

LAKE MACQUARIE COASTAL WETLANDS PARK PROPOSAL 2005



Summary

The importance of protecting coastal wetlands has been recognised by all levels of government, and is supported in NSW and Australian Government policies. In co-operation with local communities, Lake Macquarie City Council has supported the concept of a Lake Macquarie Coastal Wetlands Park system to protect and manage a series of coastal wetlands and adjacent natural areas.

The Coastal Wetlands Park proposal comprises 10 separate areas of land comprising approximately 1,730 ha located over a 15km stretch of coastline between Dudley and Swansea. These are currently owned and managed by both Council and NSW Government agencies. These areas are significant when considered on a regional basis and include both wetlands and bushland within wetland catchment areas.

The protection of many of these areas is not assured, and there are many benefits in recognising the regional linkages between these areas, and co-ordinating their planning and management. There is potential for significant economic, environmental and administrative benefit, by rationalising ownership and management responsibilities. This could include management of these areas by one authority or agreed co-ordinated management by a number of agencies.

The initial objective of the proposal is to recognise all of these areas as part of one Coastal Wetlands Park system, and to ensure that identified lands are in secure land tenure. It is also important for the NSW Government and Lake Macquarie City Council to reach agreement on co-operative management of the land and to secure ongoing funding.

There is considerable community interest in the proposal, and there would be many public benefits that would result. Benefits would include environmental rehabilitation, provision of recreation opportunities, protection of habitat for threatened species, endangered ecological communities and internationally recognised migratory species. An important benefit would be long term financial savings resulting from co-ordinated management.

The proposal that follows outlines the areas included in the proposal, their values and planning and management issues and opportunities. It provides a basis for seeking support for the proposal from the NSW Government.

Background

In 2004, Lake Macquarie City Council resolved to support the concept of a Coastal Wetlands Park within the City on the eastern side of Lake Macquarie. This followed representations from the Lake Macquarie Coastal Wetlands Support Group which identified the need to recognise a system of wetland reserves, and to institute appropriate management programs, long term security, protection and rehabilitation of natural values.

The proposal is for 10 areas containing wetlands and bushland between Swansea and Dudley to be recognised and managed as being a Coastal Wetlands Park, or linked system of parks. These wetlands are recognised as of regional importance including a number of endangered ecological communities. When considered together with adjoining bushland, these areas provide habitat and corridor linkages for a range of species, including migratory and threatened species. As a whole, these areas are also of considerable economic and social importance to the City.

This report provides information about the areas involved in the proposal, the key issues to be resolved and the options available for making the concept a reality. The report provides a basis for clearly defining the concept and seeking support from local, State and Commonwealth MPs, other levels of government and relevant government agencies.

Scope of Coastal Wetlands Park proposal

The Council resolution supporting the proposal seeks to bring about appropriate recognition of a park for the long term protection and ecological enhancement of these areas, using as a basis for the system the findings of the Lake Macquarie Coastline Management Plan, the Jewells Wetland Catchment Management Strategy and the proposal by the Lake Macquarie Coastal Wetlands Support Group.

The Coastal Wetlands Park proposal is consistent with the vision and goals of the Lifestyle 2020 Strategy, which seeks to protect and enhance the environment and the City's biodiversity and wetlands. Tourism opportunities that respect the environment are also encouraged by the Strategy. The wetlands and aquatic areas included within the Coastal Wetlands Park proposal are broadly identified on the Green System Map within the Lifestyle 2020 Strategy, and are within the Belmont and Windale Planning Districts.

The park proposal comprises both lagoon and estuarine wetlands and surrounding natural areas within the wetland catchment. Wetlands are defined by the NSW Wetlands Management Policy as land inundated with water on a temporary or permanent basis with shallow water that is usually slow moving or stationary, and may be fresh, brackish or saline. The proposal includes three groups of wetlands as follows:

1. Jewells and Redhead Lagoons;
2. Belmont Lagoon Wetlands;
3. Estuarine wetlands (comprising 4 wetlands at the entrance to Lake Macquarie, and wetlands on islands and the eastern shore of the Lake).

