

Wetlands – A National Approach

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It gives me great pleasure to be here today at the workshop on water quality and wetlands. It is most encouraging to be surrounded by such a wide range of participants, each having a specific interest in the conservation and long-term sustainable management of the region's, and Australia's, wetlands and waterways.

In my presentation today, I will discuss wetlands and water quality from a broad, national perspective, providing you with the latest advice on a number of positive steps that the Commonwealth Government is taking to develop a national approach to wetlands conservation and management; initiatives that will increase the level of community understanding and stakeholder involvement in wetland and waterway management and rehabilitation.

In the past year, the Commonwealth has further improved its commitment to the International Convention on Wetlands, otherwise known as the Ramsar Convention, and has adopted and launched the *Wetlands Policy for the Commonwealth Government of Australia*. Before going into detail on these national and international trends, I would like to spend some time touching on some of the important issues in this very rich and beautiful region of Australia.

The location chosen for this workshop was no mistake. The Wet Tropics bioregion, of which the Babinda-Tully area is the heart, is riddled with wetlands of high ecological value. This precious strip of coast contains no less than 29 wetlands of national significance; all of which are listed in the latest edition of *A Directory of Important Wetlands in Australia*. More than half of these wetlands are located within a 60-kilometre radius of Babinda.

The major occurrence of these wetlands is on the littoral shores, the alluvial and colluvial backplains, floodplains, overflow channels, stream deltas of the lowlands, and the permanent fast flowing streams and their tributaries. Providing further challenges for wetland managers in this region is the fact that the coastal regions are subject to a strong maritime influence and high levels of humidity. The climate is characterised by an intense wet season between December and April, with a moderate dry season between August and December.

Perhaps the most important and, from a management perspective, complex, of all wetlands in the Wet Tropics is the Port of Cairns and Trinity Inlet. This nationally important wetland satisfies the criteria for listing as a Ramsar site and as a Shorebird Reserve Network site. It is recognised for its ability to support vast populations of shorebirds and waders as well as a breeding and feeding area for fish and prawns. This is a good example of where sound management can incorporate a number of uses and establish systems to protect the ecological qualities.

I understand that the Queensland Government is proposing to declare the Port of Cairns as a marine habitat under the *Marine Protection Act 1982*. In conjunction with its status as both a fish and wetland habitat under State legislation, and together with the Trinity Inlet Management Plan, this move recognises the significance of the wetland as a valuable resource and will aim to balance development needs with conservation objectives.

As the impact of human interaction and development over the years becomes increasingly evident, it is critical that we intensify our research and monitoring programs to increase our overall understanding of wetlands, and other marine and coastal ecosystems generally. As our

society continues to recognise and adopt principles of integrated catchment management, it is more important than ever, particularly in the biodiversity rich Wet Tropics, to fully appreciate the fragile nature of wetland ecosystems, and the significant relationship between the on-shore aquatic systems, including wetlands, waterways, catchments, and complex marine systems such as the Great Barrier Reef.

There is no doubt in any of our minds as to the environmental, heritage, tourism and commercial significance of the Great Barrier Reef. Indeed, the Great Barrier Reef is one of Australia's, if not the world's, most prized natural assets. As you are all no doubt aware, 1997 is the International Year of the Reef and I, for one, am positive that greater attention will be placed on the protection of coral systems in Australia and around the world.

A little recognised fact is that coral reefs, by definition, qualify as wetlands. Although the Great Barrier Reef is not listed as a wetland under the Ramsar Convention, it easily satisfies the criteria and is already being managed in accordance with the Ramsar Convention's and the Commonwealth Wetlands Policy's wise use guidelines for wetlands management. This management approach is supported by a legislative framework in which conservation is the dominant theme.

The Great Barrier Reef is not a National Park as such, but a multiple-use protected area. Subsequently, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority has been established to manage the reef to provide for its protection, wise use, understanding and overall enjoyment. In recognition of its natural heritage characteristics, in 1981 the Reef was nominated for, and added to, the World Heritage List. The wise use management of the Reef is exemplary of a firm and lasting commitment from the Commonwealth and Queensland Governments to share resources and responsibilities to achieve positive conservation outcomes.

Zoning of activities in the Great Barrier Reef has been achieved in a cooperative and consultative manner and has resulted in a modern management style which exemplifies the Commonwealth's commitment to raising the profile of ALL wetlands, and at the same time accommodating a wide range of uses. Zoning plans are subject to regular revision and the Commonwealth and Queensland Governments recognise that active community involvement is an essential component of this management style.

