

## River Detectives Story of Change

Wandiligong Primary School, North East CMA region, 2024



**NORTH EAST  
CATCHMENT  
MANAGEMENT  
AUTHORITY**

River Detectives is a cross-curricular citizen-science program connecting teachers and young people with their local waterway. Through water-quality testing, macroinvertebrate sampling, and habitat surveys students learn about the importance of catchment health and their role in caring for it.

The program is available to schools and youth groups in five regions across Victoria.

Alex Shaw is a passionate sustainability educator at Wandiligong Primary School, a vibrant and energetic small school of 42 students south of Bright in north-east Victoria. Founded in 1870 during the gold boom, it is set in the picturesque Wandiligong Valley.

Being a small school is considered a strong asset, not a liability. Wandiligong PS believes small schools are great preparation for life, with an ability to provide a full and diverse curriculum in a caring, nurturing environment where students are adaptive, creative, confident, and have highly developed social skills.

Teachers at Wandiligong PS strive to link learning in the classroom with the lived experience of children and they draw on their bountiful local resources to engage and stimulate students. The school joined the River Detectives program in 2023 as an opportunity to extend learning beyond the classroom walls and make it active, stimulating and fun.



*Natural school grounds support environmental learning.*



The school had fantastic sustainability initiatives in place but wanted some help to do more.

*“As a school we had been running a program each Friday called Sustainable Wandil. During these sessions students work in two multi-age groups to do a range of different activities that promote sustainability. We have done litter pickups, planted native trees in the Diggings Reserve, we grow and cook our own produce, we audit our school rubbish and recycling and collect data on local animals. We have collected river samples before with our old outdated WaterWatch kit, but no current staff had any training.”*



In February 2023, students used the old equipment to look for insects in the water of Morses Creek.

To participate in the River Detectives program, the school adopted a site on Morses Creek in the town's Alpine Park Public Reserve, within walking distance from the school.

In their first year of participation, students from all year levels enjoyed visiting the local waterway and having some time in an environment outside of school.



*Taking and analysing water samples at Morses Creek.*

A tree planting day was held on the banks of Morses Creek in August 2023. Students planted 82 native trees, adding to the 200 trees planted in the previous three years and helping them get closer to their goal of planting 1000 trees over the next 10 years with support from the Diggings Reserve committee and the Alpine Shire Council.



*Revegetation work along Morses Creek add to River Detectives learning.*

Through this work, students develop a deep understanding of the environmental benefits of tree planting.

*"They recognise these trees play a crucial role in preventing erosion along the creek, creating habitat for native animals and ensuring a beautiful natural environment for generations to come."*

In September 2023, then North East CMA River Detectives coordinator Anna Hall visited the school on-site at Morses Creek. All students from Prep to Year Six engaged in citizen-science activities to learn the skills needed to monitor Morses Creek. They learnt the steps involved in both water quality testing and macroinvertebrate sampling.



*Waterbug sampling on Morses Creek.*



*Collecting a sample for water quality testing.*

*“We particularly enjoyed learning about waterbugs. The incursion was really good and helped me a lot as a first-time teacher of this program.”*

In 2024, the school continued its involvement, planting a further 300 plants along the banks of Morses Creek.



*Planting trees along Morses Creek in 2024.*

North East River Detectives coordinator Blair Yates visited the school in July. Inclement weather meant the session couldn't be run at Morses Creek but fortunately the school is blessed with expansive, heritage-listed school grounds. With a focus on surveying habitat quality, students talked about the animals they could see and hear and learn about how they benefit the local area.

Blair recalls, *"The kids shared some stories of their own encounters with animals. The school backs onto a hill with heavy vegetation so we saw a good number of critters and we even saw some kangaroos and deer tracks. At the end of the session Alex approached me to request another session and showed interest in having a session with Traditional Owners"*

In October Blair was able to visit again with Aunty Val of the Duduroa Dhargal Aboriginal Corporation (DDAC).



*Blair and Aunty Val speak with students.*

Aunty Val shared traditional stories and students created paintings using canvases and stencils. Blair ran a session at Morses Creek to share knowledge about its catchment; the creek's source, where it collects water from, the creek's tributaries, and where it flows.

This was a valuable way for students to understand their place within the catchment and the broader context of Morses Creek as an important waterway both upstream and downstream of Wandiligong.

Blair discussed the volume of water that flows through Morses Creek and answered students' questions.



*Aunty Val introduces the art activity then students get busy creating their canvasses.*



The school was keen to enhance the habitat of the school grounds with native revegetation. Blair was able to support the school with grant opportunities and a list of native plants known to be indigenous to the area. Using indigenous natives is best practice to restore habitat with species that would have been in a location prior to European occupation. These are the plants that will grow best being perfectly suited to the soil, rainfall, and conditions of the area and will provide the habitat needed for the area's native animals. Aunty Val offered the support of Duduroa Dhargal Aboriginal Corporation.

The River Detectives program is proud to deliver waterway-related teaching and learning resources but to also play a role in supporting schools to achieve their broader environmental goals.

Wandiligong Primary School is very excited to continue their involvement in the River Detectives program. The school is extremely appreciative it is able to access free incursions considering its remote location.

In a recent program evaluation, Alex commented, *“The students loved the program in 2024. It is such a beneficial program.”*

Alex particularly appreciates the benefits that school incursions bring.

*“When Blair comes in with his science background it provides us all with deeper knowledge and he brings new ideas. Blair’s input keeps the kids curious. They have been inspired by him, commenting that they’d like to follow his footsteps and do work like his in the future.”*

*Blair is always flexible and keen to be involved with any sustainability work our school is involved in. Having his help to make connections with Aunty Val and the Duduroa Dhargal Aboriginal Corporation has been invaluable.”*



The school has big plans for the future. An outdoor learning area was constructed in 2023 and there is a master plan for their Sustainable Wandi program.

When this space is finished it will be the home of the school’s sustainability focused learning program and will support recycling systems, waste reduction, vegetable gardens and its conservation efforts.

*The beginnings of the Wandiligong Primary School outdoor learning area.*

In 2025 the school wants to focus on habitat creation. It has identified a lack of butterflies on the school grounds, so students will plant host plants. They will be working with the local Men’s Shed to make native bee hotels and they are very keen to do more macroinvertebrate sampling with Blair to identify the creatures that rely on the habitat of Morses Creek.

**For more information about River Detectives:**

Email [riverdetectives@nccma.vic.gov.au](mailto:riverdetectives@nccma.vic.gov.au) or visit [www.riverdetectives.net.au](http://www.riverdetectives.net.au)