

Submission re:

**INQUIRY INTO AUDITOR-GENERAL'S REPORT NO. 202: MEETING OBLIGATIONS TO
PROTECT RAMSAR WETLANDS (2016)**

1. Background

I have a particular research interest in the welfare and sustainability of Australia's native waterbirds. This has in turn led to a personal concern for the survival of the global migratory birds that rely on our wetlands for habitat, food and nurture.

Sadly, our children and grandchildren will face a far different and more adverse planet because of climate change. They will be especially resentful of the poor stewardship we have shown towards the conservation of these amazing feathered species.

2. The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat

This Convention is more commonly referred to as the Ramsar Convention. However that convenient brevity omits a key aspect: special emphasis on the waterfowl habitat that has been so damaged by the threats listed on page 1 of the Auditor-General's Report No 202 ('the VAGO report').

Some of those threats are "wicked problems" like climate change that will tax the planet and its inhabitants for decades, if not centuries, to come. **But one of those threats – duck shooting - could be eliminated at the stroke of a pen, and it is high time to do that. There is currently a Bill before state parliament to propose a permanent ban on recreational duck shooting in Victoria.** There is enormous community support for a ban (87% according to a 2007 Roy Morgan poll)¹.

As stated on page 2 of the VAGO report:

"A consequence of the declining health of wetlands is the decline or loss of many bird... species."

¹ <http://www.roymorgan.com/findings/finding-4239-201302262309>

Why then would governments (state and federal) permit recreational duck shooting to continue, thereby further depleting those declining numbers?

The VAGO report is notable for its failure to list the one or more Ramsar criteria that were used to justify each wetland's inclusion on the Ramsar listings. It does however list the nine possible criteria (Appendix A). Waterbird abundance (see Criteria five and six) were especially important factors for Ramsar listings in Victoria, according to the eminent waterbird scientist, Prof Richard Kingsford from UNSW.

Although the VAGO report suggests the federal Labor governments (2007-2013) made some attempt to fund better management of our Ramsar responsibilities, the overall story is of abject neglect from both state and federal governments.

3. Conflicts of interest

The VAGO report cites lack of funding as a key problem in the widespread failure of agencies to manage our state and national Ramsar responsibilities. Of course, more money will always assist, but these agencies have found the money for other projects, so really it's a question of priorities. Why have Ramsar environmental issues been ranked so lowly on government and agency agendas?

As an example, Parks Victoria recently found the money to rebadge all State Game Reserves with new signage featuring information and graphics about shooting (see photo attached). These appeared at the Kerang Ramsar wetlands, among others. Such signs would discourage any non-shooting tourists. Why was this a more pressing project than fulfilling their Ramsar duties?

Other examples are provided by the VAGO report on pages 17 and 18. Where Ramsar management plans were found to exist, they rarely addressed risks from recreational activity or climate change:

“Recreational activities such as fishing and gaming [an apparent euphemism for duck shooting] provide social value but may pose a threat to ecological character. The impact of these threats was not identified in most management plans. Ducks are hunted at many sites, including at

Lake Murdeduke and Lake Colongulac, part of the Western District Lakes site. One of the site's environmental values, identified in the management plan, is supporting waterbird habitat. However, the potential impacts of duck hunting – such as the accidental shooting of protected species and disturbances to habitat and fauna – have not been assessed.”

Duck shooters gloss over the “accidental” shooting of protected species. After all, it can be a jailable offence under Victoria’s Wildlife Act 1975. Community volunteers go to wetlands (risking fines) to retrieve and assist wounded waterbirds and they report regular wounding of protected species and trashing of nests and habitat as a result of shooter activity. Shooters dismiss such eye-witness accounts by denigrating these volunteers as “protestors”.

It’s also interesting to note that the VAGO report has apparently accepted without question the assertion that duck shooting has “social value”. Which agencies said that?

