



UN Environment Day  
Award application

**Best community  
based environment  
project or initiative**

Darebin Parklands  
Association

May 2006

## Introduction

The transformation of Darebin Parklands from a barren, degraded, weed-infested blight into one of Melbourne's best known and loved urban bushland parks is one of Victoria's most inspiring examples of citizen led environmental rescue.

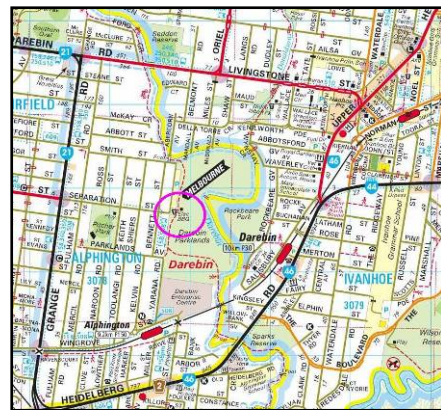
This application is made in recognition of the vision and commitment of members of the community who, as part of the Darebin Parklands Association, have for 35 years played a leading role in creating and maintaining this unique wildlife haven less than 10 kilometres from central Melbourne.

The Darebin Parklands Association is now one of the oldest and largest environmental friends groups in Australia. It works actively with the park's paid rangers, and the community, to care for this special piece of bushland in suburbia.

The DPA's goals are to *protect and improve the bushland character of the parklands, maintaining it as a wildlife haven and a place to appreciate nature*. Our long-term goal is to *reinstate native animal habitat so that more animals, including the platypus, return to live in and around the Darebin Creek*.

## From blight to beauty

Walking through the beautiful bushland that is the Darebin Parklands, it's easy to imagine that it was always this way. Hundreds of people visit to the park each week but many are unaware that the 33 hectare site, on the border of Alphington and Ivanhoe in Melbourne's north-eastern suburbs, was once a quarry, and then a tip. The bushland that provides habitat for native wildlife and enjoyment for humans has been painstakingly replanted, virtually from scratch, largely by a dedicated group of volunteers, members of the Darebin Parklands Association and its forerunner organisations.



An ancient scar tree confirms that indigenous people, most likely those of the Wurrundjeri tribe, once used the area that is now Darebin Parklands. The marked tree is the only scar that Aboriginal people left on the landscape. The same cannot be said for the Europeans who would later occupy this land.

Early settlers used the site for recreation and farming but throughout much of the 1900s, the area was one of Melbourne's least salubrious locations. The Darebin Creek – a tributary of the Yarra River that bisects the site – was regarded little more than an open drain and a dusty, noisy quarry occupied much of the site. When this closed in 1965 the old quarry hole became a municipal tip, receiving household garbage and industrial waste from across Melbourne.

In the 1970s, the then County Roads Board slated the site as a potential freeway; others thought it ripe for industrial and residential development.

Weed infested in parts, barren in others, the site's unique geological and landscape features were well disguised. But while some saw only a degraded paddock and a dirty drain, Ivanhoe residents Sue and Laurie Course, the founders of the Darebin Parklands Association, always knew the huge potential of the wild creek and precious pockets of remnant native plants at the end of their street.

When the then Board of Works moved in with bulldozers and began knocking down trees along the creek, Sue and others were galvanised into action. In 1973 they formed the Rockbeare Park Conservation Group, the forerunner to the DPA, and campaigned for the creation of a bushland reserve. In the first of many victories, the board was not only forced to stop clearing but eventually donated 300 trees for the new park, the first of



tens of thousands planted by volunteers.

While the group's initial aim was to restore the six hectares on the Ivanhoe side of the creek, it soon set its sights on bigger things, pushing for the acquisition of privately-owned land on the Alphington side to create a bushland reserve along the creek. From the start, the public shared the vision, with 1600 people signing one public letter attached to one of the many submissions for federal and state funding.



Sue's tenacious lobbying is the stuff of legend. She took the fight for the park straight to the top, enlisting the support of the Premier of Victoria, Rupert Hamer. When Sue persuaded the premier to visit the park, *The*

*Heidelberger* of January 19, 1977, reported on the front page: "*The Premier, Mr Hamer, braved thistles and blackberry bushes in the Darebin Parklands early this month, but emerged enthusiastic and impressed with the area's open space potential and historical aspects. Mr Hamer visited the parklands at the invitation of the Rockbeare Park Conservation Group [now DPA] and, with a small party, made an informal tour of the area...*"

Sir Rupert, as he was later to become, came away a convert. He took up the park's cause, bringing political clout and financial backing. A few years later he made a return visit, this time to open the park's new rangers' hut – surely the first time a state leader had inaugurated a shed. Sir Rupert was granted life membership of DPA and maintained his interest in the park until his death three years ago.

The persistence of the founders of the DPA was rewarded in 1975, when the Whitlam Government funded the purchase of land for the park; followed by the City of Northcote (now Darebin) and the Hamer State Government two years later. Northcote joined the neighbouring City of Heidelberg (now Banyule) to form a management committee, including council and community representatives. In 1979 the Darebin Creek Management Committee employed its first ranger (replacing its inaugural honorary ranger, Sue Course).

As well as lobbying, the founders of the DPA were busy restoring the neglected Ivanhoe side of the creek, long used to graze horses from the local riding school. Volunteers and local students painstakingly cleared weeds and in 1974, under the guidance of the late Ellis Stones, a local resident and pioneering Australian landscape architect, planting

began on the Ivanhoe flood plain. The saplings put in as part of these first plantings are now soaring gum trees, providing habitat, shade and enjoyment to native animals and human visitors. They are among tens of thousands of native habitat-providing trees planted by volunteers.

