

**Supplementary
Submission
No 362a**

**INQUIRY INTO THE VICTORIAN AUDITOR-GENERAL'S REPORT
NO.202: MEETING OBLIGATIONS TO PROTECT RAMSAR
WETLANDS**

Organisation: Coalition Against Duck Shooting

Date Received: 29 November 2019

Submission to the Inquiry into Auditor General Report No.202: Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands (2016)

Introduction

The Kerang Ramsar Wetlands might be presented as wetlands of international importance in beautifully printed colour brochures. The reality, however, is that these wetlands are the ugly killing fields for a dying breed of duck shooters who enjoy inflicting violence and cruelty on Australia's magnificent native waterbirds.

Victoria's Ramsar wetlands are recognised as internationally important under the Ramsar Convention especially as habitat that "regularly supports 20,000 or more waterbirds".¹ Recreational shooting of native waterbirds therefore has inherent, adverse impacts on the ecological character of Ramsar wetlands.

In the old days, the Kerang Ramsar wetlands would attract hundreds of thousands of birds. However, Professor Richard Kingsford recently stated that waterbird numbers across eastern Australia are down by around 90 per cent since his aerial surveys began in 1983 (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-11-19/drought-and-water-policy-to-blame-for-water-bird-decline/11715412>).

Victoria's Ramsar wetlands provide critical habitat for threatened and endangered native waterbirds and migratory species that are also listed as 'matters of national environmental significance' under federal environmental law. Yet the Government still allows duck shooting at most of Victoria's Ramsar wetlands (at 9 out of 12 sites now; depending on any closures).

As stated in the Strategic Directions Statement for Management of Victoria's Ramsar Wetlands (NRE) (2002), "hunting can create both physical and noise disturbance to fauna and result in the accidental shooting of protected and threatened fauna species". The noise of shotguns, disturbance by shooters' boats and dogs, and hunters tramping through the wetlands, have an impact on all species in the vicinity, and on Ramsar ecological values.

Kerang Ramsar Wetlands

Once duck shooting is banned, Kerang's internationally important Ramsar wetlands would attract tourists from around the world, generating hundreds of millions of dollars into the local economy. Visitors would marvel at Australia's native and migratory waterbirds and other wildlife. **With vision and promotion, the Kerang Ramsar wetlands would become Victoria's Kakadu.**

The rich cultural history of our First Australians will also be of major interest to international visitors. Many wetlands feature indigenous heritage places including scarred trees, ancient middens and burial sites (including sites damaged or destroyed by shooters in the past).

The Auditor General's Report, released in 2016, concluded that the Ramsar wetlands were not well-managed and the Victorian Government had failed to meet its international obligations under the Ramsar Convention.

In 2018, the Victorian Government commissioned an independent report by Pegasus Economics to review the performance of the regulating authority (https://www.gma.vic.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0003/498045/Assessment-of-the-GMAs-compliance-and.pdf). This followed a record wildlife massacre at the Koorangie Marshes, one of our very important Kerang Wetlands,² on the opening of the 2017 duck shooting season.

The final Pegasus Report was damning in its criticism of the Game Management Authority's ability to regulate duck shooting and enforce the law (see below: *Duck hunting watchdog in the gun*, Farrah Tomazin, *The Age*, 2 March 2018 and *Victorian Agriculture Minister 'very concerned' after leaked report claims hunters are regularly breaking law*, 7.30, By Lauren Day, 1 March 2018). The report found that duck shooters regularly break the law, without fear of prosecution, including the 'overhunting' of native game birds and illegal shooting of threatened and endangered species.³

What occurred at the magnificent Koorangie Marshes could only be described as a dreadful massacre of native waterbirds.

Rescuers recovered 1500 dead and wounded birds, including 296 illegally shot protected species. Also recovered were 183 illegally shot rare Freckled Ducks and Blue-billed Ducks, which are both classified as 'endangered' in Victoria.

The Game Management Authority failed to protect the waterbirds that morning. Occupational Health and Safety Regulations meant that compliance officers stood meekly on shore while the job of looking after Australia's native waterbirds was left to volunteer members of the public. The wounded birds were treated by volunteer veterinarians working out of a mobile vet clinic; while the illegally shot protected and threatened species were collected as evidence and displayed outside the Premier's office.

