

Wetlands and Waterbirds Taskforce response to the Ramsar Snapshot Study Final Report

The Ramsar Snapshot Study Final Report (the report) provides a useful overview of the management status of Australia's Ramsar-listed wetlands as at mid-2007, and highlights a number of ecological and management issues and challenges regarding the administration of Australia's Ramsar sites.

The report makes a number of recommendations aimed at improving the implementation of the Ramsar Convention in Australia for Ramsar-listed sites. It provides the basis for addressing a number of administrative, information and reporting gaps in Australia's implementation of the Ramsar Convention. Some of these have previously been identified by governments and work is underway to address them. Other recommendations point to issues that have not previously been recognized.

The body with responsibility for overseeing the Ramsar Snapshot Report and coordinating a response to its findings is the Wetlands and Waterbirds Task Force (WWTF). The WWTF comprises members from Australian, state and territory government agencies responsible for wetland management. The WWTF is one of a number of advisory committees that report through the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council structure. The WWTF provides advice on actions required to meet Australia's obligations under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and international migratory waterbird agreements. New Zealand is also a member of the WWTF.

The WWTF has developed a workplan which includes a number of actions that aim to provide an improved and more strategic framework for implementing the Ramsar Convention in Australia and to provide jurisdictions and other interested parties with clearer guidance on how Ramsar-related processes are implemented in Australia. Activities completed include the development of national guidelines for Ramsar site mapping and a national framework and guidance for describing the ecological character of Australia's Ramsar wetlands. Activities underway include the development of national guidelines for management planning and Ramsar site nomination, development of national indicators for monitoring and reporting on wetland extent and condition, an Australian Wetland Inventory and a framework for consistent and regular reporting on the status of Ramsar wetlands.

The WWTF welcomes this opportunity to provide responses to the main findings and recommendations of the report. While the main findings of the report are sound, several aspects of the analysis have been constrained by variable interpretation of some of the key terms and concepts. This is understandable in an initial snapshot study and these issues are being addressed by the work programme of the WWTF. Addressing these issues will in turn lead to more accurate and consistent reporting in the future.

The constraints on the report's findings and recommendations fall into five main areas, each of which is discussed below.

Improve wetland mapping and inventory: If we are to effectively manage Australia's wetlands, it is important to understand their distribution and extent. Therefore, development of a wetland inventory and wetland mapping across Australia is a priority for

the WWTF. Work has already commenced on the development of an Australian Wetland Inventory. Wetland mapping is available for large areas of some jurisdictions (e.g. Queensland and South Australia) and is being progressed in other states and territories. The WWTF has been working with the former National Land and Water Resources Audit to assess the extent of wetland mapping in Australia and to determine the next steps in the development of a national wetland inventory.

Standardise the categorisation of land tenure: The WWTF agrees with the need to develop and implement a systematic, standardised national scale of tenure categories. This should assist agency decision makers and site managers to better understand and compare tenure classifications across Australia's Ramsar sites. This action has been included in the WWTF Workplan. A National Land Tenure Classification has been released by the National Land and Water Resources Audit and PSMA Australia Limited. This classification system should be reviewed by the WWTF to determine if it addresses this issue.

Develop a standard list of wetland threats and impacts and a systematic approach to documenting and reporting on them: The report has captured information on the threats and impacts facing Australia's Ramsar sites, but found that a lack of standardised terminology made the information challenging to collect and interpret. The WWTF agrees with the need to develop a systematic method for describing, comparing and reporting on threats and their impacts on Ramsar wetlands. It is envisaged that this will assist in reporting consistency and identify priority threats and impacts for wetland managers. Once completed, these nationally agreed terms would be used in Ramsar documentation and in reporting processes. These issues were identified by the WWTF when developing the national ecological character description framework and have already been included in the WWTF Workplan.

Improve the quality of Ramsar site maps: The WWTF supports the ongoing improvement of data collection and mapping of Ramsar wetlands, and has developed guidelines on mapping specifications for Ramsar sites. These guidelines will help jurisdictions ensure that Ramsar site boundaries are mapped accurately and meet Australian Government and Ramsar Convention requirements. This is not a straightforward task as it involves extending boundaries to follow property boundaries rather than wetland boundaries and will take time and commitment of resources to achieve.

Improve the management of Ramsar site documentation, including updating documents in accordance with Ramsar Convention and EPBC Act timeframes and ensuring all up-to-date documents are held by both DEWHA and the Ramsar Secretariat: The report identified anomalies in the receipt, storage and retrieval of important Ramsar documents (e.g. Ramsar Information Sheets, ecological character descriptions, maps and management plans). In order to better manage documentation flows, DEWHA is currently reviewing its Ramsar documentation receipt, storage and retrieval processes and is preparing protocols to facilitate transfer of all documentation between DEWHA, the states and territories and the Ramsar Secretariat. The report identified some cases where the Ramsar Secretariat appeared to not hold the most up-to-date Ramsar site documentation; these have now been provided to the Secretariat. This issue will be further refined by the identification of a point-of-truth for Ramsar-listed wetland sites.

Develop a rolling review of Ramsar site status/condition: The report was the first step in the development of an ongoing process for reviewing and reporting on the status of Ramsar

sites. It includes recommendations to inform the development of a 'rolling review' of Australia's Ramsar sites. DEWHA engaged a consultant to develop more detailed implementation options for the rolling review and the WWTF is progressing this work as a priority.

Of key relevance is the obligation for Ramsar parties to protect the 'ecological character' of their internationally important wetlands. Therefore, the ecological character of Australia's Ramsar sites needs to be assessed, documented, monitored and managed. The WWTF has developed guidelines that provide a framework, including a step-by-step guide, for wetland site managers to develop ecological character descriptions for their Ramsar wetlands.

Ecological character descriptions, complemented by improved national processes for monitoring and reporting on changes in the ecological character of Ramsar sites, will be a significant step forward in enhancing the management of Australia's Ramsar sites. These initiatives also provide governments with a more robust mechanism for prioritising management actions and investment in Australia's Ramsar wetlands. As at 31 August 2008, ecological character descriptions had been completed for 15 Australian Ramsar sites and more are planned under the Australian Government's Ramsar Management Planning Program.

The WWTF has also recognised that a nationally agreed protocol would be desirable to promote consistent national identification and reporting of changes in the ecological character of Ramsar wetlands, and has commenced work on this protocol.

The present drought has focused national attention on the importance of managing wetlands wisely, based on sound knowledge, understanding and advice. The report has been valuable in identifying and highlighting the major national issues and inconsistencies in Ramsar site reporting. The report outlines actions that will contribute to these efforts and provide jurisdictions with a more robust framework for implementing the Ramsar Convention in Australia. The WWTF looks forward to continuing to work collectively to implement these measures.

WWTF
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