

Submission

**Victorian
Port Phillip Bay and Bellarine Peninsula Ramsar Site Boundary
Review**

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Animal Justice Party

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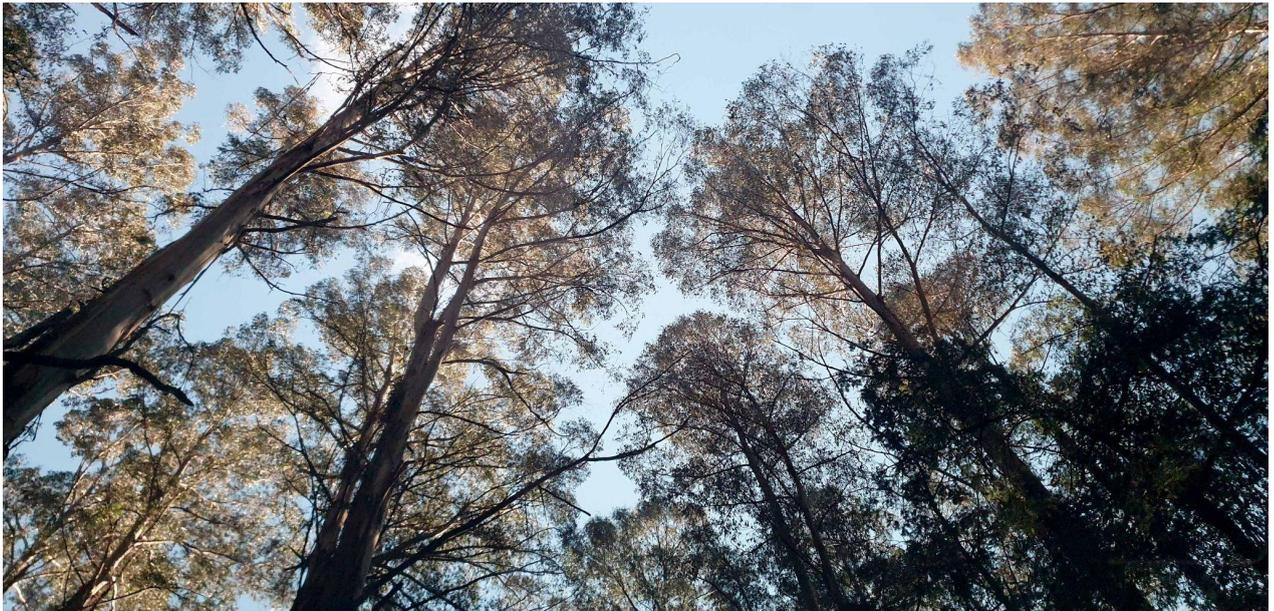
The Animal Justice Party 2021

Images

Front cover: Resident birds from the Lake Connewarre Ramsar site *Michelle Crilly 2021*

This Page: Mount Ash Forest, Kinglake, *Dr Nadine Richings © 2020*

The Animal Justice Party acknowledges the First Nations peoples as the custodians of the land on which we live and work.



About the Animal Justice Party

The Animal Justice Party (the AJP) is a political party established in 2009 to secure the interests of animals and nature through Australia's democratic institutions of government. Our vision is a planet on which animals and nature have the right to live and thrive free from negative human interference and a human society which functions with kindness and compassion within its ecological limits as a responsible member of the Earth community.

The AJP seeks to foster respect, kindness, and compassion towards all species particularly in the way governments design and deliver initiatives, and the manner in which these initiatives function.

In New South Wales the AJP has two elected representatives in the Legislative Council of NSW, Mark Pearson MLC and Emma Hurst MLC and a councillor in local government, Councillor Matt Stellino. In Victoria, the AJP has an elected representative in the Legislative Council, Andy Meddick MLC, and a councillor in Local Government, Councillor Julie Sloan.

This submission was prepared by the Victorian Submissions Working Group within the AJP. The working group makes this submission on behalf of the AJP with the approval and the endorsement of the Board of Directors.

Introduction

The AJP wants to increase biodiversity and to promote practices that enable a flourishing native bird population, coexisting with humans throughout Australia.

