



Hunter Bird
Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia

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The General Manager,
Maitland City Council,
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Sent to: info@maitland.nsw.gov.au on 20 October, 2022

Re: Objection to Latest Plans for Walka Water Works

Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc. is alarmed by the plans for Walka Water Works outlined in the press release reported in the *Maitland Mercury* of Friday 7 October 2022. The plans for Walka Water Works outlined there will destroy the natural assets of this reserve. The plans for the water reservoir/lake and wider spotted gum ironbark forest would totally destroy the site as a wildlife reserve. The 112 hectares of park, lake and bushland is the only sizable natural reserve in Maitland LGA and should be preserved as such. Surrounding LGA's have large Conservation Areas, national parks, lakes and beaches. For Maitland to compete for the tourism dollar it must at least protect its one ecological treasure.

The plans of Maitland Council and Reflections Holiday Parks do not acknowledge the site's high conservation value or its wildlife reserve status. Birdwatchers and wildlife lovers flock to the city of Maitland to visit Walka which is located within a few minutes of the city centre. It is one of the few remaining areas in NSW where over 200 species of birds can potentially be seen in such a small area (Source - BirdLife Australia's Birddata data base). This is approximately 40% of NSW's list of native bird species. A development of this size and intensity combined with the destruction of the woodland will drive away most of those species. The only species left will be those which will habituate to or tolerate human proximity.

In addition, the bush land is largely comprised of the *Endangered Ecological community (EEC)* 'Lower Hunter Spotted Gum-Ironbark Forest'. The criteria for this listing are as follows:

"Lower Hunter Spotted Gum Ironbark Forest in the Sydney Basin and NSW North Coast Bioregions is eligible to be listed as an Endangered Ecological Community as, in the opinion of the NSW Threatened Species Scientific Committee, it is facing a very high risk of extinction in New South Wales in the near future, as determined in accordance with the following criteria prescribed by the Biodiversity Conservation Regulation 2017:"

<https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/-/media/OEH/Corporate-Site/Documents/Animals-and-plants/Scientific-Committee/Determinations/2019/lower-hunter-spotted-gum-ironbark-forest-final-determination-EEC.pdf?la=en&hash=45284937A71F0175AF94955070E93778C784AA0F>

This bushland attracts seven additional threatened species, no fewer than 23 species of honeyeaters and 18 species of birds of prey, a significant number of each of these cohorts.

The current project is incompatible with previously documented council plans, policies and projects for Walka Water Works, such as:

1. Maitland City Council was appointed the Reserve Trust Manager in August 2007 through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the NSW Department of Lands and, by entering into the MOU, Council envisaged that Walka Water Works would be more strategically integrated into Council's *passive* (our italics) *open space system*.

2. Walka Water Works was listed on the [New South Wales State Heritage Register](#) on 2 April 1999 having satisfied the following criteria:

'The place is important in demonstrating aesthetic characteristics and/or a high degree of creative or technical achievement in New South Wales'.

*'The entire site has been largely unmarred by the construction of any other **unsympathetic developments**.'*

3. **Walka Water Works Interpretation Plan** has Ecology as one of its 3 main focuses: *'6.3.2 Ecology Synopsis: Exploring the flora and fauna of Walka and drawing contemporary lessons from them:*

Conserving flora and fauna

Conserving water

Changing ecology

Ways of seeing nature'

This focus on ecology would be seriously compromised if the overdevelopment advocated in the recently announced project were allowed to go ahead.

4. Walka Water Works brochure describes it as Walka Recreation and **Wildlife Reserve**: *'Welcome to Walka Recreation and Wildlife Reserve. Offering 112 hectares of park, lake and bush land*

This attraction of the site as a wildlife reserve would be seriously compromised if the overdevelopment advocated in the suggested project were allowed to go ahead.

5. The site has been promoted by the council as an important **educational resource**: *'Walka is a valuable asset which can be used by schools for programs seeking local sites and experiences to support Stage 2 and 3 curriculum outcomes in Science, History and Geography'* A Resource Kit for Schools has been developed through Our Sense of Place: Improving environmental attitudes and behaviours, a pilot project of Maitland Region Landcare with assistance from the New South Wales Government through its Environmental Trust. It was motivated by the results of a local school survey that highlighted the kind of support and resourcing schools needed to improve environmental education. It included resources for teachers, a Young Explorers Walk around the lake's edge and interpretive signage.

This outstanding educational program for the youth of Maitland would be of little value if the site is degraded and the Young Explorers Walk would be useless if there was tourist accommodation and a so-called 'beach' on the lake front. The excellent Walka Bird App would be of limited value if the important bird species could no longer be seen on the site.

6. Walka was recognised with a **National Award of Excellence by Interpretation Australia in 2018** for a new project called 'Explore Walka'.

'Explore Walka celebrates the rich ecology and birdlife of Walka Water Works and was completed in December 2017. It is the first stage of the Walka Water Works Interpretation Plan'.

In conclusion, all the above planning and outstanding projects, including environmental education for Maitland district school children, would be rendered useless if the short-sighted plans proposed for Walka Water Works were implemented.

In addition, the project plans put forward by Reflections Holiday Parks flatly contradicts part of their own **Reflections 2030 Strategic Plan** which clearly states:

- **Protect & preserve for the people:** *As stewards of Crown Lands parks and reserves, our organisation is committed to protecting and preserving precious environmental assets for the people of New South Wales*
- *We are firmly focussed on building **climate change resilience** in these areas of significant natural beauty.*
- **Accommodation Strategy:** *More places to stay – **right** stays for the **right** customers.*
- **Collaborative Stakeholder Engagement:** *Develop a Stakeholder Engagement Plan to strengthen our relationships.*

Sympathetic development of crown lands is an admirable goal but this site has unique values that would be lost as a result of this totally unsympathetic development, and gives the impression that Reflections Holiday Parks seems intent on operating in contradiction of their own principles and seem to be entirely focussed on making a profit by destroying one of the most valuable environmental and heritage crown lands reserves in New South Wales.

Our Strong Recommendation is:

That there be no commercial development or degradation of the bushland area and the lake and its surrounds west of the train station. Reflections Holiday Parks, Maitland City Council and the NSW state government should engage in genuine collaborative stakeholder engagement to make Walka Water Works the most valuable environmental and heritage hotspot in New South Wales.

About Hunter Bird Observers Club

Hunter Bird Observers Club has over 400 members, many of whom live in the Maitland area and have contributed to environmental and educational projects in that local government area. It promotes the conservation of the environment and the enjoyment of birdwatching as a leisure time activity, and is one of the strongest environmental groups in the Hunter. We have strong networks with other groups including Landcare, Local Land Services, Bird Life Australia and the Hunter Wetlands Centre which is a prime example of what can be achieved by actively promoting environmental resources for both pleasure and profit.

Yours sincerely

Robert Stewart

On behalf of Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc

Reply to randmstewart@ozonline.com.au

Cc

Ms Jenny Aitchison, Member for Maitland

James Griffin, Minister for Environment and Heritage NSW

Reflections Holiday Parks