

OUR NEW COMMITTEE

The BERG Mt Martha Annual General Meeting on October 19th saw some changes to our committee. President **Graham Hubbard** stepped down after six years at the helm, handing over to Vice-President **Peter McMahon**. Graham remains on the committee, taking responsibility for marketing. **Bruce Ferres** is Vice President, along with his EstuaryWatch role. **Barbara Thraves**, who has so ably run the Community Awareness Group for some years, and **Bronwyn Street**, our very capable Philanthropy Officer, have both retired. We thank them, we will miss them both. Neither role has been filled.



The handover! Old President Graham Hubbard and new President Peter McMahon
Photo Angela Kirsner

And some non-committee stalwarts

Though not on the committee, **Bev Fryer** has handled Membership for a number of years – a role she has now handed over to **Jan Jones**.

Barry Morris, who's been responsible for getting BERG MM's name and activities into the local papers so often over recent years, has also retired. **Patricia McLeod** is proving a very capable successor.

ART FOR BERG MM

Our thanks to the Artists of the Peninsula Studio who donated 10% of the sale of their paintings of our estuary and creek, in their recent exhibition, to BERG Mt Martha. And thanks to BERGER and artist **Anni Dowd** for organising it all.

Terry Denton, our patron, opened the exhibition on 11th October in his inimitable style, and BERG MM president Graham Hubbard told the large crowd about our work.

Six of the estuary works sold and Anni has forwarded a cheque for \$149.50. 'Only a small offering,' she said, 'but we have all benefitted from the experience of creating a work based on one location and from our collaboration with BERG MM'. And it has paved the way for possible future collaborations.



The Balcombe paintings Photo Liz Barraclough

TWILIGHT MARKET AT MT MARTHA HOUSE

November 15th saw the first of the new seasonal monthly twilight markets at Mt Martha House. BERG Mt Martha had a display next to Boomerang Bags, to highlight our activities and the Waste-Wise Peninsula activities. Along with selling delicious local produce and showcasing lots of community activities, the market aims to be zero-waste.

COUNTING OUR FAUNA

Ecologist Malcolm Legg has delivered the report of his 12-month fauna survey of the Balcombe Estuary Reserves – the third ten-yearly survey over BERG MM's 21 years. Mal spoke to BERGers about the survey following our AGM.

Our reserves are precious

The take-home message was that our reserves, and our ongoing efforts to protect and preserve them, remain very important in the context of the habitat and species loss across the Peninsula and the State.

While over 50 indigenous fauna species have vanished from our reserves over the past 20 years, 108 remain, and this alone makes the reserves of high value.

Mal also pointed out that the reserves include eight different Ecological Vegetation Classes, five of them endangered and vulnerable within the Gippsland Plains Bioregion. This too makes our reserves of State Significance.

The good news, in summary

- We have 108 species of native fauna: 13 fish, 6 amphibians, 11 reptiles (a tortoise, 9 lizards, 2 snakes), 66 birds, 17 mammals.
- One fish species, Dwarf Galaxias, is listed as Vulnerable and one bird, White-throated Needle-tail, is listed as Internationally Migratory.
- Eleven species are State Significant including 3 threatened species; 16 are of Regional Significance; and 5 of High Local Significance.
- Due to large population and habitat losses across the Peninsula, the remaining native fauna recorded can be considered to be of Local Significance. *cont next page*

Interestingly, both Great Egret and Royal Spoonbill numbers have increased over recent decades, after plummeting a century ago when their breeding plumage was fashionable for women's hats. Fashions fortunately have changed!

Of our 17 mammal species, about a third are micro-bats. Each micro-bat will eat three times its body weight in insects each night (including 300-500 mosquitoes!). They are hollow-dependent, and our bat roosting boxes are helping to sustain numbers.

Many species that have gone from the reserves over recent years are hollow-dependent. We have few old growth trees with hollows left. Most of the bushland across the Peninsula is regrowth, after 19th century clearance of old growth, and now rising temperatures are causing woodland die-back and loss of more hollows and fauna species.