The core areas of the park proposal are mostly wetlands identified as of importance under State Environmental Planning Policy 14 (SEPP 14 wetlands). There are twelve SEPP 14 wetlands plus additional small wetlands, with a total area of wetland of about 500 ha within the proposal boundaries. Lands with important natural values within wetland catchment areas and identified in the Lake Macquarie Coastline Management plan and Jewells Catchment Management Strategy have also been taken into consideration. The total area of land in the proposed core park area is 1,730ha, plus there are other areas that could be the subject to further investigation. There are additional wetland areas in private ownership

(such as Belmont Golf Course) which contribute to regional wetlands systems, but are not included in the proposal.

Although wetlands are the focus of the proposed park, substantial areas of bushland are included in the proposal. These bushland areas are important from a catchment management point of view, and comprise a total of 18 different vegetation communities, a third of which are listed as endangered ecological communities. All but one of these vegetation communities have been identified as of regional conservation significance.

The objectives of the proposal are as follows:

1. Protect wetland areas through an appropriate conservation land tenure and management responsibility.
2. Maintain habitat links between wetlands under appropriate land tenure.
3. Develop an integrated parks system which recognises and promotes the natural and recreational linkages between all the wetlands.

It is envisaged that there would be an integrated park system with common objectives and management planning, with either one management authority or co-ordinated management by different authorities. The key long term management agencies are likely to be Lake Macquarie City Council, Department of Lands, and the Department of Environment and Conservation (National Parks and Wildlife Service).

This Coastal Wetlands Park proposal has reviewed and where appropriate included other proposals. For example, the former BHP land (now State Government owned) for which a community consultative committee (Belmont Wetlands Advisory Committee or BWAC) has been established, comprises only part of the Coastal Wetlands Park system to which this report refers.

Regional, state and national context

A number of the wetlands in the area are identified as being of state and national importance, and comprise about 30% of the total area of the proposal. There are state and national policies in place to support wetland conservation. Programs operated by the Australian and NSW governments may assist with achieving support for the park proposal and with funding for implementation of protection and conservation measures as well as embellishments to support park users.

Key policies supporting protection of coastal wetlands are:

- Wetlands Policy of the Commonwealth Government of Australia (Environment Australia 1997) www.deh.gov.au/water/wetlands/publications/policy.htm;
- Commonwealth Coastal Policy 1996 www.deh.gov.au/coasts/publications/coastal-policy/summary.html;
- NSW Wetlands Management Policy 1996 www.dlwc.nsw.gov.au/care/wetlands/wetlandmanagement/policy.html;
- NSW Coastal Policy 1997;
- State Environment Planning Policy 14 – Coastal Wetlands;
- State Environmental Planning Policy 71 – Coastal Protection.

Both national and state legislation relating to threatened species and biodiversity conservation are relevant in that the wetlands and surrounding areas provide habitat for a

number of listed threatened species and migratory species, and listed endangered ecological systems also occur. These listings mean that the natural areas are of national and state interest.

A regional natural resource management context for the Coastal Wetlands Park proposal is provided by the Central Coast Catchment Blueprint 2003 which recognises the importance of protecting coastal wetlands. Regional vegetation assessment by the Lower Hunter and Central Coast Regional Environmental Management Strategy (LHCCREMS) also has reviewed the importance of the vegetation types in the area and identified some of the vegetation in the parks proposal as of regional significance.

Identification of land to be included in proposal

A map has been prepared identifying land with potential to be included in the proposed Coastal Wetlands Park system. This map also shows water catchment boundaries, SEPP 14 wetlands and public land ownership (including land owned by the NSW Government, Council or government trading enterprises).

Land has been considered for inclusion as part of the proposed Coastal Wetlands Park using the general areas identified in the Lake Macquarie Coastal Wetlands Support Group proposal and Jewells Wetland Catchment Management Strategy and Plan of Management. Only public land is included, and the proposal excludes the Fernleigh Track owned jointly by Newcastle and Lake Macquarie City Councils.

