

Northern Grampians Shire Council

Walkers Lake Plan



1. Foreword

Northern Grampians Shire Council has a commitment to the community through its social, community and environment strategy. Council is committed to provide safe and usable assets and services to improve the quality of life for residents. This is highlighted in the 2013 – 17 Council plan where providing passive and active recreational opportunities for residents and visitors throughout the shire is a priority.

The past 18 months has seen Walkers Lake gain momentum for support as an alternative recreational lake due to the uncertainty of securing water for Lake Batyo Catyo. There has been widespread support to seek a guaranteed supply of water that will contribute to the health and wellbeing of the community and also the environment sustained within the Walkers Lake reserve itself.

This plan has been compiled with support from key organisations and community members, who are also striving to achieve the best outcome for all users, and makes recommendations as to what actions are required to see this facility become sustainable in the future. The two key objectives being a balance between recreation and the environment.

Sincere thanks to those who provided input into this Plan

2. Introduction

Walkers Lake is located approximately 26 kilometres from the townships of Donald, 32 kilometres from St Arnaud and 40kilometres from Minyip. Walkers Lake and its environs are crown land, currently reserved for wildlife purposes. The lake itself has a volume of approximately 900 ML and is approximately 3 metres deep.

The lake currently only receives water supplies from an extensive natural catchment during very wet weather conditions. Prior to the recent thirteen year drought it was suggested the lake only dried out completely twice in a period of sixty years however with the recent decommissioning of the channel system the effects on what has previously been considered as natural flows will be impacted.

Decades ago overflows from the Avon River provided water regimes that were of more permanence to the Avon Plains Lakes. The building of Holland's Bank on a Shire road in the early 1900's has prevented this natural water regime and this has impacted on natural runoff into the Avon Plains Lakes, including Walkers Lake.

History identifies the Lake has been utilised for recreational activities for decades. Water sports such as skiing, fishing, yabbing, swimming and hunting in season, are currently enjoyed by local, regional and visiting communities subject to suitable water regimes. The Donald Angling Club has previously stocked the lake with golden perch and Fisheries Victoria has stocked it with Murray Cod.

Past history also identifies many of our past local regional community members also enjoyed Walkers Lakes recreational values, locals often riding their horses from surrounding locations and enjoying the tranquil lake atmosphere while swimming, and in general enjoying many water based recreational activities.

Due to the construction of the Wimmera Mallee Pipeline the adjacent Lake Batyo-Catyo that was utilised for recreational activities is no longer required as a water storage reservoir and current water supplies are subject to very intermittent water diversions from the Richardson River that do not supply the water availability or permanence local and regional recreational users are currently requesting, or as many have noted entitled to.

Following support from many local communities in 2013 the Northern Grampians Shire placed notices in the North Central News advertising for local interested community members regarding forming an Advisory Group to identify and progress the identified ongoing support for the utilisation of Walkers Lake as a location to receive pipeline delivered recreation water.

The first meeting was well attended by community members, appointed Advisory Group Members, Shire Council Members, agencies and interested local community members.

The outcome of this meeting supported the immediate progress requesting a pipeline water supply to the lake and further discussions were entered into regarding future management arrangements to potentially ensure the current opportunity for water based recreational opportunities were progressed. It was noted the lake had been subject to many recreational activities for decades when suitable water regimes were available and the lakes current natural attributes are relative intact.

2.1. Summary of Recreational Activities

The following draft future potential recreational activities include:

- Bird Watching
- Boating, Skiing, Sailing
- Camping
- Canoeing
- Fishing
- Hunting (In season)
- Picnicking
- Swimming
- Walking

3. Purpose of Plan

3.1. Management Plan Aims

The aims of the Management Plan are to provide direction on future management for the Walkers Lake Reserve in the following 2 stages:

Stage 1. Establish Walkers Lake as Recreational Lake for both passive and active recreational activities and;

- a) Secure a water supply from the Wimmera Mallee Pipeline

- b) Establish future governance arrangements including appropriate land tenure and management responsibilities.

