

Wetlands to Wastelands? Seminar September 18, 2004.

Why are we here?

Kevin McLean, Friends of Perth Airport Bushland

Perth Airport is located on relatively flat land on the eastern side of the Swan Coastal Plain near the foothills of the Darling Range. It occupies about 2100 hectares. There are about 700 hectares of natural bushland remaining on the site.

This seminar is focussed on Perth Airport's outstanding significance as a wetland area and the many issues surrounding the protection of its conservation values.

The wetlands of Perth Airport are part of the Mungala wetland suite, which lies on the eastern side of the Swan Coastal Plain where the alluvial deposits extending out from the Darling Scarp meet the sandy soils of the Bassendean Dunes (*EPA Bulletin 1119*). Creeks flow down from the ranges in eroded gullies bringing silts and clays onto the plain (*EPA Bulletin 1119*).

The Mungala suite wetlands may be underlain by sands or heavier alluvial clay material and include such features as lakes, sumplands, floodplains, and creeks.

Munday Swamp, on the eastern side of the Airport, has a peaty-clay base and is fed by groundwater and surface runoff. A major source of runoff is Poison Gully Creek, which flows down from the scarp.

Most of the undeveloped area at the airport is technically wetland and most of that area has been classified as Conservation Category Wetland (*Draft Environmental Protection (Swan Coastal Plain Wetlands) Policy and Regulations 2004*). There are numerous swamps at the airport and generally they are in exceptionally good condition.

Perth Airport is an area of considerable significance with respect to Aboriginal heritage and Munday Swamp and its surrounding bushland have been recognized as having strong contemporary Aboriginal cultural significance. We have heard from Robert Bropho about the importance of Munday Swamp to contemporary Aboriginal people and some of the history of that association.

The pre-European Aboriginal usage of the airport area is evident in the existence of artefact scatters in various locations around the airport. Isolated chips of quartz and chert may be noticed in sandy spaces throughout the landscape.

Munday Swamp is actually named after an Aboriginal leader called Munday who lead a Nyungar group known as the Beeloo (Laurie M 44:1999). Munday was well known to the early European settlers and his group moved around the area between the Swan, Canning, and Helena Rivers and extending to the east over the Darling Ranges (Laurie M 44:1999). The Beeloo hunted tortoises in the Munday Swamp area, carrying them to higher ground to the east for cooking and eating (Laurie M 44:1999). The Beeloo would probably have hunted other food species, such as wallabies, in the woodlands and heaths surrounding the swamps.

The Aboriginal heritage significance of the Perth Airport area adds strongly to the case for protecting its natural areas in perpetuity.

The site for Perth Airport was selected in 1938 but its initial construction and usage was for military purposes during World War II. Commercial usage of the airport commenced after the war and centred on areas in the vicinity of the present domestic terminal. The international terminal was commissioned in 1986. The Federal Airports Corporation (FAC) was formed in 1988, with a view to facilitating the eventual privatisation of Australia's major airports. Perth Airport was privatised in 1997, with Westralia Airports Corporation assuming control of the airport's lease for 50 years, with a 49 year option.

The conservation value of the natural areas at Perth Airport has been officially recognised for decades. The *Darling System – System 6 1983* “Red Book” made the following recommendation regarding Perth Airport (Site M52):

RECOMMENDATION: M52.1 That the Commonwealth of Australia retain as much uncleared land as possible.

This recognition of the conservation values of Perth Airport’s natural areas has continued through such processes as *Perth’s Bushplan*, National Estate Listings, *Bush Forever*, and the Draft *EPP (Swan Coastal Plain Wetlands) Policy and Regulations 2004*.

In February 1996, 4 areas (totalling about 186 hectares) at Perth Airport were placed on the Register of the National Estate. The Federal Airports Corporation challenged these listings and succeeded in having them removed from the Register. However, after some disputation between the Australian Heritage Commission and the FAC, two large areas at Perth Airport, totalling about 510 hectares, were placed on the Register of the National Estate.

