

Australia's amazing wetlands

Australian Government
Department of the Environment and Energy



What's amazing about wetlands?

Wetlands are valuable for the environment, food production, our culture and recreation. A healthy wetland has a rich natural diversity of plants and animals. Wetlands may support threatened species such as the dugong, brolga and green and golden bell frog, as well as iconic plants such as the river red gum. Migrating water birds visit Australia's wetlands every year from as far away as China and Alaska.

Wetlands provide connections in the landscape so that plants and animals can spread from place to place and maintain their populations. Wetland systems also remove sediment and nutrients, acting like kidneys for our water systems. Wetlands provide protection from the effects of extreme weather events such as coastal storm surges and floods. They store carbon, helping to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Wetlands support Australia's primary industries. Saltmarshes, mangroves and seagrass wetlands are the nurseries for our fish and seafood and some wetlands provide water for irrigation and farm animals. Healthy wetlands are also places of recreation and provide opportunities to enjoy some of Australia's natural wonders.



Ramsar wetlands

Australia currently has 65 wetlands that have been recognised as internationally important under the Ramsar Convention. The Convention's broad aims are to halt the worldwide loss of wetlands and to conserve, through wise use and management, those that remain. Australia was one of the first countries to sign the Ramsar Convention, and in 1974 designated the world's first Wetland of International Importance: Cobourg Peninsula in the Northern Territory. Australia's Ramsar wetlands cover more than eight million hectares, an area greater than Tasmania.



Visiting wetlands

Wetlands are found throughout Australia, from the reefs surrounding our coastline, to the streams and waterways that criss-cross the country, from lakes and dams in rural areas to constructed wetlands in the suburbs. Some wetlands provide opportunities for boating, fishing, birdwatching, swimming, snorkelling, bushwalking and photography. Many of our wetlands are managed as reserves by local councils or catchment groups and are open to the public.



What is a wetland?

Wetlands can be natural, artificial or a mixture of both. A farm dam and a wetland constructed in an urban area to catch stormwater are both wetlands.

Water in wetlands can be still or flowing; it can be fresh, salty or brackish. Inland rivers and coastal or marine areas with water up to six metres deep at low tide are also classified as wetlands. Wetlands do not have to be continuously wet. Many inland wetlands are dry for years at a time until the floods come.

Swamps, marshes, billabongs, lakes, saltmarshes, mudflats, mangroves, coral reefs, fens and peat bogs are all wetlands. Australia even has underground wetlands. Almost anywhere that can be wet is a wetland as long as it has plants, animals or soil types that are adapted to wet conditions.



Text of brochure adapted from *Queensland's wonderful wetlands* (Queensland Wetlands Program – a joint initiative of the Australian and Queensland Governments)

- For students:**
- *Discovering Wetlands In Australia* schools kit www.environment.gov.au/water/wetlands/publications/discovering-wetlands-australia
 - Wetland Education Centres www.environment.gov.au/water/wetlands/education-centres

- To learn more about wetlands visit:**
- Australian Government Wetlands page www.environment.gov.au/water/wetlands/ramсар
 - Ramsar Convention page www.ramsar.org
- To learn more about the Ramsar Convention visit:**
- *Wetlands Australia* update www.environment.gov.au/water/wetlands/publications/wetlands-australia
 - *WetlandInfo*—for wetland management resources <http://wetlandinfo.ehp.qld.gov.au/wetlands>

Learn more

Images: Magpie Goose at Hunter Wetlands – Bruce Gray, Australian Pelicans – Brian Furbey, Crocodile in Kakadu – Michelle McAulay, Water Lilies On Mornington Station – ©Nick Rains, Pelicans on the Diamantina – Paul Wainwright, Kakadu National Park – Michelle McAulay, Yanga National Park – Paul Doyle, Moulting Lagoon – Michelle McAulay, Moreton Bay Wetlands – Bruce Gray, Moulting Lagoon Scenery – Michelle McAulay



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Wetlands and waterbirds

Australia's wetlands provide habitat for waterbirds including waders and shorebirds. Some birds live in Australia all year round, while others migrate thousands of kilometres to visit for a few months each year. Migratory birds fly along routes known as flyways, which link chains of wetlands where travelling birds stop to feed and rest on their long migrations. Australia is part of the East Asian – Australasian Flyway corridor.



Threats to our wetlands

Some of our wetland systems are no longer working naturally because human activity has changed the way water flows in or out of them.



Wetlands are threatened by earthworks, draining, water extraction, climate change, poor agricultural practices, feral animals such as cane toads, invasive plants, and uncontrolled fires.

A damaged wetland can become a healthy system again with careful rehabilitation. However, once a wetland is drained or built on, it may not be possible to restore or rehabilitate.

Wetlands and culture

Wetland ecosystems are important to Indigenous people. Wetland plant and animal species are used by Indigenous people for food, medicine, fibre and tools. Wetlands can be significant for cultural activities, as story places or as seasonal indicators. Many wetlands also have cultural and historic significance for non-Indigenous people.

Managing our wetlands

The Australian Government and state and territory governments have laws to protect water, native species and significant wetlands. Local government planning controls can also protect local wetlands. Catchment and conservation groups and natural resource groups help restore and maintain local wetlands. Landholders, farmers and land managers contribute to the wise use of wetlands. Local wetland education centres highlight the value of wetlands and encourage visitors to enjoy the recreational benefits of wetlands. Many tourism operators promote wetlands to local and overseas visitors.



Images: Roebuck Bay Wetlands – BruceGray, Green Turtle – ©GBRMPA, Black Swans – BrianFurby, Jocks Lagoon Wetlands – Michelle McAulay, Azure Kingfisher – Wet Tropics Management Authority Queensland, Southern Corroboree Frog ©Steve Wilson, Royal Spoonbills – Paul Wainwright, Kununurra Wetlands Flood Plain – Angus MacGregor

- Some things we can do to keep wetlands healthy so everyone can enjoy them include:
- when visiting wetlands keep pets under control and carry out all rubbish
 - keep weeds and invasive species such as aquarium fish, out of wetlands
 - join a local conservation group that cares for wetlands
 - visit a local Wetland Education Centre
 - find out more about wetlands and what makes them special.

