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Public Accounts and Estimates Committee
Parliament of Victoria
Parliament House
Spring Street
East Melbourne VIC 3002

Submission in response to the Inquiry into Auditor-General's report No. 202: Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands (2016)

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to the Public Accounts and Estimates Joint Committee's Inquiry into Auditor-General's report No. 202: Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands (the Report). This submission and attached additional information provide evidence which supports the need for reform as to enable Victoria to meet its national obligations.

By way of background, BirdLife Australia is an independent science-based bird conservation organisation with over 145,000 supporters throughout Australia. We are recognised as a leading national authority on the ecology and conservation of Australia's native birds, including waterbirds and shorebirds.

BirdLife Australia has three major programs that operate within Victoria's Ramsar Wetlands, with significant expertise and an extensive knowledge base around wetland and coastal avifauna, user groups and management of threats. These programs are:

- **Migratory Shorebirds Program** – designed to improve our understanding of migratory shorebird population in Australia and work towards their conservation and management.
- **Beach-nesting Birds Program** – developed to mitigate anthropogenic impacts to beach-nesting shorebirds and seabirds.
- **Wetlands Birds Program** – developed to improve the health of inland and coastal wetlands and mitigate impacts to threatened wetland birds.

All 12 of Victoria's Ramsar Wetlands of International Importance meet listing criteria for their importance to Australia's waterbirds, migratory and resident shorebirds or both.

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Unfortunately, Australia's waterbirds and shorebirds have experienced long-term declines, with the rate of decline increasing over the last four decades. Eastern Australia's waterbird population, including game species, has declined as much as 90% over the last four decades¹ with Australia's migratory shorebirds suffering significant population declines over the same period. Water resource development in the Murray-Darling Basin has been identified as a significant driver of long-term declines in the abundances of ~50 waterbird species, indicating ecosystem-level change².

In the East Asian-Australasian Flyway, the largest migration corridor for shorebirds in the world, significant regional declines have been identified in at least 18 species³, including Eastern Curlew (*Numenius madagascariensis*) which has experienced a population decline of more than 80% in 30 years. Along with Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica ssp. menzbieri*), Great Knot (*Calidris tenuirostris*) and Curlew Sandpiper (*Calidris ferruginea*) the Eastern Curlew is now critically endangered. Another four species are listed as nationally endangered or vulnerable to extinction.

Furthermore, here in Australia, resident species such as Fairy Tern (*Sternula nereis*) and Hooded Plover (*Thinornis cucullatus*) have experienced major population declines and listed as nationally threatened.

Key threats to waterbirds and shorebirds alike include: ongoing loss, degradation and fragmentation of wetlands in Victoria; increasing development pressures both here and abroad; challenges of water management in the Murray-Darling Basin; introduced pest species; inappropriate recreational and commercial activities (i.e. recreational hunting of waterfowl); and increases in the frequency and severity of drought.

Effectively managing their remaining strongholds, including Ramsar wetlands, will be critical to halting threatened species population declines and putting them on a path to recovery.

We commend the steps the Victorian Government has taken in implementing the recommendations from the 2016 Auditor General's Report including setting up interagency site committees for all 12 Ramsar sites and finalising Ramsar Management Plans for the Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula and Western Port sites.

¹ Porter, J.L., R.T. Kingsford and K. Brandis. (2018). Aerial Survey of Wetland Birds in Eastern Australia – October 2018 Annual Summary Report. Centre for Ecosystem Science, School of Biological, Earth and Environmental Sciences, UNSW Sydney. Office of Environment and Heritage NSW.

² Kingsford, Richard T., Gilad Bino, and John L. Porter. "Continental impacts of water development on waterbirds, contrasting two Australian river basins: Global implications for sustainable water use." *Global change biology* 23.11 (2017): 4958-4969.

³ Weller, D.R. & C.V. Lee. (2017) Migratory Shorebird Conservation Action Plan, BirdLife Australia unpublished report, September 2017



However, further steps are necessary if Victoria is to meet its obligations to protect Ramsar Wetlands and to contribute to halting threatened species declines. These include, but are not limited to:

- Audit all Ecological Character Descriptions, specifically Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) for accuracy, and update where needed, ensuring key stakeholder (including local Indigenous Peoples) knowledge and current research is drawn upon.
- Improve LACs by identifying better indicator species and testing the efficacy of indicators before finalising the LACs.
- Develop, implement and resource appropriate monitoring efforts and frequencies for LACs.
- Update all Ramsar Information Sheets and commit to the six-year review period as recommended by the Federal Government.
- Prepare and implement standalone Ramsar Management Plans for all 12 Victorian Ramsar sites.
- Strengthen management plans, with properly resourced actions to proactively conserve the Ecological Character of Wetlands.
- Commit resources to the management of Ramsar sites including on-ground actions, research to overcome knowledge gaps, education and opportunities for meaningful community engagement.