The AJP recognises the importance that biodiversity plays for birdlife (and all other life) on our planet. Australian ecosystems are vital for the survival of internationally significant migratory species. Many areas of wetland and coast provide key habitats for these migratory species, so loss of biodiversity in Australia has ramifications that extend beyond our borders.

The AJP supports maximal preservation of native bird habitat, including in residential areas.¹

¹ https://www.animaljusticeparty.org/native_birds

This consultation considers eleven wetland areas that have been proposed for addition to the Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula Ramsar Site by stakeholders. The wetlands are located across the Altona and Werribee regions and their inclusion into the Ramsar system would require an extension of current boundaries.

As urban sprawl and land clearing for agriculture remove ever-increasing amounts of natural habitat, it becomes increasingly important to ensure that wetland areas are afforded a greater level of protection to provide safe habitat for our native and migratory bird species.

Our submission tackles this consultation by discussing the importance of expanding our current Ramsar site boundaries to create new protected and managed habitat for native and migratory birds and by highlighting specific characteristics of some of the proposed sites. Our submission is structured following the survey questions proposed by the consultation; recommendations are provided throughout our submission.

This submission is guided by our mission and vision and underpinned by our policies. The AJP has policies on animals, environment and human issues². Our policies on duck shooting³, native birds⁴, wildlife care⁵, and wildlife protection⁶ are particularly relevant to this consultation.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this consultation.

1. Which of the following wetland areas would you like to see added to the Ramsar Site?

As Australia continues to see the decline in population of species⁷, it is vitally important that natural habitat is not only maintained, but extended, in an effort to prevent further species decline. All areas listed for consideration in this consultation should be added to the existing Ramsar site, as it would benefit the diversity of species that utilise these spaces. This includes:

- Altona Coastal Park, Paisley/Challis Wetlands and Jawbone Marine Sanctuary and Flora and Fauna Reserve
- Point Cook Cheetham Coastal Park and Marine Sanctuary
- Grahams Reserve Wetland Conservation Reserve
- Point Wilson
- Avalon Coastal Reserve
- Moolap Point Henry

² Animal Justice Party *Policies* <https://animaljusticeparty.org/policies/>

³ https://assets.nationbuilder.com/ajp/pages/765/attachments/original/1646622683/duck_shooting_SA.pdf?1646622683

⁴ https://www.animaljusticeparty.org/native_birds

⁵ <https://assets.nationbuilder.com/ajp/pages/759/attachments/original/1646620449/Wildlife-care.pdf?1646620449>

⁶ <https://assets.nationbuilder.com/ajp/pages/761/attachments/original/1646621192/Wildlife-Protection.pdf?1646621192>

⁷ <https://www.wwf.org.au/news/news/2020/world-wildlife-populations-fall-68-australia-contributes-to-decline>

- Lake Connewarre Complex State Game Reserve
 - Breamlea Karaaf Flora and Fauna Reserve
 - Lonsdale Lakes/Lake Victoria Wildlife Reserve
 - St Leonards/Salt Lagoon Wildlife Reserve
 - Edwards Point – Swan Bay Wildlife Reserve and Coastal Reserve including Sand and Swan Islands
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Recommendations:

1. Extend Ramsar sites to include all listed sites as suggested in the submission.
 2. Conduct regular reviews of bird populations at other wetland areas in the region to consider future potential additions to the Ramsar site.
 3. Conduct regular reviews of wildlife populations at other wetland areas in the region to consider future potential additions to the Ramsar site.
 4. Conduct regular reviews of flora and fungal species at other wetland areas in the region to consider future potential additions to the Ramsar site.
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2. What do you value about the wetland areas you selected in Q1?

As a whole, the Bellarine Peninsula has a unique value to Victoria. It is home to a diverse range of wildlife, for example, 172 different bird species⁸ have been observed in the area, including a number of threatened species⁹

Each wetland holds its own value in relation to how they are utilised by threatened and non-threatened species. While each area is vastly different in relation to its biodiversity, each plays a vital role in creating safe environments for birds.