Recommendations

- **Plant** 1000 Manna Gums and 1000 Swamp Gums, to establish essential Eucalypt habitats and make some move towards creating more hollows.
- Add lots more '**habitat logs**' – old logs with holes of different sizes for lizards and other creatures.
- Install **nesting boxes** for key species.



Mal Legg at the AGM: 'Early reports tell of seeing 15-20 Wedge Tailed Eagles flying up there at a time!' Photo Angela Kirsner

The impact of pest animals

Black rats are taking over the hollows that remain, both at ground level and high up in trees – with their prehensile tails, they can climb.

They are one of ten introduced species recorded in the survey: 1 fish, 4 birds, and 5 mammals

We can blame Blackbirds and their droppings for the large numbers of *Pitiosporum undulatum*, a major weed across the Peninsula. Mal has seen introduced Indian Mynahs and Starlings throw Eastern Rosella chicks from their nests.

These birds, Mal said, were brought into Australia to help control insects in market gardens, because native bird numbers had fallen hugely with land clearing. Indian Mynah numbers, however, are falling where trapping programs are in place – something to consider at Mt Martha.

Cats, including domestic moggies, are a huge problem. They will kill dozens of small creatures in a night, without eating any, to teach their young to hunt. Foxes love to hunt wetland birds. When pressure is put on these two predators, threatened indigenous populations tend to recover to some extent.

Recommendation

- **Control pest animals:** notably foxes, cats, rabbits, introduced rodents and introduced birds.

Vitally important habitat

The Balcombe Estuary Reserves are part of the 18% of remaining bushland on the Peninsula, and they are one of the few remaining largish patches of indigenous vegetation. Such patches are vitally important for the still large diversity of fauna species that remains. The habitats they provide must be allowed to flourish and increase both within the reserves themselves, and in the surrounding landscape.

Recommendations

- Maintain and increase crucial **indigenous habitats** throughout the reserves and continue to remove habitat-changing weeds.
- Put in place **environmental monitoring** that captures changes to species diversity and abundance (particularly threatened species) across seasonal variation,

You can find the full survey report on the BERG MM website, at: <https://tinyurl.com/uamc2gq>

LIVING CULTURE IN THE RESERVES

Indigenous educator Lionel Lauch took about 20 BERGers and friends on a journey into the life of the Bunurong people on 10th November, as we explored the old campground area.

Lionel is a Gunditjmarra Kirrae Wurrung-Bundjalung man who has lived on the Mornington Peninsula since 1975. He has the permission of both the Bunurong Land Council and Auntie Caroline Briggs to teach culture in Bunurong country.



Lionel among the Spiny-headed Mat Rush in the old Campground photo Angela Kirsner

The Balcombe area provided a vast quantity and variety of foods. There were fish, yabbies, freshwater crayfish, eels and water birds – ducks, swans, cape barren geese. 'This was our supermarket!'

Eels were smoked in a hollow tree, each on a stick wedged into the tree, a fire in the hollow base. To hunt **water birds**, one man would swim underwater with a Common Reed stalk as a snorkel, while another threw a 'come-back boomerang' over the birds to distract them, so the one underwater could grab a bird's legs and pull it down.

Cooked on the fire, **Cumbungi** roots taste just like roast potato. But with the fibre left when the starch is eaten, the women make duck nets, up to 180m long. A net would be stretched across a billabong, into the trees. When the birds settle on the water, a boomerang is skimmed above to disturb them, and they fly up into the trees – and into the net.

Coast Beard Heath has a small berry that is citrus-flavoured when



Clockwise from top left: Lionel playing the Yidaki; making fire; his artefacts, including Marn-Grook ball & grinding stone; making rope from Spiny-headed Mat Rush Photos Angela Kirsner

green and like a little white grape when ripe. Lionel has worked with a chef who pickled the berries to stuff possum (sourced from NZ). The sweet-smelling flowers steeped in water with Manna Gum sap make a natural energy drink.