The 10 areas outlined in the following table have been identified in the proposal:

Reference	Name	Area (ha)	Land tenure
1	Redhead Lagoon & Awabakal Nature Reserve	238.7	3 ownerships (NPWS, LMCC & LD)
2	Jewells Wetland	460.3	4 ownerships (LMCC, RTA, HWC & LD)
3	Bangalay Reserve	54.4	2 ownerships (LMCC & LD)
4	Belmont North Wetland	621.3	2 ownerships (LMCC & LD)
5	Belmont Lagoon Reserve	148.5	4 ownerships (LMCC, DET, HWC & LD)
6	Pelican Flat/Blacksmiths Reserves	89.9	2 ownerships (LMCC & LD)
7	Coon Island	32.1	1 ownership (LD)
8	Pelican Inlet/Swansea Channel	32.9	1 ownership (LD)
9	Salts Bay Reserve & Black Neds Bay	152.1	2 ownerships (LMCC & LD)
10	Galgabba Point Reserve	53.0	2 ownerships (LMCC & EA)

(Key – LMCC Lake Macquarie City Council, LD Lands Department, HWC, Hunter Water Corporation, RTA Roads and Traffic Authority, DET Department of Education and Training, EA Energy Australia, NPWS National Parks and Wildlife Service)

An accompanying map showing the areas included in the proposal has been compiled. In addition, for the purpose of assisting the development of the proposal, a separate document with information for each individual area has been compiled.

Benefits of the Coastal Wetlands Park proposal

Benefits of implementing the proposal would include:

- Rationalising and consolidating the ownership of the parks, and thereby simplifying management. This would provide a co-operative long term land ownership and administrative framework for natural areas.
- Using the concept of a linked system of parks to highlight and market wetlands, and to raise the profile of the areas. This would also be likely to assist with raising additional funds for management.
- Supporting consistent management approaches within the parks, with economic efficiencies in management.
- Providing a strategic planning framework for the wetlands and their catchments, to recognise their values and to protect these (this would support local Landcare groups for example Belmont Lagoon, Redhead Care, Belmont Wetland, Pelican/Blacksmiths, Galgabba, Bangalay and Jewells Landcare Groups).
- By recognising the network of wetlands, and the regional context, to provide a basis for prioritising works and strategic planning and management of adjoining lands.
- Maintaining habitat for identified wetland species, or maintaining specific endangered ecological communities.
- Protection of areas of social and cultural importance, including Aboriginal and European heritage values.

It is considered that co-operative management of the separate areas would lead to much more effective management in the long term, and substantial reduction in management cost.

Identification of issues

Many issues need to be considered in implementing the Coastal Wetlands Park proposal. Important planning issues include:

- Determining an agreed framework for land tenure and long term management. (Note that long term land use is determined by Lake Macquarie Local Environmental Plan 2004, and Council has already adopted some policy actions under the Lake Macquarie Coastline Management Plan and the Jewells Wetland Management Plan);
- Considering social and economic issues, and any potential to undertake development of the land (eg: interpretive, education, recreation and tourism opportunities);
- Resolving threats that may prevent the protection and appropriate management of wetland areas (eg: RTA road reservations and proposals, sale of HWC land);
- Recognising links with other Hunter Wetland areas (eg: Ramsar listed areas of Kooragang Island and Shortland Wetlands) and matters of national environmental significance;
- Availability of adequate resources to fund rehabilitation works;
- Provision of access to the park (including Fernleigh Track development and coastal walking track);
- Identification of heritage sites;

Key management issues include the following:

- Bush fire hazard reduction requirements to protect life and property;
- Uncontrolled access, especially vehicle access to sensitive areas;
- Land clearing and maintenance requirements;
- Management requirements for threatened species and endangered ecological communities;
- Weed invasion and feral animal control;
- Rubbish dumping and filling;
- Recreational uses, signage and public education;
- Sedimentation of the wetlands (windblown sand and runoff from upstream);
- Management of heritage values;
- Access for scientific research and increasing understanding of coastal wetlands;
- Marketing of available visitor experiences;
- Integration with other community activities including landcare, school education, and recreation;
- Preparation and implementation of plans of management;

The land ownership and management options for the land include the following:

