

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Australia's national parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas

Banrock Station – showcasing sustainability at a Wetland of International Importance (Ramsar site)

This submission made by:

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In today's world we are constantly bombarded by references to the word "sustainability". This is the ethos we must now aspire to, and while many spruik this message, it's not so easy to find real life examples of this principle to show how it can be done. But, there is a place that's like an open-air classroom where you can go to see sustainability being practiced at a site that has global recognition as a Wetland of International Importance (or Ramsar site, as we refer to them more commonly) and is also a commercially operated vineyard with a wine tasting and education facility. That place is the Banrock Station Wine and Wetland Centre in the Riverland of South Australia, and it shows that a new paradigm of managing protected areas in Australia is possible, if only we can re-shape our approaches to seeing these places with special environmental values protected.

Banrock Station sits in a wide sweeping bend of the River Murray, a few kilometres downstream from Barmera. Since the Hardy Wine Company acquired this property in 1993 they have promoted the Banrock Station label and continued to rehabilitate the wetland that lies on the floodplain beside their grape growing enterprise. If you look closely at a Banrock Station wine label you'll see that each sale generates a contribution to Landcare Australia, so that wetlands in other parts of the country can benefit.

So successful has the Banrock Station venture been that it saw Hardy's win one of three prestigious international wetland conservation awards in 2002. The site is now increasingly referred to as a demonstration site for the concept of wise use, the core principle of the international wetlands convention, the Ramsar Convention.

What is it about Banrock Station that has attracted so much attention and international accolades? Firstly, it is the restoration of the wetland. Banrock Station Wetland lies adjacent to lock 3 on the River Murray. When this was built, the wetland, which under natural conditions experienced wet and dry times, became permanently flooded. Apart from the water logging that killed many trees, the wetland and floodplain suffered from carp muddying the waters, sheep and rabbit overgrazing, and rising saline groundwater. In short, it was more like a moonscape than a healthy wetland ecosystem.

The rehabilitation began in 1992 with the installation of flow control gates, with screens on these to reduce access to the wetland by carp. This allowed for a return to semi-natural patterns of wetting and drying and the removal of tonnes of dead carp when the system was dried. Sheep were removed, rabbit numbers dropped dramatically due to the *Calicivirus*, and gradually the signs of life as it once was on the floodplain started to re-appear.

Rehabilitation was not restricted to the wetland, and the adjoining mallee and river red gum woodland was helped along with direct seeding, planting of seedlings and earthworks to use runoff to best effect. The significance of this rehabilitation can be seen now with a breeding population of the vulnerable Regent Parrot resident at Banrock Station.

The change in management approach didn't stop there. The other part of the Banrock Station property is that dedicated to grape growing for wine production. The vineyard is now an industry benchmark for irrigation practices. The grape growing areas are managed according to a stringent environmental management system; one that saw Banrock Station receive international ISO 14001 accreditation for this in 2002. The vines are irrigated using water efficient drippers and usage is constantly monitored with soil probes.

Banrock Station has also built a visitor and wine tasting facility. This sees the company showcasing how they have blended sound environmental management with commerce and an education experience. Around the centre, on the walking trails and boardwalks and in the bird hides, there are information panels describing the importance of the wetland, its rehabilitation and the overall ethos for the integrated management of the property. Along the walking trails you also get to understand the cultural importance of the floodplain to the Indigenous people of the Riverland, and how they once used its wetland resources. Not surprisingly Banrock Station has accreditation under the National Eco-tourism Program and has received several awards for promoting tourism.

Banrock Station these days receives 100,000 visitors annually. However, it is much more than a place to enjoy wines, food and the panorama of a peaceful wetland; it truly is a working model for sustainable development. This concept, that many people like to poo-poo as a pipe dream, is alive and well at Banrock Station.

To cap it all off, in October 2002, the Banrock Station wetland was officially declared a Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention. On this one site you now have a working vineyard exercising best practice, a nationally recognised eco-tourism and wine tourism business and a Ramsar Wetland of International of Importance providing habitat for several threatened species. This is Ramsar's wise use principle at work, and Banrock Station is shortly to become a training centre for wetland managers and those that are yet to see that economic development can happen in a way that doesn't cause harm to environmental assets. In fact, done right, it is possible to blend these two things to achieve win-win outcomes.

The Banrock Station case shows that it is possible for private landholders to be the responsible custodians of internationally recognised environmental assets. In this case it has come about through the initiative of the Hardy Wine Company, careful planning, and an on-going and productive dialogue between the site owners and managers and those within government that can support them to ensure broader natural resource management actions are working for and not against them in maintaining the ecological values of their Ramsar site.