



Executive Summary

Report 9 – September 2006

Background

Western Australia (WA) has 120 wetlands of national importance, 12 of which are listed as being of international importance under the International Convention on Wetlands, known as the Ramsar Convention. The Convention is an intergovernmental treaty dedicated to the conservation and 'wise use' of wetland.

Management of WA's Ramsar wetlands rests with the State under a complex legislative and policy framework, though the Commonwealth, as the signatory to the Convention, is ultimately responsible for Australian commitment and compliance with the Convention.

The examination assessed the management of Ramsar wetlands in WA with particular focus on the operations of the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) and the Conservation Commission.

What the examination found...

The State has recognised the importance of registering rare and unique wetlands under the Ramsar Convention. However, conservation of these sites needs to improve, particularly the management planning and implementation of strategies if degradation is to be prevented and prohibitive rehabilitation costs avoided.

Policy and Direction

- Ramsar sites are not managed in accordance with specific overarching policies and strategies, but as individual sites. There are significant differences in activity and control across the 12 sites.
- The protection of Ramsar wetlands in Western Australia is generally supported by the legislative and policy framework though aspects such as more specific recognition of these wetlands should be improved.

Funding of Activities

- While there is no dedicated program of funding by either the Commonwealth or State for Ramsar wetlands, significant funding by DEC has benefited five Ramsar sites. Small amounts of funding have been provided for other sites as part of DEC's general conservation activities. Management activity to prevent site degradation is limited in the absence of funding.

Management and Reporting

- At the sites we visited, we found committed and skilled staff who were undertaking work of high quality. We also observed that work at one site has received national acclaim.
- A lack of coordinated and uniform monitoring means that DEC cannot provide an overview of the health of the 12 wetlands.
- There is clear evidence of a worsening in ecological character in at least two Ramsar wetlands which DEC has not reported to the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth and States are currently developing systems to report changes in the ecological character of wetlands.
- Six of the 12 Ramsar wetlands at present have no plans for their management. The preparation of management plans is a State obligation. Without a management plan DEC is restricted in the conservation activity it can undertake. DEC in June 2006 sought external funds for preparation of the remaining management plans.
- There is no agency with final responsibility for the protection and management of the ecological character of three Ramsar sites and part of a fourth. DEC is charged with implementing the Ramsar Convention but it has no legal authority to do so on these four sites because they are not vested in the Conservation Commission.



AUDITOR GENERAL FOR WESTERN AUSTRALIA

What the examination recommended...

- DEC as the lead agency for management of Ramsar wetlands should establish and communicate a clear direction for their conservation. This direction should include:
 - explicit objectives for the overall management of Ramsar wetlands
 - improved prioritisation and timelines for the preparation of management plans
 - systematic plans for monitoring and scientific activities.
- DEC should clarify with the Commonwealth and other stakeholders the respective responsibilities for Ramsar implementation including funding.
- DEC should as a priority develop and implement management plans for those Ramsar sites which lack them.
- DEC on behalf of the State should investigate options to obtain clear authority for sites not vested in the Conservation Commission. It should also advocate that any new or amended legislation provides clear responsibilities for such sites.
- DEC should conduct a gap analysis of research and monitoring that has occurred on Ramsar wetlands. Following this DEC should develop and implement a monitoring program that will allow it to provide regular and reliable information regarding all Ramsar sites.
- In the absence of an agreed methodology for assessing ecological character and wetland indicators, DEC should report emerging concerns to the Commonwealth.
- DEC and the Commission should establish procedures to end delays that occur in the finalisation of management plans such as regular review of progress against internal deadlines. In addition, DEC and the Commission on behalf of the State should consider proposing legislative amendments to provide statutory deadlines for finalising stakeholder agreement.

A copy of the report can be accessed at: [http:// www.audit.wa.gov.au/](http://www.audit.wa.gov.au/)

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