Spiny-headed Mat Rush (*Lomandra*) seed could be crushed for bread. The white leaf base tastes like snow pea, while the whole leaves make rope strong enough for climbing a tree. Lionel showed how to twist the stems, fold the twist back on itself to form a loop, twist one end about 4 times and take it over the other – again and again. His niece makes beautiful woven baskets and bracelets this way.

Swamp Melaleuca flowers make cordial, while the bark made matting, roofing, band-aids, wraps for cooking, and ‘the first compostable nappies’ (lined with absorbent moss)!

Young prongs of **Bracken** taste delicious, and will also relieve insect bites if rubbed on them.

The leaves of **Bower Spinach** contain Vitamin C. Blanch them before using them, maybe in soup, stir fries or quiches. Both leaves and

berries of **Seaberry Salt Bush** (*Rhagodia*) are edible, and the berries also provide a dye. The grey leaves of **Common Salt bush** (*Atroplex*) are good in stir fries or soups, and dried and crumbled, they are a healthy salt substitute.

To test whether you can eat a plant, Lionel said, ‘check for a reaction on your tongue or armpit’.

Small-leaved Clematis is the

‘headache vine’. Crush some leaves and inhale, or wind some vine round your head, and your headache will go (and it looks good as well!). Or boil the root in water for a tea to treat sharp stomach pains. A paste made from **Goodenia** leaves is also good for headache as well as teething and toothache.

Drooping Sheoke was the guardian spirit tree left by Bunjil. They are favourite trees to sleep under: when the wind blows through

them, the spirits whisper and the ancestors talk to you.

Music and football!

Lionel showed us his first boomerang, which he’d made from Sheoke wood – one of a number of artefacts he’d made. His deliciously warm possum skin cloak (we tried it on!) he’d made from road-kill possums, with patterns burnt inside the skin.

His soft **Marngrook** ball, grapefruit-sized, was also made from possum skin. Marngrook is said to be the precursor of Australian Rules. As Lionel described it, there were about 100 men on each team, and a pitch about a kilometre long...

His Cherry Ballart ‘clap sticks’ were cooked long and slow over fire to make the wood very hard, giving the sticks a high sound. The same cooking technique is used for spear tips (but not shafts, which need to be flexible). You can even make a sharp wooden knife this way.

And for a **superglue**, heat charcoal with ground oyster shells, cumbungi, and Xanthorrea sap.

Finally, Lionel played us his **Yidaki** (‘didgeridoo’ he said, is the sound it makes), an instrument of the people of NE Arnhem Land. His was made for him long ago from powdered hemp bark, charcoal and water, the mixture sprayed thickly on a core stuffed with sand and cooked long and slow so it shrinks, binds and hardens. Then it was lovingly polished.



BERG MM Christmas Party!
1st December, Mt Martha House
photos Richard Kirsner

ESTUARYWATCH

Bruce Ferres reports

On the third Sunday in October (20th), the sandy berm at the mouth of the creek was much the same in size and location as at our September readings. Despite lower rainfall, the estuary water level was high, just below the jetty. Waves were washing over at high tide, but never threatened to break through completely – just as at Bondi's famous Icebergs pool, where waves break over the rocks and fill the sea pool at high tide. But there the similarities end!

In September, water clarity results at all tests sites had been the poorest we'd seen for some time, and outside the acceptable range for estuarine waters. October's readings were still poor at the rotunda jetty, but acceptable elsewhere. It seemed that a really strong entrance breakthrough was needed to clear the murky waters. And in November, it happened. In the weeks before our 17th November testing, there were several mouth closures, minor flooding, then a series of openings (natural and artificial), with large volumes of sea water washing in and out of the main basin. On the day of our observations the water was surging out into the bay.

And the result? – greatly improved the water clarity. All other November readings were within acceptable limits.

