Towards Sustainable Use of Australia's Wetlands – A National Overview

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Introduction

Australia is the driest continent in the world. Despite this fact, Australia is laden with a rich diversity of natural habitats including a vast number of wetland ecosystems. As the world's largest island continent, our coastline is riddled with coral systems, mangrove forests, lagoons and saltmarshes, many of which qualify as wetlands. At present, more than 750 wetlands in Australia are listed in *A Directory of Important Wetlands in Australia* (2nd ed., 1996). In the last 200 years, more than half of Australia's wetlands have been degraded or lost.

In Australia, major responsibility for management and conservation of wetlands rests with the relevant State or Territory government and, in some cases, local authorities. The obvious exception is that where wetlands exist on Commonwealth land, the Commonwealth has responsibility for management. The Commonwealth's interest in wetlands extends to the international level as, in February 1971, Australia became a Contracting Party to the Convention on Wetlands (the Ramsar Convention).

By signing the Ramsar Convention, Australia has undertaken to ensure the ecological characteristics of its Ramsar wetlands are protected through wise management, to look after all wetlands wherever possible, and to work towards the development of a national approach to wetlands conservation. To reinforce these principles, the Commonwealth continues to build on partnerships with State, Territory and local governments. Through the Natural Heritage Trust, Environment Australia administers the National Wetlands Program which assists governments and the community to realise positive environmental outcomes for Australia's wetlands.

The Ramsar Convention

The Ramsar Convention, officially the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat, has the broad aim of halting the worldwide loss of wetlands and to conserve, through wise use and management, those that remain. To help achieve this aim, the Ramsar Convention directs Contracting Parties to develop national policies to implement and direct the adoption of wise use management principles for all its wetlands.[2]

Wise use management of wetlands involves 'their sustainable utilisation for the benefit of mankind in a way compatible with the maintenance of the natural properties of the ecosystem'.[3] In achieving wise use management of wetlands it is important to recognise the wide range of activities associated with wetlands and to develop a national approach to sustainable use.

Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention are encouraged to register internationally important wetland sites on a list maintained by the Ramsar Bureau, the administrative body for the Ramsar Convention. Ramsar sites are nominated as internationally important based on ecology, botany, zoology, limnology or hydrology. Once Ramsar sites are designated there is an expectation that the special ecological characteristics for which they are recognised will be conserved and, where possible, enhanced.

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[1] Environment Australia is the environment program of the Federal Department of the Environment.
[2] Pursuant to Article 3 of the Ramsar Convention.
[3] Davis, T. J. (ed.) 1993. Towards the Wise Use of Wetlands. Wise Use Project. Ramsar Convention Bureau. Gland, Switzerland.

In the last 25 years, Australia has nominated 49 Ramsar sites (refer to attachment 1). Although primary responsibility for Ramsar sites rests with the State and Territory Governments, the Commonwealth plays an active role in protecting Ramsar sites principally by providing funding – particularly via the National Wetlands Program and Waterwatch Australia – for the development of management plans for these sites. Environment Australia also participates on a number of steering groups guiding the development of such plans.

Meetings of the Conference of Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention are held every three years. In March 1996, Australia hosted the 6th Meeting in Brisbane. The next meeting will be held in San José, Costa Rica in May 1999.

A National Approach

To assist in the long-term sustainable management of wetlands and, through this, upholding Australia's obligations to the Ramsar Convention, the Commonwealth Government adopted and launched the *Wetlands Policy of the Commonwealth Government of Australia* in February 1997. The Commonwealth Wetlands Policy contains six strategies including:

- managing wetlands on Commonwealth lands and waters;
- implementing Commonwealth policies and legislation and delivering Commonwealth programs;
- involving the Australian people in wetlands management;
- working in partnership with State/Territory and Local Government;
- ensuring a sound scientific basis for policy and management; and
- international actions.

Environment Australia, with input from other Commonwealth agencies is currently developing an implementation plan to realise these policy strategies.

