

# *Management and rehabilitation of aquatic habitat in the Australian Capital Territory*

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## *Legislation and policy governing aquatic habitat*

Environment ACT manages natural resources including fish and aquatic habitats in the ACT.

The *Land (Planning and Environment Act) 1991* establishes the Territory Plan, which classifies waters of the ACT into 3 primary water uses:

1. Conservation
2. Water supply
3. Drainage and Open space.

Within these categories a number of secondary uses are allowed, provided they do not conflict with the primary use. Such secondary uses include:

- Recreation (fishing, boating, swimming)
- Aquatic habitat
- Irrigation
- Stock water supply
- Stormwater discharge.

The majority of urban streams have 'Drainage and Open Space' as their primary use, with recreation and aquatic habitat as secondary uses.

The majority of non-urban streams have 'Conservation' as their primary use, with recreation, aquatic habitat, and stormwater discharge as secondary uses.

One catchment (Cotter River) has its primary use as 'Water supply'.

## *Water management*

Management of water in the ACT is controlled by the *Water Resources Act 1998*. Licences to abstract surface water or groundwater are issued under this legislation. The Environmental Flow Guidelines are a statutory requirement under the *Water Resources Act 1998* and prescribe minimum flows that must be achieved in catchments.

*Think Water, Act Water: A Strategy for Sustainable Water Resource Management in the ACT* was finalised in 2004. This strategy has targets such as reducing water use by 12% per capita by 2013 and 25% by 2023. It also outlines a Riparian Zone Management Plan to be incorporated into management programs for ACT areas that contain riparian zones. This Riparian Zone Management Plan categorises riparian values for each waterbody in the ACT and outlines threats and a range of management responses required.

## *Fisheries management*

The *Fisheries Act 2000* controls recreational and commercial fishing, and has the power to declare closed waters. Some closed waters have been declared to protect spawning locations of recreational desirable species such as trout, others have been declared to protect threatened species such as trout cod and Macquarie perch.

Under the *Fisheries Act 2000*, there is a requirement to prepare a Fisheries Management Plan for the ACT, which must include:

- A description of fish species and their habitats in the ACT.
- A description of current and potential threats to fish species and their habitats.

This plan is currently being finalised prior to public release.



## *Threatened species management*

Threatened species and communities (including fish) are declared under the *Nature Conservation Act 1980*. There is currently no provision for threatened populations to be declared.

Action plans have been prepared for all listed threatened species, with these plans outlining research and monitoring needs and management activities. The *Nature Conservation Act 1980* has provision for declaring threatening processes but has not done so, preferring to concentrate on on-ground actions to reduce or ameliorate threats rather than the preparation of more plans.

The *Nature Conservation Act 1980* has no provisions for the declaration of critical habitat, but does have provisions for protecting breeding sites of threatened fish.

## *Land management*

Approximately 60 per cent of land in the ACT is national park or nature reserve, with a further 7 per cent in commercial pine plantations, and 23 per cent as rural land.

National parks and reserves operate under individual plans of management, with nature conservation a high priority. The entire length of the Murrumbidgee River in the ACT is managed as the Murrumbidgee River Corridor, with the plan of management placing high emphasis on conservation of ecological values including aquatic fauna and their habitats.

ACT Forests is currently developing a riparian management strategy to guide its riparian activities after the Canberra wildfires of January 2003. This will involve restoration and reinstatement of riparian zones, re-alignment of tracks away from streams, and the removal of steep areas and stream edges from plantation forestry

Rural lands in the ACT are leasehold with each lessee required to prepare a Land Management Agreement (LMA). These LMAs are subject to approval by the ACT Government, and contain provisions for the sustainable management and protection of riparian and wetland areas.

Such provisions cover issues like fencing out riparian zones, provision of off-stream watering points, weed control activities, etc.

Developments on Territory land are subject to the provisions of the *Land (Planning and Environment Act) 1991* and so conservation and habitat issues are considered in the Development Application/Preliminary Assessment/Environmental Impact Assessment process.

## *Aquatic habitat management and research*

There are no formal aquatic habitat management programs or policies. However, the *ACT Nature Conservation Strategy* identifies the management of degradation of aquatic systems as one of five key management issues for the ACT.

Several significant research projects on the Cotter River by the Cooperative Research Centre for Freshwater Ecology and Environment ACT on the effects of environmental flows have been recently completed. These projects have had a significant focus on macroinvertebrates, periphyton and geomorphology, but some fish components have been studied as well. The adaptive management project on environmental flows is continuing and has had some spin-offs into researching the impacts of the 2003 bushfires.

Aquatic rehabilitation projects in the ACT include riparian restoration and protection projects on rural lands (fencing, tree planting, weed control). The largest in-stream project has been the Tharwa Groynes project. (See Lintermans, *these proceedings*.)

