

A Cinderella landscape

UGLY MUD AND SALTMARSH TELLS
A BEAUTIFUL ECO-STORY



Beaded glasswort
(*Salicornia quinqueflora*).



Creeping ice plant
(Genus *Disphyma*).



Grey mangroves

Mangroves occupy an area of over 2,100 hectares within the Inlet. These communities mainly comprise a single species – white mangrove (*Avicennia marina*).



Colourful mix of ice plants (Genus *Disphyma*) and samphire (Genus *Tecticornia*).



Corner Inlet
Image: © Google Maps.



Austral seablite
(*Suaeda australis*).



View to Wilsons Prom from Toora
Mangroves and intertidal seagrass meadows provide shelter for shorebirds and a nursery ground for fish and invertebrate fauna.

By Robyn Gower

THROUGH NECESSITY, the early settlers viewed the Australian landscape through an economic lens, assessing the natural value of the land in terms of what they could extract from it.

Now, as we shift our focus to natural capital – the air, water, soils, plants and animals that essentially keep us alive – we are beginning to appreciate and value a range of diverse landscape. But not all get the attention they deserve.

A case in point is the ‘muddy, mucky landscape’ known as the coastal saltmarsh. Despite providing an astonishing array of ecosystem services, coastal saltmarshes remain greatly undervalued.

Saltmarshes are rich mosaics

Broadly defined as a mosaic of coastal ecosystems, saltmarsh is one of the most productive ecosystems on Earth, likened to kidneys or lungs in terms of its ability to filter pollution and intercept nitrogen run-off from farms.

In South Gippsland, Victoria, this lung effect is readily seen from the air as we look down at the 67,186 hectare area of Corner Inlet, adjacent to Wilsons Promontory and the Nooramunga Marine and Coastal Park. It is one of 64 wetland areas in Australia listed as a Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention.

Fringing the Inlet are some of the most floristically diverse coastal saltmarshes in the country; marshes that not only reduce farm run-off and provide a nursery for young fish but capture and store carbon at rates 30–50 times higher than the equivalent area of soil in terrestrial forests. This is a process known as blue carbon.

So, why are these and other coastal saltmarshes undervalued?

A ‘Cinderella’ story

According to Melbourne University wetland ecologist, Paul L Boon, colonial Australians have always undervalued saltmarsh.

He uses the folktale of *Cinderella* to describe how saltmarshes are perceived as “the ugly or poor stepsister of inland wetlands” – usually seen as wastelands standing “between us and our desire to live on the coast and extract resources from it”.

Viewed through European eyes, saltmarshes certainly *ain't pretty* – in Cinderella’s words, “when they look at me, they see a mess”.

Yet, if you look more closely, you can see the jewels in the landscape, like the samphire or glasswort (both of the (*Tecticornia* genus) ➡



^ **Saltmarshes revealed at low tide.**

Two views of Shallow Inlet, a small tidal waterway adjacent to Corner Inlet. Photo: © Robyn Gower.

▼ **Little Dog Island.**

Tidal river on the mainland near Little Dog Island – photo: © Robyn Gower. An aerial view of the island (bottom right) – photo: Andrew Wallace.

whose jointed branches look like strings of coloured beads.

Or the red seablite (*Suaeda australis*) that mixes with the samphire to create rivers of red marsh.

While Corner Inlet retains 80 percent of its saltmarshes, a salutary lesson can be learned if we look west to Anderson Inlet, where 60 percent of the marshes have been lost. Or further north to Botany Bay – ironically named for its biodiversity – where losses in some areas are reported as 100 percent.

However, some plants within the Inlet, including the iconic grey or white mangrove, are endangered. If the saltmarshes are not

managed well, the system gets out of balance and mangroves can, in fact, take over.

Little Dog Island an island of hope

In 2022, botanists Tim D’Ombra and Karl Just got wind of a potential sale of Little Dog Island off the coast of Hedley within Corner Inlet.

Formerly owned by a group of developers who attempted to build an eco-resort on the island in the 1990s – complete with 9-hole golf course – the 62ha island was abandoned when the project failed.

It lay idle for 14 years until Mr D’Ombra and Mr Just invited Federation University paleoecologist, Professor Peter Gell, BioDiversity Legacy strategic director Jim Phillipson and Carbon Landscape co-director Dr Steve Enticott to collaborate on a new conservation project.

Together they formed a not-for-profit organisation called Nooramunga Land and Sea to hold the island in trust for future generations, with provisions to enable community engagement and collective land stewardship.

The ‘saltmarsh crew’ are now repairing damage caused by the development and eradicating feral animals and weeds. They’re also investigating opportunities to secure other private properties in the area.

“We see these landscapes as ecological gems in the jewel that is Corner Inlet,” BioDiversity Legacy’s Jim Phillipson said.





“They are beautiful and highly productive landscapes that support human health and wellbeing. But they are fragile and easy to disrupt. To protect them, we need to value them and promote their intrinsic value – just by being left alone.”

*Author and photographer, Robyn Gower, thanks Professor Paul Boon for information used to develop this article and photo-essay. Prof. Boon’s research on saltmarsh is published in the CSIRO journal *Marine and Freshwater Research* and Royal Botanic Garden Sydney journal, *Cunninghamia*. ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ROBYN GOWER is a Gippsland-based writer, photographer and editor with a lifelong love of coastal landscapes. Robyn is the communications lead for the EcoLands Collective – a group of active and emerging environmental organisations focused on private land conservation and building biolinks between private land and public reserves in the Gippsland region of Victoria and beyond. ■

A mosaic of shrubby glasswort (*Genus Tecticornia*).
Top, top right and right.

Black Swamp, Corner Inlet.
Bottom right.

Endangered yellow sea-lavender (*Limonium australe*).
Below.

Photos: Robyn Gower.

