



National Biodiversity Strategy Review Task Group
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Australia's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy 2010 - 2020 Consultation Draft.

The following brief points are submitted on behalf of the Inland Rivers Network Inc. (IRN), a coalition of environment groups and individuals established in 1991 to promote the health of inland rivers, wetlands and groundwaters.

1 IRN welcomes release of the consultation draft for a 2010 – 2020 Australian Biodiversity Conservation Strategy.

2 IRN notes that the consultation draft is a more accessible and reader friendly document than the 1996 *National Strategy for the Conservation of Australia's Biodiversity*. Incorporation of climate change considerations as well as other updated and new information is welcomed. However in terms of meaningful strategy and articulation of clear benchmarks, targets and processes to deliver outcomes, the document is disappointingly lacking.

3 IRN agrees strongly with the list of main biodiversity threats but is deeply disappointed that although 'business as usual is not an option' is specifically stated, the strategies and processes for change to new approaches is lacking, despite the urgency in the face of ongoing biodiversity decline.

4 IRN welcomes the inclusion of 'changes to the aquatic environment and water flows' as one of the main biodiversity threats to Australian biodiversity. However, given the importance of riverine, wetland and groundwater ecosystems and aquatic biota, the strategy draft gives insufficient attention to mechanisms to address the ongoing man-induced drought imposed on the landscape through river regulation and unsustainable levels of water extraction, diversion, let alone new threats such as the in situ leach (ISL) proposals for uranium mining within the Great Artesian Basin.

5 The decline of Murray-Darling Basin wetlands, including many wetlands designated as Ramsar Sites, was highlighted in a 2008 joint IRN/ACF publication – *Wetlands for our Future – meeting national and international wetland commitments in the Murray Darling Basin*.*

6 IRN draws attention specifically to a proposal for a **National Wetlands Initiative**, as articulated in the above paper, with amendment to the EPBC Act to include freshwater area protection and management.

7 IRN recognises that responsibility for water and aquatic species is shared with more than one portfolio, as are a number of other key natural resource management responsibilities. However, in so far as DEWHA is the lead agency on biodiversity it is essential that a whole of government approach is reflected in any national strategy.

8 IRN, while recognising that state governments have a critical role in delivering this and other strategies, draws attention to the move towards national whole of government initiatives through COAG and specifically through the National Water Initiative. IRN would submit that such an approach is highly relevant to the conservation of biodiversity.

9 IRN notes with disappointment the slow progress on the establishment and resourced management of freshwater protected areas, despite the role of protected areas as a cornerstone strategy in biodiversity conservation. See also Decision VII/2 of the Seventh Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD, Kuala Lumpur 2004) which extends the CBD by adopting a goal of establishing and maintaining comprehensive, adequate and representative systems of protected inland water ecosystems; and the Third IUCN World Conservation Congress (Bangkok 2004) resolution CGR3.RES039.

10 IRN draws attention to the globally unique aspects of Australia's inland biodiversity and the need for robust strategies to sustain the viability of inland riverine, wetland and groundwater ecosystems. It is important that a national strategy not only acknowledges the natural patterns of drought and flood under which the biota has evolved and likely exacerbation due to increased extreme weather conditions under climate change but also articulates mechanisms to address and implement appropriate management responses.

References

**Wetlands for our Future – meeting national and international wetland commitments in the Murray Darling Basin. October 2008. IRN/ACF (extract below)*
Freshwater Protected Areas – Conference Proceedings 2004 IRN/WWF (see <http://www.irnsw.org.au>)

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Protecting the Australia's Endangered Wetlands:

A Proposal for a National Wetlands Initiative

extracted as briefing from

**Wetlands for our Future – meeting national and international wetland commitments in the Murray Darling Basin. October 2008. IRN/ACF*

Australia is home to some of the most diverse, beautiful and ecologically important wetlands in the world. There are more than 850 nationally important wetlands in Australia, and each one of them provides important environmental services: as critical habitat for waterbirds, nurseries for freshwater and marine fish and other aquatic life, filters absorbing pollutants and buffers reducing the impacts of floods.