### **A wild place**

Darebin Parklands is almost the size of the Melbourne Royal Botanic Gardens but unlike the manicured lawns and exotic plants found in this showcase park, it has always been a wild place. Traversed by winding trails and the creek, the park has wetlands, wind formed caves, miniature cliffs, rapids, open grassy areas, rare geological formations, a "Hidden Valley" and "Mount Puffalo", which offers sweeping views of the city skyline and the Dandenong Ranges.

Planted by volunteers and the park rangers, the indigenous vegetation supports a thriving native animal population including echidna, lizards and other reptiles, possums, bats and more than 50 bird species, such as Brown Goshawks, Tawny Frogmouths and Sacred Kingfishers. The billabongs and creek are home to waterfowl, frogs, eels, native fish and turtles.

Alongside the native vegetation are remnant introduced trees, such as the olive and mulberry groves planted by early European settlers, and the row of pines high on the hill that once guided Cobb and Co coaches travelling along nearby Heidelberg Road.

Man-made structures include the remains of historic weirs – part of the park's early agricultural legacy – a picnic shelter and lookout tower. It also has a unique spiritual healing trail, developed by the park rangers and the DPA in conjunction with the local indigenous community. Another symbolic community-built structure is the arched footbridge that spans the creek, linking the Alphington and Ivanhoe sections of the park. It was designed and built by the Rockbeare Park Conservation Group (forerunner to the DPA) in 1979.



Two years ago the association adopted a new logo celebrating the park's natural and man-made features, and DPA's 35-year role in preserving and nurturing them. It depicts the distinctive curve of the creek as it meanders through the park, the footbridge and the popular duck ponds. Concentric circles in the pond are the signature ripples made by platypus when they surface. They signify the DPA's long-term aim of restoring habitat in the park, encouraging the return of platypus.

### **Old but not grey**

While the DPA is one of Australia's oldest environmental friends groups, its innovative approach to fostering community involvement ensures it remains lively and relevant.

Three years ago the committee took up the challenge of renewing the organisation. It recognised the need to extend the DPA's appeal beyond the nature lovers and native plant enthusiasts who had traditionally made up its membership base, developing a plan to reach out to local families and children.

As part of the comprehensive membership strategy, the DPA in 2003 introduced \$2 children's memberships and established the Junior Ranger Club, with activities throughout the year including Catch-a-Carp Day, ranger-led spotlighting walks and water



pollution projects. The positive response to the Junior Ranger initiative was overwhelming in the DPA's 2005 member survey, with comments including:

*'We love Catch-a-Carp Day, the tree plantings, and the wildlife spotting'.*

*'This has been the best initiative of the DPA even though I don't have kids in that age range!'*

*'A big highlight for us. We've encouraged three other families to join'.*

The Junior Ranger activities are part of a calendar of community events aimed at building community profile and membership. Almost 300 people came to the first community bonfire night in 2003, and we now run two bonfires a year, drawing people from all over Melbourne. Two years ago the DPA established the annual Darebin Parklands Picnic Races, with events including King and Queen of the Mountain, egg throwing, gumboot tossing and sack races.



The DPA now has around 350 members – half of them Junior Rangers – an increase of 300 per cent in three years. Active membership is also booming. Our working bees, a few years ago attended by only a handful of stalwarts, have been transformed into community Park Care Days, lively affairs with up to 50 children and adults planting trees, clearing weeds and rubbish and potting seedlings.

This injection of new and active members has seen a dramatic increase in the amount of revegetation work carried out in the park, helping the DPA achieve its goal of maintaining the park as a wildlife haven and creating more native animal habitat.

In its early days, while developing the new park, the DPA's initial focus was on weed clearing, erosion control and planting. With the structural work now done, the association has moved toward strategic planting to create a range of vegetation communities. It is protecting native wildlife through broad-ranging initiatives such as a project to improve water quality and a responsible cat ownership campaign.



## Planning for the future

The DPA is committed to member involvement in choosing long-term projects. In a unique process, the organisation runs an extensive survey of members every three years, using feedback to develop a three year action plan setting out a vision and goals.

In 2003, as part of its first three year plan, the DPA adopted the overarching objective of *Protecting and improving the bushland character of the parklands, maintaining it as a wildlife haven and a place to appreciate nature.* Our long-term goal is to *reinstate native*

*animal habitat so that more animals, including the platypus, return to live in and around the Darebin Creek.*

The 2003-2005 Action Plan included a range of projects, coordinated by member “champions”, including:

- Planting hundreds of shrubs, grasses and trees as part the restoration of pre-European vegetation to “Hidden Valley”. Coordinated by DPA founder and committee member Sue Course, this project was assisted by Westpac Bank
- Establishing a native plant nursery to grow indigenous trees, shrubs, wildflowers and grasses from seed. DPA members grow thousands of native plants each year for the park as well as schools and landowners along the creek valley
- Supporting the construction of a Spiritual Healing Trail, in consultation with local Wurrundjeri people. The trail, a self-guided walk allowing people to reflect, relax and reinvigorate, attracts visitors from around the state
- Undertaking a responsible cat ownership campaign to reduce attacks by cats on wildlife in the park.

The DPA recently embarked on its next three year plan, with an impressive 20 per cent of adult members – ranging from new recruits through to our founding members – giving their views as part of the survey. The committee is now developing the 2006-2008 Action Plan, with its four main themes of Strategic Revegetation; Raising Public Awareness of DPA and Our Vision; Improving Habitat for Native Animals; and Defending and Improving the Parkland.

The park is in safe hands. Thirty five years after Sue Course, the “mother” of Darebin Parklands, took on the bulldozers, the tiny saplings planted during the first community working bees are mature trees. The former horse paddock, quarry and tip is now one of Melbourne’s best urban bushland parks and a new generation of park defenders are keeping the vision alive.