Consistent with a national approach, Australia's States and Territories are developing and implementing their own wetlands policies. New South Wales and Western Australia have already launched wetlands policies, while Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania are at various stages of developing drafts. The Commonwealth is working with State and Territory agencies to ensure that, where possible, the State wetlands policies complement both the Ramsar Convention and the Commonwealth wetlands policy.

The ANZECC Wetlands and Migratory Shorebirds Taskforce

The Australian and New Zealand Environment and Conservation Council (ANZECC) is a forum of State and Territory Environment Ministers. At its meeting in October 1997, ANZECC established the Wetlands and Migratory Shorebirds Taskforce.

The Taskforce combines the former ANZECC Wetlands Network and the ANZECC Migratory Birds and Migratory Species Network. The Taskforce has representation from each State and Territory, New Zealand and the Murray-Darling Basin Commission and is convened by Environment Australia. The current membership of the Taskforce is listed in attachment 2.

The Terms of Reference for the ANZECC Wetlands and Migratory Shorebirds Taskforce will be determined at its first meeting in February 1998. The role of the Taskforce is to assist in upholding Australia's obligations to the Ramsar Convention and related international agreements. This is achieved through actions such as: providing advice to Environment Australia on how the Ramsar Convention is implemented within each jurisdiction; contributing to Australia's national report for Ramsar Convention meetings; and preparing nomination documents for new Ramsar sites.

The National Wetlands Program

The National Wetlands Program is administered by Environment Australia to address Australia's international and national responsibilities for wetlands protection. The National Wetlands Program, through the Natural Heritage Trust,[4] has a budget of $14 million over five years. The broad aims of the National Wetlands Program are to work cooperatively with relevant stakeholders towards improved knowledge of wetlands systems, and to encourage the adoption of wise use principles in wetlands management.

As part of the Natural Heritage Trust, partnership agreements with detailed goals and objectives for each program, including the National Wetlands Program, have been signed by State and Territory Premiers and Chief Ministers, and the Commonwealth, represented by the Prime Minister. For the National Wetlands Program, each State and Territory has specified and agreed to a range of broad principles and objectives related to the protection of wetlands.

Projects being funded as part of the 1997–98 National Wetlands Program include: developing and/or revising management plans for Ramsar sites; preparing nomination documents for new Ramsar sites; and compiling the 3rd edition of *A Directory of Important Wetlands in Australia.* Also being funded are projects related to research and monitoring, development of a national inventory, and community education. A complete table of projects being funded under the 1997–98 National Wetlands Program is attached as presented in attachment 3.

A Directory of Important Wetlands in Australia

Recommendation C.1.5 of the Conference of Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention suggests that comprehensive national policies would benefit the wise use of wetlands, and that such policies should be based on a nationwide inventory of wetlands and of their resources to aid the formulation and implementation of national wetland policies.

In response to this, Environment Australia coordinates the ongoing revision of *A Directory of Important Wetlands in Australia,* which is now in its second edition. The *Directory* is revised every three years to coincide with the meetings of the Ramsar Convention. State and Territory Governments are encouraged to update their chapters and in many cases are supported through the National Wetlands Program.

The *Directory* identifies wetlands of national importance, and also includes Ramsar sites. The criteria for determining nationally important wetlands have been modelled on the Ramsar Convention criteria, with modification for Australian conditions. For reference purposes, the Interim Biogeographic Regionalisation of Australia (IBRA) has been adopted. The criteria are as follows.

1. It is a good example of a wetland type occurring within a biogeographic region in Australia.

2. It is a wetland which plays an important ecological or hydrological role in the natural functioning of a major wetland system/complex.

3. It is a wetland which is important as the habitat for animal taxa at a vulnerable stage in their life cycles, or provides a refuge when adverse conditions such as drought, prevail.

4. The wetland supports 1% or more of the national populations of any native plant or animal taxa.

[4] The Natural Heritage Trust is being funded by the sale of one-third of Telstra and has a total budget of $1.25 billion dollars over five years.

5. The wetland supports native plant or animal taxa or communities which are considered endangered or vulnerable at the national level.