The landscape in the Southeast Bellarine area is intrinsically linked via water flows from Bonnyvale wetlands, through the natural coastal wetlands of the Lake Victoria system and then through to Swan Bay. The Bonnyvale wetlands are home to many bird species; 113 species have been recorded on eBird¹⁰, including various species of crakes, grebes, ibis, cormorants, raptors, honeyeaters and ducks, such as the endangered Freckled Duck. Swan Bay is home to many shorebirds, raptors and other birds; 143 species have been recorded on eBird¹¹, including

⁸ <http://smissen.blogspot.com/p/birds-of-bellarine-peninsula.html>

⁹ <https://bellarinelandcare.org.au/component/content/category/10-blg-flora-and-fauna>

¹⁰ eBird, *Bonnyvale Wetlands*. <https://ebird.org/hotspot/L2548748>

¹¹ eBird, *Swan Bay*. <https://ebird.org/australia/hotspot/L2548763>

threatened White-throated Needletails and White-bellied Sea Eagles and the endangered Shy Albatross, which is impacted by climate change and fishing¹².

Point Henry and the Moolap coastal wetlands provide a summer home for thousands of migratory birds that have flown from as far away as Siberia and the Arctic. Nearly 70 bird species use this area each year, including 22 shorebird species protected by international treaties. The area is a vital habitat for the orange-bellied parrot, Australasian bittern and fairy wren which are all threatened species. One of the largest areas of seagrass in Port Phillip Bay is along the shoreline¹³.

Each of the wetlands operates, not in isolation but as part of a chain or network of sites that species move between according to need. This continual movement provides for an exchange of biodiversity across these areas and thus they cannot truly be regarded singularly. Protections for the sites across the whole region are therefore essential, as the damages to one can ripple out into the others. Pockets of protection are no longer sufficient for migratory species that need a chain of alternatives to move between, as the environment continues to become more unpredictable.

For humans, these wetlands provide rare opportunities to engage with unique and amazing wildlife, some that travel vast distances across the globe. Wetland environments thriving with wildlife can provide much needed mental health retreats for us in an increasingly fraught world, and Australians continue to value our connection to nature as one of the most important aspects in quality of life.

Recommendations:

5. Provide opportunities for community engagement with the Ramsar sites to promote an improved appreciation of their importance and to increase human wellbeing .
6. Consider community engagement activities such as clean up days and tree planting days.
7. Investigate the viability of employing citizen science projects such as 'Waterwatch'.
8. Provide education within the local community regarding the significance of Ramsar sites and conservation of biodiversity and natural habitat. Expand education about the value of native birds and their interactions within ecosystems¹⁴.

¹²Burgess G (2020) 'Endangered' status for shy albatross, recognising threats from climate change and fishing. ABC News Online. 28 June 2020. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-28/shy-albatross-gains-endangered-species-listing/12395140>

¹³ <https://vnpa.org.au/moolap-and-point-henry/>

¹⁴ <http://animaljusticeparty.org/policieslist/animals/native-birds/>

3. How do you think management would change at these wetland areas if they were added to the Ramsar site?

These sites already perform as de facto Ramsar wetlands given their natural support for threatened and migratory species. Currently, the management of these sites has no regard for the Ramsar convention and the protections afforded to these species are incidental and not protected for the long-term. Inclusion in the Ramsar listings extends the strategic planning of the land managers to this greater level of protection and international responsibility.

A wide array of other species – plant, mammal and reptile – are also present at these sites, many of which are listed as vulnerable or endangered. Australia is already the location of the greatest number of species extinctions – an international reputation that no one wants – in a country with some of the greatest diversity of unique flora and fauna. Including these wetlands under the Ramsar listing will help increase protections for these species for the long term. Such protection is vital for the ecosystems of Australia; and would shift our international reputation away from being a country where extinction is rampant to one where there is a great effort to protect our natural heritage.

It is possible that the inclusion of these sites in the Ramsar list could have the added benefit of increasing human patronage and concern for the areas, through greater education and public outreach.