Remnant seagrass

With the clearer water and lower level, we could see the two small remnant patches of seagrass, some 12 square metres in total, just inland of the bridge. We know that a large seagrass meadow once covered the basin floor, but ongoing sedimentation of the estuary makes it

impossible for the seagrass to re-establish. Marine biologists from The University of Melbourne have confirmed that sedimentation and high turbidity are the two prime causes of seagrass bed decline: seagrass can tolerate only 2-4 cm of sediment immersion before being severely stressed.

Peter McMahon and I have met with Shire officers from the Integrated Water Management department to reinforce our concerns. We are all agreed that action is needed, and discussions on a way forward were positive.

Re-establishing seagrass?

A recent ABC news article reports on Dr Emma Jackson, of the Central Queensland University, who is currently researching the possibility of revegetating seagrass beds using seeds or transplanting plants*.

It is a very important question. Quite apart from the major role seagrass plays in marine ecosystems – stabilising sediments, improving water quality, reducing erosion, contributing to food chains, providing a nursery habitat for many species of fish – it is a major carbon sink. New research has found that seagrass, along with mangroves and salt marshes, absorbs millions of tonnes of carbon dioxide in Australia each year.

One seagrass flower can produce 15 seeds, and one seed planted in the

right conditions can create a hectare of seagrass. Dr Jackson and her team have mastered sowing and germinating the seeds and are now working on early seedling survival. The aim is to be able to work out the best method for each location and do large-scale transplants.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could stabilise the sedimentation situation, then restore the seagrass meadows that once underpinned the diverse ecology of our estuary?

*see www.abc.net.au/news/2019-10-24/seagrass-propagation-project-and-blue-economy/11631944

PLASTIC-FREE PLACES ON A WASTE-WISE PENINSULA

'Clean Green Mt Martha' is forging ahead under the new banner 'Waste-Wise Peninsula', led by a dynamic WWP committee with members from Boomerang Bags, BERG MM, Beach Patrol, and others. The committee is currently working with Boomerang Alliance to bring the Plastic Free Places program to Mt Martha in a four-month trial, to make Mt Martha the first Plastic Free Place on the Peninsula.

It's a tried and true program that is already operating in Noosa, Byron, Adelaide and Perth. If the Mt Martha trial goes well, it may be expanded across the Peninsula.

Boomerang Alliance (separate from Boomerang Bags) was formed in Queensland in 2003 to bring groups and communities together to help them stem the massive waste of discarded resources. There are now 49 national, state and local 'allies'.

Boomerang Alliance's Kellie Lindsay has spent a week working with our WWP committee members. Together they have talked with 16 cafés and food outlets in Mt Martha Village, to discuss how they are minimising waste, notably single-use plastics; what more they can do; and how to monitor progress.

You can help! Support & encourage traders who are on board – even perhaps gently pressure them to be more clean, green & waste-wise.



Above: Seagrass remnant patch, north bank. Photo Bruce Ferres. Below: Dr Emma Jackson inspects seagrass plants being grown by CQ University



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FIELD NEWS

Field Officer Liz Barraclough reports

Weeds again! At the October **Sunday** working bee, six BERGers plus Tess (Naturelinks) removed Angled Onion along the eastern end of the boardwalk.

The **Friday group** also tackled Angled Onion, this lot along Hopetoun Creek upstream of the swing bridge on Uralla Rd. They also planted here with Balcombe Preschool groups and removed grassy and herbaceous weeds round rock revetment area. They weeded round the bird hide, they planted Coast Banksias and Sweet Bursaria in the Old Campground, and they removed scramblers and grassy weeds near Uralla Bridge and path, and Brisa from near Watson Road. They do get about!

The **Coastal Group** too has continued weeding, along the Esplanade south from Yacht Club (mainly ground flora) and northwards from the Lifesaving Club to the estuary mouth (woody weeds and their seedlings). They have also

planted and guarded 75 grasses, moved mulch from the car park onto plantings, tightened fence wire, and collected litter as they went.