Unfortunately, the health of many Australian wetlands, especially in the Murray-Darling Basin, is poor and declining rapidly. Years of excessive water use have denied wetlands the water they need to flourish. Dams, floodplain development and other diversionary structures often cause the water that does reach wetlands to flow at times and in patterns that are unnatural and ecologically damaging.

More than 90 percent of the floodplain wetlands have disappeared in the Murray Darling Basin alone. Wetlands vegetation is disappearing across the Basin; approximately 75 percent of the red gums along the Murray River are dead or dying. Waterbird populations are in collapse; colonial waterbird breeding on parts of the River is down 80 percent. And with climate change set to reduce precipitation throughout the Murray Darling, the wetlands that remain face an uncertain future.

The situation demands a coordinated and comprehensive response – a response that is equal to the Basin-wide nature of the crisis. In this paper IRN proposes that the Commonwealth undertake a National Wetlands Initiative to protect our wetlands, integrate wetlands management with Basin-wide water management processes, and strengthen the National Plan for Water Security.

Why Australia needs a National Wetlands Initiative

The threats to the health of our rivers and wetlands are not constrained by state boundaries, a fact that has played a role in recent Commonwealth initiatives such as the Water Act 2007 and the National Plan for Water Security. However, while the Water Act and NPWS recognise the importance of whole-of-catchment management in principle, their reforms are largely restricted to water allocation planning and management in the Murray Darling Basin. There are no provisions relating specifically to wetlands protection in the Water Act 2007. And despite having its constitutional basis in the need for the Commonwealth to fulfil the requirements of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, the Water Act 2007 does not include a single provision designed specifically to strengthen Australia's Ramsar program.

Water reform at the national level is incomplete without a comprehensive National Wetlands Initiative. The goal of the initiative described in this paper is to strengthen protection of Australia's most important wetlands, especially those in the Murray-Darling Basin that face immediate and critical threats, in the following areas:

- *More rapid delivery of environmental water to the Basin's most imperilled wetlands.* Both the Commonwealth and the Murray-Darling Basin states have made substantial financial commitments to return water from overallocated river systems to wetlands – in 2003, \$500 million dollars were pledged through The Living Murray Initiative, and earlier this year the Commonwealth pledged \$3.1 billion dollars toward addressing overallocation in the Murray-Darling Basin.

However, progress toward actually returning water to stressed river systems has been painfully slow – to date, only 20 GL of the roughly 500GL anticipated to be acquired has been approved for purchase via the Living Murray process. The current \$3 billion commitment to address over-allocation under the National Plan for Water Security is radically weighted toward future expenditure; the amounts budgeted to address over-allocation are only \$28 million in 2007-08 and \$85.9 million in 2008-09.

A National Wetlands Initiative would include mechanisms to speed the pace at which environmental water is acquired and used to relieve the stress on imperilled wetlands, and to ensure that environmental water that is acquired is delivered to achieve maximum benefits.

- *Improved integration between wetlands protection and water management planning through the National Plan for Water Security and the Water Act 2007.* The Water Act 2007 is based on the Commonwealth's constitutional powers to implement international environmental agreements, and Section 3 of the Act specifically states that it is intended to give effect to those agreements, which include the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and migratory bird treaties with China and Japan.

However, this recognition of the need for a national approach to wetlands protection is not always reflected in the substance of the National Plan for Water Security or the Water Act 2007. There is no provision for a national system of protected wetlands within the Water Act, nor does the Water Act require planning for Ramsar-listed wetlands to be fully integrated with water management planning.

A National Wetlands Initiative would integrate the planning for Ramsar-listed wetlands – the protection of which provides the constitutional basis for the Water Act – within the water management processes established by the Act; and it would provide a platform for recognising and managing a national system of protected wetlands.

- *A renewed commitment toward meeting international obligations to protect wetlands.* Australia was one of the first countries to join the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, in 1975, and it was the first country to designate a Ramsar site: Cobourg Peninsula, in the Northern Territory. To date Australia has named 65 wetlands as wetlands of international importance.

