



# Save the Murray

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## Wetlands



A wetland is defined as land that is inundated with shallow, slow moving or stationary water, on a temporary or permanent basis, that may be fresh, brackish or saline.

The complexity and range of wetlands makes them difficult to define. A wetland is exactly what the name suggests: wet land, but they may not always be wet.

However, they are areas that are wet for long periods, so that plants and animals living in them are adapted to, and often dependant on wet conditions for at least part of their life cycle. The period of inundation determines the type and productivity of the soils, as well as plant and animal communities.

Wetlands are also known by other names including swamps, lakes, bogs and billabongs, all of which are permanently or temporarily covered by water. They can be found adjacent to many of the rivers in the Murray-Darling Basin. Wetlands separate land environments from water environments, they are like a transition environment with features of both land and water ecosystems.

### Why are wetlands important?

There are many benefits derived from wetlands, for example they;

- purify water and provide protection from floods by absorbing and slowly releasing water
- are the breeding grounds for many animals
- are the habitat for many aquatic species, especially native fish, some rare and endangered

- are rich in cultural heritage, both Aboriginal and European
- support wildlife that can aid in the control of pests
- provide recreational and educational places for people

### Why are wetlands threatened?

Despite a growing understanding of wetland values and functions they remain one of our most threatened resources.

Wetlands are one of the most degraded habitats in the world. In Australia, it is estimated that 50% of wetlands have been lost since in 1788.

Wetlands have long been regarded as “wastelands” and breeding grounds for disease and insects such as mosquitoes.

Past misuse and poor understanding of the importance of wetlands has left many wetlands severely degraded, mainly through inappropriate drainage, inundation as a result of river regulation, vegetation clearance, grazing and agriculture practices. Some wetlands were even used as dumping grounds for rubbish and effluent.

Many of these activities occurred in the absence of a clear understanding of wetlands. Better education and a greater understanding is now leading to improved management of these important resources.

### How many wetlands are in the Murray-Darling Basin?

The Murray-Darling Basin supports over 30,000 wetlands. Ten of these are of international significance and listed as Ramsar Wetlands of international importance.

### Why do sites need wet and dry cycles?

During cycles of wetting and drying, wetlands perform a variety of important functions.



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## Wetlands Continued

Dry wetlands absorb large volumes of water during flood periods – slowing the rate at which the river rises, thereby mitigating the impact of floods. They also retain water for long periods after floods, thus providing back-up sources of water for wildlife and stock.

When wet, wetlands support a huge range of plants and animals by providing an abundance of food. During flood conditions, wetlands can overflow onto floodplains and carry decaying animal and vegetable matter called silt to the floodplains creating a rich fertilizer for soils making them a valuable resource for grazing by stock. This 'soup' also triggers fish, insect and bird breeding events.