

Information Sheet on Ramsar Wetlands

Categories approved by Recommendation 4.7 of the Conference of the Contracting Parties.

1. Date this sheet was completed/updated:

1998

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY.

DD	MM	YY

Designation date

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

Site Reference Number

2. Country:

Australia

3. Name of wetland:

Cobourg Peninsula

4. Geographical coordinates: Latitude: 11°07'-11°44'S; Longitude: 131°45'-132°45'E

5. Altitude:

At or near sea level. The interior rises gently to 30-50 m elevation, with the exception of Mount Bedwell (143 m) and Mount Roe (160 m).

6. Area:

220 700 hectares

7. Overview:

The site comprises all wetlands of Cobourg Peninsula and nearby Sir George Hope Islands, including freshwater and extensive intertidal areas. Subtidal areas are not included. The site corresponds with the Gurig National Park boundaries and is slightly smaller than the Cobourg Peninsula System (TEC004NT) as defined in the Directory of Important Wetlands in Australia, 2nd edition (1996). The Cobourg Peninsula System extends 23 km south of Gurig National Park boundaries and includes the important Minimini Creek system and Endyalgout Island. Gurig National Park, and its surrounding waters is managed jointly by the Traditional Owners and the Parks and Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory through the Cobourg Peninsula Sanctuary Board. The peninsula is predominantly unmodified with numerous extensive tidal flats, estuaries, riverine wetlands and Melaleuca swamps. The site is surrounded by Cobourg Marine Park, which takes in 229,000 ha of surrounding waters.

8. Wetland Type:

marine-coastal: A B C D E F G H I J K
inland: L M N O P Q R Sp Ss Tp Ts
U Va Vt W Xf Xp Y Zg Zk
man-made: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

9. Ramsar Criteria :

1a 1b 1c 1d 2a 2b 2c 2d 3a 3b 3c | 4a 4b

Please specify the most significant criterion applicable to the site:

10. Map of site included? Please tick *yes* -or- *no*

11. Name and address of the compiler of this form:

Parks and Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory
PO Box 496
PALMERSTON NT 0831
Telephone (08) 8989 4411 Fax (08) 8983 2349

12. Justification of the criteria selected under point 9, on previous page.

13. General location:

Northern Territory, Australia, approximately 163 km north-east of Darwin; Bioregion: Top End Coastal; IMCRA Bioregion: Cobourg (NT 58) and Van Diemen Gulf (NT 17); Admin Region: Darwin.

14. Physical features:

Cobourg Peninsula is the northern most part of the mainland of the Northern Territory of Australia. This Peninsula is flanked by the Arafura Sea in the north and by the Van Diemen Gulf in the south. The geology is dominated by a thin Quaternary layer of sands, gravel and alluvium draped over a laterised Cretaceous siltstones, sandstones and mudstones of the Bathurst Formation. Generally the northern coastline of the Peninsula is characterised by isolated bays, rocky headlands and beaches. Intertidal and coastal habitats consist of extensive dunes, fringing coral and rocky reefs, sand and mudflats, with few areas of mangroves and seagrass communities. In contrast, the southern coastline and islands comprise mainly mangrove communities associated with large mudflats. These mangrove communities are interspersed with rocky headlands. Sandy beaches do occur in the southern area of the Peninsula, but are mainly restricted to the associated islands, eg Sir George Hope Islands. The dune material consists of quartz and calcareous sands overlying mottled clay. The majority of the land surface consists of Quaternary quartzose sand, shell and coral debris, saliferous organic mud and silt. Also, mesoscale irregular sumplands/lakes (c. ten swamps, mainly in west and far north); many lower parts of creeks also are swampy.

Hydrological features: Water supply: Most of the site's wetlands are tidal. Also, numerous creeks flow into the tidal areas: most are less than 10 km long, apart from Mawuwu Creek (entering Port Bremer), Alaru Creek (Trepan Bay) and an unnamed creek (Raffles Bay), which are 13-14 km long. All catchments are relatively undisturbed.

Inundation: Tides occur twice-daily, creeks and swamps probably are seasonal.

Water depth: Tidal amplitudes is meso-tidal (3-4 m) occur along the northern coastline (Port Essington: 4.2 m), whereas the southern coastline is macro tidal (4-6 m).

Water salinity: Swamps are fresh, stasohaline; the lake near Point Danger is saline.

