

Cattai Wetlands – a Hidden Gem in our Valley



Council Name: Greater Taree City Council

Web Address: www.gtcc.nsw.gov.au

Size: 3,732 sq km

Population: 48,503



Greater Taree
City Council

Abstract: Once farmland with a degraded coastal wetland, Greater Taree City Council purchased a 486ha property in 2003 to restore it to its natural beauty. While the primary objective initially was to improve the water quality of the Manning River by remediating acid sulfate soils, a range of other environmental benefits have also been achieved including coastal wetland rehabilitation and floodplain management. Located 22km north of Taree, Cattai Wetlands now provides an important role in providing connectivity between Crowdy Bay National Park and the Lansdowne escarpment.

Over the last 12 months, Council has continued to undertake a range of on-ground works to further improve this beautiful natural asset. This has resulted in significant areas of revegetation, follow-up weed control, the construction of boardwalks and pathways, and the erection of interpretative signage.

Background:

The primary objective of the project has been to improve the water quality of the Manning River through acid sulfate soil remediation. Cattai Wetlands lies on the lower reaches of a NSW acid sulfate soil “hot spot” within the Pipeclay Canal/Cattai Creek catchment. Over the years, the release of acid into the catchment has had an adverse impact on oyster production and professional/recreational fishing.

Over the last few years the focus of Cattai Wetlands has been on achieving environmental objectives through remediating the site back to its natural state. With the rewetting of the soils, removal of weeds, planting of native species, stabilisation of banks and the establishment of basic infrastructure well underway, the focus of Council is to now “open up” the wetlands for the community to enjoy. This past year has seen improvements to site access and the provision of visitor facilities, to enable the wider community and tourists to experience the natural beauty of Cattai Wetlands.



Implementation:

Over the last couple of years a range of activities have been undertaken:

- In the absence of facilities, access to the site has only been through invitation events or organised tours. The wetlands have been the feature Council event on World Wetlands day for the last 2 years. This year, over 200 visitors walked the tracks with our passionate guides. Through “word of mouth” many groups have requested tours including the Manning Valley, Hastings and Camden Haven Birdwatchers, local/overseas Rotary groups, and the National Parks Association. Requests for tours have increased significantly with future tours organised for the Hunter and Central Coast Birdwatchers, a local photographic group and local bushwalkers.
- In March 2010, we commenced a user survey to determine what the community felt about their experience, what facilities are needed and how the wetlands could be improved. To date over 180 people have filled out the survey, with 98% rating their experience at Cattai Wetlands as either “excellent” or “good”.
- Remediation work has centred on preparing the wetlands for visitors including extensive bush regeneration works, stabilisation of creek banks and the planting of over 2000 trees with the assistance of the community and Conservation Volunteers Australia. Visitor facilities have been improved by extending existing boardwalks increasing the amount of interpretive signage.
- In October 2009 a special event was held at Cattai Wetlands with local Aboriginal Elders to explore opportunities for developing a cultural heritage centre at Cattai. All involved saw the significance and potential of the wetlands for this use.
- TAFE has used the wetlands as an “outdoor classroom” to educate students on water quality, local flora and wetland rehabilitation practices. Excursions enabled students to use practical field skills.
- Partnerships continued with a Property Vegetation Plan being signed between Council and the CMA to protect the wetlands in perpetuity. The Manning Valley Birdwatchers have also continued to do bird surveys and work skill programs have assisted with the implementation of remediation works.
- This year Council received funding through the Caring for our Country Program to explore opportunities to expand the successful acid sulfate soil remediation of Cattai Wetlands further north up the catchment.
- Council has continued a successful relationship with its neighbours. Fire breaks and boundary fencing have been maintained, and the opportunity to graze on some of Council’s land has been beneficial in reducing fuel loads and weeds.



Outcomes:

With 486 hectares secured for future generations, Cattai Wetlands has been hailed a success with:

- Remediation of a NSW acid sulfate soil 'hot spot'. While only a small part of a larger catchment, the works at Cattai Wetlands have reduced the discharge of acid into the Manning River.
- Seven endangered ecological communities preserved. The site provides habitat for an array of

vegetation communities from freshwater wetlands to swamp sclerophyll forests.

- Enhanced habitat opportunities for a large number of endangered flora and fauna species including the giant dragonfly, black-necked stork, koala, glossy black cockatoo, osprey, and green and golden bell frog.
- Almost 200 bird species observed using the site by the Manning Valley Birdwatchers. With the number of species increasing, Cattai Wetlands has become a popular bird watching spot in the region.
- Identification of 11 sites of Aboriginal cultural heritage significance by the local Aboriginal Land Council. Opportunities for an indigenous cultural centre are to be explored in the future.
- A successful partnership between Council and landowners to not only purchase the property in 2003, but in the ongoing maintenance of the wetland.
- Demonstrated overwhelming support from the community visiting the wetland with 98% rating their visit as “excellent” or “good”.
- Winner of the 2009/10 Tidy Towns Award for Wildlife Corridors and Habitats Conservation.
- Regionally, Cattai Wetlands has enhanced the regional wildlife habitat corridor linking Crowdy Bay National Park to the Lansdowne escarpment (as identified in the Mid Coast Regional Development Strategy 2006-2031). Securing the land in public ownership and remediating the landscape has provided a natural stepping stone within this corridor.

Challenges:

In the short term, Council has faced a number of challenges in 'opening up' the wetlands to the community including:

- Protecting what is special about the wetlands. While the user surveys indicated that people would like to see Cattai made more accessible, mechanisms need to be in place to prevent vandalism and to protect the sanctuary for the extensive birdlife. Public access may be trialled for limited times on set days of the week. Neighbours have offered to open/close the gates on certain days to restrict access at night.
- Consideration is also being given to the construction materials of infrastructure to ensure they are durable; and the design of trails is aimed at restricting vehicular and motor cycle access to this sensitive environment.
- Infrastructure provision. While Council would like Cattai to be used as an 'outdoor classroom' for local schools, the lack of toilet facilities is preventing this. Council is currently seeking funding options and partnerships to enable this objective to become a reality.
- Weed management. Council is currently undertaking trials with the HCRMA to explore the best approach to managing the bush regeneration program at Cattai. These findings will ensure the most efficient approach to weed management is applied and promoted to others.

In the long term, the cost of ongoing maintenance is a challenge faced by many local governments. As suggested by the community in the surveys a “Friends of Cattai” may be established to assist in the ongoing

maintenance of the wetland.

References:

http://www.gtcc.nsw.gov.au/Page/page.asp?Page_Id=269&h=0

Name: Tanya Cross

Position: Team Leader Environmental Services

Phone: 02 6592 5248

Email: tanya.cross@gtcc.nsw.gov.au