6. The wetland is of outstanding historical or cultural significance.

The 3rd edition of the Directory is currently being compiled by Environment Australia. A number of State and Territory nature conservation agencies have received funding to undertake inventory work that will be used to update existing information as well as nominate new wetlands for inclusion. It is envisaged that the next edition of the Directory will be available in electronic format as a searchable database.

Migratory Shorebirds

Australia is signatory to three international agreements relating to migratory birds: the Japan–Australia Migratory Bird Agreement (JAMBA); the China–Australia Migratory Bird Agreement (CAMBA) and the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (the Bonn Convention).

Under these agreements, the contracting parties have agreed to encourage the conservation of migratory shorebirds by establishing joint research projects and exchanging information. To protect migratory birds and their habitats, the parties have agreed to establish sanctuaries and other facilities, and monitor frequency and numbers of migratory shorebirds within their jurisdiction. In particular, the parties have agreed to seek ways to prevent damage to migratory birds, and to take necessary measures to control the importation of animals and plants which are hazardous to the preservation of migratory birds or which could disturb significant habitat.

The East Asian-Australasian Shorebird Reserve Network is an international chain of sites recognised as important migratory shorebird habitat that are protected under relevant legislation and/or agreements. Since its establishment in March 1996, the Shorebird Reserve Network has expanded to include 19 sites across eight different countries within the East Asian-Australasian region. Within Australia, Shorebird Reserve Network sites are typically located within Ramsar sites, thus highlighting the importance of wetland areas as critical habitat for migratory shorebirds. A number of projects being sponsored by the National Wetlands Program will identify new areas to be proposed for inclusion in the Network.

Waterwatch Australia

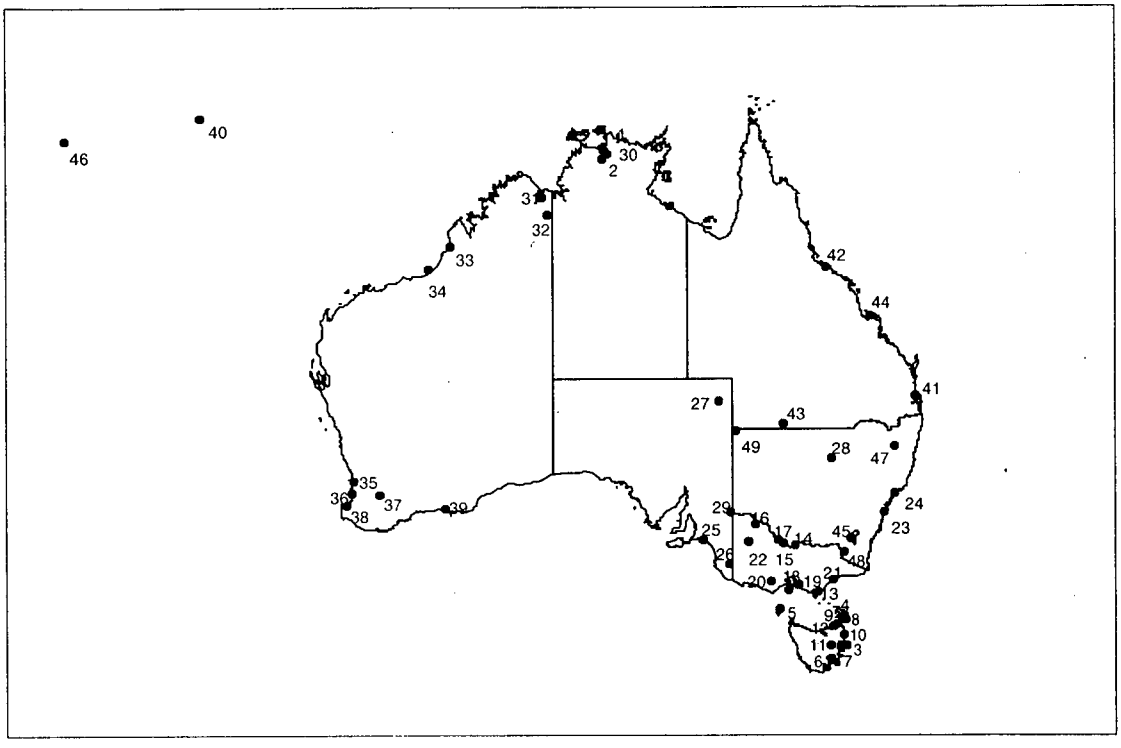
Wetland health and the health of our waterways have become of increasing concern to the Australian people. To address this concern Waterwatch Australia was initiated by the Commonwealth Government and is presently administered by Environment Australia through the Natural Heritage Trust. Waterwatch Australia coordinates and supports the monitoring of waterways by the community to facilitate actions that address water quality issues. The program operates on the basis that monitoring of waterways will better equip local communities with the skills, knowledge and impetus to take an active role in managing their land and water.

