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## Re: Port Phillip Bay and Bellarine Peninsula Ramsar Site Boundary Review

The VNPA welcomes the opportunity to provide comment into the Port Phillip Bay and Bellarine Peninsula Ramsar Site Boundary Review.

VNPA is Victoria's leading community conservation group and has for many years advocated the need for greater coastal nature conservation efforts and improved coastal planning and management in this state.

We wish to make comment across each of the 11 proposed areas, in addition to providing commentary and recommendations for the Port Phillip Bay and Bellarine Peninsula Ramsar Site as a whole.

Our key points can be summarised as:

- The VNPA is supportive of the Review and welcomes the additions to all of the proposed extensions for the Ramsar boundaries for all Port Phillip Bay and Bellarine Peninsula Ramsar Sites
- We propose three changes to the proposed boundaries:
  - All of the land at Point Henry, or at least the Point Henry Foreshore Reserve (public land) to be included within the boundaries, along with the intertidal areas to protect seagrass meadows
  - The seaward boundaries for all areas should be consistent and include the intertidal marine and coastal areas across all areas, which are important for habitats such as seagrass meadows. Point Wilson reflects this, however other areas, Moolap Point Henry, Point Cooke Cheetham, does not appear to reflect this.
  - The St Leonards Salt Lakes boundary to be extended north to include all of the salt lake
- One clear management plan should be used to guide coordinated management across agencies with clear management actions which are followed up and resourced
- Management could be more coordinated across agencies, and lead to greater ecological outcomes, attract more funding and resources to care for these areas
- Further information about the significance and values of the areas can be found in VNPA's submissions, linked at the end of this document

Below we address each of the 11 areas, and incorporate the survey questions into each area, including the values, importance for these areas gaining Ramsar status, and where necessary recommend for the boundary to be extended slightly.

## **Wetlands around Geelong**

### ***Moolap, Point Henry***

The VNPA are highly supports the addition of Moolap, Point Henry within the Ramsar boundaries, however the tip of Point Henry has been excluded. We recommend the boundary be reviewed to include all of Point Henry, including the Point Henry Foreshore Reserve, and that the boundary of this entire area be extend seaward to include the intertidal areas and seagrass meadows.

We value this area for significant flora such as its Coastal Alkaline Scrub, Coastal Saltmarsh/Mangrove Shrubland Mosaic at the Saltworks and saltmarsh. It is also known as an Important Bird Area (IBA) at the Moolap Salt works and Point Henry, particularly for its intertidal mudflats that supports nationally significant Australian populations of the pacific golden plover, red-necked avocet, curlew sandpiper and the banded stilt to name a few species. This wetland, along with others along the Bellarine Peninsula support significant numbers of orange-bellied parrot and Australasian bittern, and more than 1% of the world's chestnut teal, sharp-tailed sandpiper and red-necked stint. Moolap, Point Henry (along with Avalon) are two of a handful of critical habitat sites for the Critically Endangered Fairy Tern.

The former Cheetham Saltworks are home to nine rare or threatened plant species, and at least two that are critically endangered.

The area is important for saltmarsh, listed as vulnerable under the EPBC Act, and the seagrass meadows important for waterbirds and juvenile fish. The seagrass meadows in the intertidal zone are also worthy of protection in the Ramsar boundary.

We raise two issues and recommend for the boundaries to be extended slightly to include:

1. Point Henry, including the Point Henry Foreshore Reserve which has areas of saltmarsh
2. Extend further offshore to include not only coastal land, but the intertidal areas important for bird feeding and seagrass meadows

We explain in further detail here:

1. Point Henry, including the Point Henry Foreshore Reserve and saltmarsh area

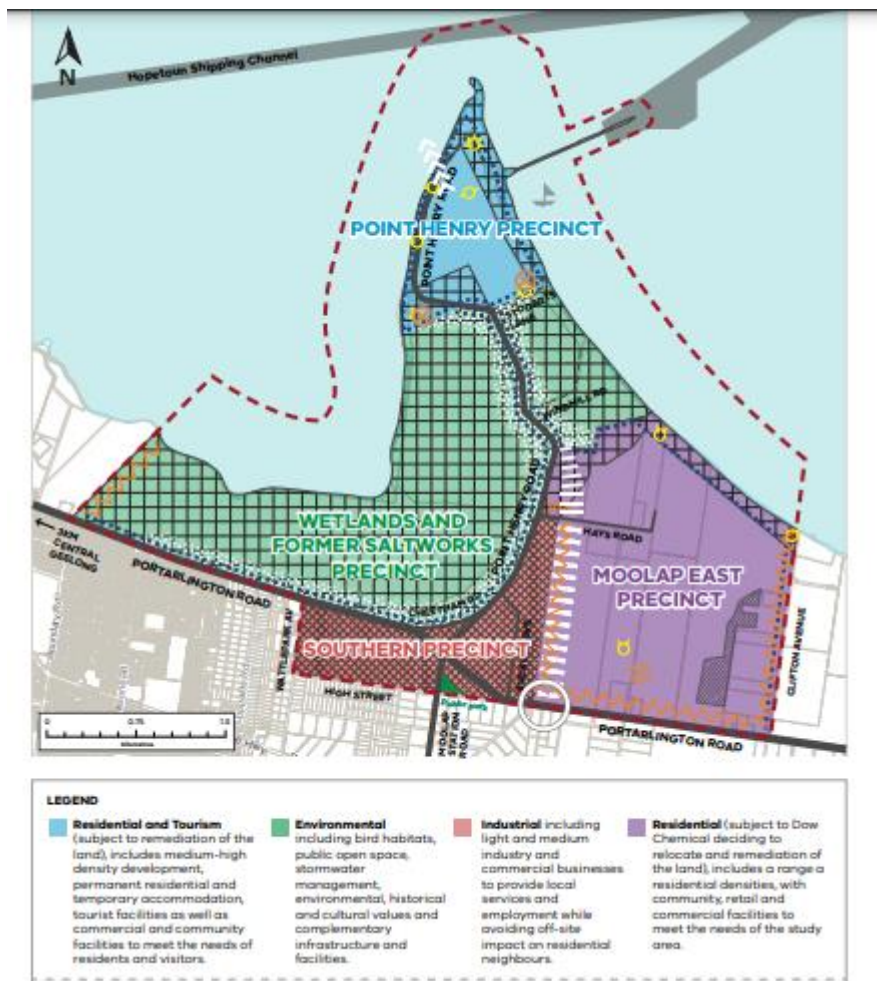
It is our understanding that Point Henry (labelled in the Final Moolap Coastal Strategic Framework Plan as 'Point Henry Precinct' - shown below) has not currently been proposed to be included in the boundary, as its private land (stated by DELWP staff at the online engagement event on Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> June).

We would like to point out that the eastern part of Point Henry, the 'Point Henry Foreshore Reserve', is in fact public land, and listed as a public land parcel under the Coastal Reserves Assessment. The *Inventory of Coastal Reserves*, compiled as part of the assessment, lists that the reserve has four conservation dependent animals and one conservation dependent plant species, endangered or

vulnerable EVC's, and is a BirdLife International Key Biodiversity Area (KBA).<sup>1</sup> Map 2 below, shows the extent of this saltmarsh habitat along the eastern part of Point Henry in green.

A significant remnant of Port Phillip Bay's severely diminished area of coastal saltmarsh, a nationally threatened community, grows on the former Cheetham Saltworks site (since European settlement, 50% of the coastal wetlands along Port Phillip Bay's western shoreline have been removed) and is coloured green in Figure 2. Although modified to form the Cheetham saltworks, the species, habitats, ecological function, form and structure are similar to more pristine examples (Ecology Australia 2016, Vegetation, biodiversity and social values of the former Cheetham saltworks, Moolap).<sup>2</sup>

Based on these conservation values, and that part of the area is in fact, public land, we believe that at the very least, the foreshore reserve should be included within the Ramsar boundaries.



Map 1. Moolap, Point Henry as part of the Moolap Coastal Strategic Framework Plan

2. Extend the boundary further offshore to include not only coastal land, but the intertidal areas important for bird feeding and seagrass meadows

It is unclear from the maps provided, whether the intertidal areas seaward from the coastal land are included in the boundary. If the current proposal does not recommend this, we strongly encourage this decision to be consider this. This area is home to one of the largest areas of seagrass (see Map 2) in Port Phillip Bay adjoins the shoreline of the Moolap Planning Area, with extensive areas of *Zostera*

<sup>1</sup> Assessment of Victoria's coastal reserves: <https://www.veac.vic.gov.au/investigations-assessments/current-assessments/investigation/assessment-of-victoria-s-coastal-reserves>

and *Heterozostera* seagrasses in Stingaree Bay and around Point Henry, and between Point Henry and Avalon to the north.<sup>2</sup>

These intertidal areas that extend beyond the coastal land boundary, are in turn really important areas for the nationally and internationally significant birdlife for feeding. A boundary that extends further seaward to account for the movement of the tides in this area is highly recommended. This would also be consistent with other proposed areas in this review, which has accounted for this, such as Point Wilson.

See map below gives some guidance on the extent of seagrass meadows in the blue shaded area, to where this boundary could be extended too.

Figure 1 Study area, former Cheetham saltworks, Moolap, Victoria.



Map 2. Extent of seagrass and saltmarsh habitat at Moolap Point Henry.

It is worth mentioning that the intertidal area is not private land, which hopefully further supports the case for the inclusion of the of Point Henry area into the new boundary.

In working with local community of the area, VNPA has supported a vision for *an internationally important conservation and ecotourism area that is benefitting the Victorian community by protecting migratory birds, improving the health of Corio Bay, reconnecting people with nature and supporting ecologically sustainable coastal land use.*<sup>3</sup>

VNPA has previously advocated for the importance of protection of the Point Henry Foreshore Reserve, including the widening of the Point Henry Foreshore Reserve and securing crown land tenure for freehold land abutting the high-water mark on the eastern side of Point Henry. In the absence of

<sup>2</sup> Moolap Plan Submission, page 6: <https://vnpa.org.au/publications/draft-moolap-coastal-strategic-framework-plan/>

<sup>3</sup> Submission: Draft Moolap Coastal Strategic Framework Plan: <https://vnpa.org.au/publications/draft-moolap-coastal-strategic-framework-plan/>

this happening, we support at the very least for Point Henry Foreshore Reserve to be recognised as part of the Ramsar boundary to support this ecologically rich area.

It is worth a reminder that infrastructure and development on the coast has a requirement to be 'coastal dependent,' under the Marine and Coastal Policy. If the planned development for the Point Henry Precinct (earmarked as residential and tourism) is the reason for not including this within the Ramsar boundary, and is not coastal dependent, then this could be inconsistent with marine and coastal policy.

It is hoped that inclusion of this site in the new Ramsar site would allow for greater protection and investment in management of the Cheetham Saltworks and surrounding areas against the severe degradation it has already seen.

In summary, based on these conservation values listed above, Point Henry is worthy of inclusion, especially the intertidal areas surrounding the private land of Point Henry, and the public land on the eastern side, namely the foreshore reserve.

### **Point Wilson**

We support the joining of the Corio Bay and Werribee River Ramsar Areas, however see it problematic that a strip of land has been omitted, and suggest one continuous Ramsar area.

Although we are supportive of this area included, we are concerned for the proposed gap in the southern section, due to reasons specified by the department of defence, which we do not understand. Given the area is important for many migratory bird species of state and national significance, such as the Curlew Sandpiper and Orange-bellied Parrots, we believe this is an oversight and recommend to complete a continuous boundary from the Werribee River Ramsar Area and the Corio Bay Ramsar Area for consistency and ease of management.

We are pleased to see the seaward intertidal area included in the Ramsar boundary, and suggest this should be consistent across all other Ramsar areas at this site.

### **Wetlands on the coast Southeast of Geelong**

#### **Breamlea Karaaf**

We support the proposed extension here.

The wetlands area is important for orange bellied parrot, contain both wet and dry saltmarsh and adjoin Poa grasslands and dunes with coastal Moonah. Given the saltmarsh here has been damaged due to past bulldozing, restricting tidal flow, it is an important area for protection.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Lake Connewarre**

We support the proposed extensions.

This area has one of the most diverse saltmarsh areas in Australia, and is of national significance. Several vegetation communities exist here which are rare elsewhere in Victoria, including silky wilsonia herbland, Australian salt-grass grassland. It is the southern range limit for glasswort and

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<sup>4</sup> The Coast is Unclear, 2014. Chris Smyth. <https://vnpa.org.au/publications/the-coast-is-unclear/>

tangled lignum. Other significant plant species include coast bitter-bush and tiny arrow grass. Murtnaghurt Lagoon is a small but rich area of saltmarsh that contains 70% of Victoria's saltmarsh.<sup>4</sup>

The fauna at this Ramsar site is of international significance important for waders, waterbirds and the wintering of the orange-bellied parrot.<sup>4</sup>

Expanding the Ramsar boundaries here and good management will be critical for managing threats including invasive species, *Spartina* Spp. And spiny rush, rabbits, foxes, cats, water extractions from catchments, and expansion of Geelong and Barwon Heads.<sup>4</sup>

## **Wetlands on the Bellarine Peninsula**

### **Lonsdale lakes/Lake Victoria**

We support the new areas proposed.

The area is important for the vegetation communities Coastal Saltmarsh/Mangrove Shrubland Mosaic, Grassy Woodland, Wetland Formation and Plains Grassland. Of regional significance is the dry saltmarsh and moonah dune scrub, while of state significance is the wintering site of orange-bellied parrots.<sup>4</sup>

This area has been threatened from the large residential Stockland development and any nutrient discharge directly into the lakes.

### **St Leonards**

We support the proposed addition of St Leonards Salt Lake into the Ramsar site, but advocate for the north section of the lake to be included too, as currently its leaves out a significant area of the lake.

A significant area to protect, as the Lakes's dry saltmarsh is of particular significance. The coastal alkaline scrub is also important, as after here and looking towards Indented Heads the scrub becomes very narrow.<sup>4</sup>

We recommend that the northern boundary of the Lake be added to the boundary to maximise the values protected and for continuity and simplicity of management.

### **Edward Point/Swan Bay**

We support the proposed extensions.

Swan Bay is significant both at the state and international level, it is important for wet and dry saltmarsh and dune scrub, waders and waterbirds such as the pacific golden plover, grey plover, eastern curlew, and fairy terns. It has more than 1 % of the world's populations of the blue-billed duck, chestnut teal, Australian white ibis, red-necked stint and the silver gull.<sup>4</sup>

Given that the main threats are disturbance of nesting water birds, introduced species, coastal developments and sea-level rise, it is important this site is included.

## Wetlands of northern Port Phillip Bay

### Point Cook Cheetham

We support the addition of the Cheetham wetlands into the Ramsar site, however recommend the boundary extend further seaward to account for tidal influences.

There are extensive areas of Coastal Saltmarsh, strips of Coastal Alkaline Scrub and patches of Mangrove Shrubland/Coastal Saltmarsh/Berm Grassy Shrubland Estuarine Flats which are well worth protecting. While the wet and dry saltmarsh and dune vegetation is of state significance, the animals that use these areas are nationally and internationally significant, including the orange-bellied parrot, striped legless lizard and the yellow sedge-skipper butterfly. On the bird front, this area is one of a few in the area that support more than 1% of the world's population of the red-necked stint, chestnut teal, and pacific gull.<sup>4</sup>

Inclusion into the Ramsar site should make managing threats easier being invasive species, water quality from stormwater, drainage and rubbish, increasing visitor numbers and new urban development.

Extending the boundary further seaward to include the low tide intertidal areas is recommended to ensure the boundary is consistent with other proposed areas within the Port Phillip (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Ramsar site (such as Point Wilson).

### General comments on the Ramsar areas as a whole

#### New improved management plan required

We appreciate the complexity of the different management areas spread out over space, and not in one continuous area, makes coordinated management challenging. For this reason we recommend that the existing management plan be updated to reflect the new additions, and it is all integrated, rather than having separate management.

The public consultation separated out each area and did not allow overall comments for the whole Ramsar area. We are concerned that this segmentation of areas could be reflected in the new management structure once these additions occur. This would be problematic, and we know that management is far more effective if done collaboratively and as a whole. The 2017 Ramsar Management Plan should reflect these new areas, their values and the need to manage the Port Phillip Bay and Bellarine Peninsula Ramsar Site as a whole.

VNPA also supports the similar views in BirdLife Australia's submission.

### Survey Questions

We address question three from the survey that is relevant across all proposed areas.

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

If this Ramsar site is managed as one network, rather than separate single wetland areas, this would be an opportunity to:

- have all areas included within one management plan

- give management agencies clarity, oversight and coordinated management which would increase conservation outcomes of these ecological rich areas
- attract greater attention, resources, funding and opportunities to manage the areas, at both the state and federal level.

## Key documents

Links to VNPA documents worth reviewing for values and more detail include:

### **The Coast is Unclear**

Report by Chris Smyth, reviewing the values, threats and recommendations for the entire coastline of Victoria. The areas relevant to this Ramsar wetland review can be found on pages 82-89.

Report found at: <https://vnpa.org.au/publications/the-coast-is-unclear/>

### **Moolap Point Henry**

Information on the natural and cultural heritage values of Moolap, Point Henry, can be found in various submissions:

Moolap Plan Submission, page 5 onwards: <https://vnpa.org.au/publications/draft-moolap-coastal-strategic-framework-plan/>

Moolap Coastal Strategic Plain Discussion Paper: <https://vnpa.org.au/publications/moolap-coastal-framework-plan/>

The VNPA also supports the submission made by BirdLife Australia.

Thank you,

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