Australia's record of maintaining the ecological character of Ramsar-listed wetlands and promoting the sustainable management of *all* wetlands, both of which are required under the Ramsar Convention, is less impressive. The health of many of the Ramsar-listed wetlands in the Murray-Darling Basin is in rapid decline. The authors of an expert report on the Coorong, at the mouth of the Murray River, have recommended that consideration be given to adding the Coorong to the Ramsar Convention's Montreux list of wetlands in danger.

A National Wetlands Initiative would renew Australia's commitment to meeting international wetlands obligations by strengthening the Commonwealth's capacity to develop and implement management strategies for Ramsar sites, raising the profile of Ramsar-listed wetlands, and promoting the sustainable management, or "wise use," of all wetlands, as required by the Ramsar Convention.

Now is the right time for a National Wetlands Initiative

With some of Australia's largest red gum forests dying along the Murray River, the Coorong facing imminent ecological collapse, and waterbird populations plummeting in northern Basin wetlands like the Macquarie Marshes, we are facing a crisis in Australian wetlands protection. Every year we delay action, more wetlands are lost and the cost of rehabilitation goes up.

As dire as the situation is, it also presents a unique opportunity. A decisive intervention has the potential to yield dramatic benefits. Because the Commonwealth is undertaking more comprehensive Basin planning and management under the Water Act 2007, new mechanisms for protecting wetlands can be integrated seamlessly and effectively into the new Basin planning arrangements. Because the Commonwealth has committed to substantial expenditures to reduce overallocation, mechanisms for prioritising wetlands recovery actions can assist managers in directing expenditures for acquisitions. A National Wetlands Initiative can accomplish more now than at any time in recent memory.

How a National Wetlands Initiative would work

A comprehensive National Wetlands Initiative would include a set of integrated actions in three areas: (1) recovering water for wetlands, (2) Ramsar and protected areas designation and management, and (3) integrating wetlands protection within broader environmental legislation including the Water Act 2007 and the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act.

- *Water for wetlands.* The single most important reason for wetlands decline in Australia is lack of water, and the single most important thing Australian governments can do to improve wetlands health is to expedite dramatically the acquisition of water for the environment. A National Wetlands Initiative would:
 - Immediately finance recovery of environmental water by balancing the NPWS expenditures evenly over next 10 years;
 - Set targets *and* timelines for returning water to parched wetlands.

- *Ramsar and protected areas designation and management.* Too often, designation of Ramsar sites is not followed up by adequate management planning, management activity, and investment in rehabilitation. In addition, Australia still has not begun the effort to establish a comprehensive, adequate and representative system of high conservation value freshwater areas equivalent to the terrestrial national parks and marine parks systems. A National Wetlands Initiative would:
 - Incorporate Ramsar management plans into Murray-Darling Basin Plan prepared under the Water Bill 2007;
 - Establish a procedure for preparing and accrediting Ramsar management Plans under the Water Bill, similar to the Water Bill's procedure for Water Resource Plans;
 - Establish a Commonwealth Fund for Private Ramsar Managers, so that private individuals who assist Australia in meeting its international wetlands commitments by agreeing to Ramsar listing for wetlands on their lands would be eligible for the funding they deserve;
 - Begin the process of establishing a national system of High Conservation Value rivers and wetlands, possibly including a component for community groups to develop and participate in nominations.

- *Incorporating wetlands protection into broader environmental legislation.* A National Wetlands Initiative would elevate the importance of wetlands protection within the Water Act 2007, so that the Act truly lives up to its constitutional justification. It would also include amendments to the EPBC Act that reflect the national significance of wetlands and water management.

The National Wetlands Initiative would amend the Water Act to:

- Include an explicit requirement that investment in water recovery through the National Plan for Water Security be directed by the Murray-Darling Basin Plan;
- Include a requirement that the Basin Plan ensures that enough water is set aside to mitigate the impacts of climate change on wetlands;
- Ensure that there is explicit jurisdiction under the Water Bill to protect environmental flows from diversion and theft.

The National Wetlands Initiative would amend the EPBC Act to:

- Provide that any action that has a significant impact on local, regional or national water resources be subject to EPBC Act assessment and approval;
- Provide that any action likely to have a significant impact on nationally important wetlands as listed in the *Directory of Important Wetlands* be subject to EPBC Act assessment and approval.
- Improve cumulative impact assessments in water resource management