Management of all Ramsar areas, including those to be added, needs improving in general to fully live up to the obligations under the convention. Use of the wetlands as recreational hunting areas does not, in our submission, live up to the ideals of the convention and does not afford sufficient protections for endangered and migratory species. Such species can be harmed from the sounds of gunfire in these wetlands even when they are not the target species. They can abandon feeding or breeding grounds, they can suffer trauma and shock, and in the worst case, as has been demonstrated for many decades, they can become unintended victims of gunshot through mistaken identity or willful illegal behaviour on the part of duck shooters.

Even if recreational duck shooting could once have been considered a sustainable activity within a Ramsar site, the progression of the effects of climate change and drastic, continuing decline in bird species numbers clearly show that it is no longer a marginal activity, but one that can swiftly threaten the viability of a vulnerable species.

Evidence from the Pegasus Report of 2017 shows that the activity has not been properly and effectively enforced, allowing for major breaches in the standards of protection the public would expect for Ramsar sites especially. We would argue that there is no evidence of improvement on the performance of the Game Management Authority in the intervening years.

Management of all Ramsar areas should be updated to exclude all shooting activities.

Recommendations:

9. Increase public education and awareness of newly listed Ramsar sites.
 10. Exclude all shooting activities from Ramsar sites as being incompatible with the sustainability of threatened migratory species, as was the original intention of the convention.
 11. Reduce human appropriation of native bird habitat¹⁵.
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4. Do you have any relevant data from these wetland areas (e.g., bird monitoring data) that could assist in the detailed assessment process to follow?

A partner organisation, Geelong Duck Rescue, regularly attends the Connewarre wetlands in the region between January and June each year. We are able to provide photographic evidence of threatened and endangered species such as Brolgas, Australasian Bitterns and Magpie Geese within the region utilising wetlands, particularly in 2021-2022.

These species, being sighted at an existing Ramsar wetland, thrive when they are supported by a chain of local wetlands offering similar support. They do not, and are not expected to, thrive with single sites in isolation. The more wetlands that are brought up to the protections of the Ramsar convention, the greater their opportunities for survival in the long term.

Recommendations:

12. Promote citizen science opportunities such as summer/winter birdcounts, or 'backyard' bird counts¹⁶ to gather valuable data and engage the local community.
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5. Do you have any other comments on this engagement?

The AJP believes that protecting Victoria's threatened species and ecological communities within and beyond the Bellarine Peninsula's boundaries is important, to ensure that we have a local area rich in biodiversity, clean air, healthy waterways, and a safe haven for wildlife. In short, we must protect the health and wellbeing of the planet. Massive declines in biodiversity and increased human contact with wildlife also increases the risk of creating conditions for

¹⁵ <http://animaljusticeparty.org/policieslist/animals/native-birds/>

¹⁶ <https://aussiebirdcount.org.au/>

pandemics^{17,18}, as seen on a global scale in 2020. Three major crises are threatening life on Earth: biodiversity emergency, climate emergency and emerging diseases^{17,18,19}.

The *United Nations Global Biodiversity Outlook 5* report recognises the biodiversity emergency and that we need to act with urgency to modify our actions in key areas²⁰. It identifies 8 critical transitions that are required to shift to a "sustainable coexistence with nature". If Australia, Victoria and Bellarine can act with urgency to employ this plan, we will be well-placed to preserve biodiversity and ecosystems and support the health and well-being of all Australians and Victorians, regardless of species. The 8 transitions are:

1. The land and forests transition: conserve intact ecosystems, restore ecosystems, combat and reverse degradation, and avoid and reduce land-use change.
2. The sustainable fisheries and oceans transition: protect and restore marine and coastal ecosystems, and manage all ocean activities to ensure sustainability.
3. The sustainable freshwater transition: an integrated approach to guarantee water for nature and people, improve water quality, protect critical habitats, control introduced species and safeguard connectivity to allow the recovery of freshwater systems from mountains to coasts.
4. The sustainable agriculture transition: redesign agricultural systems through agro-ecological and biodiversity-sensitive practices.
5. The sustainable food systems transition: enable sustainable and healthy diets with an emphasis on diverse foods, mostly plant-based, and reduce consumption of animal products and production of waste.
6. The biodiversity-inclusive One Health transition: manage ecosystems, including agricultural and urban ecosystems and wildlife, through an integrated approach to promote healthy ecosystems and healthy people.
7. The sustainable climate action transition: employing nature-based solutions, alongside a rapid phase-out of fossil fuel use, to reduce the scale and impacts of climate change, while providing positive benefits for biodiversity and other sustainable development goals.
8. The cities and infrastructure transition: deploy 'green infrastructure' and make space for nature within built landscapes to improve the health and quality of life for citizens and to reduce the environmental footprint of cities and infrastructure.

