



## Wetlands and Indigenous values

For Australia's first people, the land and sea and all that connects them are the source of identity, spirituality, culture, economy and wellbeing.

Indigenous people have long-held cultural and traditional responsibilities to protect and manage their land and sea country. Indigenous owned land accounts for approximately 20 per cent of the Australian continent, with Indigenous Protected Areas accounting for 43.6 per cent of the National Reserve System. Indigenous Australians also manage or jointly manage 11 of the 65 Australian wetlands designated as internationally important under the Ramsar Convention.

### Wetland values

Indigenous people have looked after their country in Australia for tens of thousands of years. Land and sea country is central to Indigenous people's lives and wellbeing. It provides an economic base, it underpins Indigenous history, innovation and culture and is fundamental to spiritual beliefs.

Wetlands have significance as ceremonial and initiation sites, traditional hunting and gathering grounds and as boundary markers. Indigenous country encompasses land, water, sea and sky and the connections between them. The value placed on connectedness enables landscapes to be managed at an ecosystem or habitat level.

Almost all wetland plants and animals have some form of traditional use as food, fibre, containers, tools, weapons, transport, shelter and medicine. Many wetland species have significance as totems, symbols that acknowledge specific birds, animals, rocks or flora species, and are considered sacred by their owners.

### Recognising the social, economic, cultural and spiritual values of wetlands

The Australian, state and territory governments collaborate with Indigenous people to develop policies and programmes relating to Indigenous land and sea management. Each jurisdiction fosters relationships with a number of key Indigenous groups to give guidance on supporting Indigenous values in conservation and environment, land rights, native title and natural resource management. Groups engaged in wetlands policy include the National Native Title Council, the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, the Northern Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance and various Indigenous land councils. The work of the Department of the Environment and the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office is also informed by an Indigenous Advisory Committee.



Photo credit: The Gippsland Lakes are culturally significant to the Gunaikurnai people © Paula Camenzuli

The Ramsar Convention encourages the integration of the socio-economic and cultural-spiritual values of wetlands, as well as traditional knowledge, in the wise use and management of wetlands.

The first ever Ramsar-listed site, Cobourg Peninsula in the Northern Territory, has unique biodiversity, landforms, habitats and wildlife including terrestrial, riverine, freshwater, brackish and coastal/marine ecosystems. Indigenous people have lived on the Peninsula for over 40 000 years. It is considered that the Creation Ancestors first entered Australia via Malay Bay near the Cobourg Peninsula before travelling across the rest of the country creating people and places. The on-going role of the Traditional Owners (the Arrarrkbi) in the joint management of the site has helped to maintain its natural and cultural values.

In other Ramsar sites:

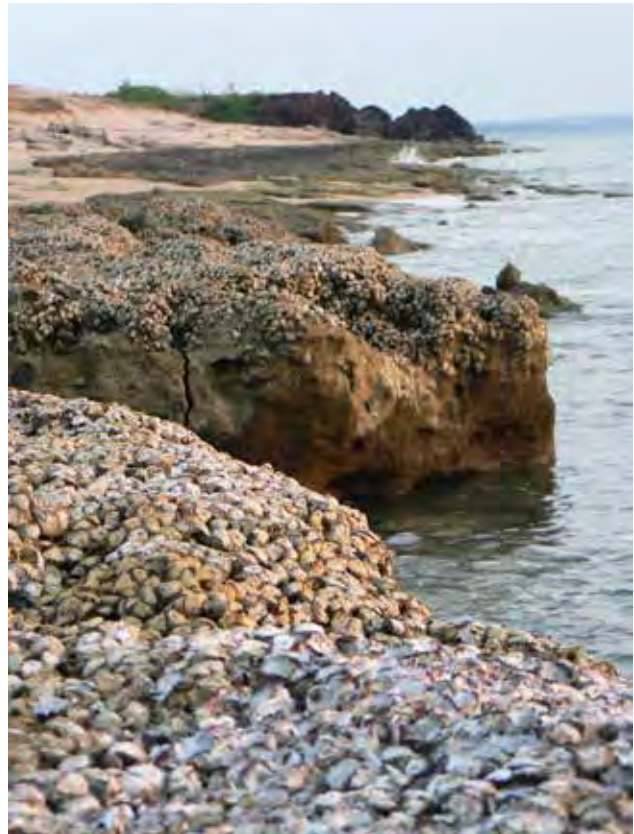
- In the Kimberley region of Western Australia, the Nyul Nyul people have a strong association with fresh water sources on their traditional land. The Nyul Nyul Rangers are protecting the wetlands in 'the right way', managing fire, feral animals and weeds under the Working on Country programme in association with the Kimberley Land Council and the Kimberley Ranger Network. One research project has used interviews with elders and traditional owners to investigate in more depth the Nyul Nyul knowledge, totems, values and practices associated with freshwater sources.
- Kakadu National Park Ramsar site is one of the few World heritage sites listed for both its cultural and natural values. The land and the people have always been linked, and today the Aboriginal people of Kakadu, the Bininj in the north and Mungguy in the south, work together with park staff to combine traditional skills and knowledge with contemporary park management. The Bininj and Mungguy people are proud to share their country and its wetlands, birdlife and rock art sites with up to 225 000 visitors each year.
- The Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site forms the largest coastal lagoon system in Australia. A partnership between Greening Australia and the Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation has resulted in cultural and conservation outcomes for private land located between the Avon and Latrobe Rivers. Fifteen new sites have been registered as culturally significant since 2012, including old campsites and the pathways that connected them.



The emerging cultural land map conveys the importance of these wetlands to the Gunaikurnai people and how they form part of the creation story of the Dreaming.

Other national initiatives:

- Under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, the Australian Government recognises the role of Indigenous people in the conservation and ecologically sustainable use of Australia's biodiversity and promotes the use of Indigenous people's knowledge of biodiversity with the involvement and cooperation of the owners of the knowledge.
- Under the National Water Initiative, Australian, state and territory governments have agreed to recognise Indigenous needs in water access entitlements and planning frameworks.
- Cultural and spiritual values are recognised under the Australian and New Zealand Guidelines for Fresh and Marine Water Quality 2000.
- The Murray-Darling Basin Plan requires the development of Water Resource Plans to have regard to Indigenous values and uses and to include meaningful consultation with Indigenous people.
- The Australian Government's Working on Country programme recognises Indigenous people's strong relationship and obligations to country and their desire to have their land and sea management work recognised as paid employment. Vast areas of Australia, including wetlands, are actively cared for by Indigenous people who undertake environmental work including the management of cultural sites, heritage values, fire regimes, biodiversity, feral animals, weeds, land disturbance, pollution and climate change impacts. In this way, Working on Country achieves not only environment outcomes but also cultural, social, education, health, employment and economic development outcomes.



Coastal view of Black Point North in the Cobourg Peninsula Aboriginal Land & Wildlife Sanctuary Peninsula wetland area © the Department of the Environment

## More information

- [Wetlands fact sheets](#)
- [Working on Country](#)
- [Indigenous Protected Areas](#)

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