FIELD Game Australia (FGA) put a proposal to Winton Wetlands’ committee of management offering its resources to help secure more water and develop conservation and wetland management projects. FGA also asked for a limited trial of reintroduction of duck hunting. The proposal was rejected.

**Hunters fear for future of Winton Wetlands**

A pro-hunting lobby group, Field and Game Australia (FGA), believes that the current eco-tourism model for Winton Wetlands is doomed to fail unless a broader approach was taken for its use.

In this week’s FGA magazine Winton Wetlands was described as “dry as a chip” and after 10 years and nearly $20 million “even the most casual observer would struggle to evaluate any notion of success with the parched landscape.”

FGA member Simon O’Brien asked the question, could the FGA help?

After plenty of research and discussion the FGA sought and was granted a meeting with the Winton Wetlands committee of management where they presented their ideas but they were ultimately rejected.

FGA proposed that the committee “tap into” the FGA’s knowledge and experience when it comes to conservation and wetland management, and utilise its thousands of members for volunteer labour on projects at Winton Wetlands as well as use its considerable network to lobby and advocate for more water.

FGA also wanted a limited trial reintroduction of duck hunting on parts of the wetland which they said would have been small and managed depending on the ecology of the wetland.

In this week’s article FGA said it was happy to advocate for much needed environmental water so the wetting and drying cycle could be managed, and introduce partners to invest in the wetland conservation projects.

Above all they sought an opportunity for hunter conservationists to re-engage with an important wetland in the north-east of the state.

Benalla Rural City Council and Wangaratta Rural City Council, they said, supported a limited trial based on a desire to generate greater community involvement and economic activity.

Dean O’Hara (FGA chief executive officer) said the rejection was an opportunity lost.

“We were disappointed because we believed we could help bring about improvements not only for hunters but for the environment, locals and visitors as well,” he said.

“Our organisation was born out of hunting but we are conservationists as well.

“To see a beautiful wetland not reach its potential is a tragedy.”

Mr O’Hara pointed to the dramatic improvements made to the Heart Morass wetland in Gippsland which went completely dry for the first time in 2006. According to the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority the wetland area was previously used for heavy grazing and suffered from acid sulphate soils and salinity.

WGCMA website said active engagement of the local community was fundamental to the success of the restoration project which was built around a partnership between five key organisations, Bug Blitz Trust, Field and Game Australia, Hugh Williamson Foundation, Watermark Inc.

While the project is ongoing and includes plans for expansion, the wetland remains a perfect example of what can be achieved with a broader, united approach according to Mr O’Hara.
Continued improvement in all areas main goal - WW CEO

WHILE it may be steady as she goes for the Winton Wetlands committee of management (WWCoM) they have a vision and the field and Game Australia (FGA) proposal in the future.

Winton Wetlands chief executive officer Daniel Basham said he welcomed the submission from the FGA but at this stage legislation prevented any hunting in the reserve.

“The WWCoM over the next few years will continue to focus on the renewal of the wetlands while developing the economic, social, educational and research opportunities,” he said.

“At this moment, within the Mokoan Project, the committee does not believe that a proposed hunting trial is a priority and hopes to review the FGA proposal in three years’ time.”

Mr Basham acknowledged the long dry period was impacting the project and although some of the smaller wetlands filled up this year the majority of the landscape was dry.

“Our wetland ecologist is currently developing a three phased hydrology plan (2 month, 6 month and two year timeframe) and we will be undertaking numerous projects to improve the water management (90 small projects are already earmarked – some have commenced),” Mr Basham said.

As far as future funding is concerned Mr Basham said the original restoration funding agreement in 2010 with the Victorian Government provided $20 million (exclusive of GST) to the committee to implement the Lake Mokoan Future Land Use Strategy (FLUS) to restore, rehabilitate and improve the Winton Wetlands.

“These funds were intended to complete the first Future Land Use Strategy (FLUS),” he said.

“There was no indication within the FLUS and there has never been an expectation that the project would be finished at the completion of the funding.