The climate is monsoonal tropical being characterised by two seasons: a hot, dry winter, and a hot wet summer. The average rainfall is 1350 mm. Median and mean annual rainfall at Cape Don Light station (west end of peninsula) are 1280 mm and 1319 mm respectively, mostly falling in December-April; annual evaporation is c. 2400 mm. The seasonal nature of rainfall on the Peninsula produces a large variation in the hydrological regime. Steep salinity gradients exists between the estuaries and backswamps and also up along the estuaries from their mouth. Runoff is between 500-1000 mm of annual rainfall. Temperatures and relative humidity are high. Cyclone activity is low to moderate. Cyclones are potentially the most serious natural hazard.

15. Hydrological values:

Protection of surface and ground water is important for conservation and human consumption. Present surface and ground water barely cater for current potable water needs.

16. Ecological features:

The dominant vegetation type on the Peninsula is eucalyptus open forest often containing *Eucalyptus nesophila*, *E. miniata*, *E. tetradonta* and *Gronophyllum ramseyi*. In the stream and swamp communities *Melaleuca viridiflora* and *Barringtonia acutangula* are the dominant species, the mid-stratum typically contains *Grevillea pteridifolia* and *Pandanus spiralis*, and the lower stratum *Eriachne burkitti* and *Eulalia aurea*. In the coastal dune communities *Casuarina equisetifolia* and *Pandanus spiralis* are the dominant species with *Sorghum intrans*, *Enneapogon pallidus* and *Fimbristylis nutans* is the lower stratum. In the mangrove and salt flat communities 31 mangrove species are found, with *Avicennia marina* and *Rhizophora stylosa* being the most common and *Nypa fruiticans* being the rarest. Major sea grass beds near Kuper Point and Mangrove Point on the north coast.

17. Noteworthy flora:

Rare or threatened plants of the site include *Gossypium cunninghamii*, *Eriachne bleeseri*, *Nypa fruiticans*, *Fatoua pilosa*, *Xylacarpus granatum* and *Habenaria hymenophylla*.

Uncommon plants of the site include *Pisonia grandis* and *Hovea longifolia*. Unusually extensive areas of *Gronophyllum ramseyi* exist on the Peninsula.

18. Noteworthy fauna:

Notable fauna (Waterbirds): Composition: c. 58 species recorded, at least 21 listed under treaties (JAMBA/CAMBA); includes four darters and cormorants, 12 herons and allies (e.g. Eastern Reef Egret *Egretta sacra*), 23 shorebirds (e.g. Eastern Curlew *Numenius madagascariensis*) and six gulls and terns. Breeding: At least six seabird breeding rookeries occur on islands associated with the Peninsula, including Crested Tern *Sterna bergii*, Black-naped Tern *Sterna sumatrana*, Roseate Tern *Sterna dougallii*, Bridled Tern *Sterna anaethetus*, Little Tern *Sterna albifrons* (Ne) Other breeding species include Beach Thick-knee *Esacus magnirostris*, Striated Heron *Butorides striatas*, Wandering Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna arcuata*, White-bellied Sea-eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster*, Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* and Pied Oystercatcher *Haematopus longirostris*. Migration Stop-over: 16 migrant shorebird species occur; but mudflats are not known to support unusually large numbers of shorebirds (Storr 1977; Blakers *et al.* 1984; PWCNT databases; R. Chatto, unpub.; Thompson and Goodfellow unpub.; Hope, R. pers. comm.). *Notable fauna (other taxa)*: Composition: Saltwater Crocodile *Crocodylus porosus* occurs in the tidal areas (e.g. south ends of Port Bremer and Raffles Bay) but densities are relatively low. At least 13 frog species occur on the peninsula, including *Sphenophryne adelphe*, *Crinia bilingua* and eight species of *Litoria*. Marine turtles occur at most of the islands and headlands, with all species known to breed in the NT being recorded breeding here. Good feeding sites for turtles exist at the south western part of the Peninsula. Dugong *Dugong dugon* occur in the Minimini channels and widely in adjacent shallow seas, with high densities in some northern embayments. Rare Species: Four rare sea turtles occur on the peninsula: Green Turtle *Chelonia mydas* (Nv), Hawksbill Turtle *Eretmochelys imbricata* (Nv), Pacific Ridley *Lepidochelys olivacea* and Leathery Turtle *Dermochelys coriacea* (Nv). One of the few instances of leathery turtle nesting on the Northern Territory mainland was at Danger Point (Ramsar datasheet; Tyler and Davies 1986; Wood and Bonnin 1987; Bucher 1989; Woerle, F. pers. comm.; Ottley, B. pers. comm.).

