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The EPBC Act – Protecting Australia’s Ramsar Wetlands



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Department of the Environment and Heritage

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[Want to know more?.....www.environment.gov.au/wetlands/index.html](http://www.environment.gov.au/wetlands/index.html)





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Convention on Wetlands: What is Ramsar?

‘Convention on Wetlands’ - treaty to provide the framework for national action and international cooperation, protecting wetlands and promoting wise (sustainable) use.

The Ramsar Convention was first signed in Ramsar, Iran in 1971.

Mission: “The conservation and wise use of all wetlands through local, regional and national actions and international cooperation as a contribution towards achieving sustainable development throughout the world”.



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The Convention on Wetlands

- Australia one of the original 18 countries to sign Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, Iran, 1971)

intergovernmental treaty dedicated to conservation and “wise use” of wetlands

first of the modern global treaties on conservation and wise use of natural resources





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Benefits of Ramsar Listing

- Listing wetlands IN PERPETUITY;
- International and national prestige and recognition;
- Greater security for the future management of Ramsar wetlands;
- Added protection under the Australian Government *EPBC Act 1999*;
- Establishes a management framework through management plans.



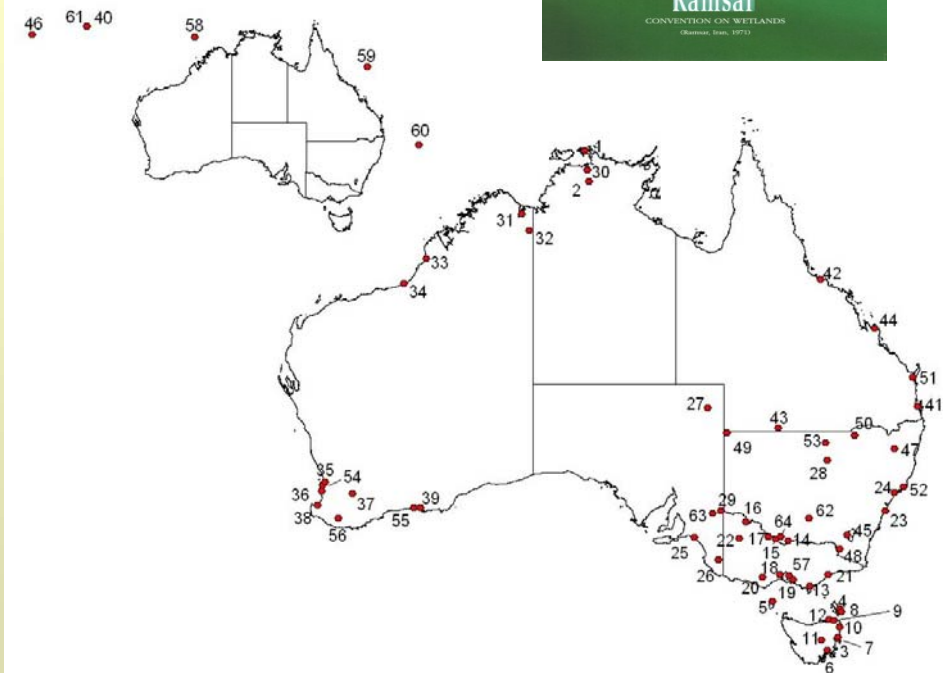
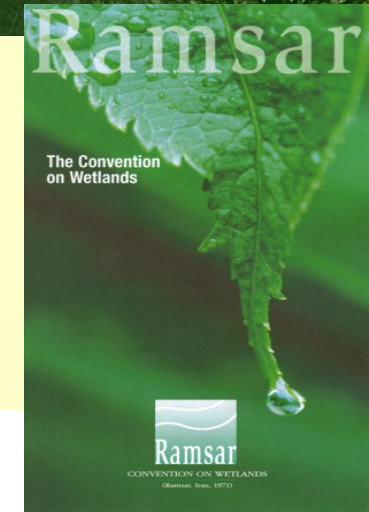


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The Convention on Wetlands

- Australia designated world's 1st Ramsar site in 1974 - Cobourg Peninsula Aboriginal Land and Wildlife Sanctuary
- currently 136 Contracting Parties with 1288 Ramsar sites totalling 108.9 million hectares
- 64 Ramsar sites in Australia covering approx. 7.3 million ha





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Convention on Wetlands

- Ramsar in Australia – Australian Government role
- Inland Waters Section of the Australian Government Department of the Environment and Heritage - Administrative Authority to Convention in Australia
- focal point for communications with Ramsar Bureau and main agency responsible for coordinating implementation of Convention