From a national, and indeed international perspective, Australia is at the forefront of protecting and better managing its wetlands. Since signing on to the Ramsar Convention in 1971, Australia has identified a total of 49 wetland sites which are considered to be of international importance and are now listed under the Ramsar Convention. It is also worth noting that, with great honour, Australia was chosen to host the Sixth Conference of Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention, held in Brisbane in March 1996. Among other things, the Ramsar Convention directs Contracting Parties to develop national policies to implement and direct the adoption of wise use management principles for all of its wetlands; a challenge that the Commonwealth welcomes and is actively pursuing.

After months of development, followed by broad-ranging consultation, Senator the Hon. Robert Hill launched the Wetlands Policy of the Commonwealth Government of Australia to coincide with the inaugural World Wetlands Day in February 1997. This policy was well received by a wide range of stakeholders. The Commonwealth is now focused on developing an implementation plan to complement and deliver on the strategies outlined in the Commonwealth's Policy.

Another important means by which we will be supporting the objectives of the Commonwealth Policy is through the development of partnership agreements with each of the State and Territory Governments for delivery of the Natural Heritage Trust. In relation to wetlands, we

will be encouraging those State and Territory Governments without wetlands policies in place for their own jurisdictions, to follow the lead set by the Commonwealth and those States who have wetland policies, so that we can work towards a national approach to the wise use of wetlands.

Also, the National Wetlands Program, administered by Environment Australia, has been established to complement the National Rivercare Initiative of the Natural Heritage Trust. The National Wetlands Program provides funding to communities and State bodies to promote the conservation of Australia's wetlands. One method by which this is achieved is by actively encouraging the development and implementation of wise use management practices by both government and non-government sectors.

Projects currently being funded as part of the National Wetlands Program include the development and/or revision of management plans for Ramsar sites, preparation of nomination documents for highly significant wetlands to be recognised as Ramsar sites, research and monitoring, development of a national inventory, updating the existing *Directory of Important Wetlands in Australia*, and broad-ranging community education programs. It is worth noting that the launching of the Natural Heritage Trust marks the first time that the Commonwealth has provided grants to the community for environmental projects.

I look forward with anticipation to the outcomes of the Natural Heritage Trust, not only for improved wetlands management, but in other areas such as vegetation, and the better use of our coastal resources through the Coasts and Clean Seas Initiative, which was launched recently.

The Coasts and Clean Seas Initiative will provide funding through the Natural Heritage Trust for the conservation, sustainable use and repair of Australia's coastal and marine environments. This unique program will focus on protecting the marine environment from negative impacts of human activity by tackling pollution problems, and addressing threats to biodiversity and habitat. This initiative will provide Australians with an opportunity to conserve our precious coasts and seas and prevent further degradation.

Last but not least, declining water quality is regarded as one of the most serious issues affecting our marine and coastal environments. In Australia today there is a growing awareness that water is a precious and finite resource which must be managed in a sustainable way. Waterwatch Australia, also administered by Environment Australia, provides a national framework for community-based water quality monitoring programs.

Since its inception in 1993, Waterwatch has expanded to all States and Territories. The number of monitoring groups has increased from about 200 operating in 16 catchments to 1150 in 86 catchments. Across Australia, data is collected by groups using nationally adopted protocols. This data includes temperature, acidity, turbidity, reactive phosphorus and nitrogen. The data is planned for inclusion in the National Database Program which will provide a system for collating, analysing and developing management responses at the catchment level. It will also be possible to merge information at both the State and National levels.

It is estimated that more than 50 000 Australians are participating in the program at nearly 4000 sites. Waterwatch is operating in every major metropolitan centre as well as in the rural areas. This program continues to create links between urban and rural dwellers leading to greater cooperation in catchment management.

In closing today, I would like to stress the importance of building partnerships and reinforcing existing links between the three tiers of government, conservation groups, industry, primary producers, and the community to achieve better environmental outcomes. There is a diverse

range of interest in wetlands, from tourism through to irrigation for food and fibre crops, that all compete for the same valuable resources. Increasingly, governments need to be aware of these stakeholder needs when making decisions that may impact on the long-term sustainability of wetlands. Management plans for wetlands and waterways must be developed to acknowledge these interests while integrating wise use management principles and objectives.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am confident that the strategies contained within the Commonwealth's Wetlands Policy will be delivered in the most effective, equitable and transparent manner possible. I trust you will continue to enjoy your time at this workshop and find it a useful opportunity to learn about the region's coastal wetlands and waterways, the Great Barrier Reef, as well as the issues that are driving State, national and international policy development for the protection and sustainable management of wetlands and water quality.