

Ramsar Convention

Wetlands are Important

Australian
Nature
Conservation
Agency

Wetlands are among the most important life support systems on earth. Yet over half of Australia's wetlands have been destroyed since European settlement. Those that remain are some of our most threatened natural areas.

What are wetlands?

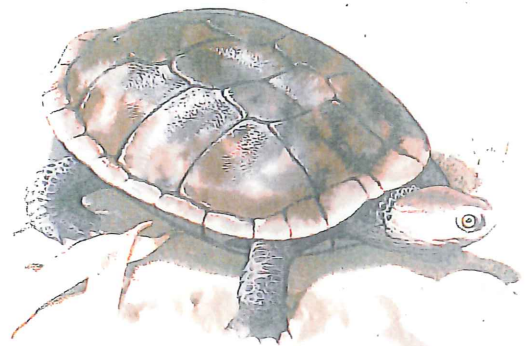
Wetlands can be broadly defined as areas featuring permanent or temporary shallow open water. This includes billabongs, marshes, swamps, lakes, mud flats, mangrove forests, virtually any land which is regularly or intermittently inundated with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish, or salt, including areas of marine water which does not exceed a depth six metres at low tide.

Some wetlands are valued landscapes because of their scenic beauty and popularity as recreational sites. However their attractive appearance can ironically lead to their demise by overuse (trampling, boating, noise, pollution, over-fishing etc). More generally, wetlands have acquired a poor image, frequently the setting for dark and murky deeds in literature and often referred to as dangerous or worthless, mosquito infested places.

Why conserve wetlands?

Wetlands are not only among the world's most productive environments, in the developing world they are essential in supporting human populations and their continuing loss or deterioration is a major global concern. Wetlands are important because:

- * they are breeding grounds for many animals especially fish and waterbirds - the billion dollar commercial and recreational fishing industries in Australia depend on the health of wetland areas



*Above: The Western Swamp Tortoise (*Pseudemys umbrina*) an endangered species, will become extinct unless habitats are protected.*

Photo: ESU photo library ANCA

Below left: Wetlands support large breeding colonies of waterbirds such as this Ibis colony, which can help to control insect numbers on nearby farming lands.

Photo: Andrew Corrick

- * they are vital habitats for the survival of many species, some of them in danger of extinction such as the Western Swamp Tortoise, the Orange-bellied Parrot, the White-bellied Frog, the Honey Blue-eye Fish and the Tasmanian Mountain Shrimp
- * they support wildlife which can help control insect pests on farms
- * they help to purify water by acting like 'kidneys' along waterways, trapping sediments and nutrients
- * they provide protection from floods by absorbing and slowly releasing water
- * they protect the coastal shoreline from the effects of waves
- * they reduce erosion on farms and in urban areas
- * they are natural fire-breaks
- * they are important drought refuges for livestock and wildlife
- * they provide places for a range of recreational activities such as swimming, fishing and boating.