Following its inception in 1993, Waterwatch was quickly adopted by governments and communities and is now operating in every State and Territory through ACT Waterwatch; Streamwatch NSW; Waterwatch SA; Ribbons of Blue WA; Waterwatch Victoria; Waterwatch Tasmania; Waterwatch Queensland; and Waterwatch NT. The number of monitoring groups has increased from about 200 operating in 16 catchments to more than 1500 groups in over 100 catchments.

Attachment 1

Environment Australia

WETLANDS DESIGNATED BY AUSTRALIA TO THE LIST OF WETLANDS OF INTERNATIONAL IMPORTANCE (THE RAMSAR CONVENTION ON WETLANDS)



Location Site	Hectares
1. Cobourg Peninsula Aboriginal Land & Wildlife Sanctuary	220 700
2. Kakadu National Park Stage I (including wetlands components of Stage III)	683 000
3. Moulting Lagoon	4 580
4. Logan Lagoon Conservation Area	2 320
5. Sea Elephant Conservation Reserve	1 730
6. Pittwater-Orielton Lagoon	2 920
7. Apsley Marshes	940
8. East-Coast Cape Barren Island Lagoons	4 230
9. Flood Plain Lower Ringarooma River	1 650
10. Jocks Lagoon	70
11. Northwestern Corner of Lake Crescent	520
12. Little Waterhouse Lake	90
13. Corner Inlet	51 500
14. Barmah Forest	28 500
15. Gunbower Forest	19 450
16. Hattah-Kulkyne Lakes	1 018
17. Kerang Wetlands	9 172
18. Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) & Bellarine Peninsula	7 000
19. Western Port	52 325
20. Western District Lakes	30 182
21. Gippsland Lakes	43 046
22. Lake Albacutya	10 700
23. Towra Point Nature Reserve	281
24. Kooragang Nature Reserve	2 206
25. Coorong and Lakes Alexandrina and Albert	140 500

26. Bool and Hacks Lagoon	3 200
27. Coongie Lakes	1 980 000
28. Macquarie Marshes Nature Reserve	18 143
29. 'Riverland'	30 600
30. Kakadu National Park Stage II	692 940
31. Ord River Floodplain	102 000
32. Lakes Argyle and Kununurra	150 000
33. Roebuck Bay	55 000
34. Eighty-mile Beach	125 000
35. Forrestdale and Thomsons Lakes	754
36. Peel-Yalgorup System	21 000
37. Lake Toolibin	437
38. Vasse-Wonnerup System	740
39. Lake Warden System	2 300
40. Hosnie's Spring	<1
41. Moreton Bay	113 314
42. Bowling Green Bay	35 500
43. Currawinya Lakes	151 300
44. Shoalwater and Corio Bays	239 100
45. Ginini Flats Subalpine Bog Complex	125
46. Pulu Keeling National Park	122
47. Little Llangothlin Lagoon	258
48. Blue Lake	320
49. Lake Pinaroo	800
TOTAL AREA	**5 041 584**

Attachment 2

ANZECC Wetlands and Migratory Shorebirds Taskforce

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Attachment 3

NATURAL HERITAGE TRUST PROJECTS BEING FUNDED UNDER THE NATIONAL WETLANDS PROGRAM (1997–98)

