

This hidden island is just 4km from the CBD. But good luck getting there



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There's a place in the middle of the Yarra River, around four kilometres upstream from the CBD, where you can feel like you're all alone.

Well, as long as you ignore the occasional burst of exhaust noise from the trucks rattling by on the nearby CityLink tollway.

Herring Island has existed for almost 100 years, but many people don't know it's there. Even those who do probably haven't visited.



Herring Island. JUSTIN MCMANUS

The main reason is access. The artificial 3.2-hectare island was formed in 1927 when a channel was cut through the disused Richmond basalt quarry, which had the effect of straightening out the Yarra to prevent flooding.

There are jetties allowing people to visit any time they like by kayak, canoe or private boat.

But a free punt service ferrying people to the island only operates on weekends and public holidays between January and Easter.

For the rest of the year, it's basically deserted, a tranquil counterpoint to the busy suburbs of South Yarra, Toorak and Richmond that buzz away nearby.

Aside from the peace and quiet, Herring Island's attractions include the flora and birdlife (foxes and snakes have also swum across from the Yarra's banks), as well as a sculpture trail installed in the late 1990s.

There is potential for the public to learn more about this relatively well-kept secret.

Parks Victoria is currently seeking public feedback on the future use and management of Herring Island.

A draft concept for the island suggests upgrading its two landings, as well as exploring options for improved frequency and accessibility for the punt.



Friends of Herring Island volunteers Stanley Barker and Damian Curtain. JUSTIN MCMANUS

“It’s such a great space, and it’s probably under utilised. It’s not very easy to access,” says Parks Victoria ranger team leader Ross Polke during a tour of the island with *The Sunday Age*. While he wants more people to visit, Polke acknowledges that much of the appeal of Herring Island lies in how little used it is.

“It’s a tricky balance between providing more opportunity for people to use the space, while also maintaining the kind of secret nature of it,” he says.

That could mean increasing the amount of time that the punt is in operation or allowing larger vessels to dock and bring visitors. There’s only one idea that’s off the table.



The wattle is out on Herring Island. JUSTIN MCMANUS

“The suggestion gets thrown in every now and then to build a bridge directly across,” says Polke.

“That would completely change the island and invite a whole lot of new issues.”

For long-time Friends of Herring Island volunteers Stanley Barker and Damian Curtain, the beauty of it is in its solitude.

A group of up to 20 people come across every month or so to help with weeding or planting.

Much of the vegetation was planted by the group, which involved finding varieties that would grow well in the silty soil that was dredged up to create the island in the first place.



There is a sense of solitude on Herring Island. JUSTIN MCMANUS

Back then, it was like a barren moonscape. Now, you can almost get lost among the plant life.

“It’s just a little bit of recreated nature for the animals to come back,” says Curtain, the group’s “president for life”.

“It’s a nice little secluded spot in the middle of the city.”

But Curtain is happy for more people to come and see it.

“I like it being a quiet place, but I don’t want it to be a secret,” he says. “Come and quietly enjoy it, look at the art, enjoy the nature.”

Barker’s affinity for the place may stretch beyond his lifetime.

“My family have talked about scattering my ashes here,” the 78-year-old laughs.

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