



HUNTER RIVER ESTUARY WETLANDS



PROLOGUE

The important ecological functions of wetlands are now universally recognised but unfortunately this awareness may have come too late. Once perceived as worthless swamps, half of the world's wetlands have already been drained for agricultural use or filled with waste for use as building sites.

But because environmental scientists have identified the significant role wetlands play in sustaining marine and terrestrial ecosystems, governments around the world have now imposed tougher regulations to protect those that remain.

Wetlands are called “the kidneys of the landscape” and provide key habitats for maintaining biodiversity. They are directly or indirectly the source of a large amount of our food-supply but mankind still continues to destroy and severely degrade this transitional environment between land and water.

The “Hunter River Estuary Wetlands” are protected by legislation at the Local, State and Federal Government levels, as well as by international treaties and conventions. But these are being recklessly ignored in the relentless quest for developable land.

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE – A BRIEF CHRONOLOGY

The accompanying historic photograph shows the **Hunter River Estuary** as it was **50** years ago; an ecosystem where **interdependence** and **connectivity** played a crucial role.

The estuary was once made up of twenty-one (21) islands which formed a mosaic of wetland types – **Mangrove Swamps, Tidal Mudflats, Salt Marshes, Tidal Wetlands, Salt Flats, Casuarina** and **Melaleuca Swamps**, as well as **fresh and brackish wetlands** and **Reed Swamps**, all fed and maintained by extensive creek systems.

The internationally renowned naturalist John Gould, when he visited in the 1840's, wrote of the wonders of the estuary and marvelled at its wildlife. It is still the largest and most valuable estuary – wetlands in New South Wales and was described in the **1973** “Coffey” Commission of Enquiry findings as forming, **“a Continuous Ecological Unit”**

Birds of the Estuary – Up to recent times the estuary provided unique habitat for more than a quarter of Australia's bird species – was home to countless thousands of Wild Ducks and Waterfowl and attracted over **25,000** migratory waders annually, many of whom flew up to **15,000** kilometers from breeding grounds in **Siberia, Mongolia, Asia** and **Alaska** to find refuge from the Northern hemisphere winters. Declining numbers resulted in large parts of the estuary being protected by bi-lateral agreements with **China** and **Japan**, as well as the worldwide **RAMSAR** Convention and the **Australasian - East Asian Shorebird Site Network**.

Economic Resource – Historically, the **Hunter River Estuary** was recognised as a very important feeding and nursery area for fish and crustaceans, particularly Prawns. In **1970**, local prawn fisherman Reg Hyde caught enough Prawns coming out of Hexham Swamp to pay off his new fishing trawler in **9** days – also in **1970** a tagged King Prawn from the estuary was caught **600** kilometers north, along the Queensland coast – in **1925**, the annual phenomenon of migrating schools of King Prawns that came from the estuary was monitored by professional fisherman Herb Deamer. He observed a continuous stream of prawns stretching some **20** kilometers up the coast from the estuary to near Boat Harbour, confirming the Hunter estuary’s substantial past contribution to the seafood bio-mass.

Counting the Costs – Regrettably, since the 1950’s these wetlands, including the creeks that were their life-blood, have been drained for cattle farming, used for rubbish dumps, reclaimed for industrial sites, polluted by urban and industrial development and damaged by coal mining activities. This has brought about a dramatic decline in the capacity of the estuary to function as an effective ecosystem – migratory wader bird numbers have reduced sharply and at last count were around **3,500** annually, about **one-eighth** of what they were – fish and prawn catches are about **one-tenth** of what they were – wildlife numbers have plummeted. **This loss must and can be reversed!**

Ignoring the Facts – Over the years, numerous authoritative reports and enquiries have recommended protecting and restoring the estuary’s natural functions. However, despite these recommendations and because of an absence of integrated planning by governments, urban and industrial development has continued unchecked.

In **1972**, the Department of Public Works - Hexham Swamp Environmental Impact Report made repeated reference to the lack of planning in the area and stated “**It is recommended that a policy of tidal ventilation** [reopening the floodgates] **be adopted**”. Over **30** years on, this recommendation is yet

to be realised. This inaction has allowed the environmental, financial and social benefits that will be gained, when this does occur, to be overtaken by the impacts of incompatible development.

The **1973** Coffey Commission of Enquiry drew attention to the various adverse affects of continued land degradation in the estuary and stated, “**Unfortunately, many such habitats have already been destroyed along the New South Wales coast, and it is important that this trend be arrested before we find that we have endangered the marine, bird and other life that depend upon them for existence**”.

Another year later, in **1974**, the National Trust’s – Hunter River Estuary Report stated, “**It has become increasingly clear that plans for massive industrial development of the area, formulated some 20 years ago, are no longer in the best interests of the Hunter region. There is now a need to provide positive protection for this unique estuarine environment**”.

Some **30** years later, in **2000**, all these concerns were echoed in the Healthy Rivers Commission of Enquiry into the state of the Hunter River and its catchment. It concluded that, “**Ecologically Sustainable Development remains an ideal rather than a reality for the Hunter River and catchment**” and noted the growing community concern about providing proper protection for the estuary.

Undoing important Work – Nature Reserves have been established on Kooragang Island and Hexham Swamp and around **15 million** dollars spent already by the State and Federal Governments to acquire more of the estuary’s wetlands to restore them to health by revegetation, reestablishment of tidal inundation, remediation of creeks and treatment of freshwater catchment runoff. Their restoration will have significant spin-off benefits for tourism and see a resurgence of the local fishing industry.

In their questionable wisdom, our decision-makers are again planning massive industrial development within the estuary. However, scientific analysis, collective

experience, documented data and wisdom reveal that the estuary's unique and fragile environment is near to or at its sustainable limits and urgently needs innovative solutions to survive.