The Pegasus Report confirmed that it is impossible to regulate and enforce duck shooting seasons, which will always remain uncontrolled slaughters of native waterbirds.

Nature-Based Wetlands Tourism

In 2015, a report by the Auditor General stated that small regional towns were in serious financial trouble. Yet with political will and vision, local residents and business owners could be enjoying a thriving nature-based tourism industry, similar to the successful Phillip Island model. Phillip Island attracts over one million visitors, including 170,000 Chinese tourists. It generates \$498 million annually and has created 2100 jobs for Victoria.

The Phillip Island project was the vision of three Labor politicians in the 1980s, Premier John Cain, Joan Kirner and Evan Walker. Their aim was to protect the penguins and establish a thriving nature-based tourism industry. The vision succeeded on both fronts.

The beautiful old heritage town of Boort, situated just 40 kilometres from the Kerang Ramsar wetlands, is also experiencing serious financial difficulties, with residents leaving and Boort's last bank closing some time ago.

Yet Boort has a very strong indigenous community with the Dja Dja Wurrung clans, who could enter a business partnership with the Andrews Government to create a thriving, sustainable, lucrative nature-based tourism industry.

Lake Boort has many examples of birthing places, middens, scarred trees and burial sites. It is also a nature lover's paradise. Indigenous and wildlife tours would very quickly turn around the financial fortunes for this dying heritage town.

The tourism-minded Andrews Government successfully lobbied to obtain UNESCO World Heritage listing for the Budj Bim Aboriginal heritage land near Portland. As Premier

Andrews stated, the World Heritage listing will now open this very important indigenous cultural site to the rest of the world.

Nature-based tourism is vital for the future of small regional towns. The small Wimmera town of Sea Lake was closing down until Chinese tourists started arriving to visit Lake Tyrrell. The night skies offered magnificent views of the stars that started attracting large numbers of Chinese tourists, reversing the financial fortunes for the residents and small businesses of Sea Lake. The Andrews Government saw the tourism potential and injected government funding of \$2.3 million to improve visitor facilities and anticipate 192,000 visitors by 2025.

Victoria's Great Ocean Road tourism generates a staggering \$1.7 billion into local towns from Torquay through to Warrnambool and is a far more popular tourist destination than the Great Barrier Reef (see attachment 1, Andrews' Government media release).

The Andrews Government has also financially supported the 'Silo trail' tourism project where visitors can move between regional towns to view the huge murals painted by talented artists on the local silos that depict life in these small Wimmera towns. Again, the vision is proving to be a huge drawcard for tourists.

In 2009, the Victorian Environment Assessment Council (VEAC) recommended National Park status for the Kerang Ramsar wetlands. Unfortunately, the government failed to go ahead with the recommendation after objections from duck shooters.

It is now time to declare these magnificent wetlands a National Park and put an end to the recreational shooting of native waterbirds, so that these wetlands of international importance can be opened up to nature-based tourism. This needs to happen as soon as possible before they are degraded any further.

The numbers of duck shooters in Victoria have dwindled from over 100,000 in 1986 down to only about 13,000 active duck shooters on the wetlands today, making up about 0.02 per cent of Victoria's population.

It is time for the Victorian Government to ban the recreational shooting of native waterbirds and introduce a nature-based tourism industry that would protect Victoria's Ramsar wetlands and very quickly reverse the financial fortunes for the small towns and surrounding regions.

With vision and promotion, the Internationally recognised Kerang Ramsar wetlands will become Victoria's own Kakadu.

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29 November 2019

Attachments:

1. Victoria Government Media Release, **Waterways Inject Millions into Tourism and Economy**, 20 March 2018
2. The Weekly Times, **Secret report into Box Flat wildlife massacre itself runs foul of secrets**. By Chris McLennan, 3 Jul 2015

Duck hunting watchdog in the gun

Farrah Tomazin, The Age, 2 March 2018

Duck hunting season opens on March 17.
Photo: Jason South

The government agency meant to enforce Victoria's game hunting rules lets duck shooters flout the law and is widely viewed as toothless, including by its own staff.

