

River Detectives Journey of Change

St Brendan's Primary School

Corangamite CMA region, 2026



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, including the Corangamite Catchment.

Small School, Big Impact: How St Brendan's Students Are Becoming River Detectives

Nestled in Victoria's beautiful volcanic region, St Brendan's Primary School may be small in size, but it is making a significant impact through its commitment to environmental learning.

Surrounded by rolling beef and dairy farmland near the township of Cororooke, the school's 37 students are discovering the power of science, stewardship and community through the River Detectives program.

Serving families from Cororooke, Beeac, Nalangil, Larpent, Swan Marsh and Colac, St Brendan's has built a strong culture of hands-on learning. Over the past four years, River Detectives has become a valued part of the school's Outdoor Learning program, giving students the opportunity to explore, investigate and care for local waterways.



Taking Learning Beyond the School Gate

For the staff at St Brendan's, one of the greatest strengths of the program is its ability to bring learning to life.

Outdoor learning teacher Alice Armistead reflects *"I was drawn to River Detectives because it was interesting, relevant and hands-on, it gives our students an opportunity to move beyond the classroom and learn in a real environment. I believe it is an excellent way to build students understanding of environmental science."*

The school's River Detectives journey began at a site along the Gellibrand River, where a local family where happy to provide students access to monitor river health. When that opportunity came to an end, the school established a new monitoring site on the Woady Yaloak River near Cressy.

"The new site is close to school and easy for students to access safely," Alice explains. "It has allowed us to continue the program and maintain those valuable connections with our local waterways."

Young Scientists in Action

Each year, St Brendan's Grade 4 students take on the role of River Detectives. Accompanied by a teacher and learning support officer, they visit their monitoring site twice a year in terms 2 and 4. Sampling is also conducted in term 3 however testing is conducted back in the classroom at school for third term due to bus costs and time constraints.



During each visit, students become scientists, carefully observing their surroundings and investigating the health of the river ecosystem.

Alice goes on to explain that, "We encourage students to use all their senses, we ask them what they can see, hear, smell and feel. They quickly begin to notice changes in the river and the surrounding habitat from season to season."

Students test water quality indicators including salinity, reactive phosphorous, pH, turbidity and temperature. They also search for macro invertebrates (water bugs), birds, fish and other wildlife that help tell the story of the river's health.

"Students love looking for evidence of life in and around the waterway. There is always excitement when they discover something new," Alice says.

The visits also include practical environmental action, with students collecting rubbish and helping care for the natural areas they monitor.

Growing Environmental Awareness

While the scientific skills students gain are valuable, staff say the most important outcome is the deeper understanding students develop about the importance of healthy waterways.

When asked about the impact the program has had on students, Alice said, *"one of the biggest changes we've seen is the students' understanding of water quality and what makes water safe and healthy. They are beginning to appreciate that water is a precious resource."*

A key lesson that students revisit throughout the program is the connection between actions and consequences within a catchment.

"Students are often referring to the knowledge learnt during these site visits to answer questions in other subject areas. They live a better way of life and make good choices because they know firsthand how important water quality is. They know what impacts water positively and negatively," Alice explains

Building Confident, Curious Learners

The River Detectives program has also strengthened students' connection to each other, their teachers and the natural world around them.



Reflecting on the program Alice said, "One of my favourite things is seeing students genuinely excited to participate. They love getting out on the bus, exploring the river and learning through experience."

For a small rural school, these shared experiences create powerful opportunities for relationship building.

"You get to know students differently when you're learning alongside them outdoors," Alice reflected.

"We develop a shared interest and curiosity, and that helps strengthen those connections."

Watching the landscape change throughout the year has become another highlight. Alice loves seeing students notice how the river and surrounding environment change through the seasons: *"They start to understand that ecosystems are dynamic and constantly changing."*

Small Challenges, Big Rewards

Like many rural schools, St Brendan's must navigate practical challenges, including transport costs, timetabling and ensuring adequate classroom coverage during excursions.

Despite these hurdles, staff remain committed to the program because of the benefits they see in their students.

"There are certainly challenges, but when you see the excitement, knowledge and confidence students gain from these experiences, it is absolutely worth it," Alice said.

Looking Ahead

The future of River Detectives at St Brendan's is bright. Staff hope to continue participating for many years to come and are eager to expand the program's impact through partnerships with environmental organisations.

Alice notes that, "We would love to work alongside groups like Landcare or Greening Australia on projects such as river clean-ups and revegetation. It would be a fantastic opportunity for students to see how they can contribute to positive environmental change."

For the students at St Brendan's Primary School, River Detectives is more than a science program. It is an opportunity to explore, discover and take meaningful action in their local environment.



"When students realise they can make a difference, even in a small way, that's incredibly powerful."

Alice reflects, "They're not just learning about the environment, they're becoming caretakers of it."

Through curiosity, exploration and hands-on learning, these young River Detectives are proving that even the smallest school community can make a lasting impact on the health of its local waterways.

For more information about River Detectives email riverdetectives@nccma.vic.gov.au or visit www.riverdetectives.net.au

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