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Roles and Responsibilities

Ramsar in Australia – Australian Government's role

- implementation in cooperation with other Australian Government gov't agencies, State/Territory gov't agencies, NGOs, community groups and private landholders
- All Ramsar site information maintained by Australian Government DEH
- Facilitate funding support through NWI, NAP, & NHT (in cooperation with state govts, regional bodies, etc)
- *Environment Protection & Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act): Ramsar wetlands are a matter of national environmental significance
 - Ramsar Sites Database

www.deh.gov.au/water/wetlands





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Ramsar in Australia – State/Territory role

- State/Territory gov'ts responsible for managing natural resources within their jurisdiction, including Ramsar sites
- undertake to manage those sites to maintain special ecological values for which they have been recognised





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Ramsar in Australia – State/Territory role

- ongoing site monitoring also expected - to determine if any changes to ecological character are occurring
- must report on Ramsar site management and wetland management more generally to Ramsar Conferences of Parties (CoPs)





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Site Manager Commitments

Ramsar site managers accept a number of commitments, including to:

- establish an appropriate management planning framework;
- ensure that the ecological character of site is maintained or enhanced;
- utilise wetland resources in an ecologically sustainable way (“wise use”); and
- report on the management of the wetland.



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Ramsar in Australia – other Ramsar site managers

- management responsibilities for sites owned by private landholders/organisations lies with those individuals/organisations
- commit to same undertakings as gov't Ramsar site managers (including management planning, monitoring and reporting)





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Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999

- Legislative protection for Ramsar sites
- Developed to provide a legal framework for consistent, timely and science-based decision making
- Provides more regulatory power to the Australian Government, but is focused on matters of National Environmental Significance (NES)





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Ramsar wetland protection

The matter protected is the **ecological character** of a Ramsar Wetland, not just things within the boundary.

Ecological characteristics can include:

- physical features (channels, billabongs)
- physical processes (floods) and
- the plants and animals that are native to the site.



Photographer: Kylee Wilton





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Updated definitions from Ramsar

- “Applying the MA's terms and concepts, under which services form an integral part of ecosystems, an updated definition of Ramsar "ecological character" is:
- *"Ecological character is the combination of the ecosystem components, processes and benefits /services that characterise the wetland at a given point in time."*
- The phrase "at a given point in time" refers to Resolution VI.1 paragraph 2.1, which states that "It is essential that the ecological character of a site be described by the Contracting Party concerned **at the time of designation for the Ramsar List**, by completion of the Information Sheet on Ramsar Wetlands (as adopted by Recommendation IV. 7)."



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Exemptions for ‘continuing use

- Existing farm practices are exempt from the EPBC Act.
- However, an intensification or a change of use (such as cropping a new area) is not a continuation of use and may need to be referred.
- Actions that need a specific environmental approval from the State government are also not a continuation of use





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Management Planning for Ramsar Wetlands

- Prescribed by Regulations (Schedule 6) under the Act
- The primary purpose of management of a declared Ramsar wetland must be, in accordance with the Ramsar Convention:
 - to describe and maintain the ecological character of the wetland; and
 - to formulate and implement planning that promotes:
 - conservation of the wetland; and
 - wise and sustainable use of the wetland for the benefit of humanity in a way that is compatible with maintenance of the natural properties of the ecosystem.





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Management Plan Principles

- A management plan for a Ramsar wetland should:
 - describe ecological character
 - state the characteristics that make it a wetland of international importance
 - state what must be done to maintain its ecological character





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Management Plan Principles

- provide for continuing monitoring and reporting on the state of its ecological character
- be based on integrated catchment management approach
- Wetland management should provide for public consultation on decisions and actions that may have a significant impact on the wetland.
- Wetland management should make special provision, if appropriate, for the involvement of people who:
 - have a particular interest in the wetland; and
 - may be affected by the management of the wetland.





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Management Plan Principles

- Wetland management should provide for continuing community and technical input.
- be reviewed at least every 7 years.
- include mechanisms to deal with the impacts of actions that individually or cumulatively endanger its ecological character,
- and state whether the wetland needs restoration or rehabilitation and provide for this if needed



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Benefits for Ramsar Wetlands and Migratory Species of the EPBC Act 1999

- Consistent higher level of legal protection
- Legislative acknowledgement of Ramsar principles such as wise use, ecological character
- Stronger links between international obligations and on-ground management
- Off-site impact mitigation
- Improved management framework
- Designation of important wetlands under threat
- Consultation





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Benefits for Ramsar Wetlands and Migratory Species of the EPBC Act 1999

- Secondary benefits
 - Increased profile
 - Increased collaboration across the levels of government

