the Molonglo River Reserve. This would be beneficial to the river, the reserve and to the residents of the Molonglo Valley, and Coombs in particular.

Currently it is not part of the reserve and is slated for eventual residential development.

I would like to see the peninsula gradually transformed into a great bush resource, where local residents (and others) can walk and ride and experience a vast diversity of nature. Once it is gone it is lost for ever. In the long run, we will look back and ask :“Why wasn't this place protected and preserved as a small oasis of bush?”

The Parks Service would eventually determine the shape of this transformation, but I image extensive revegetation, good quality walking and cycling tracks, a small amount of parking, some seats to sit and take in the ambience and some interpretation signs, perhaps some bird hides and even perhaps platypus viewing platforms. But importantly the area remain a piece of bush. This would be a fitting addition to the Bush Capital.

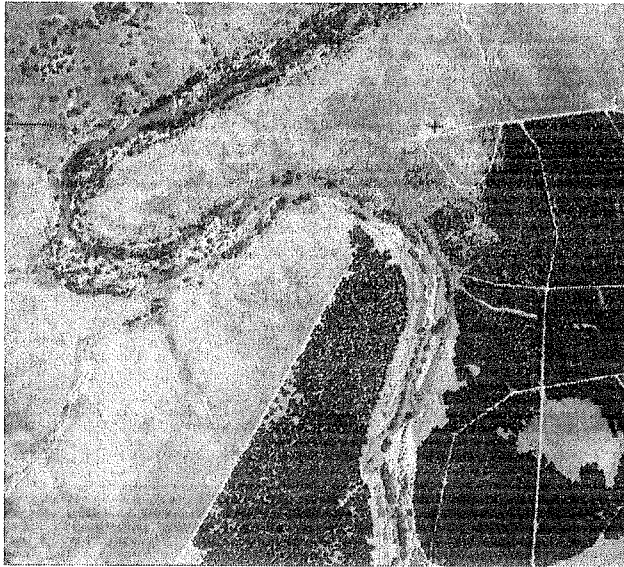
Coombs is the suburb most closely connected to the reserve with the length of Annabelle View and Edgeworth Parade directly adjacent to the reserve. Excellent work has been done to provide walking and riding tracks along the edge of the reserve and more is coming. These are used extensively by Coombs residents. The Coombs peninsula is the one part of this area that has not been landscaped and it is here that you encounter wildlife and some natural bush.

I propose that the whole of the Coombs Peninsula be included within the Molonglo River Reserve, and thereby not be subject to residential development. This would be beneficial to the river, the reserve and the peninsula and enhance the experience of residents.

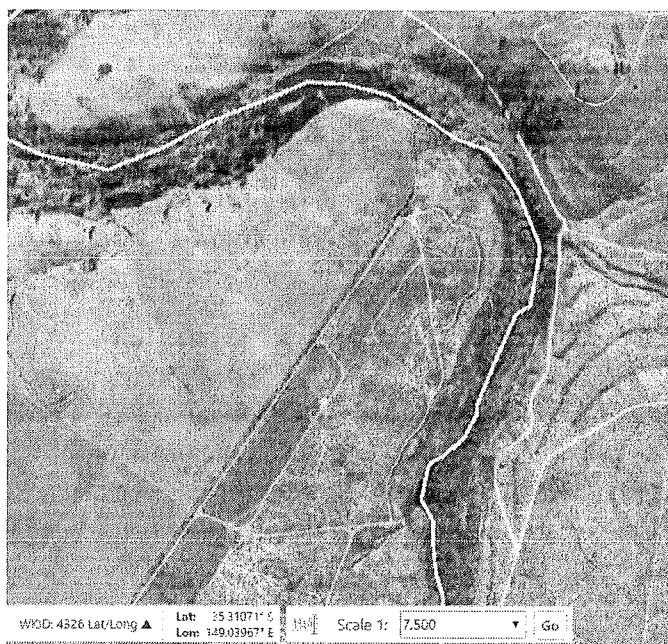
I argue this on the following grounds:

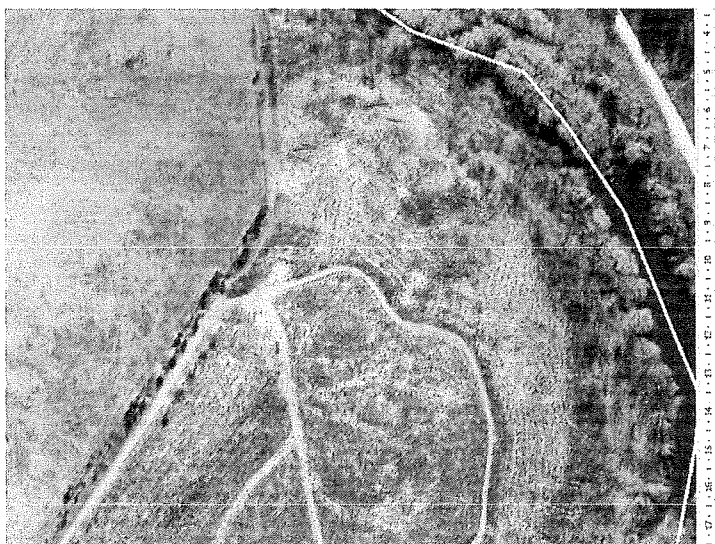
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| 1. Residual Vegetation | 3 | Platypus Protection |
| 2. Environmental Protection | 4 | Bushfire Protection |

Residual Vegetation



This photo from 1955 shows that before the fires what is now Fred Daly Avenue marked the boundary between open farmland and treed land. It appears to me that the trees shown in what is now Coombs are still gum trees at that time. The opposite side of the river, what was then Misery Hill and Misery Point (now Barra Hill and Point) is also completely free from trees but pine plantation can be seen elsewhere. In next photo from 2004 after the fires all the trees are gone except for a line of gum trees along the line of what is now Fred Daly Avenue, continuing onto the peninsula





A closer look at the same area as the previous photo. The gum trees on the Coombs Peninsula are part of the only trees in Coombs that predate the Canberra bushfires.

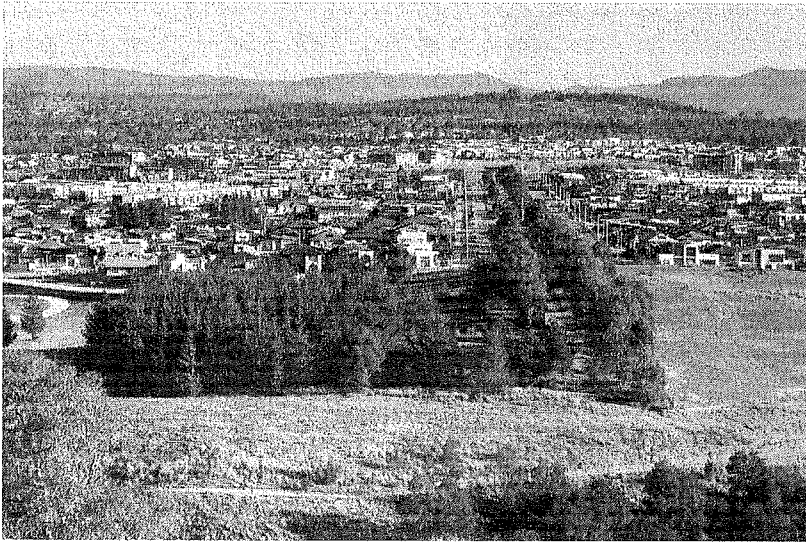


The same view in 2018. The trees have grown larger and some pines trees have regrown.

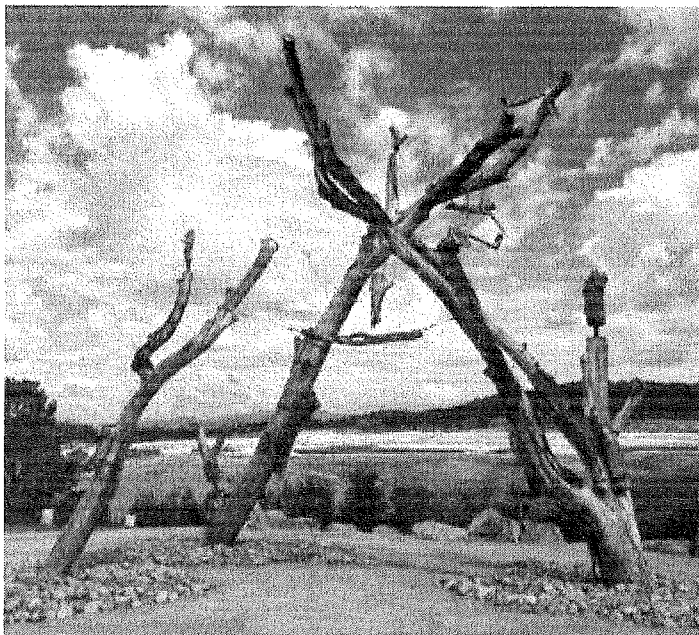
All photos from ACT Mapi

The gum trees along Fred Daly Avenue (and also some along Colbung St) are the only remnant trees in Coombs. The ones on the peninsula are the only remnant trees still in a natural state. The others have been protected by including in urban parks. So these trees on the peninsula are very important. We need to protect not just the trees, but also bush environment of these trees.

