

## **Building a water stewardship community in Western Port, Australia**

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### **Extended Abstract**

The International Water Stewardship Standard was developed during the Millennium drought. The Standard is designed to achieve a sustainable water balance, good water quality, good water governance and healthy ecosystems and cultural sites (e.g. wetlands and riparian zones). Water Stewardship Plans can be easily developed and implemented from scratch (or built upon existing plans and works) and can be externally accredited.

Designated in 2002 under UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme, the Mornington Peninsula and Western Port Biosphere Reserve (**Western Port Biosphere**) is located south-east of Melbourne in Victoria, Australia. It has a combined area of 2,142 square kilometres and is made up of five local government areas and French Island. It contains a mix of landscapes: national and marine parks, rural agriculture and urban-growth areas. It has numerous sites of geomorphological and historical significance and is a region of great biological diversity due to an unusually wide range of habitat types. Western Port is listed under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance.

Our project, being led by Western Port Biosphere in collaboration with Water Stewardship Australia, Ingham Enterprises and a group of regional stakeholders, is aiming to build collaboration between major water users, the community, water agencies, local government and other stakeholders around the framework of the International Water Stewardship Standard. The Watson Creek Catchment, stretching from Baxter to the internationally significant Yaringa Marine National Park was the initial focus of the project. A Reference Group supporting the project includes representatives from the Western Port Biosphere Reserve, Mornington Peninsula Shire Council, Port Phillip and Westernport Catchment Management Authority, Parks Victoria, Melbourne Water, South East Water, Southern Rural Water, EPA Victoria, Inghams Enterprises, and Water Stewardship Australia.

Funding from the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust has enabled good progress in the first year of our 3 year program with 15 Site Water Stewardship Plans currently being produced. We are developing these Site Water Stewardship Plans with deliberate mixture of landholders, organisations and businesses. Our water stewards include a chicken processor, horticulture farms, plant nurseries, livestock producers, grazing properties, horse agistment properties, schools, a camp site, a wetland reserve, and a golf course. We have learned valuable lessons about the water stewardship process and its value in water, stream and catchment management. The role of schools in the program, as well as businesses, are important in linking together the rural landholders in a community of participants.

Landholders are developing Site Water Stewardship Plans to address their specific site risks and protect site or catchment values. They have been planning and implementing works such as (but not limited to) the following:

- Riparian zone fencing (& off stream watering points)

- Riparian zone revegetation
- Improved soil and pasture management and erosion control (e.g. using native grasses to bind soil)
- Installation of wetlands to treat water quality onsite before release and/or create wildlife habitat
- Use of alternative water sources (recycled water via purple pipe)
- Local capture and recycling of water
- Monitoring of water levels and water quality

These actions result in water and costs savings while creating environmental benefits, including protection of native vegetation, enhancing natural pest control predators, creating wildlife habitat and corridors, treating water quality and quantity issues on site, preventing erosion and sedimentation, and enhancing ecosystem quality in stream and wetland environments.

The project is now entering its second phase, incorporating other catchments within the Biosphere's region and is seeking further landholders, business and organisation to develop their Site Water Stewardship Plans. We are working through the government agencies, landcare groups and industry associations to create a core of water stewards in each catchment throughout the Western Port Biosphere. Expansion of the program will proceed catchment by catchment within the Biosphere, using a number of criteria to identify the best areas for the current phase of the project. The criteria were catchments which:

- were adjacent to Watson Creek;
- had good data sets and information available;
- had interested landholders or landcare groups;
- had high value receiving waters values – e.g. Ramsar site, national park, high value species, etc;
- had high value industries, that are large water users or may have significant impact on water values; and,
- had interested industry associations to support landholders.

Our project is currently working in the catchments of Watson, Merricks, Langwarrin, Balcombe, & Sweetwater Creeks as well as Cardinia Ck/Bunyip River, Bass River, Chinamans/Tootgarook and Hastings North catchments. In 2017, we have plans to expand the program further into Cape Shank/Main Ck, Cannons Creek, Lang Lang River catchments, and possibly the catchments on Phillip Island and French Islands.