

Echuca and District Branch Bird Observation & Conservation Australia



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Forest Assessment
Natural Resources Commission
GPO Box 4206
SYDNEY 2001

Re: River Red Gum wetlands assessment

The Echuca and District Branch of Bird Observation & Conservation Australia has about 75 members and we take an interest not only in observing birds but in the retention and enhancement of bird habitats. Our members reside in various localities in southern (Riverina) NSW and northern Victoria.

Much of our birding is in red gum forests and associated wetlands, e.g. Barmah-Millewa Forest, Perricoota-Koondrook Forest and red gum wetlands around Deniliquin.

Over recent years, the Victorian Environment Assessment Council (VEAC) has conducted an enquiry into the red gum wetlands on the Victorian side of the border. VEAC has made a number of recommendations, some of which were amended by a Ministerial Panel. We made submissions to VEAC and to the Panel. In general, we are reasonably happy with the recommendations as they stand and hope that legislation to create new parks and reserves will be passed in the next Victorian parliamentary session. In our submissions, we stressed the need for good management, increased on-ground staff and adequate finance. We argued against cattle grazing but supported the use of sheep to help manage grassland areas and to ensure the grassland conditions were kept suitable for the endangered Plains-wanderer and other 'grassland species'.

Red gum wetlands provide important habitat for a range of birds as well as plants and other animals, some of which are locally endangered.

As many of the red gum wetlands straddle the NSW/Victorian border, we feel that it would be wise to have joint and coordinated management of these forests and wetlands. We were impressed with the now-defunct Barmah-Millewa Forum which brought together representatives of agencies and users from both sides of the border and from the Commonwealth. For better or worse, that body has been wound up.

Where national parks or conservation reserves are declared on the Victorian side of the border, it might be appropriate to consider creating reserves adjacent to them, in NSW.

In particular, we feel that much of Gulpa Island and parts of the Moira, Millewa and Perricoota Forests should become reserves. We are not happy with cattle grazing in these forests, particularly during drought times or when native grasses are in flower. Because cattle eat selectively, cattle are having an adverse impact on species diversity. By ignoring flammable plants like Giant Rush in favour of more palatable grasses, cattle do little to reduce the spread of this flammable plant, i.e. cattle may be increasing the fire risk. The proximity of cattle to watercourses which supply drinking water is unacceptable.

We support present projects which involve fencing along Gunbower Creek and some of the tributaries of the Murray River, fences designed to keep cattle away from stream banks. In forests like Millewa and Perricoota this is difficult due to the flat nature of the terrain and flooding.

Before European settlement, much of the red gum wetlands adjacent to the Murray River flooded in late spring, the floodwaters drowning young red gum saplings which had sprouted on lower areas of land since the previous year's flood. One result was extensive Moira Grass plains and swampy areas which provided ideal habitat for a range of birds, including Brolga. Whereas once there were thousands of Brolga in Barmah-Millewa and Perricoota-Koondrook forests, today they are seldom, if ever, observed in these forests.

Because of river regulation and climate change, floods are now less common and not as deep. Many saplings now survive and, along with Giant Rush (*Jucus ingens*), are taking over from the Moira Grass. On marginally higher areas, many red gums are stressed or dead.

Adequate environmental water releases and good management are needed to alleviate these problems, to maintain the health of red gums and to protect remaining areas of Moira Grass plain. Fire (controlled ecological burns) is a tool which might be used to help control Giant Rush and sapling growth.

Whilst we are keen that bird rich areas like Kate Malone Bend, the Reed Beds and Langmans Sandhill are declared reserves ~ *we recognize the existence of Moira Lakes Flora Reserve, the Reed Beds Exclosure, Langmans Sandhill Exclosure and other and smaller exclosures but would like the size of these increased* ~ we recognize that some areas of red gum forest (as distinct from pine or box forest) should remain available for timber harvesting.

Judging from the opposition to the VEAC recommendations, any attempt to make the entire forest system a huge national park is likely to result in strident opposition, especially from those who have enjoyed long-term commercial use of the forest. Such opposition could defeat any attempt to create large national park/s.

The timber industry is important in several local towns, including Barham-Koondrook. High value-added forestry products such as furniture and veneer might be encouraged; in general, trees should not be cut merely for firewood. Habitat trees should be left in each coup. Clear felling is not desirable. Cutting trees alongside billabongs and water courses should not be permitted ~ this is happening (e.g. alongside some billabongs in Gullpa Island) ~ and better enforcement of the rules is needed.

Ironically, perhaps, there has been relatively little opposition to the creation of such 'exclosures' as the Reed Beds Exclosure where the community banded together to help construct a magnificent new bird observation structure and associated elevated redgum walkway.

Apart from the exclosures and flora reserves, there are no red gum wetland national parks in the Moama-Deniliquin area. This area attracts many tourists, many of them weekend visitors from Melbourne. Creating more reserves may benefit the tourist industry in the long run and help protect good habitat for birds, other wildlife and indigenous plants. But, at the present time, it would unwise to declare all the forests national park.

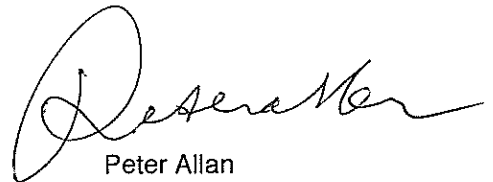
We support the creation of more parks and reserves in the area but feel that some forest areas should remain available for timber harvesting. Grazing (e.g. by sheep) may be appropriate at times in certain places and at certain times at the behest of park managers.

Most importantly, there is a need for adequate on-ground staff, adequate finance and good management. Management plans need be carefully and scientifically prepared/revised to promote good ecological outcomes.

Yours sincerely,



Keith Stockwell
Secretary



Peter Allan
President