Stage 2. Implement short and long term maintenance and infrastructure development plans to maximise recreational opportunities to meet current and future user needs taking into consideration:

- a) public safety
- b) protection of cultural heritage values
- c) biodiversity issues
- d) links to other regional recreational initiatives
- e) economic and socio values
- f) conservation of the lakes surrounding natural environment

3.2. Walkers Lake Advisory Group

Walkers Lake Advisory Group was formed as a result of community feedback in relation to the need for a recreational facility required in the St Arnaud region to cater for the needs of the community due to the absence of water security for Lake Batyo Catyo.

The group has worked towards creating recommendations for Northern Grampians Shire Council (NGSC) to consider for the feasibility of the lake as a recreation lake based on the following key areas:

- Status of the land including current and future options
- Management options
- Suitability of Walkers Lake as a recreation lake and how it would meet the needs of the community including accessibility
- Infrastructure – Needs and costs associated with relevant development if recommended and ongoing operational costs
- Limitations of the site in sustaining use associated with recreational activities
- Risks – Assessment, review and management strategies
- Water supply options, costs of supply and management
- Land use and biodiversity management

Working group participants who have attended meetings are:

Cr Kevin Erwin , Cr Tony Driscoll, Doug Johnson, Jenny Bibby, Wayne Robbins, David Byrne, Bernie Dunn (GWM Water), Martin Woodward (Park Victoria), Rob Loats (VR Fish), Steve Jesse (Avon Plains and Banyena Lancare), Carrie Jesse (Avon Plains and Banyena Lancare), Colin Coates, Michael Barratt, Joan Barrett, Fiona Burchell (Avon Plains and Banyena Lancare), Trevor Baldock, Graham Clark, Cr Merrilee Reid, Craig Pickthall, Chris Reid, Michelle Clark, Bernie Casey, Phil McCrae, Keith McPherson, Dale Casey and others.

4. Strategic Directions

4.1. Vision for Walkers Lake

- The vision is to maintain as close as possible the natural attributes of the lake and surrounds whilst providing the local and visiting community a location of high permanence to enjoy the recreational activity of their choice

4.2. Objectives

To:

Stage 1

Reserve the lake for recreational purposes and appoint the Northern Grampians Shire Council as the local community Committee of Management under the auspice's and appointed by the Northern Grampians Shire Council or direct to DEPI or similar

Stage 2 - Implement short and long term maintenance and infrastructure development plans to:

- a. review boating safety rules and implement recommendations
- b. maximise the number of years when the recreational target operating level is achieved
- c. promote Walkers Lake with consideration of the community and Northern Grampians Shire Council expectations as a safe, healthy and permanent community location to be utilised and managed with basic amenities
- d. protect and enhance the natural environment including vermin control and manage vehicle access to these areas
- e. protect cultural heritage values
- f. manage fire risks
- g. communicate the values of Walkers Lake and its by-laws to visitors

4.3. Recreational/Tourism Values

Walkers Lake when holding good water levels attracts local, regional and recreational users from a wide area of regional Victoria. Visitors to the lake enjoy the passive camping experience while relaxing under the lakes shoreline red-gum trees and locals also enjoy bush walking and consider it as a highly regarded water sport location.

With adequate water levels, the lake supports a very good redfin fishery and in the past large quantities of yabbies has been caught by local, regional and the visiting fishing public.

Swimming and associated water sports have been enjoyed for decades and most importantly this lake provides local, regional and the visiting public a place to enjoy and relax during the hot summer months of the year. The campers and day visitors all contribute to the local economy

Duck hunting is also enjoyed by many and is mainly confined to opening day of the duck season.

5. Future Water Supply Management

The following actions are dependent upon a water allocation for Walkers Lake being secured and the appropriate future reserve management arrangements in place.

This management plan will be holistic in terms of its implementation. Although the plan needs to be endorsed by the NGSC, some actions will be the responsibility of the recommended Committee of Management and other organisations such as GWMWater. The plan will be an important document to support expenditure of local monies and support State and Federal grant applications for future facility developments.

5.1. Water Allocation

The target maximum water level is below the edge of the canopies of the lake fringing Red Gum trees. This provides an approximate depth of 2.5m across the bowl of the lake. Refer to map attached

A submission by Northern Grampians Shire Council to the 2013-2014 Bulk Entitlement Operations Review, has requested a supply to the lake from the Wimmera Mallee Pipeline. Operationally this is feasible due to the close proximity of the Lake to the main 450mm water supply trunk line to Donald and also the relatively small volume required to top-up the lake each year, compared to other larger recreational lakes in the district.