Some of the tiny 0.4 per cent of Victorians who hold a duck shooting licence may claim such social value, but almost half (45%) of them didn’t bother to go duck shooting at all last year (GMA statistic). The statement about ‘social value’ is highly contentious. Regional residents resent the noise and disruption to their homes, families and businesses every shooting season. Duck shooting deters other tourists, and a recent federal survey agreed that if duck shooting were banned, there would be no economic loss to the state because the money would be spent on other activities.²

Those of us concerned about the fate of waterbirds (and their habitat) during duck shooting seasons have come to realise that some key personnel in the relevant agencies (DELWP, CMAs, Parks Victoria) are duck shooters themselves. There is serious concern about conflicts of interest.

The VAGO report speaks of the urgent need to improve governance. In the private sector, decision makers are expected to disclose any conflicts of interest and step aside from a decision process if the outcome is likely to affect

² See page 1 of the federal survey report, [https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/ADE1F41517817F2ACA2584770015A21D/\\$File/Report-Economic-and-social-impacts-of-recreational-hunting-and-shooting.pdf](https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/ADE1F41517817F2ACA2584770015A21D/$File/Report-Economic-and-social-impacts-of-recreational-hunting-and-shooting.pdf)

them personally. Why doesn't the same standard of transparency and ethics apply in the public sector? Why aren't staff who deal with wetlands required to disclose whether or not they are licensed duck shooters?

4. Level playing field?

State agencies are under even more pressure to yield to shooters since the Game Management Authority (GMA) was established as a taxpayer-subsidised promoter of hunting in 2014. The Minister responsible for its establishment, Peter Walsh, is a member of hunting lobby group Field & Game Australia (FGA)³ although he doesn't disclose this on the parliamentary Register of Interests. The GMA is currently chaired by a duck shooter, Brian Hine. Conflicts of interest?

Although the Andrews government won power in 2014, they continued the pro-shooting programs of the previous government and added to them. Under the \$5.4m Sustainable Hunting Action Plan (2016) the GMA is given a co-ordinating role across agencies. So we now have a taxpayer-funded advocate for shooters. Where is the level playing field? We don't have a taxpayer-funded advocate for our waterbirds.

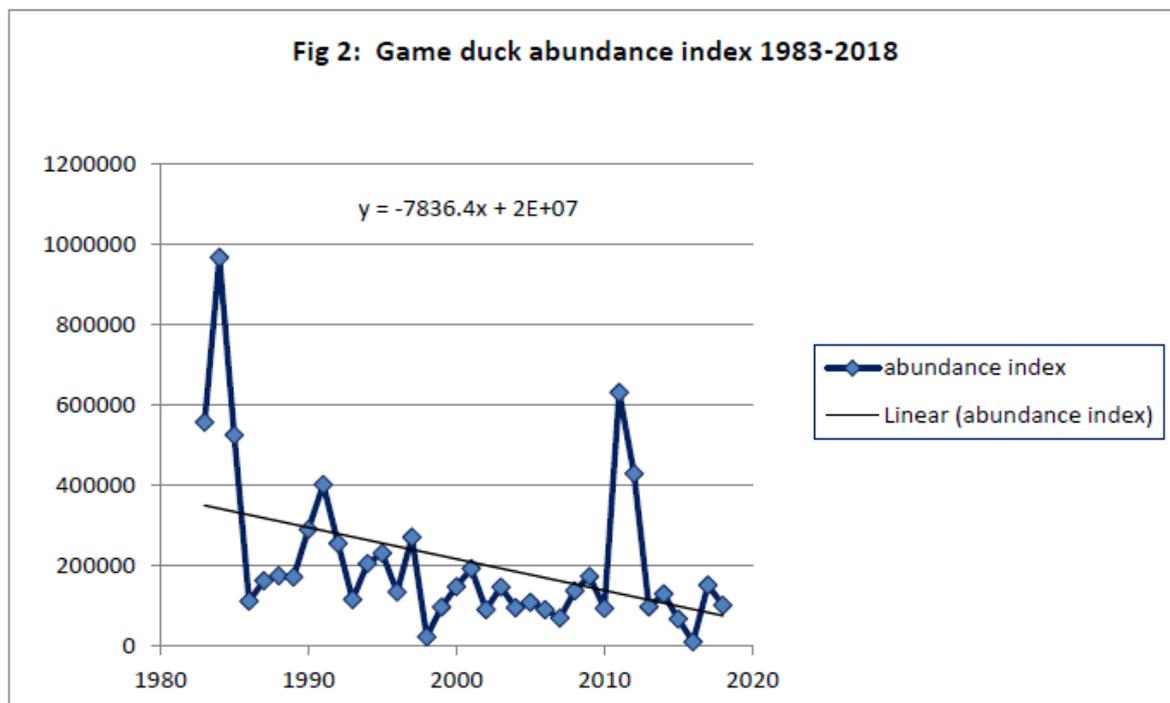
Government agencies have failed abysmally over many years to carry out their Ramsar responsibilities. The idea of letting them say: "Leave it to us, we'll do better next time" is as practical as trying to fix a broken relationship with: "Please take me back, I promise I'll change". These agencies have demonstrated one thing clearly: they don't respect our Ramsar international commitments; they don't care about our waterbirds; they are effectively in league with the shooters.