19. Social and cultural values:

Cobourg Peninsula has important social and cultural values to the traditional Aboriginal owners. The traditional owners still conduct an active ceremonial life and undertake semi-traditional hunting and gathering, all of which have a strong coastal orientation.

Cobourg Peninsula has significant historical value, as Victoria Settlement (Port Essington) was the site of an English military settlement that existed between the years 1838-1849. It was the only European colony in tropical Australia at that time.

The Peninsula also has recreation value to local, interstate and international visitors.

20. Land tenure/ownership:

The majority of Cobourg Peninsula is freehold Aboriginal Land and falls within Gurig National Park, the far south-east part is in Aboriginal freehold trust (Arnhem Land Aboriginal Land Trust). The sea immediately surrounding the Peninsula has been declared the Cobourg Marine Park. The Cobourg Peninsula Sanctuary Board through the Cobourg Peninsula Aboriginal Land and Marine Park Act administers Gurig National Park and Cobourg Marine Park.

21. Current land use:

(a) the site: Aboriginal land use - traditional owners live in the National Park in a semi-traditional manner;

Recreational use - restricted visitor numbers (15 vehicles at any one time);

Tourist use - Seven Spirits Wilderness Resort, Trophy hunting (feral animals) safaris; Recreational fishing tours from Cape Don.

Conservation use - managed as a National Park; and

Pearling Lease - a small section of the National Park is leased to a pearling company as a land base for their culture operations offshore.

(b) the surroundings/catchment: the Peninsula abuts the Arnhem Land Aboriginal Reserve. The Reserve land use is also Aboriginal land use as outlined in (a).

The waters surrounding the Peninsula have been declared a Marine Park. Existing uses of the Marine Park include traditional Aboriginal hunting, conservation, commercial fishing, pearl culturing and recreation.

22. Factors (past, present or potential) adversely affecting the site's ecological character, including changes in land use and development projects:

(a) the site: Wilderness resort and feral animals including pigs, water buffaloes, Timor ponies, Bali cattle and sambar deer;

(b) the surroundings/catchment: The traditional owners believe that Dugong (*Dugong dugon*) numbers are decreasing in some areas because of the effects of prawning trawlers working in the area.

23. Conservation measures taken:

A National Park has been declared over almost the entire Peninsula and a Plan of Management prepared. The Plan places restrictions on the location and types of activities and developments that may occur. Visitors to the National Park require a permit. Visitor numbers are limited to about 15 vehicles at any one time. Visitation to the National Park is also constrained by its remoteness and difficult access. Cobourg Marine Park surrounds Cobourg Peninsula and occupies an area of approximately 229 000 ha.

24. Conservation measures proposed but not yet implemented:

A plan of management for Cobourg Marine Park is in preparation.

25. Current scientific research and facilities:

Research is being carried out on Banteng distribution and on the impact of fire on vegetation. Coastal, intertidal and subtidal (6 m) habitats are currently being mapped and assessed.

26. Current conservation education:

Due to the remoteness and limits on visitor numbers the educational potential of Cobourg Peninsula is small, however a visitor information centre exists.

27. Current recreation and tourism:

Visitor numbers to Cobourg Peninsula lies between 2000–3000 per year. The wetlands are a destination for tourists and recreationists seeking a remote wilderness experience. Visitor activities include fishing, bird-watching, trophy hunting of feral animals and general sight-seeing.

28. Jurisdiction:

Government of the Northern Territory

29. Management authority:

The Management Authority of the area is The Cobourg Peninsula Sanctuary Board (which comprises 8 members - 4 nominated by the Northern Land Council & 4 nominated by Minister for Parks and Wildlife).

Contact address:

Parks and Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory
PO Box 496, PALMERSTON NT 0831
Telephone (08) 8989 4411; Fax (08) 8932 3849

30. Bibliographical references:

References are listed at the end of the relevant sections of the Gurig National Park plan of management (1987) prepared by the Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory on behalf of the Cobourg Peninsula Sanctuary Board.

ISBN 0 7245 0791 4

Australian Nature Conservation Agency (1996) *A Directory of Important Wetlands in Australia, second edition*. Editors: R Blackley, S Usback and K Langford. ANCA.