“The committee of management have already starting deliberations for future management and funding.

“It is hoped that decisions will be made very soon and I suspect announcements will be made early next year.”

The official ‘vision’ of WWCoM is to “deliver a sustainable tourism and recreational asset that renews our wellbeing, our community, our economy and our environment”,

Mr Basham said the committee has focused on rebuilding ecological integrity and protecting and reintroducing threatened species; building new and renewing existing infrastructure and amenity to rebuild local access, recreation and pride; creating unique and life-changing experiences for local, paddock and international visitors; involving local Indigenous people in the renewal project and through real collaboration and through recognition of hundreds of indigenous cultural heritage sites.

Mr Basham said the committee has set about its task since day one with gusto and has delivered a thriving site in support of multiple partners and organisations.

He pointed to continued growth in visitor numbers with 65,287 visiting last financial year (24.6 per cent increase from 2017/18); volunteers – with 4114 hours recorded last financial year; plantings and site regeneration – with 7590 plants and 50ha of direct seeding in the last financial year; infrastructure – 125km of road and path maintained last financial year; species recovery including squirrel gliders, Rakali (water rat), Murray cod juveniles, Growing Grass Frog reintroduction project under way and supported by Australian Geographic, and the Eastern Long Necked Turtle to local population and monitoring under way.

More than 2000 students visited the site and there were 91 engagements with Yorta Yorta Nations Aboriginal Corporations.

Science and research projects included ecological renewal continued with programs in turtle protection, water quality monitoring and management, feral animal and weed control, installation of nesting boxes and dryland and wetland plantings.

Mr Basham said Winton Wetlands’ role as an education and research centre continues to grow with an increased number of school and university students attending programs at the site, as well as postgraduate and honour students conducting their research on aspects of the site’s ecology.

Current projects include Indigenous Trail Project, Education and Research Centre, Wetland Themed Playground, Revegetation Projects and Species Recovery Projects.

Mr Basham said future revenue sources include a Vavel sanctuary, Demonstration Wetlands – complete with board walks and hides, Winton Wetlands – Phase 3, Eco accommodation – linking to Cycle Tourism, through Tourism North East, and a Solar Farm.

WHAT’S NEXT? The State Government launched the restoration of the 8750-hectare Winton Wetlands in 2010, it’s the largest wetland restoration project in Australia. Winton Wetlands has more than 3000 hectares of wetlands surrounded by substantial areas of red gum and box grassy woodlands. After 10 years the question has been asked is it heading in the right direction?

FGA described Lake Mokoan as a failed and wasteful water storage but very popular recreation and hunting destination before it was decommissioned in 2014 and in its place emerged the opportunity to rehabilitate the landscape and recreate a natural wonder that would attract community interest, volunteer effort and a flood of visitors who would generate significant value to the economy.

It was traditionally hunted, and hunting remained a feature of local activity until the decommissioning.

Surprisingly, according to FGA, given the track record of hunters in conserving and rehabilitating Victorian wetlands, there was no invitation to take part in the new Winton Wetlands project.

The FGA believes the rehabilitation of this massive area (8750ha including woodland) and its promotion as a natural wetland attraction has been impacted severely by two things: the inability to secure environmental water and exceptionally long dry periods.

“When the wetlands fill, it is a sight to see, but since the project began it has been mostly dry, and a wetland without water is about as attractive a proposition as a pub with no beer,” the FGA article said.

Ultimately, the pitch was rejected, with the committee advising that while interesting and enlightening, the decision was to focus on the economic, social, educational and research opportunities, and a trial of duck hunting was “not a priority”.

Hunters won’t be back on the Winton Wetlands in the immediate future, but they will be keeping a close eye on this important wetland complex.

Some recent rainfall would help with both the ecology and the economics of the Winton Wetlands but the real question according to FGA is whether the test of the eco-tourism model will ever deliver the benefits that were delivered when hunters and fishermen enjoyed access.

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