

Coastal wetland at risk



Thrombolites, Lake Clifton.
Tim Swallow

Project Title

A Component of the Peel-Harvey Catchment Council's Ramsar Initiative

"CC082614: Implementing the Peel-Yalgorup Ramsar Management Plan: a priority Coastal Hotspot"

Ramsar Initiative Coordinators

Amanda Willmott and Liz Bonner

Project duration

July 2009 – June 2011

Project Area

Peel-Yalgorup System Ramsar Site

Stakeholders & Funding

Caring for our Country funding, Alcoa World Alumina Australia, City of Mandurah (in kind & stakeholder), Australian Government

Beneficiaries

General public, local community, Ramsar site's ecology

Under threat

“Once upon a time a flock of birds flew every year from their breeding ground in the arctic to the Peel-Yalgorup Wetlands in Australia. Year after year they relied on food being available in the estuaries and lakes around Mandurah, but in time their survival became more threatened by the spread of human habitation. One day they arrived to find that their food sources had been turned into housing estates, and the water around them was contaminated. One by one the birds died and many species just disappeared.”

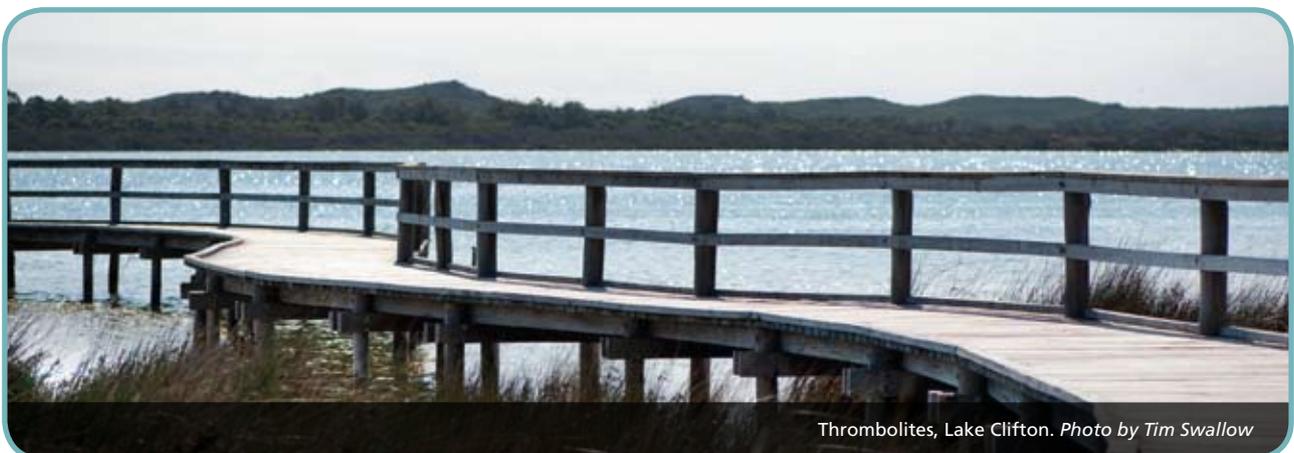
True, this is merely a projection. But it could become a reality because the Peel-Yalgorup System, an internationally acclaimed suite of wetlands, is under threat. A recent project funded through the Australian Government’s Caring for our Country initiative targeted threats and fostered heightened awareness about the area, so that this wetland (including the bird species, fish species and the Threatened Ecological Community it supports) can be effectively monitored and conserved through the collaborative implementation of a sound management plan.

The Peel-Yalgorup System, near Mandurah, covers over 26,000 hectares and sustains an extensive variety of birdlife, yet it’s not just the birdlife which is under threat. Consisting of four unique, complementary ecosystems (the Peel Inlet and Harvey Estuary, the freshwater

marshes - Lake McLarty and Lake Mealup, the salt lakes of Yalgorup National Park, and the Goegrup and Black Lakes) the Peel-Yalgorup meets seven out of the nine possible criteria needed to qualify for listing as an internationally important wetland, or ‘Ramsar site’. A number of these criteria are met by multiple species.

International recognition

The loss of wetlands is not just an Australian issue but a world-wide concern. The Ramsar Convention is an international treaty developed in 1971 to designate wetlands that are globally significant. “The Convention aims to ensure that the unique biodiversity of wetlands is recognised and that the best wetlands are protected for future generations,” says Ramsar Initiative Coordinator, Amanda Willmott.