¹⁷ Grandcolas P. & Justine J-L. (2020) COVID-19 or the pandemic of mistreated biodiversity. *The Conversation* 30/4/2020 <https://theconversation.com/covid-19-or-the-pandemic-of-mistreated-biodiversity-136447>

¹⁸ Armstrong F. Capon A. & McFarlane R. (2020) Coronavirus is a wake-up call: Our war with the environment is leading to pandemics. *The Conversation* 31/3/2020 <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-is-a-wake-up-call-our-war-with-the-environment-is-leading-to-pandemics-135023>

¹⁹ IPBES (2020) Workshop Report on Biodiversity and Pandemics of the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. Daszak, P., das Neves, C., Amuasi, J., Hayman, D., Kuiken, T., Roche, B., Zambrana-Torrel, C., Buss, P., Dundarova, H., Feferholtz, Y., Foldvari, G., Igbino, E., Junglen, S., Liu, Q., Suzan, G., Uhart, M., Wannous, C., Woolaston, K., Mosig Reidl, P., O'Brien, K., Pascual, U., Stoett, P., Li, H., Ngo, H. T., IPBES secretariat, Bonn, Germany, DOI:10.5281/zenodo.4147317

²⁰ Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (2020) *Global Biodiversity Outlook 5*. Montreal. <https://www.cbd.int/gbo/gbo5/publication/gbo-5-en.pdf>

Extending the boundaries of the current Port Phillip Bay and Bellarine Peninsula Ramsar site to include the 11 sites under current consideration will not only provide supporting habitat for native and migratory bird species, but will also play an important role in preserving and maintaining biodiversity within Victoria.

Recommendations:

13. Act with urgency to develop and employ a system-based plan to address the eight transition pathways identified in the *United Nations Global Biodiversity Outlook 5* report.
 14. Introduce habitat protection as a fundamental and consistent planning principle in all regions and sectors.
 15. Expand education about the value of native birds and their interactions within ecosystems²¹.
 16. Increase support for long-term monitoring of the health of native bird populations²².
 17. Ensure that any plans for the Ramsar site that potentially affect the Aboriginal community are identified early and prioritised for discussion and consultation.
 18. Encourage increased growth in, and support for, respectful, sustainable, wildlife-based tourism across the Ramsar site²³.
 19. Further support initiatives aimed at identifying and proposing sites for inclusion on the list of Wetlands of International Importance under the Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, 1971), for the implementation of international treaties that relate to the protection of migratory birds, such as the Japan-Australia Migratory Bird Agreement, the China-Australia Migratory Bird Agreement, and the Republic of Korea-Australia Migratory Bird Agreement²⁴.
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Conclusion

There are many benefits and no disadvantages to increasing Ramsar sites across Port Phillip Bay and the Bellarine Peninsula. Australia's commitment, as a global citizen, to the protections afforded vulnerable and migratory birds is essential for the survival of many species, and other nations would be rightly disappointed in Australia if we fail to make these protections available to as many sites as possible. We currently face the greatest decline in species globally, but even more so here in Victoria. The Ramsar convention aims to conserve and enhance remaining wetlands through wise use and careful management. It is our responsibility to fulfil these obligations in Australia.

²¹ <http://animaljusticeparty.org/policieslist/animals/native-birds/>

²² <http://animaljusticeparty.org/policieslist/animals/native-birds/>

²³ <https://animaljusticeparty.org/policieslist/environment/wildlife-and-sustainability/>

²⁴ <http://animaljusticeparty.org/policieslist/animals/native-birds/>