NWP	National Wetlands Program
NRI	National Rivercare Initiative
NVI	National Vegetation Initiative ('Bushcare')
NLP	National Landcare Program
MD2001	Murray–Darling 2001

QUEENSLAND

State Partnership Projects

Title	Project description (proponent)	Funding	Program
Management Planning and Public Education for Migratory Shorebird Roost and Feeding Sites in Moreton Bay	Produce site specific management plans for migratory shorebird habitats within Moreton Bay (Department of Environment)	97–98 $39 092 98–99 $47 789	NWP
Gulf of Carpentaria Shorebird Surveys	Obtain suitable information to base a nomination for Gulf of Carpentaria to become a marine park, Ramsar site and Shorebird Reserve Network site (Department of Environment)	97–98 $24 290 98–99 $44 500 99–00 $44 500	NWP
Brigalow Belt North - Biodiversity Strategy	Develop a regional land management strategy (Department of Environment)	97–98 $20 000	NVI, NWP
Lake Eyre Basin Catchment Management Regional Initiative (Queensland component)	Integrated catchment management strategy through community consultation and cross border framework (LEB Steering Group through Department of Natural Resources & SA DEHAA)	97–98 $10 000	NLP, NRI, NWP

Community Projects

Title	Project description (proponent)	Funding	Program
Tarradarrapin Creek Wetlands Planning & Management Project	General inventory and management plan of Tarradarrapin Creek wetlands (Birkdale Progress Assoc. Inc.)	97–98 $2750	NWP
Ingham Tyto Wetlands	Restoration of a degraded wetland through management program (Hinchinbrook Shire Council)	97–98 $15 000	NVI, NWP

NEW SOUTH WALES

State Partnership Projects

Title	Project description (proponent)	Funding	Program
Survey of Wetlands of Northwestern NSW	Map wetlands of northwestern NSW at 1:250 000 scale and identify management options for their conservation (National Parks and Wildlife Service)	97–98 $44 943	NWP
Wetland Inventory for the Northern Tablelands	Map data for all wetlands in the North. Tablelands, incorporate into GIS, identify wetlands for 3rd edn of the Directory (Department of Land and Water Conservation)	97–98 $40 000	NWP
Updating the Directory of Important Wetlands	Review the NSW chapter of the Directory (NPWS)	97–98 $15 000 98–99 $15 000	NWP
NSW Wetland Action Plan Workshop	To support a workshop to develop a NSW Wetland Action Plan (DLWC)	97–98 $9900	NWP

NSW Wetland Rehabilitation - Review, Workshops and paper	Employ a project officer to increase awareness of wetland rehabilitation (NSW Fisheries)	97–98 $13 936	NWP
Lachlan Floodplain Wetlands Adaptive Water Management Framework	Develop a water management plan for the Lachlan Floodplain by conducting a comprehensive assessment of wetland water needs for the valley and providing baseline ecological information for the ongoing assessment of wetland health (DLWC)	97–98 $52 325	NWP & MD2001

Community Projects

Title	Project description (proponent)	Funding	Program
Production of Frogfacts Leaflets	Production and publication of five new Frogfacts information sheets (Frog and Tadpole Study Group of NSW Inc.)	97–98 $5350	NWP
Seaham Swamp Wetland Interpretation Station	Develop an interpretation station overlooking Seaham Swamp Reserve (Seaham Swamp Landcare Group Wetlands Centre)	97–98 $27 500	NWP
Wetland Site Interpretations for Education and Impaired Visitors	Update interpretive signs/sculptures around the Shortland Wetlands Centre and provide for visually impaired persons (Shortland Wetlands Centre)	97–98 $10 990	NWP
Rehabilitation of Littoral Wetland and Establishment of Walkway	Restore the degraded wetland by controlling feral animals, removing weeds and constructing a walkway to minimise human impacts. Involve the local community/schools in these actions (Redhead Landcare)	97–98 $14 937	NWP
Five Islands Wetland Management and Conservation Study	To protect the integrity and biodiversity of Five Islands Wetland by involving the community in on-ground and education activities. Prepare planning documents for the construction of interpretive materials (Five Islands Wetland Landcare Group)	97–98 $10 945	NWP
Development of Wetland Management Plans with Community Consultation	Develop and implement management plans for 6 wetlands and educational packages to inform the community of wetland values (Hawkesbury-Nepean Catchment Trust)	97–98 $15 400	NWP

