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Ramsar Secretary General visits Australia

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Anada Tiéga, the Secretary General of the Ramsar Convention, visited Australia in October 2009 to attend a conference in Cairns and see first-hand the work Australia is doing to protect its wetlands and implement the Ramsar Convention. Mr Tiéga visited a number of Ramsar wetlands and met with site managers and other key stakeholders to discuss the opportunities and wetlands.

A citizen of Niger, Mr Tiéga has many years’ experience in working with wetland conservation and sustainable use both at local level and internationally. He served for some years in the environmental administration of Niger, following which he became Niger’s country representative for The World Conservation Union (IUCN). In the mid-1990s, he served as IUCN’s regional coordinator for West Africa.

Mr Tiéga’s site visits started at the Boondall Wetlands Environment Centre, part of the Moreton Bay Ramsar site in south-east Queensland, where he met representatives from the Brisbane City Council, Wetlands International-Oceania, Queensland Wader Study Group and Australian and Queensland government officials.

Discussions covered the educational work of the Boondall Wetlands Environment Centre; the Queensland Wetlands Program (a joint program of the Australian and Queensland governments); the March 2009 Moreton Bay oil spill; the recently released Healthy Waterways Report Card; links to international wetlands work including the Australia East Asia Flyway program; and migratory shorebird counts and community educational activities of the Queensland Wader Study Group.

Mr Tiéga commented on the national (and ‘international’) applicability of the work undertaken through the Queensland Wetlands Program on wetland mapping, indicators and inventory as well as the high level of cooperation between governments and non-government agencies on wetland management in Queensland.

Mr Tiéga’s next site visit was to the Coorong and Lakes Alexandrina and Albert, South Australia. Mr Tiéga saw the difficult situation facing the site and met with site managers, traditional owners and community members to discuss management issues. This provided him with an understanding of the short and longer-term planning and actions being implemented or considered, to ensure an enduring outcome for these internationally-important wetlands.

Mr Tiéga also visited the Macquarie Marshes in New South Wales, a site for which an Article 3.2 notification (of ‘likely’ human induced adverse change to the ecological character of the site) has been recently made. He had the opportunity to see a wetland that was partially inundated with water and a flush of green. This picturesque phase of the marshes was a product of an ongoing NSW environmental water flow and to a lesser extent, recent rainfall in the area. Like the Coorong, the marshes are suffering from reduced flows.

Mr Tiéga met with former and current managers of the privately-owned part of the Ramsar site (‘Wilgara’), as well as Australian and New South Wales government officers and was provided with an update on the development of a response strategy to address the Article 3.2 notification. The final site visit by Mr Tiéga was to the Towra Point Nature
Reserve Ramsar site at Kurnell in Sydney. Towra Point is situated in the highly-urbanised and industrialised Georges River and Botany Bay Catchments.

Mr Tiéga visited an area on the site where management actions such as dredging and beach nourishment have been undertaken to protect breeding habitat of the endangered little tern. Site managers also provided an overview of the monitoring program in place to evaluate this work.

While in Canberra, Mr Tiéga met the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts, the Hon Peter Garrett, AM, MP, international organisational partners including World Wildlife Fund Australia, Wetland International Oceania, Birds Australia, the Australian Committee for IUCN; as well as the Australian Wetlands Alliance to discuss Australia’s implementation of the Ramsar Convention.

Mr Tiéga also addressed an event at the Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts to celebrate the 35th anniversary of the listing of Cobourg Peninsula as the world’s first Wetland of International Importance.

Kenny Wauchope, traditional owner and chair of the Cobourg Peninsula Sanctuary and Marine Park Board, and Peter Fitzgerald, senior district ranger of the Garig Gunak Barlu National Park, attended the celebration.

Cobourg Peninsula is managed jointly by the Northern Territory Government and the Cobourg traditional owners through the Cobourg Peninsula Sanctuary and Marine Park Board. Cobourg Peninsula is a good illustration of community involvement and participation in management decision-making for Ramsar-listed wetlands. Under the Ramsar Convention, the role of Indigenous communities in managing local wetlands is well recognised. The advantages of participatory management provide a blend of local environmental knowledge with scientific understanding for more effective wetland management.

Mr Tiéga also officially launched the updated Australian Wetlands Database Ramsar site information pages, a key tool for the Ramsar Convention’s Communication, Education, Participation and Awareness program in Australia.

The enhanced database promotes the wise use of wetlands and provides easily accessible information about Australia’s wetlands, including all of Australia’s 65 Ramsar sites. The database features a virtual tour of Cobourg Peninsula Ramsar site.

The database will be a valuable resource for wetland site managers, other key stakeholders and the public in general. The department welcomes feedback on the database and inquiries can be made at wetlandsmail@environment.gov.au

Information: www.environment.gov.au/wetlands

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