Thrombolites, Lake Clifton. Photo by Tim Swallow



Lake Mealup. Photo by Liz Bonner

Few people realised that the Peel-Yalgorup area was a designated Ramsar site or that it was given its 'internationally significant' tick in 1990, because for the following 20 years there were no clear strategies or management plans in place and the ecological decline of the area was in part the result of the complexity of tenure and governance covering the site. That was until 2004 when the Peel-Harvey Catchment Council made raising the profile of the Ramsar listing and the development of a Management Plan a priority, and the broader initiative was made possible through funding provided by the State and Australian Governments. The momentum continued in 2009 with the introduction of the Caring for our Country initiative.

Wetland protection

So why are these wetlands important and what are the threats?

"One of the biggest threats to the wetlands is the decades of nutrient enrichment and algal blooms affecting the Peel-Harvey Estuary," explains Amanda Willmott. "The Yalgorup National Park houses a number of salt lakes that provide habitat for different species and includes a Threatened Ecological Community of Lake Clifton Thrombolites which has iconic biodiversity value. The suite of wetlands furthest inland provides another kind of habitat supporting different fauna species, and

the river based wetland within the Serpentine River – the Goegrup Lakes - have unique cultural significance and are also under threat from nutrient enrichment."

Nutrient enrichment and algal blooms, acid sulphate soils, erosion, salinity, pest plants and animals can nearly all be traced back to the main threats of urban development, agriculture, commercial and recreational fishing, groundwater extraction and recreation.

"Additional problems include the disturbance of waterbirds, altered inundation patterns, and climate change which in turn has an impact on the natural assets of the region," says Ms Willmott.

If nothing is done to address these problems the wetlands will deteriorate and become unsustainable. "Weeds will take over and the health of the wetland will decline. The things that make the site internationally important are all at threat including: habitat loss, species extinction, loss of cultural values, and reduced commercial and recreational fishery," explains Ms Willmott.

On the waterbird fly-way

If you're into birding you will probably know that migratory birds arrive in the Peel-Yalgorup each spring. Having travelled for thousands of miles along an ancient fly-route from the arctic it is the stop over in an incredible journey for them. They arrive physically weakened

having lost half their bodyweight during flight, and are desperate to feed as they need to recover and restore their bodyweight for the 14,000km return journey to breed.

Should the wetlands disappear or become unsustainable then many species will be under threat as shorebirds rely on the inter-tidal zone which is particularly at risk from urban development.

Activities undertaken during the project

This Caring for our Country funded project focused on implementing key aspects of the Peel-Yagorup System Ramsar Site Management Plan. Activities included a targeted media campaign, engaging the community and volunteers in the monitoring and identification of water birds and the installation of a bird-hide at Nairns.

On ground works consisted of revegetation of Lake McLarty, that included putting up fencing to control feral animals, conducting weed control, and planting rushes to recover the natural qualities of the lake.

Two Caring for our Country targets were met; 'protecting Ramsar wetlands' as above, and 'increasing participation in natural resource management' which was achieved by facilitating a series of training workshops. Sixty-two people were trained in shore bird monitoring and identification and are now part of bird monitoring programmes at various levels.

The importance of volunteers

To this end many volunteers continue to give their time to protect the wetland. Identifying and monitoring birds on a regular basis is important and the project saw an improvement in the count effort which resulted in better quality bird data. "There was a 50% increase in volunteering due to the training sessions. The enthusiasm and participation were inspiring. I think people really enjoyed them from an educational perspective and also from the sense of protecting something which although on their back door is actually of international significance. At the beginning of the project 80% of the community were unaware that the wetland is protected by the

Ramsar convention and under Federal environmental legislation. Now people in the community are not only aware but are actually engaging in the legislative process – having their say on future development that may impact the wetlands," says Ms Willmott.

Future activities

The Ramsar initiative will continue into the future through the collaborative implementation of the Peel-Yalgorup System Ramsar Site Management Plan. Under the plan, a variety of actions are proposed, including continued community participation in monitoring and on-ground works. "We aim to continue the collaborative approach to managing the wetlands working with private landholders, local government and government agencies. Implementing the management plan will pave the way for successful outcomes on the ground," says Ms Willmott. The level of activity will depend on the resources committed by all levels of government to support the community's volunteer effort.

Raising public awareness

The project was brought to the attention of the general public by brochures, fliers, public displays and a launch, as well as a notable 12 minute documentary called Birds of the Peel-Yalgorup, which can be found on YouTube. "This project has impacted the future of both the land and community because it has increased local people's understanding of how important their backyard is," says Ms Willmott.



Dick Rule, award winning volunteer, with co-ordinators Amanda Willmott & Liz Bonner.

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This case study can be viewed online at
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