

EXCELLENCE IN THE ENVIRONMENT AWARDS



COUNCIL NAME

Parkes Shire Council

WEB ADDRESS

www.parkes.nsw.gov.au

SIZE

5,958 square
kilometres

POPULATION

14,728

From Wasteland to Wetland: Transforming Retired Infrastructure into a Rural Oasis

Since 2023, Parkes Shire Council has been working towards its vision of transforming the town's decommissioned wastewater treatment ponds into a 25-hectare ephemeral wetland. Using water from the council's recycled system, the wetlands now sustain diverse flora and fauna, including migratory birds. A universally accessible pathway is being developed to enhance visitor access, further transforming the site into an attraction for both locals and tourists.

This ambitious project has involved the expertise of specialist wetland designers, extensive earthmoving, and the installation of locally sourced stag trees and root balls.

Background

The transformation of the abandoned wastewater ponds began after a new treatment plant was completed in 2018. Following recommendations from the Environment Protection Authority, Council opted for wetland development instead of allowing cattle grazing, to provide a critical ecological habitat and fulfill the community's need for accessible freshwater recreational spaces. With only 3.2% of land in Parkes Shire conserved compared to the state average of 9.4%, this project addresses significant deforestation and conservation challenges.

Local naturalists had long identified the site's biodiversity potential, and extensive community consultations revealed a demand for recreational and nature-based spaces. Feedback collected during 2021 consultations emphasised the need for improved public spaces, sport and recreation facilities, and visitor attractions. This project aligns with broader strategic goals, including Parkes Shire's Destination Management Plan, which highlights the area's untapped potential for nature-based tourism. The Parkes Wetlands project not only addresses the immediate ecological rehabilitation of retired infrastructure but also fulfills a significant community desire for accessible recreational spaces.

Implementation

Planning for the wetlands began as the new wastewater plant neared completion, with the Council unanimously supporting the initiative. Following overwhelmingly positive feedback from Council consultation with key community groups, including the local Landcare, birdwatching and bushwalking groups, a specialist wetlands ecology design firm was engaged to design the wetlands.

Construction started in 2023, involving significant earthworks to create varied habitat zones, such as islands, mudflats and deep refuge zones and installation of stag trees and large woody debris, alongside the planting of over 3,000 macrophytes and 600 native tubestock. Local residents participated in planting days, fostering community engagement. By late 2023, the wetlands were flooded using water from the Advanced Water Recycling Facility, and wildlife quickly began to return. Construction of a 2.5-kilometre gravel walking track commenced in early 2024, with completion anticipated in August.



May 2023 - Major earthworks complete.

The project was managed internally by council staff, in close collaboration with partners, such as the earthmoving firm handling major works. The total cost was \$800,000, with \$600,000 allocated to wetland development, partially funded by a \$100,000 grant from the NSW Environmental Trust, and \$200,000 for the walking track funded through the Local Roads and Community Infrastructure (LCRI) Program.

Outcomes

The project has already achieved significant milestones, including the rapid transformation of the site through earthworks and revegetation efforts. In addition to the macrophytes and tubestock, over 2,000 native plants have been added to the wider wetland area over the past five years, significantly boosting biodiversity.

The wetlands were flooded in late 2023 in anticipation of summer. Once water levels were significant, wildlife flocked back to the site. The return of numerous bird species, including rare sightings, highlights the ecological success of the wetlands. The community has already responded positively, expressing enthusiasm for the space as a recreational asset and tourism drawcard.

Once the site is officially open, the wetlands are expected to provide long-term benefits, such as increasing biodiversity as vegetation matures and boosting tourism through birdwatching and nature-based activities.

Key Learnings

The project has demonstrated the critical importance of community and stakeholder engagement during the project planning phase. Garnering strong support from residents, councillors and key groups was paramount and ensured the project's success. The Council has committed to regular maintenance and ongoing investment to sustain biodiversity and tourism growth. Plans are underway to collaborate with regional and state tourism organisations such as Destination Central West NSW and Visit NSW to position the wetlands as a premier birdwatching destination in Central West NSW.

Future developments include completing the walking track, installing bird hides, viewing platforms, interpretive signage, and an outdoor learning space. Additional plans involve creating a universally accessible amenities block and formalising a walking track to connect the wetlands to the town centre. On National Tree Day in July 2024, 500 native tubestock will be planted on-site, further enhancing the area. These ongoing efforts aim to ensure the wetlands remain a thriving space for both residents and visitors.





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This project was the 2024 Overall Winner of the Natural Environment Protection & Enhancement: On-Ground Works category at the LGNSW Excellence in the Environment Awards. This award was supported by our category partner NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water.