VICTORIA

State Partnership Projects

Title	Project Description (Proponent)	Funding	Program
Management Strategies for Victorian Ramsar Wetlands	Management guidelines setting out management principles for Vic Ramsar sites and plans for integrated management of each site (Parks Victoria)	97–98 $60 000	NWP
Documentation of the Natimuk-Douglas Wetlands as a new Ramsar site in Victoria	Preparation of nomination and site designation documentation. Includes a management plan which is to be integrated with the current management framework for existing Ramsar sites project (Department of Natural Resources and Environment)	97–98 $21 800	NWP
Nomination of Two Victorian Ramsar sites to the Shorebird Reserve Network	Prepare nomination documentation for two sites in Port Phillip Bay to be added to the Shorebird Reserve Network (DNRE)	97–98 $9600	NWP
Documentation of the Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands as a new Ramsar site in Victoria	Nomination of new Ramsar site (DNRE & Melbourne Water Corporation)	97–98 $5900	NWP

Important Rivers and Streams in Victoria	Assessment of wetlands in category of 'permanent rivers and streams and seasonal and irregular rivers and streams' for the Directory of Important Wetlands in Australia (DNRE)	97–98 $50 000	NWP
Management Planning and Works - Ramsar and Related Wetlands	Planning and management activities on and adjacent to Western Districts Lakes Ramsar wetlands (Parks Victoria)	97–98 $12 000	NWP

Community Projects

Title	Project Description (Proponent)	Funding	Program
Community Awareness Geelong Ramsar wetlands	Integrated catchment approach to best practice management of Ramsar wetlands (City of Greater Geelong)	97–98 $44 750	NWP

TASMANIA

State Partnership Projects

Title	Project description (proponent)	Funding	Program
Protection of Threatened Nesting and Migratory Shorebirds in Tasmania	Establish an inventory of coastal resources, produce a technical manual which identifies sensitive coastal areas and establish a coastal network with a management plan and raise awareness (Department of Environment and Land Management)	97–98 $49 000	NWP
Tasmanian Peatland Survey	Assist in understanding how peatland systems function and contribute to their sustainable management (DELM)	97–98 $50 000	NWP
Development of Tasmanian Wetlands Policy	Produce a draft Wetlands Policy for Tasmania and arrange all necessary negotiations and consultations through preparation and approval stages (DELM)	97–98 $45 000	NWP

Community Projects

Title	Project Description (Proponent)	Funding	Program
Seymour Wetlands Conservation Project	Conserve and maintain the natural integrity of Seymour Swamp through protection and progressive rehabilitation (East Coast Regional Development Organisation)	97–98 $6300	NWP
Protection and Care of Clear Lagoon	Prevent further damage to the marshland by: replacing fencing, removing rubbish/weeds, circulating a pamphlet, and erecting a notice (Birds Tasmania)	97–98 $6000	NWP
Huonville Wetland Project	Continue developing the wetland educational area near the school, develop resources and curriculum which utilise the wetland, and continue promoting environmental awareness in the school and local community (Huonville Primary School Landcare Group)	97–98 $7000	NWP
Maintaining Water Quality in Coffee Creek	Construct a wetland on the tributary to Coffee Creek to filter out effluents, improving water quality in Coffee Creek and thereby North West Bay (Huntingfield Coffee Creek Landcare Group)	97–98 $5500	NWP
Dover School Farm Wetlands Restoration Project	Rehabilitate a degraded wetlands area and inform and demonstrate responsible water and soil management practices to students and the community in Dover (Dover District High School Farm Management Committee Inc.)	97–98 $19500	NWP