

ATTACHMENT A:

Comments re the Victorian Auditor-General's Report No 202: Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands (2016)

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

This Convention is often abbreviated to “the Ramsar Convention”. Note that the full title of the Convention has special emphasis on the **waterfowl habitat** so damaged by the threats listed in the Auditor-General's Report No 202 (‘the VAGO report’)¹.

Climate change is one of those threats – not easily dealt with. However **one of those threats – duck shooting – is easy to eliminate if politicians choose to ban it**. Our major states and territories have banned it already. There is overwhelming community support for a ban in Victoria (87% according to a 2007 Roy Morgan poll)².

Victoria's Ramsar wetlands are in a sorry state due to neglect by all levels of government and as a result: *“A consequence of the declining health of wetlands is the decline or loss of many bird... species.”*³

Waterbird abundance was a key factor for Victoria's Ramsar listings, according to Prof Richard Kingsford (UNSW). In section 3 below, it is clear that this **waterbird abundance has been decimated over the last four decades**. Yet recreational shooting is still permitted on Ramsar wetlands.

2. Conflicts of interest

Although funding constraints have contributed to the widespread failure to manage our Ramsar responsibilities, the responsible agencies – with the notable exception of Melbourne Water – appear to have given low priority to funding their Ramsar responsibilities.

¹ <https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/20160914-Ramsar-Wetlands.pdf> - VAGO report - page 1, accessed 14.4.2020

² <http://www.roymorgan.com/findings/finding-4239-201302262309> accessed 14.4.2020

³ VAGO report, page 2

Where Ramsar management plans exist, they fail to address risks from duck shooting:

“Recreational activities such as fishing and gaming 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.”⁴

The “accidental” shooting of protected species is a serious offence under Victoria’s *Wildlife Act 1975*. Our CADS volunteers regularly find wounded and dead protected species at wetlands, as well as damage to habitat from shooter activity. Our Attachment B, page 38, outlines a scandalous massacre of protected species at a Ramsar wetland in 2017. Regulatory authorities were in attendance but failed to prevent this illegal activity.

The above statement about alleged “social value” of duck shooting is misleading. In fact, regional residents report significant economic and social loss from gunshot noise that disrupts animals, families, businesses and tourism every shooting season.

As discussed in Section 4 of our submission, it seems that some of the decision-makers in the relevant agencies are duck shooters themselves. There are serious concerns about conflicts of interest.

There is an urgent need to improve governance. Personnel who deal with wetlands should be required to disclose whether or not they are licensed duck shooters, and step back from the decision-making if they have a potential conflict.

In general, Victoria’s government agencies have failed over many years to address their Ramsar responsibilities. In this way they have demonstrated a

⁴ VAGO report, page 18

lack of respect for the environment and for our Ramsar international commitments.

However, Melbourne Water has shown exemplary commitment to its Ramsar sites - they are well maintained, with regular monitoring of waterbird numbers. As a consequence, these sites attract birdwatchers from across the globe as well as local tours that educate the public re the value of these precious species and habitats. **Eco-tourism has enormous economic potential.**

3. Waterbird population decline

Waterbird abundance has dropped by 90 per cent in eastern Australia over recent decades.⁵ The following graph⁶ is taken from a recent submission by Animals Australia to the GMA, and it shows the results of annual aerial surveys by Prof Kingsford's team:

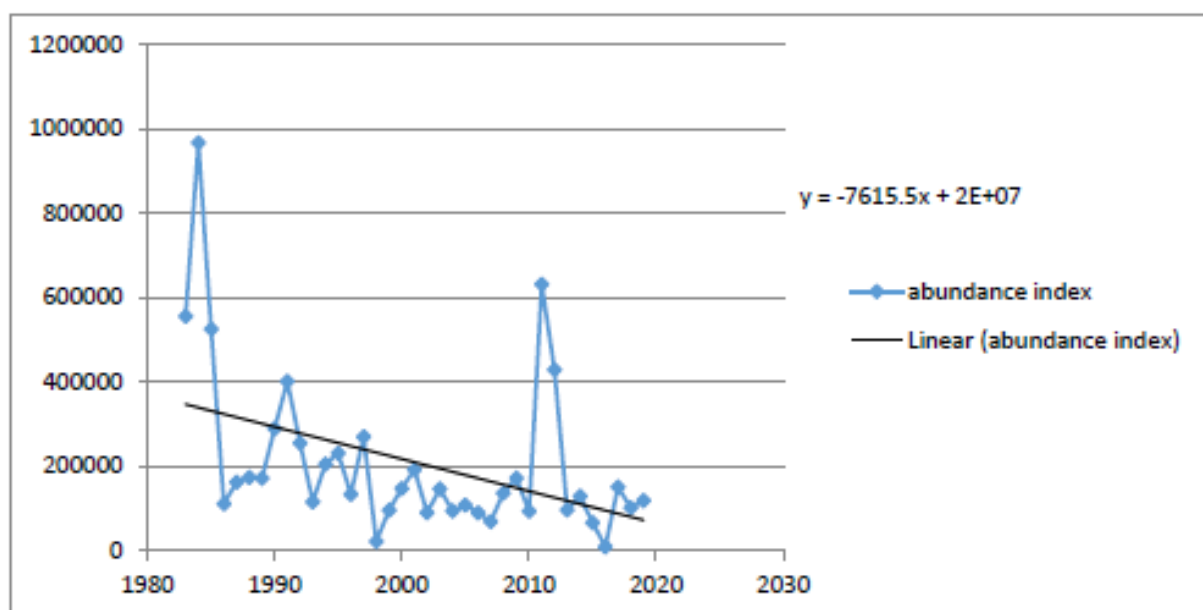


Figure 14. Game Duck abundance index: 1983-2019. Long-term trend of decline for all game species combined. Animals Australia performed this regression analysis for the annual EAWS data on game duck abundance.

As waterbirds move freely across eastern Australia, **this dramatic decline also applies to our Ramsar abundance.** The Commonwealth Environmental Water

⁵ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-11-19/drought-and-water-policy-to-blame-for-water-bird-decline/11715412>

⁶ From a submission by Animals Australia to the GMA, December 2019 – available on GMA website: https://www.gma.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/504604/Animals-Australia-Submission-to-2020-duck-season-arrangements.pdf.

Office at the Department of Environment & Energy is responsible for Australia's Ramsar commitment. This role includes (inter alia):

- leading the development of national guidance on and approaches to implementing the Ramsar Convention in Australia
- working with state and territory governments to promote the conservation of Ramsar sites and wise use of all wetlands and to review the condition of Ramsar sites
- representing Australia at the triennial Conference of Parties and collating the national report for these meetings. ⁷

Do they report the damning situation of our Ramsar wetlands with the long-term decline of their waterbird abundance?

Climate change is a key factor in this decline. **Climate change and duck shooting are simply incompatible.** The recreational carnage adds to the losses from increasingly adverse environmental conditions. Wetland habitat fell to a record low in eastern Australia last year (Kingsford survey data).

4. Ramsar Tourism

Victoria has the potential to become a mecca for year-round wetlands tourism (compared with a duck shooting season of 3 months or less). Visitor centres can and should display the environmental story of flood and drought cycles, for habitat and wildlife. However, **eco-tourism and duck shooting are incompatible.**

Some restoration work is required for degraded wetlands. This could be funded by the savings if duck shooting – heavily subsidised by taxpayers – was banned.

⁷ VAGO report, page 4