The photo below shows a view of the peninsula and along Fred Daly Avenue from the opposite side of the river. The trees in Fred Daly Ave have been protected by building the avenue as dual carriage way with a very wide median strip.



On the opposite bank (Barra Hill and environs) where there are no established trees, the Parks Service is going to extraordinary lengths to try to recreate a treed environment. Not just tree planting but bringing in large dead trees (and even power poles) and planting them to create high perching and nesting places for birds. This shows the importance of large established trees in the rehabilitation of the Molonglo River valley. We need to look after and value the ones we have. We have one government in the ACT that should be acting with a unity of purpose rather than a series of competing agencies all going in different directions.



An example of dead tree planting from Barra Point

Coombs is well supplied with parks and playgrounds, but the vast majority is carefully cultivated and designed. Kids (and adults) need places where they can experience and explore the natural world and create their own adventure from what nature provides. Constructed playgrounds are all very well, but they provide closed rather than open ended activities. A piece of playground equipment does one thing – what the designer intended.

It might be argued that these trees could be preserved while the peninsula is developed for housing. It is possible but I strongly doubt that it would happen. In North Wright which is still under development, all the trees are gone from the area subject to housing development. In North Coombs which had a small number of much older trees, only 3 were kept. To keep the trees on the peninsula would greatly interfere with the estate design. Even if the trees were kept, they would lose their essential character as bush trees and become urbanised trees.



Some of the trees now.

Environmental Protection

The ACT Government has done an enormous amount of work to protect the water quality of the Molonglo River, through the construction of settling ponds and wet lands. These are designed to intercept and trap nutrients, soil, litter and debris, whilst improving the quality of water downstream. Holdens Creek Pond, opposite where I live is an example.

The proximity of the Coombs Peninsula to the Molonglo River means there is very limited capacity to do this interception. Development on Coombs Peninsula would be closer to the river than any development so far.

Throughout 2018 I observed the earthworks underway to develop North Coombs on the opposite side of Holdens Creek Pond from where I live. The developers were just unable to control runoff from the site. Whenever it rained large quantities of mud and silt would overwhelm the environmental protection measures designed to contain the runoff. I don't think this was particularly the fault of the developers – it seemed to me that they made a reasonable effort to do what was expected of them, but the forces of nature are just too strong and the standard methods for runoff protection are just not up to the task they face..

Fortunately most of this ended up in Holdens Creek Pond rather than the river. If similar development is undertaken on the Coombs Peninsula this runoff will end up in the river.



Runoff covering the walking path around Holdens Creek Pond

North Coombs has now moved on to the next stage where the first dwellings are under construction, and this brings a new set of problems. Builders seem unable or unwilling to properly control rubbish generated by their activities.

Polystyrene is a particular concern. Large quantities of this are used in concrete slab construction. It is very light and very friable. So now we see pieces of polystyrene, small and large, around the edge of the pond and heading down towards the Molonglo. One large piece was even found in Fred Daly Avenue, over 600m from the building site.

Fast food packaging has also become common. This is also very light and is easily blown around by the wind. Milkshake containers and Big Mac containers now litter to the edge of the construction area. On the peninsula they will end up in the river. Plastic drink bottles are also very common.

No doubt we would all be told that the strictest standards would be enforced to prevent these things happening. I just do not believe that these would be effectively enforced. Just yesterday I spoke to one of the Rangers about these issues in North Coombs, and he admitted that he was aware of the issues but was at a loss to know what to do about it. My neighbours have also been trying to get some action taken, but report increasing frustration as they get the bureaucratic run around, but no action.

Platypus and other Animal Protection

Karen Collins's submission wrote very well about this issue.

"Our family regularly sights wombats, echidna and of course kangaroos in this area. I have observed the black yellow-tailed cockatoos that roost in the pine trees here. Also, very recently and for the first time, we have seen a rather dark wallaby near the river. From the end of the peninsula, where the river broadens to a wider, deeper pond, we have noted water dragon, lizards and a variety of parrots and water birds.

Fisherman that we have encountered, tell us that while there are mostly carp, golden perch and river cod are found in the river.

It is with absolute assurance that I can inform you, that platypus can be observed in the above section of the Molonglo River. I doubt if there are many other areas of larger Australian cities that can lay claim to this most unique, elusive resident in their suburban rivers. On one occasion I have been within a metre of an adult size platypus resting on the peninsula embankment. The most recent sighting was of a much smaller platypus spotted in the company of a larger platypus. This suggests either a breeding pair, or young and parent platypus (more likely); the nesting burrow of which must be somewhat close by, within a few hundred metres. Given this pond area does not rise and fall as quickly or as much as more narrow parts of the river, it is possible there is a main burrow in the immediate pond vicinity itself. The river either side of the pond, up to around 2km, possibly more, will encompass these platypuses home territory."

