

Broometimes

The many brilliant aspects of Roebuck Bay

Apart from being visually spectacular, Roebuck Bay is one of the most important intertidal mudflats in the world.

Jessica Hall reports.

Located on the coast adjacent to Broome, Roebuck Bay covers an area of about 66,000 hectares.

It is of great cultural and ecological importance and in 1990 was listed under the Ramsar Convention, which focuses on the conservation of internationally important wetlands.

Perhaps one of its most important functions is that it is home to countless numbers of wader birds during their annual migration period, with some coming from as far as Siberia.

Broome Bird Observatory warden Ricki Coughlan said Roebuck Bay was one of only 20 intertidal mudflats of its nature in the world.

"This one is of greatest significance due to its size and open nature," she said.

Ms Coughlan said Roebuck Bay had the greatest richness and abundance of invertebrates living there, not only in numbers but also in different types, for the birds to feed on.

"It has the best climate, the best position, the best food resources and the beaches along the bay provide the perfect environment for high-tide roosting as it enables birds to get a clear view of predatory birds," she said.

The birds arrive at the bay from about August to October and leave from about March to May.

Ms Coughlan said the first lot of birds were testing the air just recently.

"Soon they will start their 12,000km journey home, it's quite sad to see them go, you start feeling like a mother hen after a while," she said.

Ms Coughlan said their expedition was incredible. "When they leave, the next place they touch their feet will be the Yellow Sea in China, that's 6000km without stopping," she said.

"They don't eat and they sleep on their wing, they're like the little Hulks of the bird world."

Once they reach China, they feed on the mudflats there then continue on to North Asia, with some going as far as the tip of Siberia, where they breed.

Once the chicks are six weeks old they have to leave, otherwise they will freeze to death, so they make their way to the shores of Roebuck Bay and stop over for about two years before they join their parents in the flyway.

"At the moment the bay looks absolutely beautiful with all the birds coloured up in their breeding plumage, ready to go," Ms Coughlan said.

"Without Roebuck Bay you would have to wonder where the 180,000 birds that spend their winter here each year would go."

Minyirr Park supervisor Micklo Corpus said from an indigenous point of view it was extremely important Roebuck Bay was respected and protected. According to Mr Corpus, Roebuck Bay sits on a song cycle, which comes from the Dreaming, and is made up of different ecosystems making it possible for all flora, fauna and humans to live together.

"It is part of our culture to look after the land and ensure that everyone has a lifestyle which includes all the animals," he said.

Mr Corpus said ultimately it was about respect.

"Providing the environment is right people can live and it is important everyone protects and looks after this land because we all live here."

In July 2004 a variety of community groups joined together to form the Roebuck Bay Working Group (RBWG).

Groups involved include Rubibi Traditional Owners, Broome Shire Council, Broome Visitor Centre, Broome Bird Observatory, Commercial Fishers, Department of Conservation and Land Management, Department for Planning and Infrastructure, Environs Kimberley, Department of Fisheries, Kimberley Land Council, Roebuck Plains Station, Thangoo Station and World Wide Fund for Nature.

Their main aim is to protect Roebuck Bay's value through community-based management planning.

in-focus

by Jessica Hall

RBWG secretary Tanya Vernes said although there had been quite a lot of studies done on Roebuck Bay, they were not tied together in a holistic planning framework.

"Our main aim is to take a broad look at what's happening and progress sustainable management of Roebuck Bay," she said.

Ms Vernes said Roebuck Bay was also commercially important for Broome through activities such as tourism, aquaculture and commercial and recreational fishing.

She said with rapidly increasing tourism and recreational fishing it was extremely important that the values upon which these activities depend were also protected. These uses have a strong reliance on the health, and therefore the biodiversity, of the Bay. Ms Vernes said with these increasing and often competing pressures there was a need for well-planned and coordinated management of the whole area – the Bay and its surrounding ecosystem.



PRISTINE LANDSCAPE: The Roebuck Bay was formed to provide sustainable management.

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