



Conservation

DON SAUNDERS AND JENNY LAU

Rainforest Rescue CEO, Kelvin Davies, amongst the oil palms at the newly protected property, Cassowary Conservation Reserve. Photo courtesy Rainforest Rescue

MURRAY-DARLING BASIN PLAN

BOCA has made two submissions commenting on the Guide to the Proposed Murray-Darling Basin Plan (the Guide); one direct to the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) and the other as a joint BOCA/Birds Australia submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the impact of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan in regional Australia.

In both submissions BOCA congratulated the MDBA for undertaking a thorough assessment of the environmental condition of the rivers and floodplains of the Murray-Darling Basin (MDB). The Guide clearly outlines the very poor environmental condition of the rivers, wetlands and floodplains of the MDB and recognises the imperative to significantly increase the allocation of water to the environment via the establishment of long-term sustainable diversion limits (SDLs).

BOCA believes that the MDBA has used the best available science to assess the current status of waterbirds in the MDB. The Guide accurately portrays the ongoing impact of reduced flows and altered flooding regimes on the health and productivity of wetland ecosystems throughout the MDB. As a direct result, waterbird populations have suffered a massive collapse in numbers, with total waterbird abundance falling by 80% since 1983. Between 1983 and 2006, 15 species of resident shorebirds declined by 81% across south-eastern Australia. Since 1985, populations of many bird species in South Lagoon (Coorong) have declined, including (but not limited to) Black Swan (59%), Fairy Tern (82%) and Australian Pelican (77%). The Guide accurately links declining waterbird populations to the ecological decline of major wetlands throughout the MDB, in particular the large wetlands on the lower reaches of the Condamine-Balonne, Gwydir, Macquarie, Lachlan and Murrumbidgee Rivers.

BOCA indicated its support for the return of a high level of water to the environment and its disappointment that the MDBA has not fully considered the environmental, social and economic benefits of a SDL of 7,600 Gigalitres per year (GL/y). The Guide states that this level of SDL would result in a high level of certainty that all the objectives of the Commonwealth Water Act 2007 are met, including giving effect to all international agreements and ensuring that water dependent ecosystems are more resilient under a range of climate change scenarios. Unfortunately, the Guide only provides details on the impacts of SDLs of between 3,000 and 4,000 GL/y, which are at the lower end of what **might** be required to improve the environmental condition of the MDB.

BOCA considers that SDLs of between 3,000 and 4,000 GL/y represent an unacceptable environmental compromise as these will not necessarily result in a significant improvement in the health of the rivers, wetlands and floodplains of the MDB. After decades of environmental neglect and decline, the MDBA must recommend a SDL that will, with a high level of certainty, deliver a healthy, sustainable system of wetlands, floodplains and rivers in the MDB. BOCA urged the MDBA to undertake a complete assessment of the social, economic and environmental impacts of SDLs between 4,000 and 7600 GL/y in the proposed Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

For some regional communities, the short-term socio-economic impacts of implementing the MDB Plan will be difficult. Birds Australia and BOCA indicated their support for the development of government-funded structural adjustment packages to support these communities as they adapt to new water sharing arrangements. BOCA believes that it is imperative that the final MDB Plan is developed in consultation with regional communities, to provide regional communities with blueprints and funding to build healthy, vibrant and above-all, sustainable economies.

VEAC METROPOLITAN MELBOURNE INVESTIGATION

BOCA has commented on the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council's Metropolitan Melbourne Investigation Discussion Paper, noting that the Paper provides a comprehensive assessment of the contribution of public land to Metropolitan Melbourne's liveability and natural values. In particular, the Paper identifies and discusses the contribution of Melbourne's public land to the conservation of Victoria's biodiversity. BOCA indicated that a further area for VEAC to consider would be the contribution of public land to habitat connectivity in the Port Phillip and Western Port catchments as these areas provide vital stepping stones for birds moving between key habitats within Metropolitan Melbourne and surrounding municipalities.

BOCA strongly supported a number of recommendations relating to areas of significant bird habitat such as the Cheetham Wetlands and the Ramsar listed Edithvale-Seafood Wetlands. However, BOCA opposed a recommendation that would allow on-lead dog walking in the proposed Point Cook Coastal Park. BOCA commented that as VEAC has recognised the significance of the Park to shorebirds of international and national importance, it is imperative that the welfare of these species is given priority over recreational use by dog-owners and dogs.

One important network of conservation areas which did not feature in the VEAC report involves Bush's Paddock, Pinkerton Forest (which BOCA members survey on a regular basis) and Grey Box Forest in the Shire of Melton. Although the three sites are close to each other, they are not physically linked – this should be an objective. BOCA has brought the importance of this network to VEAC's attention.

Further reading: www.veac.vic.gov.au.

CASSOWARY HABITAT, QLD

Rainforest Rescue has purchased its thirteenth property in the Daintree forest as a continuation of its efforts to protect habitat for the Southern Cassowary. At 27.66 hectares, this is the largest acquisition to date and is to be known as Cassowary Conservation Reserve. It has been fully funded by individual donors and business supporters.

In the past, the property was partly cleared for commercial plantations of oil palms, pineapples and bananas. Oil palm is an introduced species that has been identified as a potential environmental weed. Rainforest Rescue has therefore prioritised removing the remaining oil palms and other weeds from the property and replanting the cleared area. The trees planted are local rainforest species, propagated in Rainforest Rescue's Daintree rainforest plant nursery from seeds collected from the Daintree rainforest.

Rainforest Rescue was the recipient of a \$3,500 grant in 2010 from BOCA's ABEP grants program to assist with its Daintree tree planting work.



Rainforest Rescue CEO, Kelvin Davies, admiring Rainforest Rescue plantings in the Daintree
Photo courtesy Rainforest Rescue

SERTBC COUNT, VICTORIA

The South-eastern Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo Annual Count will be held on Saturday, 7 May 2011. This year there will be a training day for those who have not participated before. To register for the count or enquire about the training day contact Bronwyn Perryman on 1800 262 062 or email rtbc@birdsaustralia.com.au.

MACQUARIE ISLAND PROJECT DEFERRED

Weather has interrupted the Macquarie Island pest eradication project which aims to rid the Island of rabbits, mice and rats. Low cloud and high winds for most of June and July 2010 made conditions unsuitable for the four helicopters to drop specially prepared baits laced with the poison brodifacoum.

The limited amount of baiting which was achieved resulted in some hundreds of birds being killed through secondary poisoning, with Kelp Gulls, Giant-Petrels and Pacific Black Ducks feeding on carcasses of animals killed by the poison. When the program resumes later this year, 2011, mitigation measures will be implemented to reduce secondary poisoning of birds, including the use of teams of people scouring the area to collect and dispose of carcasses of rabbits, mice and rats as quickly as possible. Some losses of birds from secondary poisoning had been anticipated and the delay in the program provides an opportunity to develop strategies to minimise this impact.

It is important that the \$25 million program of pest eradication continues and is completed to ensure protection of the nesting habitat of the four species of Albatross, King and Royal Penguin colonies and burrowing petrels and prions – see the article by Dr Xenia Dennett "Macquarie Island Nature Reserve Critically Endangered" in *The Bird Observer*, April 2007.

CHILTERN QUARRY, VICTORIA

The proposal for a new hard rock quarry adjoining Chiltern-Mt Pilot National Park in north-eastern Victoria was flagged as a conservation issue in *The Bird Observer*, August 2009.

The Chiltern area is renowned as one of Victoria's most important areas for birdlife. It is extensively visited by BOCA members and it is not uncommon for us to receive international and interstate enquiries about visiting the area to see birds.

The assessment of flora and fauna on the site by consultants (Biosis) identified the presence of the FFG-listed Victorian Temperate Woodland Bird Community along with five bird species of State significance (Hooded Robin, Speckled Warbler, Brown Treecreeper, Painted Honeyeater, Black Falcon). Other species including Turquoise Parrot and Barking Owl have also been recorded from the study area and the habitat could be used by two nationally threatened species: Swift Parrot and Regent Honeyeater.

In a submission to the Indigo Shire, BOCA submitted that use of this land for a quarry with its associated infrastructure, traffic, dust and noise would have a detrimental impact on the existing birdlife. The most serious impact will be caused by the loss of mature trees. As stated by Biosis, "The trees within the study area are relatively large compared to the adjacent national park and as such are important for hollow-dependent fauna". There was also strong local opposition to the proposed quarry on environmental and aesthetic grounds.

Indigo Shire Council rejected the application, but it is not yet known whether the proponents will appeal the decision.

STOCKYARD HILL WIND FARM, VICTORIA

As reported in *The Bird Observer*, June 2009, BOCA corresponded with the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments outlining our concerns about a proposal for a very large wind farm (more than 280 turbines) which would surround Lake Goldsmith and other important wetlands west of Ballarat. The Ballarat Branch of BOCA provided a lot of valuable historic survey data which was important because the prevailing long term drought meant that field work by the proponents' consultants did not reflect the real value of the area for birdlife. Members of the Ballarat Branch were also active in their opposition to the proposal.

Subsequently, the Victorian Planning Minister appointed a Planning Panel to conduct a public hearing and BOCA was able to make a submission and appear before the Panel.

At the time of the Panel hearing the original proposal had been reduced to 242 turbines. The Panel's report to the Planning Minister recommended that this be reduced by a further 85 turbines.

In a Media Release dated 29 October 2010 the Victorian Planning Minister made the following statements:

"I have accepted the recommendations of an independent panel and approved planning permits for 157 turbines as well as the associated infrastructure.

"It was determined that the original application would result in an unacceptable impact on the Brolga population and the historic Mawallock property adjacent to the site.

"The approval of the permits for the reduced number of turbines, along with the conditions that have been applied to those permits, ensures the right balance between the commitment to renewable energy and minimising the impact on the local fauna, flora and community.

"The main issues identified in the report were the protection of the Brolga population, landscape and visual impact, noise, flora and fauna impacts, public health effects of noise, built heritage impacts and transport and site access.

"In addition to rejecting the turbines that impact the local Brolga population, the permits contain conditions to address the environmental impacts identified through the assessment process."

A win for the birds!

DUCK SEASON

The Department of Sustainability and Environment has announced that in Victoria there will be a full-length duck season of 12 weeks, with the bag limit at the maximum allowed under the Wildlife (Game) Regulations 2001 – ten ducks each day including no more than two Australasian Shovelers. The season commences Saturday, 19 March and closes Monday, 13 June.

The media release from DSE justifies the decision on the basis that there is "extensive breeding and wide dispersal of waterfowl across Eastern Australia's wetlands".

With so many wetlands recently flooded, this should be a great opportunity for waterbirds to breed and build up their populations which have suffered severely through more than a decade of drought. It might be expected that breeding will continue into autumn and there is a real possibility that the opening of the duck season will disrupt some breeding, even though DSE must undertake a February survey to assess the threats of hunting to breeding populations and threatened species.

Prior to the 2010 Victorian election, a petition was tabled in State Parliament containing 31,000 signatures opposing duck hunting. Neither of the major parties took any notice and both issued election policies promoting hunting.

BOCA and Birds Australia have sent a joint letter to the Victorian Premier informing him that both organisations are opposed to duck hunting and have issued a joint media release under the heading **Another Fowl Political Decision**.