Due to extremely low water levels in 2014, the lake will require a fill from empty in the first year.

5.2 Water Supply

Water supply to WMP supplied recreation lakes is generally undertaken in the winter-spring period. GWMWater receives advice from the Regional Recreation Water Users Committee on the priorities for allocation of recreational water. The Regional Recreation Water Users Group is a committee of the Board of GWMWater and was established in October 2008, the Regional Recreation Water Users Group has been formed to represent community views and provide advice to GWMWater regarding the management of recreation water and related facilities at GWMWater sites.

There is currently a charge of \$20 per mega litre (ML) for the supply of water to WMP recreation lakes. This is subsidised by all GWMWater ratepayers via the recreation water levy, which was introduced in 2013.

Northern Grampians Shire Council will seek financial support from the State Government to fund the initial fill of the lake similar to other recreation facilities and commits to reviewing the costs of WMP recreation water to Walkers Lake for the annual top up supply.

5.3. Management Water Supply Infrastructure

All water supply assets connecting Walkers Lake to the Wimmera Mallee Pipeline will be constructed to industry standard specifications and will be operated by GWMWater staff. GWMWater to seek funding to provide this connection and undertake all associated planning requirements to install this water supply infrastructure.

5.4. Water Quality Issues and Management

Blue Green Algae blooms in recreational water bodies are considered to pose a potential public health risk, for primary contact recreation, when trigger levels are reached. These trigger levels are identified in the Regional Blue Green Algae Co-ordination Plan. The Local Water (BGA) Manager is identified in this plan as being responsible for monitoring and managing a local bloom under their own emergency management plans. NGSC are the most appropriate Local Water manager for Walkers Lake.

Action: NGSC to be appointed as the Local Water (BGA) Manager for Walkers Lake.

5.5. Management of Flooding Impacts

Natural inflows to Walkers Lake have been impacted upon by historic works such as Hollands Bank. There is also a small diversion structure that can direct water from the Souths Creek Catchment into either Walkers Lake or Hollands Lake. The community preference is that this structure directs surface water into Walkers Lake and only when the Walkers target level is reached, that water is directed into Hollands Lake.

The Avon Plains Management Plan notes that under current conditions, the lack of episodic flushing events following flooding may be causing an increase in salinity at the Avon Plains Lakes. These flushing events are likely to occur more often as the supplementary supply to Walkers Lake will increase the amount of time that the lake is at a higher level.

6. Recreational Uses and Facilities Development

The advisory group community members were strongly of the view that the historic levels of use and visitor behaviour would not change greatly with the establishment of Walkers Lake as a formal recreational venue. Therefore any developments are to be minimalistic and low impact on the surrounding environment.

Future Facilities

Boat Ramp

Currently boats are launched at several places on the western side of the lake. There was general support to formalise the need for a constructed boat ramp to provide safe launching and retrieval of watercraft to prevent unacceptable erosion of the shoreline and most importantly to prevent environmental degradation. The site for the boat ramp has been identified and state government funding for the ramp has been secured.

Action: Construct boat ramp

Toilet Facilities

Currently the lake has no public toilet facilities due to the current level of use and reserve status. If a toilet facility is required then it should be an appropriate design and the new committee will consider whole of community needs, public health requirements, location, access, visibility, signage and aesthetically designed facilities that will fit the unique Walkers Lake environment. Two possible sites were identified by the advisory group, including the grounds of the former Avon Plains School.

Action: Investigate toilet facility requirements for Walkers Lake.

Rubbish Bins and/or Collection

There is currently no rubbish service provided at Walkers Lake. The advisory committee strongly recommended to manage and promote the removal of rubbish is the responsibility of the lake user/visitor. It would be a requirement to take all your accumulated rubbish with you when you leave.

Action: Inform visitors of the take your rubbish home policy through signage and encourage peer pressure from regular lake users.

Entrance Road Upgrade

Currently the main lake entrance road is in disrepair and an upgrade for an all-weather surface is required.

Action: The tracks to be upgraded with Gre Gre gravel are identified on the attached map.