Perth Airport bushland is listed in *Bush Forever* as Site 386. Site 386 occupies 629.5 hectares.

The Friends of Perth Airport Bushland group was formed about ten years ago with a view to lobbying for the protection and appropriate environmental management of the natural areas at the airport. During that time the group has made a large number of detailed submissions relating to airport planning documents and proposals, written many letters regarding issues pertaining to Perth Airport’s natural environment, and had many meetings with a variety of stakeholders and relevant parties regarding such matters. Overall, lobbying for the protection and appropriate environmental management of Perth Airport’s natural areas has been a difficult and frustrating task and there have been many regrettable losses. Perth Airport is owned by the Commonwealth and the Commonwealth administers the *Airports Act 1996* and the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* – the two main pieces of legislation affecting the airport’s environmental protection and management.

The airport’s operator has limited incentive to make conservation concessions or to outlay large sums on natural area management as it endeavours to maximise its returns on the lease investment for investors. Of greater concern to our group has been what we regard as the appallingly unsatisfactory performance of the Commonwealth with respect to the protection and management of the Perth Airport’s natural areas. The ultimate responsibility for this lies with the present Commonwealth Government as it is its responsibility to ensure that the letter and spirit of all the relevant legislation relating to the protection of the area’s biota is complied with and put into effect. The Commonwealth is in a position to approve or reject development plans or proposals put forward by the airport operator and is in a position to communicate with community groups regarding concerns they may have regarding issues pertaining to protection of the airport’s biota. In our view, the present Commonwealth Government has failed to meet its responsibilities in these areas and that that has led to some very bad environmental outcomes.

In our experience, the Commonwealth, in recent years, has not even attempted to address community concerns regarding environmental issues pertaining to Perth Airport’s natural environment. In our view, it is the Commonwealth’s unavoidable responsibility to direct and constrain the airport operator to act in such a manner that damaging environmental impacts on areas of high conservation value will be strictly avoided. But the Commonwealth has proven to be far more inclined to attempt to justify severe environmental impacts than to prevent them. All we can do as a group is to try to alert the wider community as to what is happening. This conference is part of that process.

Perth Airport’s natural areas are not generally accessible to law-abiding members of the public. The landside natural areas are, however, physically accessible to the off-road vehicle fraternity and they do considerable damage to various wetland and bushland areas within the airport’s boundaries. Our group has made innumerable complaints about this problem – to little avail. The 4WD and motorcycle enthusiasts are generally not in the natural areas to appreciate their environmental values and only a few people outside this subset of the population would have visited the airport’s bushland and wetland areas. This is one of the

airport's conservation problems in that the community does not have a sense of "ownership" of area that assists conservation campaigns for other sites around Perth.

In actual fact, Perth Airport has quite remarkable remnant areas – both in their size and in their attributes. Perhaps the most important thing to keep in mind is that the scale of the remnant area means that it constitutes an ecologically viable and functioning sample of the original Bassendean Dunes system on the eastern side of the Swan Coastal Plain. Of course much of the area has been greatly disturbed and modified since European settlement and many native fauna species have disappeared. But, in relative terms, there is no comparable site in the urbanised portions of the Perth Metropolitan Area with respect to wetlands situated in a broad scale bushland landscape. One can walk for kilometres at the airport and observe all the basic physical and ecological variations and processes that would have been typical of the Bassendean Dunes landscape at the time of European settlement – with banksia/sheoak/jarrah woodland ridges, transitional heaths on slopes, dampland heaths, and paperbark swamps and lakes in swales and basins.