If you require further information, please contact BirdLife Australia Conservation Campaigner Andrew Hunter at [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely,

[REDACTED]

Samantha Vine

Head of Conservation

BirdLife Australia



Additional information:

Inadequacy or lack of baseline information describing the ecological character of Ramsar Wetlands.

In many cases information in Ecological Character Descriptions (ECD), specifically Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC), are out of date, inaccurate or were not set at the time of the site declaration.

Ecological Character Descriptions

A finalised and published ECD is a requirement for each site under the National Framework and Guidance for Describing the Ecological Character of Australian Ramsar Wetlands⁴ (The Framework) and should provide the baseline description of Ramsar Wetlands at the time of their listing. As such an accurate ECD is integral in assessing human-induced changes to the ecological character of the site.

The Report found the majority of sites (ten) (excluding the Glenelg Estuary and Discovery Bay site which was listed in 2018 after the Report) have an ECD published between 2010-12, well past their initial listings. For nine Ramsar Wetlands that were listed in 1982 this is a significant gap, over 30 years between the time of their listing and the publication of their ECD and may not accurately describe their baseline ecological character. While Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula still lacks a published ECD.

This is problematic as Ramsar Wetlands are recognised as a matter of national environmental significance (MNES) under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*⁵ which requires an action that “has, will have, or is likely to have, a significant impact on the ecological character of a Ramsar wetland must be referred to the Minister (*Federal Environment Minister*) and undergo an environmental assessment and approval process.”

Without accurate, up to date and published ECDs, any environmental assessments of proposed actions are unable to adequately assess the impacts to the ecological character of Ramsar Wetlands. Further, third parties, including NGOs and the local community, will lack the necessary information to effectively participate in the environmental assessment and approval process including providing input and comment on draft reports.

⁴ Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts (2008). National Framework and Guidance for Describing the Ecological Character of Australia’s Ramsar Wetlands. Module 2 of the National Guidelines for Ramsar Wetlands— Implementing the Ramsar Convention in Australia. Australian Government Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, Canberra.

⁵ Department of the Environment (2013). Matters of National Environmental Significance – Significant impact guidelines 1.1 *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*. Australian Government Department of the Environment, Canberra.



Limits of Acceptable Change

A key component of an ECD, as set in the Framework, is a description of limits of acceptable change (LAC) of critical components, processes and benefits or services (Critical CPS) in order to provide a better understanding of the ecological character of the wetlands. LACs act as indicators for the health of Ramsar Wetlands and if triggered could demonstrate a change in the ecological character of the site and should result in further investigations so as to not lead to a reduction or loss of the criteria for which the site was listed.⁶

The Report found less than half of Victoria's Ramsar Wetlands have LACs for all of their identified Critical CPSs that inform the ecological character of each site.

Of the sites with LACs, we have found that they are often poorly defined or not sensitive enough to determine a change in the ecological character of the site.

For example, an LAC for the Critical CPS of the Glenelg Estuary and Discovery Bay supporting a diversity of waterbirds with a total of 95 wetland dependent species, would be triggered in the absence of a list of waterbird guilds (ex. ducks, swans, and grebes) in any three out of five years. We believe this LAC is not sensitive enough to detect important ecological changes. For example, if only one individual representing an identified waterbird guild (e.g. one individual native duck) is recorded in any three out of five years then the LAC will not be triggered. Under this indicator, the local waterbird population could see massive declines in abundance yet be within the LAC⁷.

Another LAC for the Glenelg Estuary and Discovery Bay Ramsar site is the absence of the threatened Hooded Plover in three out of five years. For a resident and highly sedentary species for which this area supports 1% of the national population (and 5% of the Victorian population), disappearance of the species from the site in any one year would indicate a major population crash, and have significance not only to this Ramsar site but to the species population as a whole. If we waited for the LAC to be triggered, three years of absence in a five-year period, we would be unlikely to identify the source of this localised extinction and to recover the population without significant investment, if at all. This LAC was clearly developed in isolation of drawing on current databases and expertise, in particular there was no liaison with the current recovery program led out of BirdLife Australia.

⁶Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (2012). Limits of acceptable change – Fact sheet. Australian Government, Canberra.

