

Project Summary

Understand the role of small headwater streams in urbanizing catchments for supporting waterway health

Project D1: Headwaters

This project will improve understanding of the environmental, social and economic values of headwater streams, to inform land development planning decisions.

Headwater streams, where catchment runoff first accumulates sufficiently to create overland flow paths, are dominant parts of the riverscape. The smallest streams of catchments are primary sources of streamflow, important sources of organic matter and invertebrates to downstream waters, and act as 'hot spots' for retention and transformation of nutrients such as nitrogen and carbon.

While small headwater streams are likely to be extremely important for maintaining downstream river and bay health, they are particularly vulnerable to degradation or loss in rapidly urbanizing cities such as Melbourne.

If catchment managers continue to adopt conventional urban drainage infrastructure, we are likely to continue losing these critical ecosystems and the values and services they provide.

This research seeks to investigate and quantify the magnitude of the values and services provided by headwater streams across the MW management region; and ultimately facilitate their effective management and protection in areas of rapid urban growth.

Methods

The project will combine desktop and field-based work to firstly develop a clear understanding of existing knowledge regarding the hydrology, water quality treatment, and ecology of headwater streams. This literature review will also include identification of potential sam-

pling and monitoring methods as well as approaches used overseas to identify and conserve headwater streams in urbanizing environments.

Secondarily, the project will undertake a rapid desktop GIS analysis to quantify the scale of the 'headwater stream problem' in MW's management area i.e. how many have we already lost?, how many are we likely to lose under future urban growth and climate change? and what are the likely implications for regional biodiversity and the health of downstream waterways and bays?

By combining the newly developed stream network layer with existing layers including forest cover, hydrologic disturbance, number of farm dams, existing catchment urbanization, proposed future catchment urbanization, and available biodiversity data, this work will facilitate the communication of present/future headwater stream condition and risk by stream length across the MW management region.

Outcomes to date

- A number of headwater streams in the north-west of Melbourne have been instrumented, including surface and sub-surface wells.
- Currently trialling the use of novel thermal cameras to detect groundwater inputs.
- Preliminary field observations suggest these systems are hydrologically, very intermittent.

Project Team:

University of Melbourne

Matthew Burns

Sam Imbergerr

Rob James

Melbourne Water

Nino Polon

Belinda Lovell

Rhys Coleman

Richard Akers

Sharyn Rossrakesh

Sarah Watkins