

Victoria's Wetlands and Ramsar Sites, the Inquiry into Auditor-General's report No 202: Meeting obligations to protect Ramsar Wetlands (2016).

Submission by Peter Hylands and Andrea Hylands

Ramsar sites in Victoria are overwhelmingly governed by a culture and a purpose that is a very long way from the spirit of the Ramsar Convention.

Precisely no heed of international agreements is taken in these matters and we note the Victorian Government fails to mention Ramsar sites, only referring to game reserves in its correspondence to us. We need to remind ourselves that as well as your government's obligations to the Ramsar Convention, there are other international agreements in place and to which Australia is a signatory.

These include JAMBA, Japan Australia Migratory Bird Agreement (66 species covered by the agreement) / CAMBA, China Australia Migratory Bird Agreement (81 species) / ROKAMBA, Republic of Korea Australia Migratory Bird Agreement (59 species).

Nature, culture and commerce are not separate things that live in a silo, they are connected in the most complex ways. The issue here for Victoria is that economic development activities should look to the future and not the past. These things have environmental and economic consequences that are enormous. The time taken, the scale and scope of duck shooting in Victoria and on Ramsar sites has a very negative impact on the possibilities surrounding regional development. It is increasingly shameful, given environmental circumstances, that such a minority of individuals engaged in such a cruel and destructive activity can shape the future of large parts of regional Victoria.

Economic factors

The prime economic benefit of Victoria's Ramsar sites is not being achieved, these things are tourism, nature based tourism including the international circuit of twitchers and those interested in wildlife and other non-violent recreational activities. While Phillip Island and the Penguins are a long term and major tourism success story, Ramsar sites are in deep neglect, impacting the economic outcomes for their regions.

Ramsar Sites are decrepit and typically lacking investment, particularly if they are designated game reserves.

The impact of the large scale and threatening shooting activities on these Ramsar sites, sign posted as game reserves, turns regions into no-go-zones as tourists avoid the Ramsar site shooting zones.

It is worth noting that the share of rural exports in Australia's total share of exports, over the past 50 years, has gone from 37% to 9%. Incomes have stagnated, towns have fallen vacant and esteem has evaporated. No wonder so many country residents are feeling neglected. The Victorian Government have conspicuously failed to ensure that conservation yields local rewards, and what

is particularly concerning is that, as populations of waterbirds in Eastern Australia have fallen by 90 per cent in just 40 years, and Ramsar sites are often the place of last refuge, Victorian Government Ministers still continue to promote the mass scale killing of birdlife on Ramsar sites. Many endangered species are also killed on Ramsar sites and other wildlife, such as Wallabies, are illegally shot. As the wildlife vanishes, then so do the economic opportunities.

An example of a region in Victoria not reaching its economic potential is the Gannawarra Shire (with its important Ramsar Sites and a traditionally duck shooting hotspot). The LGA has a structural unemployment rate of 14 per cent and very high social security take up rate, the region is ageing and young people are leaving adding to the rate of demographic change, all this looks grim. To pretend that decades of mass slaughter of birdlife on the Ramsar sites in this shire has somehow been beneficial to economic outcomes is not reflected in the economic realities facing the region. A change in direction can be difficult but is often essential.

It is our view that, the economic benefits of investment in and change of use on Victoria's Ramsar sites, is ignored by Victoria's politicians in favour of personal attitudes as well as entrenched relationships with shooters and the gun lobby.

Information economy

There was a general level of embarrassment when local tourist information centres with Ramsar sites, designated as game reserves and where shooting occurs, were asked about details of, and bird watching opportunities on Ramsar sites in Regional Victoria.

Important international Ramsar sites have no signage, instead the signs state they are game reserves. Signs also claim that they "acknowledge the Traditional Owners of this land", these claims are disingenuous given both current use and the evident destruction and littering of these sites over long periods without remediation.

Education: Given the numerous international examples and networks - we have raised the issue of the educational opportunities, at school and college level, made possible by the presence of Ramsar sites within a region, with Victorian Government Ministers. The result is that we have been completely ignored.