⁷Lees, D. & Maguire, M. (2019) Monitoring the health of shorebirds within the Glenelg Estuary and Discovery Bay Ramsar Site, March 2018-June 2019. Birdlife Australia.



Some LACs are not monitored frequently enough for timely detection of LAC triggers. By the time the LAC has been triggered, it may be too late to undertake management actions capable of reversing changes to the ecological character of the Ramsar site. A recent BirdLife Australia study found the monitoring requirements for Waterbird Breeding (a Critical CPS) at the Corner Inlet Ramsar Wetland⁸ - two annual sampling periods separated by at least one year, within a five-year period - are insufficient to assess whether the LAC has been triggered. Two complete breeding season surveys in a five-year period would provide a low sample size for assessing the health of the breeding population as this does not provide a safeguard for extreme seasonal fluctuation based on a stochastic event, e.g. a large storm event or extreme climatic conditions, where the two sampling points may be unrepresentative of the natural variation in breeding success within Corner Inlet.

When an LAC is triggered further investigations should be conducted and appropriate management actions implemented in order to maintain the ecological character of Ramsar Wetlands. LACs that are inaccurate, not sensitive enough to determine a possible change or have inappropriate monitoring frequencies can lead to, at best, slow management responses and at worse an irreversible change to the ecological character of the Ramsar wetland.

Recommendations:

- Audit all Ecological Character Descriptions, specifically Limits of Acceptable Change for accuracy and update, including accessing all available current research and data, and expert stakeholder knowledge.
- Develop, implement and resource appropriate monitoring efforts and frequencies for Limits of Acceptable Change.
- Update all Ramsar Information Sheets and commit to the six-year review period as recommended by the Federal Government.

⁸ Maguire, M. & K, Ekanayake. (2018) A pilot study in to the feasibility of monitoring breeding success of shorebirds and seabirds in Corner Inlet. January-March 2018. Birdlife Australia.



Weak Ramsar Management Plans and management actions

Ramsar Management Plans (RMPs) are used to “formulate and implement planning so as to promote the wise use and conservation of wetlands.” Together, with Ramsar Information Sheets (RIS) and ECDs, RMPs inform key management actions for Ramsar Wetlands⁹.

The Australian Government “encourages” RMPs to be developed following the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Regulations 2000*, the *Australian Ramsar management principles*,¹⁰ and advice from the Ramsar Secretariat.¹¹ However these are not binding, resulting in some management plans incorporated into broader, regional management plans, such as Regional Waterway Strategies, where actions and objectives that would achieve Ramsar goals are not distinct from other goals or objectives.

Stand alone RMPs, specific for each site, that follow the management principles would be better suited to ensure that management actions, monitoring and evaluation activities are directed to upholding and conserving the ecological character of wetlands.

Management actions should proactively conserve the Ecological Character of Wetlands.

Meeting obligations to protect Ramsar Wetlands can not only mean conserving the status quo but also must include a positive vision for the future to improve and develop them.

The Victorian government has many great opportunities to ‘go beyond’ its Ramsar obligations. A good example is the former Cheetham Saltworks site at Avalon and adjacent coastal environment, including parts of the Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula Ramsar site which provide critical feeding habitat for a range of threatened migratory shorebirds. Due to decommissioning, the ponds have lost water and are mostly dry today. Too little has been done to preserve this important site. Works to secure and improve the sites’ environmental values have begun (supported by the Port Philip Bay Fund), but the years of degradation and uncoordinated management have meant higher investment is required to mitigate the current threats to the sites integrity.

⁹ Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts (2009). National Guidelines for Notifying Change in Ecological Character of Australian Ramsar Sites (Article 3.2). Module 3 of the National Guidelines for Ramsar Wetlands— Implementing the Ramsar Convention in Australia. Australian Government Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, Canberra

¹⁰ Department of Environment. Australian Ramsar management principles. <https://www.environment.gov.au/water/wetlands/managing/australian-ramsar-management-principles>

¹¹ Ramsar Secretariat Handbook 18: Managing Wetlands (4th ed, 2010), <https://www.ramsar.org/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/lib/hbk4-18.pdf>.



Migratory shorebirds will require a network of functioning sites that allows them to complete their annual journey if we are to reverse the continuing negative population trends and prevent future extinctions.

Recommendation:

- Prepare and implement standalone Ramsar Management Plans for all 12 Victorian Ramsar sites.
- Strengthen management plans, with properly resourced actions to proactively conserve the Ecological Character of Wetlands.