- Preparing a plan of management supported by a binding legal agreement;
- Seeking listing of lands under Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC) Act heritage schedules. If agreed, this would support Commonwealth funding opportunities;
- Listing of areas as Ramsar wetlands;
- State Government conservation agreements with private landholders;
- Trust structure with LMCC as trust manager under Crown Lands Act;
- Trust structure with a community group as manager;
- Transfer of Crown lands to NPWS and preparation of a plan of management;
- Transfer of Crown lands to LMCC and classification and management as community land under LG Act;
- Consolidation of land in public ownership into one landholding (and identified private land offered for dedication) and transferred to a separate agency or body (to be established) for management;
- Existing ownership being retained with the preparation of a consolidated plan of management for the whole area and one body obtaining a lease or being responsible for management by way of a formal management agreement or memorandum of understanding;
- Joint management agreement under Section 121 of the Threatened Species Conservation Act and preparation of a plan of management.

Consultation process for preparing the proposal

There are a range of stakeholders with interests in the proposal. A workshop attended by key stakeholders was held in late 2004 to consider the scope of the proposal, and to identify key issues requiring consideration. The workshop was attended by all key agencies and by community representatives. All the government agency representatives present indicated that they are happy to participate in the development of a proposal because they have a continuing interest in the area.

The key stakeholders are as follows:

- Department of Lands
- Lake Macquarie City Council
- Hunter Water Corporation
- Roads and Traffic Authority
- Hunter-Central Rivers Catchment Management Authority
- Department of Environment and Conservation (National Parks and Wildlife Service)
- Lake Macquarie Coastal Wetlands Support Group
- Lake Macquarie Coastal and Wetlands Alliance
- URGE (United Residents' Group for the Environment)
- Awabakal Land Council
- Bahtabah Land Council

The Australian Department of Environment and Heritage is also a potentially important stakeholder in the process, given that many of the migratory and threatened species that could be protected in the parks are matters of national environmental significance under the Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999.

Areas for inclusion in the proposal

The 10 separate areas proposed to be included in the Coastal Wetlands Park proposal are briefly described below and key strategic actions are suggested:

1 REDHEAD LAGOON & AWABAKAL NATURE RESERVE (Area 1)

Most of the natural areas in this area are within Awabakal Nature Reserve and managed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service. A small part is owned by LMCC, and there are two holdings of Crown land that have been identified as desirable to be added to the Nature Reserve. The main issue appears to be to consolidate ownership and management (preferably by NPWS).

The following actions are proposed:

- (I) Consolidation of Crown land inholdings into Awabakal Nature Reserve.
- (II) A memorandum of understanding to be agreed between LMCC and NPWS about co-operative management of their lands.

2 JEWELLS WETLAND (Areas 1 & 2)

The areas proposed for inclusion in a park and the management approach have been identified in the Jewells Wetland Catchment Management Strategy and Management Plan already adopted by Council. A significant issue is the complexity of land management authorities and issues of land tenure, which affect the ability to protect and manage the wetland.

The following actions are proposed:

- (I) A memorandum of understanding to be agreed between LMCC, LD, RTA & HWC about co-operative management of their lands.
- (II) Other recommendations of the Jewells Wetland Management Plan to be progressively implemented.

3 BANGALAY RESERVE (Area 3)

Bangalay reserve is within the Jewells Wetland catchment and is primarily owned by the Department of Lands, with some adjacent parcels owned by LMCC. The main issues relate to management responsibilities. LMCC is responsible for managing this land, and it may be appropriate to consolidate all the land within LMCC ownership which has the benefit of clearly defining management responsibility.

Although this reserve does not include a wetland within its boundaries, it forms an important part of the Jewells Wetland catchment and has a direct habitat corridor connection. It therefore has been included in the park proposal.

4 BELMONT NORTH WETLAND (Area 4)

The final land tenure of this area has currently not been determined. Areas in the east which could be part of the Coastal Wetlands Park proposal include the former BHP land which is subject to a separate consultative process to determine future use. There are additional areas of LMCC land which adjoin LD land and should be included.

Consideration is being given by the NSW Government to making the LD land a State Conservation Area.