I personally have not seen platypus in the river in Coombs, but a number of other residents have related similar experiences to those of Karen. I remind you of the recent news story about a juvenile platypus that needed to be euthanized in Victoria after becoming entangled with hair bands.

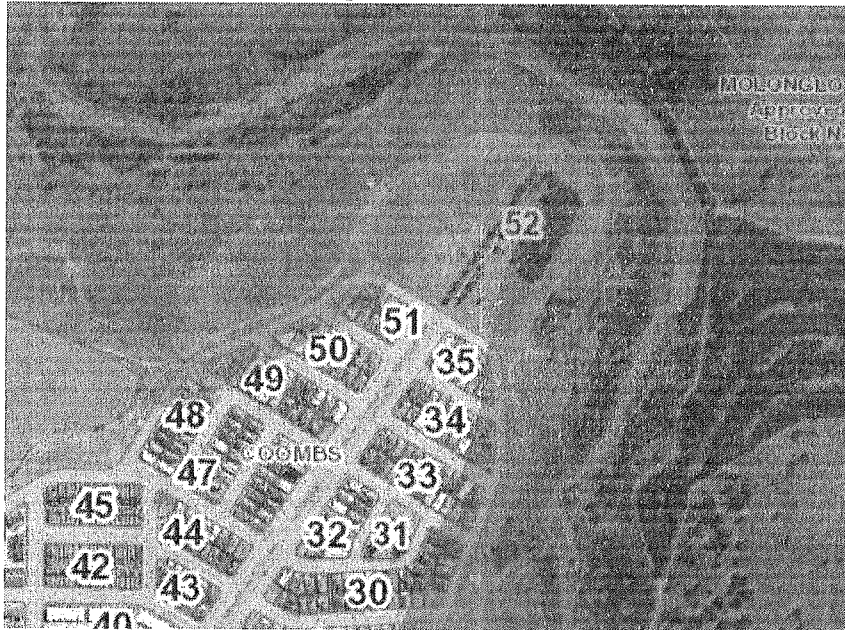
"Much effort has been made to return the river corridor to its natural state with native plantings, erosion control, weed & feral pine eradication, along with track markings and observation areas for recreation. What impact will further residential development of the peninsula have on the river ecology, specifically the platypus population?

Unleashed domestic dogs, domestic/car noise, soil run off, litter, habitat loss etc all impact on the river to increase weed, deplete oxygen, increase turbidity and more, that in turn deter and reduce native species diversity. My family has moved from Isaacs and I can assure you that walking/access tracks that back close to residential properties along Isaacs Ridge are not pleasant with rubbish, weeds, barking dogs that encroach."

Another issue with animal protection is the "choke point" effect that will be created if the peninsula is developed for housing. Only a very narrow corridor will remain in the reserve for animals to move along the river valley. This will inevitably lead to greater conflict between animals and dogs, and force even more kangaroos onto the roads.

Bushfire Protection

I present below an image taken from ACT Mapi that shows the designated bushfire prone areas adjacent to the Coombs Peninsula. The area in red on this map (shaded grey in this B&W print) has been assessed as being **at high risk** to bushfires.



This map shows that some existing houses in Edgeworth Pde and Annabelle View are also in the red zone. What differentiates the peninsula from these existing houses is that the peninsula is surrounded by the red zone. Houses in Edgeworth Pde are potentially at risk from the north west. There is excellent visibility from these houses in that direction. Similarly, Annabelle View is threatened from the east.

The peninsular area is at much greater risk because it is threatened from all sides and very few (if any) residents would have good visibility in all directions. There is also a much greater risk of residents becoming surrounded by fire and unable to escape.

I lived in a bushfire prone area in Victoria for many years. I am very familiar with what is required. The need for a bushfire plan. The stay or go dilemma. What is the trigger to leave? and so on.

Authorities have enormous difficulty getting those affected to take those requirements seriously or even to recognise that they are relevant to them. Whenever a fire occurs, I am astounded by the stories that emerge of the lack of awareness and the lack of preparation. We are all familiar with the site of someone hosing down their roof with a garden hose wearing shorts and things.

One group of people who seem impossible to reach are those who live in urban areas that are threatened by fire. These residents are nearly always completely unaware of risks of fire and the need for awareness over the summer months. This is particularly true of new residents in a district.

I understand fully that certain fire protection measures are mandated if the peninsula were to be developed for housing. Despite these, I believe it would be the height of folly to allow any residential development in such a dangerous location.

John Hutchison