



**Private Member's Motion on Ramsar Convention for the Preservation of
Wetlands**

Main Committee

30 May 2011

Sharon Grierson MP

Ms GRIERSON (Newcastle) (19:25): I rise to mark the 40th anniversary of the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance. I welcome the member for Gippsland's motion and I celebrate the achievements in my electorate, in the Australian community and internationally that have been brought about because of this treaty.

In Australia we have 64 Ramsar listed sites, and internationally there are over 1,900 wetland sites. Australia, like 159 other nations, is a signatory to the Ramsar convention. The treaty provides a framework for the recognition and protection of wetland ecosystems and the plant and animal life that relies on them. Like this motion, the treaty recognises:

... that wetlands constitute a resource of great economic, cultural, scientific, and recreational value, the loss of which would be irreparable ...

The United Nations Environment Program World Conservation Monitoring Centre estimates that six per cent of the world's land surface is composed of wetlands. In my electorate, the Hunter estuary is a Ramsar listed wetland and includes Kooragang Nature Reserve, Ironbark Creek, parts of the Hunter River and the Hunter Wetlands Centre. Dotted with melaleuca swamp forests, freshwater reed marshes and mangrove creeks, the Hunter Estuary is a living environment, providing a temporary home for migratory waterbirds during their seasonal migrations and a more permanent, or semipermanent, ecosystem for the breeding of fish.

The estuary is also a place for recreation, for amateur fisher men and women, for birdwatchers and for families canoeing or picnicking in the wetlands. As a result, the Hunter Wetlands Centre has become a hub for ecotourism in the region, attracting more than 100,000 visitors each year and contributing to the environmental, cultural and economic prosperity of the city. In fact, in 2005 it won the international Ramsar conservation award for education. In both 2007 and 2009, it won the Hunter Tourism Award for ecotourism.

But, since European settlement and the encroachment of urban developments on wetland ecosystems, there have been tumultuous changes in landscapes, and it is

estimated that over half of Australia's wetlands have been destroyed. Through habitat change, pollution, overexploitation, the introduction of alien species and climate change, our wetland ecosystems and the biodiversity that they sustain continue to be at risk. A 2009 snapshot Ramsar study report into the management of Australia's Ramsar listed wetlands to the end of 2007 revealed serious ecological and management issues at protected wetlands.

That is why, as a government, we have invested in Australia's wetlands, building partnerships between government and local volunteer organisations to protect, promote and preserve wetland ecosystems and biodiversity. That is why we have provided almost \$2.5 million for educational facilities at the Hunter Wetlands Centre since being elected in 2007, as well as \$550,000 to support conservation management and ecotourism at the Hunter Wetlands Centre and over \$16,000 for volunteer groups who work at the centre.

Through this funding, Green Corps, for example, have supplied environmental training and work experience for young people aged 17 to 20 who have worked to restore wetlands in the Hunter estuary.

It would be remiss of me, in the context of this debate, to not acknowledge the tireless efforts of one of my constituents, Christine Prietto, in promoting the Ramsar convention in Australia and helping make the Hunter Wetlands Centre the national success story it is today.

In 2001-02, Christine led the process for the listing of the Hunter Wetlands Centre under the convention, building on the work of Kevin McDonald, Brian Gilligan, Max Maddox and probably lots of other people I have forgotten. Christine has since played a major role in promoting public awareness of the convention and now serves on Ramsar's Scientific and Technical Review Panel. The success of the Ramsar convention, both nationally and internationally, owes a great deal to the expertise and passion of people like Christine.

I commend this motion, and I thank all those people around the world who tirelessly work to protect our natural environment. Over the past 25 years in my electorate our local volunteers, our environmental leaders and our activists have put in an outstanding effort.

My daughter is nearly 29, and I recall being a volunteer at that stage in the wetlands myself. I congratulate them for returning an area earmarked to become landfill to its natural state as a wetland ecosystem rich with biodiversity.

To all of them: happy 40th anniversary and congratulations on a job well done.