

Draft EIS Toondah Harbour: QWSG review and Submission

Submission from The Queensland Wader Study Group (QWSG), a Special Interest Group of the Queensland Ornithological Society Inc. (QOSI)

The Queensland Wader Study Group (QWSG) was established in 1992 as a special interest group within the Queensland Ornithological Society Inc. (QOSI), to monitor wader populations in Queensland and to work towards their conservation.

QWSG has a Position Statement on Toondah Harbour (21 September 2021), which can be found on the QWSG website (Website: www.waders.org.au).

This following submission from the QWSG is our review of the Draft EIS provided by Walker Corporation for public comment on 12 October 2022.

Members of the QWSG have reviewed relevant Chapters of the Draft EIS, which relate to impacts on the conservation of migratory waders on the Toondah Harbour tidal mudflats they feed on and adjacent roost sites:

- Based on our review of the Draft EIS, the proposed development will have a significant negative impact on threatened species of migratory waders using the site (Table 17.11, page 52, Chapter 17, Draft EIS), including but not limited to Far Eastern Curlew (Critically Endangered), Great Knot (Critically Endangered) and Bar-tailed Godwit (Threatened).
- The scale of the dredging and reclamation required for the proposed development means prolonged periods of disruption and disturbance across the site and its adjacent wader roosts (Cassim Island, Oyster Point and Nandeebee Park). The detrimental effects on the migratory wader species using the sites and near-by roosts, is likely to be unavoidable, severe and permanent.

The QWSG unequivocally oppose the use of this part of the Moreton Bay Ramsar Site for the proposed development of a residential and retail development over the wetlands at Toondah Harbour.

(Note: The QWSG recognises the existing ferry terminal needs renewal to support the economic and social advancement of North Stradbroke Island and supports appropriate and environmentally sound development of the ferry terminal and its links to the island.)

Background

Moreton Bay became a Ramsar site in 1993, one year after the Bay was gazetted a marine park in Queensland. Surveys of shorebirds conducted by QWSG formed a part of the information that led to the gazetting of the Moreton Bay Marine Park in 1992 and subsequently to the declaration of parts of the marine park as a Ramsar site the following year. Since that time QWSG has worked with all levels of government, the private sector and community organisations to improve the conservation of Moreton Bay as one of Australia's most significant migratory shorebird habitats. QWSG is recognized both nationally and internationally for its practical on-the-ground work and for its advisory role with governments, the private sector and non-government sector. QWSG has provided advice and submissions to the Commonwealth Government on the proposed Toondah Harbour development. It has also made available to the developer's consultant appropriate data on shorebirds in Moreton Bay.

Australia became a signatory to the Ramsar Convention in 1971 and has remained a supporter of international obligations under the Convention with more than 70 Australian wetlands registered by Australia under the Convention. QWSG notes that in recent years two development applications submitted to the Commonwealth under the EPBC Act (1999) that would have impacted upon Australian coastal Ramsar sites have been declined by the Federal Minister for the Environment – the first at Turtle Cove on the Queensland Fraser Coast and the second adjacent to the Ramsar site at Eighty-mile Beach in Western Australia. QWSG welcomes the decisions of the Minister for the Environment to protect the coastal habitats for migratory shorebirds in these internationally-recognised important areas.

Walker Corporation propose to develop a residential and retail complex over intertidal mudflats to the north of the existing Stradbroke Island Ferry terminal. If it proceeds, the development will extinguish part of the Moreton Bay Ramsar site. Should it proceed, its lengthy construction period will disturb a wider area of Moreton Bay marine environment

Three levels of Government

The Queensland Wader Study Group calls on the Australian Federal Government, the Queensland State Government and the Redland City Council to respect obligations to protect internationally-recognised wetlands at Toondah Harbour in Moreton Bay under the Ramsar Convention.

QWSG recognises that the existing ferry terminal needs renewal to support the economic and social advancement of North Stradbroke Island and supports appropriate and environmentally sound development of the ferry terminal and its links to the island. QWSG does not support the current proposed development that extends well beyond the terminal site to extinguish approximately 44 hectares of marine coastal habitat within the Ramsar site

- In the interests of public accountability and citizen engagement, QWSG calls on the Queensland State Government and the Redland City Council to be transparent in their arrangements with the developer about the Toondah Harbour proposal. QWSG notes that some aspects of the arrangements between the developer and government remain 'commercial-in-confidence'.
- The QWSG calls on the Queensland State Government to withdraw the declaration of a Priority Development Area for the wetlands to the immediate north of the Toondah

Ferry terminal and reaffirm its commitment to the protection of the Moreton Bay Ramsar site.

