Project Summary

Project 5.4
Sub-project 3: Improving community engagement through volunteer work on waterways

Over the past 20 years, there has been a dramatic increase in community participation in waterways management in Australia. Volunteers are increasingly important in waterway management, given the need for extensive datasets and the management of sites and species that are geographically dispersed, coupled with a sense of urgency in protecting and improving the condition of waterways.

As noted in Melbourne Water's *Healthy Waterways Strategy* (2013), volunteers make significant contributions to improvement works, environmental monitoring, habitat management, and biodiversity surveys, amongst other things. As such, it is essential to understand the motivations, activities and experiences of volunteers, in order to identify the value of volunteers to waterway management and support recruitment and long-term participation in volunteer programs.

Aim
This research aims to explore the experiences and perspectives of volunteers that contribute to the management of Melbourne's waterways, with a view to further enhancing these community partnerships.

This project currently supports research by several postgraduate students enrolled in the Master of Environment degree at the University of Melbourne. Each student's research project focusses on a specific community of volunteers that contribute to waterways management. Their research addresses the following objectives:
- To investigate volunteers' motivations for volunteering and how these might change over time
- To investigate the ways in which volunteers understand the benefits of their work for waterway management
- To identify factors that support or constrain volunteer participation in these programs.

This research will then be synthesised to identify strategies for enhancing the quality of community engagement through volunteer activities.

Research Methods
The research consists of semi-structured interviews with volunteers that contribute to the management of Melbourne waterways, whether through data collection, governance processes, or improvement works. There are currently two Masters students enrolled in this project: Maddy Sbeghen (focussed on Birdlife Australia volunteers contributing to the Melbourne Water Regional Bird Monitoring project); and Cynthia Zhang (focussed on Waterwatch volunteers collecting water quality data).

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Each student researcher will conduct approximately ten semi-structured interviews with current volunteers. A purposive sampling strategy is used to select participants across a range of ages, length of service, locations, and expertise.

During the one-hour interviews, participants are asked questions regarding their volunteer history, current experiences of volunteering with their program, and the future aspirations for volunteering. Data is collected in the form of:

- digital audio recordings of the interview, which are then transcribed
- observation notes made by the student researcher
- photographs of the volunteer site.

All data is uploaded into nVivo and manually coded through an iterative process to identify key themes and patterns.

Progress to date

Maddy Sbeghen commenced in July 2017 and will complete her research in November 2017. After meeting with Melbourne Water and Birdlife Melbourne staff to consolidate her understanding of their partnership, she then recruited and interviewed 12 volunteers who contribute data to the Melbourne Water Regional Bird Monitoring project. In addition, she attended a survey and made observation notes on the work of volunteers. Ten hours of interview data have been transcribed and uploaded into nVivo, and this data is now being analysed.

Preliminary findings suggest a range of motivations for volunteering, such as care for wetlands and birds, learning from or teaching others about birds, enjoying the social aspects, and improving physical and mental health. Additionally, volunteers identify a range of contributions to waterways management beyond the collection of biodiversity data, such as educating others in local birdlife, understanding implications of site management for birdlife, advocating for the protection of wetlands, and monitoring visitor behaviour on reserves.

> "I quite enjoy the social side of it … Quite often, my wife and I will just go out and go on our own and enjoy that. Then again, we enjoy going out in company with others that know their birds extremely well."

Excerpt from an interview with a volunteer on a bird monitoring program

Cynthia Zhang commenced in July 2017 and will complete her research in June 2018. Her study focuses on volunteers who monitor water quality in Melbourne waterways, as part of the *Watchwatch* program. In collaboration with Melbourne Water staff, Cynthia has designed a sampling and recruitment strategy for her study. The first interviews will be conducted in October and November, and will continue early next year.

Project team

Stephanie Lavau, Tim Fletcher, Darren Bos, Adeline Stuart-Watt (University of Melbourne); Maddy Sbeghen, Cynthia Zhang (University of Melbourne students); Peter Morison, Rhys Coleman, Belinda Lovell, Lauren Mittiga, Trish Grant, Monica Tewman, Tiana Preston, Lisa Kitson, Michelle Ezzy, Leigh Smith (Melbourne Water).