With duck hunting season starting in weeks, a scathing review has found the state's Game Management Authority is not fulfilling its responsibilities in compliance and enforcement, placing pressure on the state government to suspend shooting this year and overhaul the agency.

"While many hunters are responsible and respect the game hunting laws, non-compliance with the game hunting laws is commonplace and widespread," says the leaked report.
"The GMA is widely perceived by its stakeholders and its own staff as either unable to ensure compliance ... or to effectively sanction offenders when those laws are breached."

The review, by Pegasus Economics, was commissioned by the GMA board last year in the wake of a controversial start to the 2017 season, in which hundreds of protected birds were killed at the Koorangie State Game Reserve, west of Kerang.

GMA officers found hunters engaging in "illegal, unethical and irresponsible" behaviour including shooting before it was legal to do so, failing to recover shot birds and shooting protected species.

However, only one infringement notice was issued to a hunter for shooting early, and four were later issued to a group who failed to retain a wing on a game duck for identification. In contrast, 11 banning notices were issued to anti-hunting protesters.

The review also found:

The small size of the agency places it in danger of being "captured" by the interests it is meant to regulate. Tougher minimum licensing standards for game hunters are needed.

The authority's complaints handling system doesn't meet the standards of a good regulator.

The agency sometimes slides into advocacy and promotional roles that are in conflict with its regulatory role.

The latest figures suggest the GMA has only one compliance manager and five full-time senior game officers, while Victoria has about 25,000 licensed game hunters.

"They can barely oversee one wetland, let alone up to 20,000," said Coalition Against Duck Shooting spokesman Laurie Levy, who has called for the GMA to be abolished.

Agriculture Minister Jaala Pulford said yesterday that she asked her department to review the structure of the GMA.

But she confirmed the 2017 season would begin on March 17 as planned, pointing out that several improvements had already been made. These included a requirement for hunters to retrieve the birds they shoot and to salvage the meat, as well as for hunting to start later on the opening weekend.

A GMA spokesman said there would be more compliance officers this season than ever before. However, Animals Australia director Lyn White said: "This comes back to the government's obligation to uphold the law.

"If the Andrews' government cannot provide the Victorian community with a concrete assurance that hunting laws will be monitored and enforced on all Victorian wetlands throughout the three-month season, then it should not be allowed to proceed."

With the state election only nine months away, duck hunting is likely to again prove politically dicey for Labor. It is understood that hunting organisations have also written to the minister expressing concerns about the government's ability to fulfil its role.

Victorian Agriculture Minister 'very concerned' after leaked report claims hunters are regularly breaking law

7.30

By [Lauren Day](#)

Updated 1 Mar 2018, 4:46pm



PHOTO: A dead duck left by hunters at Koorangie State Game Reserve last year. (Supplied: Coalition Against Duck Shooting)

RELATED STORY: [Dumped dead ducks reignite debate over hunting](#)

Hunters are regularly breaking the law in Victoria and the regulator in charge of policing them is failing, a leaked report has revealed.

Key points:

- Victoria's Game Management Authority has failed to enforce hunting laws, leaked report says
 - The report found it was common for hunters to break the law
 - Last year hundreds of protected birds were killed and more than 1,000 dead ducks dumped
- The state's Agriculture Minister has labelled the report "very concerning" and refused to rule out shutting the Game Management Authority (GMA) down.

Last year's duck season was marred by a bloody opening weekend in which at least 260 protected birds were killed at the Koorangie State Game Reserve, near Kerang.

More than a thousand ducks were also left uncollected, including hundreds that were found buried whole at the wetland, [as 7.30 revealed last year](#).

That chaotic weekend sparked a closure of that game reserve and an independent review of the GMA — the regulatory body that is supposed to ensure sustainable and responsible hunting.

7.30 has obtained a leaked copy of that review and its findings are damning.

Media player: "Space" to play, "M" to mute, "left" and "right" to seek.

VIDEO: [7.30 story about dumped dead ducks from March 2017](#). (7.30)

The report by Pegasus Economics found "non-compliance with hunting laws is commonplace and widespread" and that "by any standard, the GMA has failed to deliver on its responsibility to enforce the hunting laws".