The following actions are proposed:

- (I) LMCC consider transferring its lands for incorporation with the LD land as part of a memorandum of understanding to be agreed between LMCC & LD.
- (II) That the concept of a State Conservation Area for this land be supported, with its management forming part of a co-operative management of the Coastal Wetlands Park system.

5 BELMONT LAGOON RESERVE (Area 5)

This land is owned by LMCC, Department of Lands and Hunter Water Corporation. There are also some areas of wetland in private ownership adjacent. There are significant management and development issues that require consideration in determining a final proposal.

The following actions are proposed:

- (I) Department of Lands consider transferring its land to LMCC for incorporation with the LMCC landholding.
- (II) That LMCC enter into a memorandum of understanding with HWC and Dept Education and Training in relation to co-operative management of the lagoon area.

6 PELICAN FLAT/BLACKSMITHS RESERVES (Area 6)

This area comprises land in the ownership of both LMCC and the Department of Lands. There are areas of listed endangered ecological community and significant vegetation communities that do not occur anywhere else in the City. Wetland areas occurring are not listed in SEPP14. Land tenure and management responsibilities appear to be key issues, as is future use of the Belmont Airport site.

The following actions are proposed:

- (I) Department of Lands and LMCC review options for consolidation of the land within a single ownership, and enter into a memorandum of understanding in relation to land transfers and/or co-operative management.

7 COON ISLAND (Areas 7 & 8)

This land is owned by the Department of Lands. The main issues relate to management.

The following actions are proposed:

- (I) The Department of Lands and LMCC review options for management of the land in conjunction with other LD and/or enter into a co-operative management agreement with LMCC.

8 PELICAN INLET/SWANSEA CHANNEL (Areas 7 & 8)

This land is owned by the Department of Lands. The main issues relate to management.

The following actions are proposed:

- (I) The Department of Lands and LMCC review options for management of the land in conjunction with other LD land and/or enter into a co-operative management agreement with LMCC.

9 SALTS BAY RESERVE & BLACK NEDS BAY (Area 9)

Most of this land is owned by the Department of Lands, with adjoining land owned by LMCC. The main issues relate to consolidation of ownership and achieving consistent management.

The following actions are proposed:

- (I) The Department of Lands and LMCC review options for management of the land in conjunction with other LD land and/or enter into a co-operative management agreement with LMCC.

10 GALGABBA POINT RESERVE (Area 10)

This land is owned by LMCC and EA (reserved for acquisition in Lake Macquarie LEP 2004). Some adjoining land is owned by RTA and could be investigated for future inclusion in the long term. The land adjacent to Galgabba Point wetland is within within Galgabba Creek catchment. Important wetland vegetation communities occur along the creek although not mapped as wetland in State Environmental Planning Policy No. 14. The land is also an important habitat corridor.

The following actions are proposed:

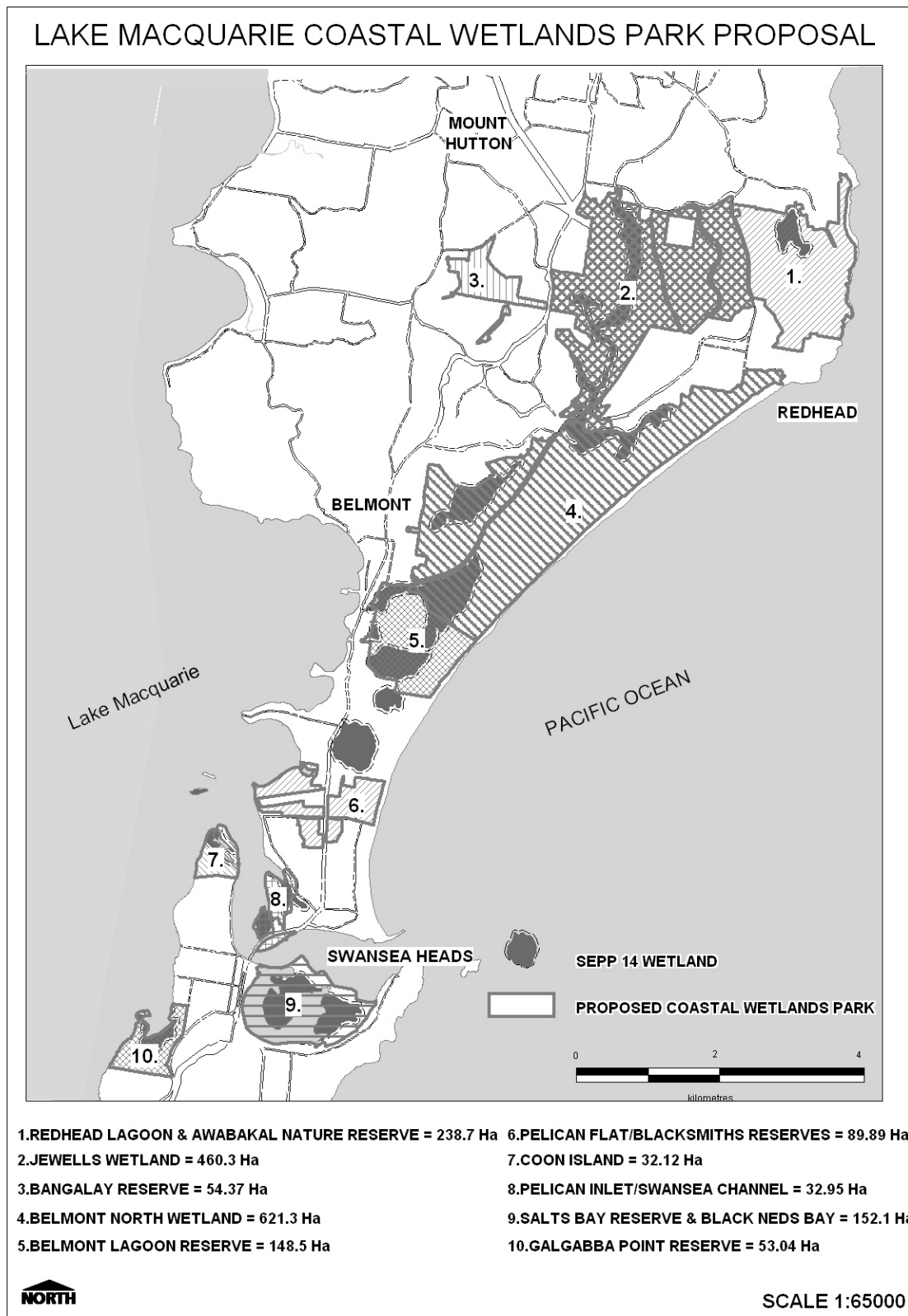
- (I) That appropriate management and site rehabilitation be applied in accordance with a plan of management.
- (II) That EA and LMCC review options for management and ownership of the land and/or enter into a cooperative management agreement.

Proposed actions

Immediate steps required to support the implementation of the proposal are:

1. Lake Macquarie City Council to resolve to support the proposal as presented.
2. Formally refer the proposal to NSW and Australian Government agency stakeholders.
3. Seek support for the proposal from local MP's and relevant NSW Government Ministers (Lands, Environment, and Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources).
4. Support the preparation of an information/publicity brochure.
5. Discuss the development of a memorandum of understanding between Lake Macquarie City Council and all the NSW Government agency landholders. This would agree on desirable future use and a future management framework.
6. Organise a further key stakeholder workshop to discuss establishing a framework for implementation (including administrative and funding options such as agreement on a memorandum of understanding).
7. Seek immediate funding from the Hunter-Central Rivers CMA to undertake on-ground works on those parts of the proposal under LMCC care, control and management.
8. Investigate funding options, including corporate sponsorship, CMA funding or Australian Government funding.
9. Prepare an implementation plan and budget in consultation with key NSW Government agencies. (eg: project management cost, 5 year rehabilitation program, labour, maintenance, purchase of adjoining land, etc).
10. Prepare an overall plan of management for public consultation and implementation by agencies.

MAP



(Note: Detailed maps of each of the 10 areas have been prepared showing land parcels)