The one agency which does seem to have managed its responsibilities well – despite little support at state and federal level – is Melbourne Water. I would like to commend them on the work they have done at Edithvale-Seaford and also at their Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula sites. They actually monitor bird numbers there regularly.

³ Scroll down on his link until you see a list of FGA members – including Peter Walsh - who stood for election in Nov 2018: <https://www.fieldandgame.com.au/2018/11/22/1365276/victorian-election-update>

5. Changes to ecological character

The most damning change to ecological character is the loss of waterbird abundance over recent decades. The following graph⁴ shows the result of annual aerial surveys across eastern Australia by Prof Kingsford's team:



There is a clear decline in abundance, and the 2019 figures, which are not yet available, are going to be far worse, according to verbal reports from Kingsford's aerial survey team.

No one tells the waterbirds whether to go to Ramsar wetlands or other wetlands. This dramatic species decline is general, so it does apply to Ramsar abundance. Yet it seems the responsible agencies have not seen fit to note this or report this shocking decline in abundance as required by the Ramsar Convention. According to page 4 of the VAGO report, the federal Department of Environment & Energy represents Australia at the triennial Conference of Parties and collates a national report for these meetings. It seems to me that they must be misrepresenting the true situation when they make their reports.

⁴ From a submission by Animals Australia to the GMA, December 2018 – available on GMA website.

That in itself is concerning from the point of view of Australia's reputation as a global citizen.

Climate change is going to be a fact of life, sadly, even though the GMA is yet to mention its name in its deliberations about duck seasons. Climate change and duck shooting are simply incompatible.

6. Ramsar Tourism

If only the pro-shooting personnel were removed from the decision-making, Victoria could become a mecca for wetlands tourism.

Some restoration work would be required for degraded wetlands, but this could be funded from savings if we no longer had to subsidise duck shooting. We are facing more regular, more serious droughts, but well-designed tourist centres could showcase our landscape during all the powerful cycles of nature: from crippling drought through to torrential rain, and the regeneration of life that comes with water. That tourism could be all-year-round, every year, as opposed to a maximum of 3 months for duck shooting (often less, as drier times have become the norm).

Overseas tourists in particular are amazed at the light and the vastness of our landscapes, and the clean air we offer.

Once again, Melbourne Water is leading the way, with good tours already available at its Werribee wetlands.

7. CONCLUSIONS

- a) There is little to be gained from relying on promises by the negligent parties to do better next time. We need a new statutory authority responsible for conservation of all wetlands – Ramsar and others - and the flora and fauna they sustain.
- b) Duck shooting should be permanently banned as inconsistent with Ramsar responsibilities and the threat of climate change.

- c) Staff and politicians involved in decisions about wetlands should be required to declare whether they are licensed duck shooters.

- d) Victoria has enormous potential as a Ramsar tourism destination. That should be our focus and goal to bring economic benefits to regional communities. The economic claims of duck shooting have been largely discredited.