- The QWSG calls on the Federal Minister of the Environment to safeguard the Moreton Bay Ramsar site by upholding the obligations under the Ramsar Convention and thereby decline the application for the development of a residential and retail development over the wetlands at Toondah Harbour.

‘Wise use’

The Draft EIS identifies the likelihood of harmful consequences for migratory waders, including several threatened species, should the development proceed (Table 17.11, page 52, Chapter 17, Draft EIS). Therefore, the QWSG review of the EIS was informed by the international guidelines which Australia agreed to uphold regarding the wise use of important wetlands, namely:

- The Ramsar Convention states:
 - The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance is an intergovernmental treaty that provides the framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources.
 - Wise use of wetlands is the maintenance of their ecological character, achieved through the implementation of ecosystem approaches, within the context of sustainable development.
- The three key elements of the Ramsar Convention’s ‘wise use’ definition are:
 - **ecological character**, which is the combination of the ecosystem components, processes and benefits/services that characterise the wetland at a given point in time;
 - **ecosystem approaches**, which consider the complex relationships between every element of an ecosystem, and promote the integrated management of land, water and living resources (including humans); and
 - **sustainable development**, which is a pattern of resource use that aims to meet human needs while preserving the environment so that these needs can be met not only in the present, but also for generations to come.’
- The Australian Government’s own ‘Wise use of wetlands in Australia’ webpage reiterates the need to protect and conserve wetlands:
 - ‘The Ramsar Convention is an international intergovernmental treaty which aims to halt and, where possible, reverse, the worldwide loss of wetlands and to conserve those that remain through wise use and management.’
(<https://www.dceew.gov.au/water/wetlands/publications/wise-use-wetlands-australia-fact-sheet>, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water)

The QWSG review of the Draft EIS and in particular Chapter 17, required us to carefully consider the implications for migratory waders described in the EIS’s own risk assessment of the actual impact of the development in terms of habitat loss as a result of dredging and reclamation for the Toondah Harbour site . The EIS’s assessment is that habitat loss is “certain” to happen, will be “high” risk to shorebirds and the damage will be “permanent” (Table 17.11, page 52, Chapter 17).

In addition to the destruction of at least 44 hectares of tidal flats used by migratory waders, the Draft EIS predicts the extensive dredging and reclamation activities required for the project will be 'likely' to cause disturbance and disruption (for many years) to adjacent roost sites (Cassim Island, Oyster Point and Nandeebee Park). The QWSG is concerned about the likelihood of prolonged disturbance to wader roost sites close to the development site as the use of these sites by migratory waders varies from year to year for no known reason. The most recent QWSG data for monthly counts at Oyster Point in October and November 2022 demonstrates significant increases in the number of migratory waders (including threatened species) using this site compared to earlier data used in the preparation of the Draft EIS. For example, on 7 October 2022 there were 9 Far Eastern Curlew (Critically Endangered) and 303 Bar-tailed Godwit (Threatened); on 5 November 2022 there were 205 Far Eastern Curlew and 252 Bar-tailed Godwit

Apart from the migratory wader species listed as Critically Endangered or Threatened, QWSG has grave concerns for the many other migratory wader species using the Toondah Harbour site (and its adjacent roosts) some of which are known to be extremely site-loyal, for example Grey-tailed Tattler.

The devastating predictions presented in the Draft EIS for the future of this important tidal wetland, its migratory waders and its surrounding shoreline make it clear the Ramsar Convention's 'wise use' principle should not be applied to this proposed development.

Regarding the Ramsar Convention's 'urgent national interest' guideline:

- The QWSG is aware there have been previous discussions in the Queensland State Parliament (Hansard records) about the Toondah Harbour development proposal. We are aware there is information, obtained under Freedom of Information, which confirms both the Commonwealth and State governments consider the application of the Ramsar Convention's 'urgent national interest' test to be inappropriate in the case of Toondah Harbour.

Conclusion:

Based on our review of the relevant Chapters of the Draft EIS for Toondah Harbour, we find the EIS predictive of significant negative impacts for the migratory waders, including threatened species, which feed on this tidal wetland and its adjacent roosting sites.

Accordingly, QWSG restates its strong objection to this proposal and calls for the immediate rejection of the inappropriate and harmful development application which will permanently extinguish a Ramsar Site and accelerate declines in Moreton Bay's environmental values.