Around 30-40 hectares of this landscape was recently obliterated to make way for a Warehousing and Distribution Park off Horrie Miller Drive. Don't be deceived, this was a very bad conservation loss for the Perth region. A large proportion of the development site was on the Register of the National Estate and much of it was classified as Conservation Category wetland. The area was very rich in bird life, supported large numbers of bandicoots, and had a diverse reptile fauna. The public was made aware of the comment period for the Major Development Plan associated with the project by means of a tiny advertisement placed in the Public Notices of a weekday edition of *The West Australian*. Our group missed this inconspicuous advertisement and only became aware of the Major Development Plan's existence in the last week of the three-month comment period. In any case, the Federal Minister for Transport and Deputy Prime Minister, John Anderson, wholeheartedly approved the plan after receiving recommendations that it should be approved – despite all the environmental losses - from the Canberra bureaucrats. What a surprise. This is a system that does not work in the public interest. Frankly, it is a disgrace.

The Friends of Perth Airport Bushland has raised numerous environmental issues associated with airport developments with the airport operator and the Commonwealth – usually with no satisfactory outcome. We have often only become aware of developments when the bulldozers have started clearing. We raised objections regarding the construction of the large Australia Post centre near the domestic terminal, the Cummins site off Horrie Miller Drive, and the clearing operations for the Star Track building, for example.

We lodged very detailed submissions regarding the *1998 Preliminary Draft Perth Airport Master Plan and Environment Strategy*. It is our very strong view that the documents did not give Perth Airport's environmental values sufficient recognition and that it did not guarantee enough of the natural areas would be retained. We have never wavered from this view and are awaiting the release of the final 2003 *Perth Airport Master Plan*. It was reported in early August that John Anderson had approved the document but it is our understanding that WAC is not making it available for viewing until mid-October. We were not at all satisfied with the Preliminary Draft document released early this year and made many suggestions for its improvement.

We objected very strongly to the Commonwealth regarding the process by which several hectares of bushland were reduced to a height of 30 cm to make stone-throwing children less of a hazard in an area on the western side of the airport. We pointed out that the existing fences simply needed improvement but we were ignored.

We objected strongly to the Commonwealth and the airport operator regarding the use of the poison Pindone to control feral pests at the Perth Airport. We were aware the bait is toxic to small native animals such as bandicoots but the Commonwealth and the airport operator dismissed our concerns.

We objected strongly to the Commonwealth and the airport operator regarding the storage of green waste and very large quantities of mulch off Zante Road directly adjacent to the Poison Gully wetlands. Our concerns were ignored.

We objected very strongly to the Commonwealth regarding the diversion of Poison Gully Creek around the Poison Gully wetlands and around Munday Swamp in 2002/2003. A huge new drain, cutting far deeper than any creek or drain in the vicinity was constructed to prevent water accumulating on airport land. The waters of Poison Gully creek not flowing to the north in a built drain to the west of the Forrestfield Marshalling Yards normally flowed via a curving tree-lined channel into the large Poison Gully wetland south of Grogan Road and then north under Grogan Road along a meandering paperbark-lined channel into Munday Swamp. But this naturally meandering, shallow, and tree-lined channel was cut off and by-passed with the construction of the new drain. In other words, the normal channel of Poison Gully creek on airport land was deprived of its inward water supply and that water is now feeding a massive new drain which takes water directly to the airport's northern main drain. As a consequence, the Poison Gully wetland, off Zante Road, has far less water feeding into it and its value as water bird habitat has been greatly reduced. Furthermore, the general area to the south and west of Munday Swamp will undoubtedly have its water table lowered as the new drain is exceedingly deep. The actual construction of the drain was an environmental disgrace with a great deal of vegetation destroyed by earthworks. The Commonwealth's performance over this issue beggars belief. We contacted the Commonwealth's representatives very early in the process of the drainage modifications but were not given accurate information regarding WAC's intentions.

There are many unresolved environmental issues at Perth Airport and it is our strong view that the Commonwealth and the airport operator are way out of touch with community expectations in Western Australia with respect to protection of the natural environment. Perth Airport is an extremely valuable wetland and bushland habitat area on the Swan Coastal Plain – particularly in the context of the eastern side of the plain south of the Swan River. It merits far more protection and far better environmental management and we hope the community will help bring about the changes that are necessary.

Bib.

Laurie, M., *Ever Flowing Forward The Story of Belmont* (Perth:1999).