



**Australian Government**

**Department of Sustainability, Environment,  
Water, Population and Communities**



# WETLANDS AND THE RAMSAR CONVENTION

Wetlands are areas of land where water covers the soil – permanently or just at certain times. They include: rivers, swamps, marshes, billabongs, lakes, lagoons, oases, saltmarshes, mudflats, mangroves, coral reefs, bogs, fens, and peatlands. Wetlands can be natural or artificial and the water within a wetland may be static or flowing, fresh, brackish or saline. There are even underground wetlands.

## Why are wetlands important?

Wetlands provide people with many environmental, social and economic services. On a global scale wetlands provide services estimated to be worth US\$4.9 trillion annually. Wetlands are used for recreational activities including boating, fishing, swimming, water skiing and bird-watching. They protect our shores from wave action and reduce the impacts of floods. Wetlands also provide direct benefits to our primary industries. They form nurseries for fish that are critical to Australia's commercial and recreational fishing industries, and filter water helping to reduce high levels of nutrients such as phosphorous and nitrogen in agricultural runoff. Their natural ability to filter water has been used commercially to treat wastewater from industry and mining, and sewage effluent.

## What is the Ramsar Convention?

Concerns about the loss of wetlands and waterbirds throughout Europe in the 1960s led to the creation of the first modern international treaty aimed at managing natural resources sustainably. The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (the Ramsar Convention) was signed in Ramsar, Iran on 2 February 1971. The Ramsar Convention aims to halt the worldwide loss of all wetlands and to conserve, through wise use and management, those that remain.

The Convention encourages member countries to nominate sites that are important for ecological, botanical, zoological, limnological or hydrological significance, to the List of Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar sites). Member countries are obliged to promote the conservation of Ramsar wetlands and wise use of all wetlands and work to ensure that Ramsar sites are managed to protect their ecological character. To mark the anniversary of the signing of the treaty, World Wetlands Day is celebrated on 2 February each year to raise public awareness about wetlands and promote their conservation and wise use.



## What is Australia's involvement in the Convention?

Australia was one of the first countries to sign the Ramsar Convention, and in 1974 designated the world's first Ramsar site: Cobourg Peninsula in the Northern Territory. The *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* provides a framework for protecting their ecological character and managing our Ramsar sites in accordance with the Convention.

Key actions to implement the convention in Australia include:

- developing national guidance on implementing the Convention in Australia
- providing funds to support the conservation and wise use of our Ramsar sites
- developing Ecological Character Descriptions for all Australian Ramsar sites
- participating in the Partnership for the Conservation of Migratory Waterbirds in the East Asian – Australasian Flyway
- participation in international treaties for the protection of migratory birds: Japan-Australia Migratory Bird Agreement, China-Australia Migratory Bird Agreement and the Republic of Korea-Australia Migratory Bird Agreement
- regularly reviewing Ramsar site condition
- working with state and territory governments to promote the conservation Ramsar sites and wise use of all wetlands, and
- coordinating and facilitating collaboration between the Convention's Oceania member countries.

Australia's Ramsar sites cover around 8.1 million hectares, forming an impressive estate of diverse wetland types; freshwater and marine; permanent and ephemeral; in every climatic zone. Our Ramsar estate includes:

- coral reefs like Ashmore Reef National Nature Reserve
- seagrass shoals, mangroves and tidal flats such as Queensland's Moreton Bay
- inland lakes, billabongs and floodplains like Victoria's Barmah Forest
- artificial lakes such as Western Australia's Lakes Argyle and Kununurra
- monsoonal rivers and tropical floodplains of Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory
- coastal lagoons such as Tasmania's Jocks Lagoon
- alpine cirques like Blue Lake in Kosciusko National Park, New South Wales
- arid, ephemeral lakes such as South Australia's Coongie Lakes, and
- sub-alpine sphagnum bogs like the Australian Capital Territory's Ginini Flats Wetland Complex.

### More information

More information on Australia's wetlands and the Ramsar Convention in Australia is available from: [www.environment.gov.au/wetlands](http://www.environment.gov.au/wetlands) or the Ramsar Convention website: [www.ramsar.org](http://www.ramsar.org).

