



SHOREBIRD CONSERVATION CONSERVING SHOREBIRD HABITAT: The Milang Wetland Project.



Where

Milang is a small township located approximately 80 km south east of Adelaide on the shores of Lake Alexandrina. This is a largely agricultural region with few large population centres. The wetland in question is located in the middle of the township in between the shopping area and the caravan park and holiday shacks. Along with The Coorong and Lake Albert, Lake Alexandrina is listed under the Ramsar convention which identifies it as wetland of international importance.



The Birds

Lake Alexandrina is an important breeding area for cormorants, grebes and ibis. Some of the more common shorebirds using the area include the red-necked stint, curlew sandpiper and sharp-tailed sandpiper. The Milang Wetland in particular is an important site for Latham's snipe. This threatened species breeds in Japan and eastern Russia and over winters in Australia during our summer.

Who

The Milang Wetland Project has been largely undertaken by a small group of dedicated local volunteers. The group was formed in 1996 and is known as Milang 2005. It seeks to promote and enhance the facilities of the town and has a special interest in conserving the natural environment. In the long term, it aims to restore the health of the local wetland. The group has received encouragement and guidance from Wetland Care Australia. Other organisations involved with this project have included the local council, Conservation Volunteers Australia and various environmental funding agencies.

Problems and challenges

One of the main problems and challenges facing the Milang Wetland was a general lack of awareness and appreciation for it despite the fact that it was located in the center of town. For years it had just been regarded as a "smelly swamp". Because the wetland was not valued it was in danger of being left to further degrade or to be developed inappropriately.

A number of proposals were made to "improve" the area over the years. These included filling in the wetland to extend the caravan park, dredging the area to make way for a historical boat display and linking the wetland to the lake to provide a safe mooring place for boats. None of these proposals eventuated, mainly due to lack of funding, but also due to heavy restrictions placed on any development of the area by government agencies.

Other issues facing the wetland include continuing degradation through the invasion of weeds. Of particular concern is the encroachment of kikuyu grass into the samphire vegetation of the wetland. Being in such a central location in the township, there is also the potential of human disturbance affecting the wetland and the birds which rely on it.



Foreshore sculpture showing wetland wildlife



Solutions

When Milang 2005 were told that their proposed project to connect the wetland to the lake to create a safe mooring facility could not go ahead due to environmental concerns, there was a level of general disappointment. However all was not lost. As the group learnt why the project could not go ahead, they inadvertently became aware of the environmental and conservation values of the small wetland. It became apparent that the wetland was an important frog breeding site, provided habitat for migratory shorebirds and contained significant native vegetation.

Initial frustration soon developed into an increased appreciation and awareness of the important natural feature that the town was lucky enough to have right in its midst. Before long, the “smelly swamp” became known as a “wonderful wetland”.

Now that the community was aware of the significance of the wetland, the next step was to protect and manage it for the future. This is where the partnership between Milang 2005 and Wetland Care Australia helped. Wetland Care Australia was able to offer expertise in issues of wetland management, plant and animal identification, control of pest plants and animals, preparing funding applications and community education programs.

Other important partnerships were forged with Conservation Volunteers Australia which provided a team of young international volunteers to help with on ground works. The group has successfully obtained a number of grants totaling over \$170 000 from a wide range of sources including Alexandrina Council, South Coast Dune Care, Wetland Care Australia and the Australian Government’s Natural Heritage Trust.

Because the wetland is located in such a central and visible site, it provides an ideal opportunity for the broader community to become aware of its value and of the work undertaken to conserve it. This has been further enhanced by putting up interpretive signs and bird hides. Good use was also made of the local media to further spread the group’s message.

To protect the wetland from undue trampling and disturbance, a series of boardwalks, paths and a perimeter fence have been constructed. The group is working to control the spread of weeds in the wetland and developing a monitoring program to measure a range of environmental indicators.

Outcomes for the environment

- The values of the wetland have been recognised and it is now protected from inappropriate development.
- The community is aware of the importance of wetlands and the threats they face.
- Indigenous plants have been used to revegetate portions of the wetland.
- Weed removal and control programs have been implemented to retain the ecological character of the area.
- Interpretive signs highlighting the values of the wetland have been installed.
- Fencing has been constructed to exclude disturbance by people and dogs.
- A monitoring program of water quality, macro-invertebrates, frogs, fish and birds in the wetland has been implemented.

Outcomes for the participants

- The project has created cohesion in the community and given confidence to the members of Milang 2005 to successfully undertake a number of other projects.
- The group has gained experience in compiling successful grant applications.
- Group members have had access to and support from organisations with expertise in wetland management.
- Milang 2005 received a special environmental award from Alexandrina Council in 2004 for their achievements.
- A sense of pride and ownership has been fostered in the local community and it has been demonstrated that a small local project can contribute to conservation on an international scale by providing habitat for migratory shorebirds.

Measures of success

One of the most successful aspects of this project was the way in which it united and empowered the local community to take on a number of different projects around the township. This has had many social benefits such as increasing community cohesion and confidence.

The project participants feel that they have been successful in;

- Building their capacity to successfully initiate and carry out further projects.
- Integrating the local community and other stakeholders to carry out on ground works.

At the moment, there is little environmental data that has been measured to indicate how successful the project has been for shorebird conservation. This partly stems from the fact that this wetland remained unknown and unappreciated for so long. Therefore no monitoring or data collection was carried out before the project commenced. It is of vital importance that the monitoring programs implemented for this project are continued in the long-term future. This will provide the best source of information as to how successful the project has been from an ecological point of view.

Future strategies and directions

- A plant nursery has been established to provide indigenous plant stock for future projects and revegetation work.
- An environmental walking track and education centre are under construction.
- A recycling centre has been established with profits to be used to fund other environmental works in the district
- Results of monitoring programs will be made available to the Murray Catchment Water Management Board.



Volunteers constructing boardwalk



Crossing the road



Milang wetland





Summary

The Milang Wetland Project has been able to achieve important conservation outcomes because;

A recognition of the natural values of the wetland developed

Local people were persistent and enthusiastic in getting behind the project

Support and expertise were provided by professional organisations

Every opportunity to raise awareness of the project and engage the media and broader community was taken

Important objectives for the project in the future include;

Developing and conducting a long term monitoring program of project outcomes

Maintaining the momentum and enthusiasm of the local community in undertaking further projects

Key groups and contacts

Birds Australia
Tel (03) 9882 2622
Email: mail@birdsaustralia.com
Website: www.birdsaustralia.com.au

WWF Australia (Shorebird Conservation Project and Threatened Species Network)
Freecall 1800 032 551
Website: www.wwf.org.au

Wetland Care Australia
Tel: (02) 66816069
Website: www.wetlandcare.com.au

Milang 2005 Inc
Website: www.users.chariot.net.au/~milang

Australasian Wader Studies Group
Website: www.tasweb.com.au/awsg/



Ranger and volunteers at work.



Milang Wetland

The shorebird case studies were developed by Birds Australia as part of the Shorebirds Conservation Project which is funded by the Natural Heritage Trust and managed by WWF Australia