6.1. Safe Boating

Walkers Lake is a popular powered and non-powered boating venue. Under the Marine Safety Act 2010 a Waterway Manager is required for the Lake. Northern Grampians Shire Council (NGSC) is the current Waterway Manager for Lake Fyans and Lake Lonsdale in the southern part of the Shire and should this continue then may be the most appropriate body to be the Waterway Manager for Walkers Lake. For the NGSC to meet its obligations as the Waterway Manager, an upgrade of the navigational aids is required under the Schedule for the waterway. An upgrade of the signage at the lake is also required to ensure compliance with Victorian standards.

The Australian Height Datum referred to in this section is the surveyed height above sea level. In the future it is proposed that the lake will be declared a 5 knot zone when the water level drops below 1.5 metres in depth within the unrestricted speed area 50 metres from the shoreline.

Action: Upgrade navigational aids under the Schedule for the waterway including an upgrade of the signage at the lake to compliance with Victorian standards.

Action: Erect signs at boat ramp to declare Walkers Lake a five knot zone when the water level drops below 1.5 metres in depth.

6.5. Walking Track

Walking tracks exist around the lake and are to be reviewed for any upgrades to be considered if required.

6.6. Water Skiing

For the purpose of this plan water skiing includes the use of water skis, wakeboards and ski-tubes. Walkers Lake may be currently subject to unauthorised use for all these activities. Actions pertaining to safe boating, including skiing are contained in section 6.1.

Trends in water skiing include the popularity of wakeboarding and wakeboard boats. These boats have the ability to create large wakes and hence increase bank erosion risks. This will need to be monitored in the future and appropriate action taken if required. The committee of management will consider all aspects of boating management including consideration to restrictions and controls for the long term sustainability of the lake environment and its users.

6.7. Swimming

There will be no designated swimming areas at Walkers Lake. Swimmers and water craft operators have co-existed well in the past, and this is expected to continue.

6.8. Duck Shooting

Shooting of game birds is a permitted activity at Walkers Lake during the open season declared under the provisions of the Wildlife Act 1975.

6.9. Fishing

Prior to drying out during the 13 years of the drought (dry weather period) and refilling with water during the recent floods the lake was stocked with 5000 golden perch by the Donald Angling Club and 5000 Murray Cod by DPI Fisheries Victoria. Recreational fishing prior to the previous dry of the lake produced some excellent returns to anglers, redfin to 2.6 kilograms, golden perch to 1.4 kilograms and excellent fishing for yabbies was enjoyed by anglers travelling from the local regional area and from towns such as Geelong and Ballarat.

During this time it was frequent to see these community members camping under the large red gums on the west side of the lake.

When the lake filled during the recent flood event the lake was stocked by DEPI Fisheries Victoria with around 6000 Murray Cod due to the unavailability of golden perch at the time. When the lake receives water via the Wimmera Mallee Pipeline a request will be made to DEPI Fisheries Victoria to re-stock the lake with 5000 golden perch annually, subject to suitable water regimes.

6.11. Providing for a Safe Visitor Experience

Visitors and campers currently have fires around the lake foreshore. This can pose a risk for reserve land and neighbouring properties if not managed properly. The CFA Act (1958) requires the manager ‘to take all practicable steps (including burning) to prevent the occurrence of fires on, and minimise the danger of the spread of fires on and from any land vested in it or under its control or management’. To meet this responsibility visitor fires are only to be established according to CFA regulations. Access for CFA fire trucks is poor on the eastern side of the lake, and neighbouring landholders have requested that this be addressed.

Action: Develop and implement an operational fire plan to address issues listed above.

6.12. Pest Plants and Animals

The Committee of Management has responsibilities under the Catchment and Land Protection (CALP) Act 1994 to control and/or eradicate pest plant and animal species

Action: Undertake pest plant and animal responsibilities as per CALP Act, 1994.

7. Monitoring and Evaluation

A review of the Management Plan will be undertaken in 2015-16.

8. Implementation Plan

The following priorities have been adopted:

Stage 1

- Secure a water supply from the Wimmera mallee Pipeline
- Establish future governance arrangements including land tenure and management responsibilities
- Review and construct a boat ramp facility

9. Appendices

- Walkers Lake Map including infrastructure locations

9.1. Land Tenure and Management

Current:

Walkers Lake is currently reserved for Wildlife purposes, in accordance with the Land Conservation Council recommendations. Walkers Lake is currently managed by Parks Victoria.

