

Currawinya Lakes—a wetland of international importance

Currawinya Lakes Ramsar site is one of Queensland's most important inland wetland areas. This large Ramsar site of over 151,300 hectares is located in the state's semi-arid south-west region within Currawinya National Park.

It supports an amazing diversity of wetland types including the large Lake Numalla (freshwater) and Lake Wyara (saltwater), clay pans, swamps, smaller lakes, springs, and the waterholes of the Paroo River.

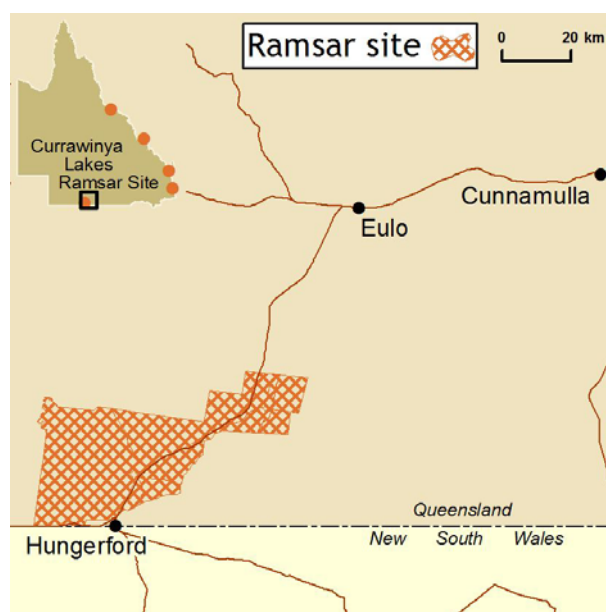
Although Currawinya's larger lakes, Numalla and Wyara, are within three kilometres of each other, they have separate catchments and different levels of salinity which affects what plants and animals each lake supports.



The site contains a rich diversity of inland Queensland wetlands, with a range of freshwater and saline features, such as Lake Numalla. Photo: Queensland Government.

The semi-arid climate and flooding from the Paroo River are key drivers of the health of Currawinya's wetlands. The frequency, timing, and duration of floods are major influences on these systems. The freshwater Lake Numalla, and Boorara and Carwarra Creeks capture water from the Paroo River when in flood. These influxes of freshwater maintain the lake's depth and reduce any build-up of salinity. Lake Wyara, on the other hand, is saline with a virtually closed catchment, although extreme flood overflow from the Paroo River can still affect the lake.

Many Australian inland lakes only form for a few weeks after heavy rain. However, Lake Wyara may hold water for a couple of years at a time. It is thought that the ephemeral nature of this lake triggers large bird breeding events. While each lake can dry out completely, this only happens to Lake Numalla about once every 20 years. During drought conditions, lake waters become a critical refuge for wildlife.



What is a Ramsar site?

The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat (more commonly referred to as the Ramsar Convention) was adopted in 1971 in the Iranian city of Ramsar. The convention aims to halt the worldwide loss of wetlands and to conserve remaining wetlands through wise use and management. The Ramsar Convention encourages the designation of internationally important sites containing representative, rare or unique wetlands, or wetlands that are important for conserving biological diversity. Queensland has five Ramsar sites—Currawinya Lakes, Bowling Green Bay, Shoalwater and Corio Bays, Great Sandy Strait and Moreton Bay. Currawinya Lakes was listed as a Ramsar site in 1996.

Ecological character

As a Ramsar Convention signatory, Australia is expected to describe and maintain the ecological character of each of its current 65 Ramsar sites. An ecological character description (ECD) is a rigorously prepared assessment of the ecosystem components, processes and benefits/services of a site. The ECD is the benchmark against which ecological changes at the site are assessed for significance.



Currawinya's other wetland types include large permanent waterholes on the Paroo River and springs formed by water from the the underground Great Artesian Basin. Other smaller, semi-permanent lakes in the area include the brackish Lake Karatta and the freshwater lakes, Kaponyee and Yumberarra.

There are many different types of clay pans at Currawinya; some small, shallow ones only hold water for a couple of weeks, while others are very large and might hold water for over a year. These clay pans are an important wetland feature of the Ramsar site, providing significant habitat for both the waterbirds and woodland species of the area.

Currawinya's wetlands have a special cultural significance to the area's Traditional Owners, the Budjiti people. Historically, the area's waterbird breeding seasons were occasions for hunting and egg gathering by Indigenous people. In drought conditions, waterholes and springs were valuable sources of food and water, as well as important spiritual and ceremonial sites. Currawinya's numerous archaeological artefacts show evidence of Aboriginal occupation dating back some 12,000 years.

The area around the Currawinya Lakes was once used for sheep grazing. In 1991, Currawinya National Park was established to protect the significant values of the area. The Ramsar site within the national park was established at that time.

Threats to the Currawinya Lakes Ramsar site include changes in climate, pest animals including non-native fish, and sedimentation from surrounding catchments. Potential mining and water extraction would also pose a threat if undertaken.

Why is Currawinya special?

Currawinya Lakes is a Ramsar site because it contains a rich and diverse area of wetlands, including a range of saline and freshwater ecosystems that have remained largely unchanged by human impact. The site's Great Artesian Basin springs also represent a unique and endangered ecological community.



A Currawinya Great Artesian Basin spring (Eulo Supergroup). Photo: Queensland Government.

Currawinya's wetlands support a remarkable variety of native animals and plants, often at critical stages of their lifecycle, e.g. for breeding, feeding and drought

refuge. Threatened animal species observed at the site include the silver perch, grey snake and painted snipe. Threatened plant species at the site include the regal pumpkin burr (*Sclerolaena walkeri*) and daisies (*Calocephalus sp.*).

Currawinya's birds

Over 200 bird species have been observed at the Currawinya Lakes Ramsar site. Sometimes more than 250,000 individual birds are present at any one time. In 2010, over 20,000 Australian pelicans alone were recorded. The area is a refuge for one of Queensland's near threatened duck species, the freckled duck. No other wetlands in arid and southern Australia are thought to consistently support such high numbers of waterbirds.

The Currawinya Lakes form an important part of an inland route for migratory shorebirds, with Currawinya National Park listed as a site within the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. The site also supports species listed under a range of international migratory bird agreements.



Significant numbers of waterbirds have been recorded, including the pink-eared duck, hardhead, Eurasian coot, black swans, grey teal, sharp-tailed sandpiper, Australian shoveler, banded stilt, red-necked avocets, freckled ducks and hardheads (shown). Photo: Queensland Government.

Enjoying Currawinya

Currawinya National Park offers a unique experience. It is popular among campers and day visitors, but its remoteness, about a four hour drive from Charleville, means that extra care is needed. Visitors can enjoy nature walks and drives, wildlife watching, camping, canoeing and fishing.

The Queensland Wetlands Program supports projects and activities that result in long-term benefits to the sustainable management, wise use and protection of wetlands in Queensland. The tools developed by the Program help wetland landholders, managers and decision makers in government and industry. The Program is a joint initiative of the Australian and Queensland governments.

Contact wetlands@ehp.qld.gov.au
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