



## Wetlands and the community

Wetlands are among the most important and productive ecosystems in the world. They are the main suppliers of fresh water for human use, and provide water, habitat and refuge to thousands of animal and plant species. But their rate of decline is alarming.

Best estimates indicate that 64-71 per cent of the world's wetlands have been lost since 1900AD, and that those that remain continue to face many pressures, particularly from human activity and climate change.

The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, to which Australia is a signatory, calls for global commitment to the conservation and wise use of the world's wetlands. Signatories to the Convention envision a future where all people take action for the wise use of wetlands.

'All people' includes you.

### Why should you care about wetlands?

Australia has tens of thousands of wetlands. They include swamps, marshes, billabongs, lakes, lagoons, saltmarshes, mudflats, mangroves, coral reefs, bogs, fens and peatlands.

Wetlands provide vital ecosystem services. They supply water, improve water quality, support primary industries, provide flood and storm mitigation, act as a carbon sink, provide habitat for biodiversity and threatened species and provide communities with recreation and tourism. They are often places of significance for Indigenous people.

However, their important economic, social and environmental values are not well recognised in the broader community or necessarily fully considered in development planning and decision-making.

The health of wetlands can be jeopardised for many reasons. Wetlands are at risk of degradation or decline when they are converted to other uses (mainly agricultural and urban), when their flow is regulated and when the threats of climate change or invasive species are not mitigated. A significant underlying pressure is that of population growth and associated peri-urban residential development.

Building the community's awareness, interest and capacity is an important part of sustainable wetland planning and management. A large proportion of Australia's wetlands are on private land, so the actions and decisions of individuals and local communities are critical to ensuring wetlands are used wisely.

## Raising awareness about the importance of wetlands

The Australian Government is responsible for promoting Ramsar-listed wetlands and reporting on Australia's wetland conservation and management achievements. The Ramsar Convention's Programme on Communication, Capacity-building, Education, Participation and Awareness was established to help raise awareness of wetland values and functions. This Programme calls for coordinated international and national wetland education, public awareness and communication and encourages the promotion of training in the fields of wetland research, management and conservation.

The Commonwealth Environmental Water Office and Murray Darling Basin Authority work with communities in the Murray-Darling Basin to protect, restore and provide for the ecological values of the Basin's riverine systems and wetlands. In the Great Barrier Reef catchments, coastal communities and key stakeholders are provided with practical advice and resources aimed at effectively managing coastal wetlands and estuaries to protect seagrass, mangroves and saltmarsh, which then contribute to the health and resilience of the reef.

State, territory and local governments also develop educational material about wetlands for landowners and the general community and invite public participation in development of environmental water management plans, seasonal watering plans, waterway management strategies and park management plans. Landholders are also encouraged to adopt private conservation measures on their land. This approach has potential to conserve and restore the ecological values of wetlands that are not protected through other means.

## Community involvement in wetland conservation

Non-government organisations and community groups contribute significantly to the education of the broader community about wetlands through publications, websites and teaching resources and through participation in awareness-raising and capacity building events and activities. WetlandCare Australia works with communities to protect, promote and restore wetlands and their catchments. It also coordinates the Australian Wetland Network, a group of non-government organisations involved in conservation and wise use of wetlands. The Network provides a communication platform with linkages to other sectors and a remit to forge partnerships for common goals.



Photo credit: Birdlife at the Hunter Wetlands Centre © Department of the Environment.

Wetland Education Centres are located in every Australian state and territory and range from small, non-staffed interpretation facilities to dedicated centres with trained staff. Several are associated with Ramsar sites and some present opportunities for new or diversified economic enterprises. For example, Banrock Station, a South Australian vineyard and wine centre, attracts visitors to its Ramsar-listed wetlands and promotes learning about wetlands conservation and sustainable land use practices.

Community groups also play an important role in collecting and analysing data relevant to wetland condition, such as bird counts, fauna tagging, fish monitoring and vegetation surveys, and taking remedial action to manage the impacts of pest species, erosion control, fencing, etc.

‘Citizen science’ is a way of encouraging volunteers to make a direct contribution to scientific research at the same time as experiencing a location and learning about its environmental challenges. Citizens contribute to research by observing, taking readings, collecting and analysing data and monitoring conditions. Protocols and methodologies are developed by professional scientists and access to the internet, mobile phone apps, GIS technology and satellite imagery enable greater participation of volunteers. The result is a reliable source of large, easily-analysed data sets which would, without the support of volunteers, be difficult and costly to obtain.

World Wetlands Day is celebrated on 2 February each year. In Australia, the day provides opportunities to learn about the values of wetlands.

## Opportunities to take action

Locate and visit your nearest Ramsar-listed site and visit a Wetlands Education Centre in your state or territory.

Become a citizen scientist, and help to gather vital information about wetlands and the habitats and biodiversity they support.

Get involved in local wetland conservation activities provided through landcare, catchment management authorities and friends-of groups.

Participate in World Wetlands Day educational and celebratory activities on 2 February every year.

Find out what your local Catchment Management Authority is doing to support private conservation by local landholders.



Photo credit: Local schoolchild gauging the health of the Murray River in Mildura by testing which organisms are present © the Department of the Environment.

## More information

- [Wetlands fact sheets](#)
- [World Wetlands Day](#)
- [Atlas of Living Australia](#)

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