"From all around the world we are hearing that children are becoming more and more disconnected from nature. I am so pleased and impressed that you have such a strong interest in the environment and in the wetlands. The secretariat is trying to do more with children who are knowledgeable and active and trying to inspire those who are not yet engaged" Dr Christopher Briggs, Secretary General, Ramsar Convention (January 2014)

Our message to the Japanese students of Kodomo Ramsar:

“As you live and as you learn and become wise you will come to understand that nature is as delicate as the petals of a flower. You are also part of the natural world that will sustain you and your future families. We congratulate you on your work and we hope that many more will learn from you about conservation and caring for our beautiful planet Earth which we all share” Peter and Andrea Hylands

Health and safety

There appear to be no attempts at cleaning up after a duck shooting season is over, Ramsar wetlands remain littered with the detritus of shooting parties, broken bottles, shot gun cases, remains of birdlife, skulls and so on, plastic, beer cans and other discarded waste.

Ramsar sites in Victoria can also be extremely dangerous places to visit given the largely unsupervised shooting activity. Residents living close to Ramsar sites also describe the three months of extreme nuisance and danger inflicted on them. *Regional Victorians opposed to duck shooting* have made the following comment:

“There is an unacceptable risk to nearby residents and unsuspecting members of the public who may come to bushwalk, kayak or bird watch. It's also a shocking risk to our struggling native waterbirds, many unique to our country”.

Lawlessness on Ramsar Sites in Victoria

Location Kerang Wetlands Koorangie State Game Reserve 2017

We will take you back to the 2017 season, which was a massacre of birdlife of the most horrific kind, much of it entirely ‘illegal’. Here is a statement made to us by Laurie Levy regarding the opening of the duck season on the Ramsar wetlands surrounding Kerang:

“We were out in the wetlands at 5.30 in the morning and getting ready. The opening time was 7.20am. There were probably at least one thousand shooters out on the marshes. This had always been a wetland know for brutality over the years, it had not had water for a long time. This was the first time it had water in a long while and of course it had a large contingent of Game Management Authority compliance officers and the police. They believed they could control duck shooting.

Well they found out that morning that they could not. Shooting started at least 20 minutes before the opening time. It was not just one or two shots going off, it was a barrage of shooting. It was like a war zone and I was standing with the head of the Game Management Authority and he was just shocked and rescuers were going up to him and to the police and saying you have to do something about this. They were totally impotent, they could not do anything because it was an uncontrolled slaughter of native waterbirds as it always has been and I went into the water to rescue a wounded bird right on the opening at 7.20am and brought that bird out, took it to our mobile veterinary clinic to have it treated, walked back and I was promptly arrested, fined \$930 and ordered off the wetlands for the whole of the season.

But I guess that by the end of the day a lot of our rescuers were traumatised by what they saw. The difference between rescuers and shooters is that when shooters hit a bird and when a bird falls out of the sky they cheer and they don't have any empathy at all for their victims. Rescuers are only out there to help those birds. So when they see, especially new rescuers, the brutality and the violence and the cruelty that duck shooters inflict on those birds, a lot of the rescuers are totally and utterly traumatised by it.

Following the disastrous and immensely cruel 2017 season about which the Victorian Government's own Pegasus Economics commissioned report stated:

"Non-compliance with hunting laws is commonplace and widespread and that by any standard, the GMA has failed to deliver on its responsibility to enforce the hunting laws".

The fault however does not lie with the GMA, it rests firmly on the shoulders of the senior members of the Victorian Government.

Our particular concern has been to observe children engaged in acts of extreme cruelty to birdlife on Victoria's Ramsar sites.

"The events on Victoria's (Australia) Ramsar wetlands are not only crimes against nature, they are also crimes against the child. The last thing the world needs is governments encouraging gun violence from children as young as twelve years old"
Peter and Andrea Hylands, Hokkaido, Japan

Summary

What is required is a contemporary and honourable approach to Ramsar Wetlands in Victoria. This means:

- Embracing the spirit of the Ramsar Convention;
- A proper respect for the natural world, education and the wellbeing of children;
- Respecting and implementing contemporary economic development opportunities;
- Treating Ramsar sites with respect;
- Proper signage and information systems, including information on signs about which bird species may be present;
- A welcome mat for international visitors, that is to provide international visitors with the opportunity to enjoy and learn from their visits to Victoria's Ramsar sites;
- A respect for law and order;
- Conduct conservation measures on Victoria's Ramsar sites to protect birdlife rather than allowing the cruel slaughter of birdlife that is devastating stressed populations of waterbirds; and
- Protection of endangered species of birds and other animals that live on or visit Ramsar wetlands in Victoria (many endangered birds have been wounded and killed on Victoria's Ramsar sites).

Peter and Andrea Hylands
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