Proposed:

The recommended structure is for NGSC to seek management responsibility from Parks Victoria through DEPI in line with a proposed Recreation status.

Whilst DEPI will remain the land owner NGSC will be a delegated manager to form a local committee of management to take responsibility of the ongoing management of the reserve with representation from NGSC, local community and user groups as well as authorities with experience in managing a recreational lake reserve.

Glossary

AHD – Australian Height Datum, used for altitude measurement. Zero is the mean sea level for the period 1966-68.

Freeboard - Height between maximum design operating level and the top of the bank.

Full Supply Level - The maximum normal operating level of a reservoir behind a dam.

* – these rules are not subject to negotiation as they are necessary for water supply purposes.

9.5. Existing Legislation

Wildlife Act

Walkers Lake is currently managed as a Wildlife Reserve under this Act.

Marine Safety Act 2010 One of the main purposes of the Marine Safety Act 2010 is to provide for the efficient and safe operation of vessels on State waters as managed by the designated Waterway Manager.

Planning and Environment Act 1987

The purpose of the Planning and Environment Act 1987 is to establish a framework for planning the use, development and protection of land in Victoria in the present and long-term interests of all Victorians.

At a municipal level, planning schemes are established including zones which determine permitted and prohibited to implement the State Planning Policy Framework and the Local Planning Policy Framework including the Municipal Strategic Statement and local planning policies.

Aboriginal Heritage Act

The aim of the Aboriginal Heritage Act is to provide for the protection of areas or items of cultural heritage significance within Victoria.

Aboriginal Affairs Victoria (AAV) is the primary agency that provides advice to the Victorian Government on Aboriginal issues and administers the legislation that protects Aboriginal cultural heritage. Dja Dja Wurrung is the Registered Aboriginal Party (RAP) applicants for the area containing Walkers lake.

Walkers Lake and the surrounding reserve land is mapped as an area of Cultural Heritage Significance.

The implementation of the recommendations of this Management Plan will in some cases require actions to comply with the Act:

- a) A Cultural Heritage Management Plan (CHMP) must be undertaken if proposed works or activity are a 'high impact activity' according to the Aboriginal Heritage Act Regulations (i.e. road or bicycle track that extends for more than 500 metres, construction of three or more dwellings on a lot) and/or is within an 'area of cultural sensitivity' (i.e. lunette on eastern side of lake, 50 metres from registered cultural heritage place, 200 metres from waterway or prior waterway). Some activities are only high impact if they result in 'significant ground disturbance'.
- b) If a CHMP is not required, depending upon the impact other courses of action include a voluntary Cultural Heritage Plan, a basic agreement with the RAP on the management of Aboriginal Heritage Issues for the project may include actions such as a site monitor present during works.

Other Acts

- a) Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act 1999 - This act requires that an action that is likely to have a significant impact on a matter of national environmental significance requires approval from the Federal Environment Minister.
- b) Flora and Fauna Guarantee (FFG) Act 1988 - This is the primary legislation for the protection of flora and fauna in Victoria. The purpose of the Act is to protect and conserve a

wide range of species and communities, manage threatening processes, maintain genetic diversity and encourage cooperative management.

- c) Victorian River Health Strategy 2002 – This strategy provides an overview of government policy relating to the management of activities affecting river health, including environmental flows and water allocation.
- d) National Strategy for the Conservation of Australia's Biological Diversity 1998 – This strategy relates to the conservation of biodiversity, the sustainable use of its components and the equitable sharing of benefits arising out of the utilisation of natural resources.
- e) Victoria's Biodiversity Strategy 1997 – This strategy is essentially a state analogue of the commonwealth strategy, providing for the conservation of biodiversity in Victoria.
- f) Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994 - Aims to set up a framework for the integrated management and protection of catchments and set up a system for the control of noxious weeds and pest animals.
- g) Fisheries Act 1995 and Wildlife Act 1975
- h) Environment Protection Act 1970
- i) Litter Act 1983
- j) CFA Act 1958

References: