

Financing of FGA's environmental projects - Wetlands Environmental Taskforce (WET) and Heart Morass

1. Millions of dollars have come from a philanthropic trust, the Hugh Williamson Foundation.

For example, back in 2016-17, FGA's annual report (p17) stated: "... the combined contribution by the Hugh Williamson Foundation to assist the purchase of the three properties containing the Heart Morass, and to Bug Blitz (schools program), **now exceeds \$2.3 million...**" and the funding has continued since then.

2. FGA and WET (a tax deductible charity) appear to have interrelated finances. WET has a loan from FGA of more than \$400,000 (2021-22 and previous FGA annual reports).

In 2018-19 FGA charged WET \$18,000 for the management of WET (p7 of FGA annual report). It is unclear whether FGA charged management fees in other years.

3. A number of government agencies have assisted the WET Trust. For example, significant support comes from the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority (WGCMA). On 16 June 2023 Ms Watt of this Inquiry asked FGA about government funding, but FGA appeared to downplay the contribution of the taxpayer to its projects. Please refer to Table on next pages.
4. PFAS chemical contamination from the nearby Defence base threatens the financial value of Heart Morass as well as the health of those who eat wild-shot birds from that region.

"The PFAS contamination of Heart Morass from the neighbouring Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) base remains a major issue ... There is no simple or quick fix to this problem... contamination continues to run off the RAAF base onto our property, as the EPA is unable to make any order against a Commonwealth body." Extracted from p6, FGA annual report 2017-18

It is unclear why ducks are still hunted there, given the EPA's warnings in 2018 (3 wetland tests) and [2019 \(19 more wetland tests\)](#) not to consume ducks from Heart Morass and surrounds.

5. The WET Trust appears to be facing financial difficulty. The VicRoads offset funding finishes up next year, and the Williamson Foundation will likely reduce or end funding:

"However, the Williamson Foundation's very generous support is not open-ended. We need to start addressing this issue of where future funding might come from now."

"... we need to find more sources of funding."

Comments from David Hawker AO, Chair of WET, in (respectively) the 2018-19 FGA annual report p12, and the 2021-22 FGA annual report p9.

WET ran at a \$39,000 deficit in 2021-22, following a \$57,000 deficit in 2020-21 (refer FGA annual reports).

6. One of the project partners at Heart Morass is Watermark Inc but there appears to be no publicly available information about them, e.g. who they are, and what they have contributed. Why the apparent secrecy? Does this funding come from the gun industry, for example?

Examples of Public Funding for FGA's environmental work

Item	Source	Reference
\$100,000 donation	Trust For Nature (TFN) ¹	2011-12 FGA annual report p17
Supervision and planning services for Heart Morass enhancement	West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority (WGCMA) - State government	2012-13 FGA annual report p20
\$504,000 over 10yrs for Heart Morass; responsibilities include weed control	VicRoads offset funding; taxpayer funds (administered via TFN)	2013-14 FGA annual report p11
\$30,000 for weed control at Heart Morass	State government	2016-17 FGA annual report, p17
\$200,000 for improved water regulator at Heart Morass	State government	2016-17 FGA annual report p17
Consultants' report recommending major water infrastructure at Heart Morass and adjacent Dowd Morass: total cost of proposal would be \$1.3m	WGCMA – State government ²	Refer footnote 2. Unclear if the proposed work was undertaken.
Funds for FGA Sale to plant 8,000 trees at Heart Morass	Gippsland Lakes Coordinating Committee (funded by State government)	2017-18 FGA annual report p15
Water-watch program at Heart Morass	WGCMA – State government	2017-18 FGA annual report p15
\$14,739 for Australian National Hunting Archive in 2018	State government	2018-19 annual report p13

¹ TFN is funded by conservation-minded members of the community, who may be unaware their donations are helping to fund duck shooting at Heart Morass.

² <http://epbcnotices.environment.gov.au/entity/annotation/8727b9b7-5981-e711-aec9-005056ba00a7/a71d58ad-4cba-48b6-8dab-f3091fc31cd5?t=1523491200337>

The specifications for this consultant's report include: "Feeding, breeding and sheltering habitat for a diverse range of wetland biota, including waterbirds."

\$20,041 for Australian National Hunting Archive in 2019	State government	2018-19 FGA annual report p13
Funding for track upgrades and recreational access infrastructure in Heart Morass	Waterway Recreational Values program administered via WGCMA (funded by state government)	2020-21 FGA annual report p9
Funding for Bug Blitz (FGA's schools program) including field days in east Gippsland	Bushfire Recovery Victoria (funded by state government)	2021-22 FGA annual report p9
\$40,000 for FGA's Bug Blitz schools program at Heart Morass and Connewarre - in conjunction with FGA Sale and Geelong Branches	Sustainable Hunting Action Plan (SHAP) 2021-2024 – funded by state government	https://djsir.vic.gov.au/game-hunting/action-plan/grants
\$48,134 to Geelong FGA for 300 nest-boxes at Connewarre (\$160 each)	Sustainable Hunting Action Plan (SHAP) 2021-2024 – funded by state government	https://djsir.vic.gov.au/game-hunting/action-plan/grants
\$40,000 to FGA to enable it to “prepare for the delivery of conservation and ecosystem management-based courses.”	Sustainable Hunting Action Plan (SHAP) 2021-2024 – funded by state government	https://djsir.vic.gov.au/game-hunting/action-plan/grants

The above Table presents known examples of public funding, but it is not exhaustive.

Succession planning is one of the risks in relying on a vested interest group to use government money for environmental restoration. If duck shooting is banned, it seems the WET environmental projects may diminish or cease. In terms of “value for money” the taxpayer may get better continuity by funding a government agency or unemployed Victorians to do this work.