The Tuesday Group was cancelled, and the November Sunday working bee was replaced by Lionel Lauch's Indigenous Cultural Guided Walk (see article, page 2).

Working with schools

Fifty **Balcombe Grammar** students were at the Waterwatch session that BERG Debbie McMahon organized with a group of BERG MM volunteers on 6th November. They were at The Briars, and were delighted to find a little turtle! John Inchley and Bruce Ferres scooped it out of the water into a bucket so the students could see it, then it was returned to the ranger.

Ninety **Osborne Primary** students also came along to a morning session on 15th November in the Old Campground. Debbie McMahon and her ten BERG MM volunteers organized and ran a number of activities, including

Waterwatch, and litter collection and survey.

BMX tracks

Many of you will have noticed the numerous BMX tracks that have been carved out in parts of the reserves. Destruction of indigenous bushland and habitat is forbidden within the reserves. We are working with the Shire, the kids involved, and their parents to find a solution that works for us all. We hope it will be possible to find other places where kids can build and use bike tracks.



The little Long-necked Turtle found at The Briars Photo Debbie McMahon

WINNING WASTE PIONEERS

Remember the Mt Martha Primary students featured last issue in *The Creek* for their Mt Martha clean-up?

These wonderful Year 4 students are the winners of the Waste Pioneers Program sponsored by Mornington Peninsula Shire, Veolia and NewTechPoly.

Six students – Signe, Camryn, Kai, Chloe, Tia and Scarlett – gave an amazing seven-minute presentation on their ideas for cleaning up ocean plastics, to a panel of three judges and an audience of 100, competing against ten other local schools.



The five girls with the 'buddy bench' they won

'SOS! – SAVE OUR SEAS!' was their message! Tia spoke about the clean-up she organised at Balcombe Estuary, when 26 people came and collected 54.28kg of rubbish. Kai showed his model of an electronic bin that weighs collected rubbish then puts it onto your special credit card account. Chloe invented a contraption to sit in a drain, with a net to catch rubbish.

When it's full, the garbage truck empties it.

The students won a 'Buddy Bench' for the school, made from the recycled plastic collected at the Estuary clean-up day, plus \$1000 worth of rubbish removal.

'All up,' said teacher Joelle Rubinstein, 'the Waste Pioneers Program has been hugely successful in educating and motivating kids to make a difference'.

BERG MM Working Bees	Other BERG MM Activities	Other Groups
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Sunday working bee: monthly, 2nd Sunday, between 9am & noon. Details emailed a few days ahead, or call Liz Barraclough 0408 388 430. ❖ Coast Group: monthly, 3rd Wednesday, between 9am & noon, location emailed a few days ahead or call Suzanne Ryan 0418 387 604. ❖ Friday working bee: weekly between 9.30am & noon. Call Liz Barraclough 0408 388 430. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Waterwatch & EstuaryWatch testing: monthly, 3rd Sunday. WW, meet 9.15am at Augusta St bridge: call Sue Milton 0407 350 175. EW meet 9.00am at the Rotunda; call Bruce Ferres 0435 389 804. ❖ BERG Mt Martha Committee meets monthly at Mt Martha House, 9.00am, usually the 2nd Saturday. Next meeting 8th February (no meeting January). All members welcome. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ BirdLife Mornington Peninsula bird-watching 2nd Wednesday and 3rd Sunday. Enquiries to Max Burrows 9789 0224, mornington@birdlife.org.au or www.birdlife.org.au/locations/birdlife-mornington-peninsula. ❖ SPIFFA 1st Monday, 7.30 pm, at Seawinds Community Hub, 11A Allambi Ave, Rosebud West. Enquiries 5988 6529, or www.spiffa.org. ❖ Sunshine Reserve working bee 9.30am, last Sunday of month. Call Pia Spreen, 5974 1096
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THE CREEK

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