

The RAMSAR Convention on Wetlands - Background Information

This document was prepared to celebrate the 25th anniversary of Dowse Lagoon being declared a RAMSAR wetland.

Management Authority. The original Ramsar application stated that the Management Authority is the Qld Gov't Environmental Protection Agency, which subsequently appears to have been delegated to the BCC in the case of Dowse Lagoon.

RAMSAR Convention on Wetlands

First adopted in February 1971. Groundbreaking in that it was the first global agreement for conserving natural resources on a global scale. Its basic tenet, that there should be a network of protected areas and a wise use principle for management, has since been adopted in other international agreements and in international law.

Preparation for the signing involved unravelling some contradictions and conflicts:

1. On the one hand, wetlands were not highly regarded 100 years ago. People had developed a primordial fear of wetlands - they had a reputation for evil, a source of disease (eg malaria) and an obstacle to any sort of positive development. People who lived in marshes were always looked down upon. Even today, some politicians still talk of "draining the swamp".
2. And yet our history was full of advanced civilisations who lived in proximity to wetlands: Mesopotamia between the Tigris and the Euphrates - the Fertile Crescent, the Nile delta, Rome by the Pontine Marshes and the Netherlands.
3. And, of course, there was emerging scientific knowledge of the environmental importance of wetlands.

Ornithologists were the big driver behind the convention because of their concern for migratory birds. On the other hand, and perhaps this was a reflection of the times, their concern was specifically for waterfowl and the driver, if you read the history of the convention, was hunting.

The US led the way with an attitude-changing program that started in the 1930's and culminated in a series of booklets on wetlands from the mid 60's.

The text of the convention took 10 years to put together and 9 international meetings of experts before the parties met in the small Iranian town of Ramsar for the official signing. This might seem excessive but bear in mind that the agreement was groundbreaking.

Wetlands definition. "Wetlands are areas of marsh fen, peatland or water, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish or salt, including areas of marine water the depth of which at low tide does not exceed six metres".

So wetlands include such things as fish & prawn ponds, rice paddies, gravel pits and sewerage farms.

Nominated wetlands. The Convention recognises that all wetlands have value but that some have more value than others. It encourages the signatories to nominate those wetlands "of international importance" to be evaluated against a set of criteria. Australia now has 65 wetlands recognised.

Moreton Bay was declared on 22 Oct 1993. Dowse and Third Lagoons were included in the Declaration.

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Wise use. The Convention provides for “wise use” of wetlands, in part because most were modified already.

The adopted definition was:

“The wise use of wetlands is their sustainable utilisation for the benefit of humankind in a way compatible with the maintenance of the natural properties of the ecosystem”.

Sustainable utilisation was defined as “human use of a wetland so that it may yield the greatest continuous benefit to present generations while maintaining its potential to meet the needs and aspirations of future generations”.

Natural properties of the ecosystem were defined as “those physical, biological or chemical components such as soil, water, plants, animals and nutrients, and the interactions between them”.

Note that Australia’s original RAMSAR application for Moreton Bay stated that:

“Up to 1M tonnes of coral and 150 000 m³ of sand per annum are extracted from the Bay for use in the building, foundry and manufacturing purposes.” (Coral extraction ceased in 1997 with the closure of the QCL facility at Darra).

Monitoring & obligations

Article 3.2 of the Convention requires that “Each Contracting Party shall arrange to be informed at the earliest possible time if the ecological character of any wetland in its territory and included in the List has changed, is changing, or is likely to change as the result of technological developments, pollution or other human interference. Information on such changes shall be passed without delay to the organisation or government responsible for the continuing bureau duties.”

It is worth reflecting on the degree to which Australia complies with this requirement as regards Dowse and Third Lagoons.

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6 Nov 2018