"The events at Koorangie Marshes, and earlier similar events at Box Flat in 2013, represent significant failures of a state regulatory agency to enforce the laws for which it is responsible and have seriously undermined the GMA's credibility as an independent and credible regulator," the report said.

It also found that even the GMA's own staff don't believe it can ensure compliance with the hunting laws or effectively punish those who break them.

Other criticisms include that the GMA focuses too much energy on managing protesters instead of policing hunters, that the licencing regime is ineffective and that the GMA sometimes "slides into advocacy and promotional roles that conflict with its responsibilities as a regulator".

Activists say report should end duck hunting in Victoria

PHOTO: [Laurie Levy has been protesting the duck season for more than 30 years](#). (Lauren Day)



Long-time duck rescuer Laurie Levy said last year's season was one of the bloodiest he had seen in more than 30 years of activism.

He has been briefed on the Pegasus report and thought it would spell an end to duck hunting in Victoria.

"I had hoped that the report would force the [Agriculture] Minister [Jaala Pulford] to bring duck shooting to an end for all time," he said.

"The report was so damning of the Game Management Authority, I thought this can't go on. The Minister would have to look after our native water birds and close down duck shooting completely."

He said it illustrated there was effectively no-one policing the waterways and has called for drastic measures.

Apart from closing the season down, "the only other way you can introduce law and order to the wetlands is to bring the army in", he said.

"You can't do it through the police because the police are so busy looking after the public of Victoria," Mr Levy said.

"They don't have time to be on the wetlands, so you would have to bring the army in.

"But the Government could take the best option and ban duck shooting altogether, as three other states have done."

'We can only do what we can do', GMA says



PHOTO: Brian Hine says the Game Management Authority needs more resources and the help of shooters. (ABC News)

The GMA said the report is comprehensive and it is taking it seriously.

"The Board is supportive of the recommendations made," GMA chair Brian Hine said.

"We've implemented the ones that we can implement, that we have the power and resources to do now and they're in place and they'll be in place now for the forthcoming duck season."

However, he pointed out that the Authority has limited resources.

"It's a \$5 million budget and about 20 staff, so we need more, we need to make the best of what we've got," he said.

"We have an excellent very small team who have been working very hard for three years, since the establishment of the Authority, to ensure we have the right processes and procedures in place.

"We're not perfect, we're not there yet and we need help, we need help from hunters themselves. So it's really critical.

"We can only do what we can do. I think we're getting very good value for the relatively small budget and relatively small authority that we have."

Mr Hine said the GMA had already made a number of changes since last duck season.

The start time on the opening weekend is later, the licence testing tougher and hunters will now be breaking the law if they don't retrieve shot ducks or harvest their breast meat.

But Ms Pulford said the report is very concerning and will not rule out shutting down the GMA.

"I think today it's premature to speculate about the results of some work that we're undertaking as a government," she told 7.30.

"It is entirely possible that the GMA will not survive this process in its current shape, in its current form.

"The very first test that the GMA has to pass, they didn't get through so well."

Mr Light also revealed the FGA had written to Ms Pulford, along with two other hunting organisations, to express concerns about the GMA's ability to fulfil its role.

"The GMA and the Government need to strictly enforce the rules, we've been calling for this for a long time," he said.

The Pegasus Economics report showed that one hunting organisation described GMA as "woefully inadequate".

¹ Criteria for identifying Wetlands of International Importance
<http://www.environment.gov.au/water/wetlands/ramsar/criteria-identifying-wetlands>

² The Marshes and Lake Bael Bael are also identified as Priority Wetlands in the Kerang Priority Wetlands Protection Project, a North Central CMA/National Landcare Project (and one of many research and conservation projects at Victorian wetlands): <https://fieldcapture.ala.org.au/project/index/dc1740c6-28ef-45bc-844f-59a689e84fd0>

³ Previous bird massacres occurred in 1993, when the entire known population of nearly 300 Freckled Ducks in Victoria was wiped out on Lake Buloke; and the 2012 and 2013 Box Flat massacres, which only came to light due to tip-offs and strong media coverage (see attached *The Weekly Times*, **Secret report into Box Flat wildlife massacre itself runs foul of secrets.**).