

**Nutrient retention capacity of a constructed
wetland in the Cox Creek sub-catchment of the
Mt. Bold Reservoir, South Australia**

by

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Table of contents

Table of contents	i
List of tables	v
List of figures	ix
List of abbreviations	xiii
Declaration	xiv
Acknowledgements	xv
Abstract	xvi
1 General introduction	1
1.1 Eutrophication	1
1.2 Constructed wetland systems as water treatment facilities	2
1.3 Phosphorus retention mechanisms	6
1.4 The project	9
1.4.1 Sources and management of phosphorus in the Cox Creek sub-catchment	9
1.4.2 Objectives of the study	9
2 Study site	11
2.1 Background	11
2.2 Phosphorus transport into the Cox Creek sub-catchment	15
2.3 Cox Creek wetland system	17
2.3.1 Brookes Bridge sedimentation basin	17
2.3.2 Woodhouse wetland system	18
2.3.2.1 Sedimentation pond	18
2.3.2.2 Reed Bed	19
2.3.2.3 Pond 1	19
2.3.2.4 Pond 2 and Pond 3	19

3	The influence of discharge on the effectiveness of the Cox Creek wetland system at reducing nutrient loads for different flow classes	24
3.1	Introduction	24
3.2	Methods	26
3.2.1	Rainfall measurement	26
3.2.2	Composite sampling and water quality analysis	26
3.2.3	Flow rate classification	26
3.2.4	Water residence time	27
3.2.5	Suspended solids and nutrient loading	27
3.2.6	Suspended solids and nutrient budget	27
3.2.7	Statistical analysis	28
3.3	Results	29
3.3.1	Rainfall data	29
3.3.2	Flow patterns of the Cox Creek wetland system	30
3.3.3	Frequency of flow rate classes	31
3.3.4	Flow volume of each flow rate class	32
3.3.5	Water residence time of each flow rate class	33
3.3.6	Loadings of suspended solids and nutrients of each flow rate class	33
3.3.7	Relationship between flow, suspended solids and nutrient concentrations	41
3.3.8	Suspended solids and nutrient budget	49
3.4	Discussion	52
4	Nutrient storage capacity of macrophytes in the Cox Creek wetland system	56
4.1	Introduction	56
4.2	Methods	59
4.2.1	Macrophytes survey	59
4.2.2	Statistical analysis	61

4.3	Results	63
4.3.1	Plant biomass in Reed Bed and Pond 1 of the Cox Creek wetland	63
4.3.1.1	Above ground biomass	63
4.3.1.2	Below ground biomass	63
4.3.1.3	Total plant biomass	63
4.3.2	Plant nutrient contents	66
4.3.2.1	Above ground nutrient contents	66
4.3.2.2	Below ground nutrient contents	66
4.3.3	Plant nutrient storage	71
4.3.3.1	Phosphorus storage	71
4.3.3.2	Nitrogen storage	71
4.3.4	The influence of macrophytes to sediment redox potential	74
4.4	Discussion	76
5	Phosphorus sorption and nutrient storage in sediment of the Cox Creek wetland system	80
5.1	Introduction	80
5.2	Methods	83
5.2.1	Collection of sediment samples	83
5.2.2	Analysis of sediment samples	83
5.2.3	Phosphorus fractionation	85
5.2.4	Phosphorus adsorption-desorption experiments	87
5.2.5	Statistical analysis	87
5.3	Results	88
5.3.1	Nutrient and organic matter contents	88
5.3.2	Sediment phosphorus fractionation	90
5.3.3	Phosphorus sorption	92
5.3.3.1	Sorption isotherms	92
5.3.3.2	Phosphorus adsorption-desorption	93
5.4	Discussion	96

6	Influence of sedimentation rates in reducing P loads from the Cox Creek wetland system under different flows	100
6.1	Introduction	100
6.2	Methods	102
6.2.1	Hydrograph and the flow events	102
6.2.2	Design of sediment traps	102
6.2.3	Sediment traps deployment at different flow regimes	105
6.2.4	Laboratory analysis	105
6.2.5	Calculation of sedimentation rates	106
6.2.6	Statistical analysis	108
6.3	Results	109
6.3.1	Hydrograph and the flow events	109
6.3.2	Sedimentation rates of the Cox Creek wetland	109
6.3.3	Characteristics of deposited sediments	111
6.3.4	Phosphorus accumulation rates of the Cox Creek wetland	113
6.4	Discussion	116
7	General discussion	119
7.1	Partitioning phosphorus removal	119
7.1.1	Nutrient loading and hydrology	122
7.1.2	Contributions of macrophytes	122
7.1.3	Contributions of sediments	123
7.1.4	Contribution of sedimentation	123
7.1.5	Conceptual model of phosphorus mass balance	124
7.1.6	Reconciling the nutrient budget	125
7.2	Implications for water quality control and management strategy	126
7.3	Future research recommendations	127
7.4	Conclusion	127
	References	129

List of tables

Table 1.1	Performance of constructed wetland systems for removal of water pollutants.....	5
Table 3.1	Calculated water residence time within six different flow classes.....	33
Table 3.2	Calculated inflowing loads of suspended solids (SS), total phosphorus (TP), filterable reactive phosphorus (FRP), total nitrogen (TN), total Kjeldahl nitrogen (TKN) and oxidised nitrogen (NO _x) within six different flow classes from the year 2004 until 2009. Inflowing loads were calculated from measurements of discharge and concentrations measured upstream of the Brookes Bridge sedimentation basin.....	35
Table 3.3	Calculated outflowing loads of suspended solids (SS), total phosphorus (TP), filterable reactive phosphorus (FRP), total nitrogen (TN), total Kjeldahl nitrogen (TKN) and oxidised nitrogen (NO _x) within six different flow classes from the year 2007 until 2009. Outflowing loads were calculated from measurements of discharge and concentrations measured downstream of the Woodhouse wetland.....	37
Table 3.4	Relationships between loadings of suspended solids (SS), total phosphorus (TP), filterable reactive phosphorus (FRP), total nitrogen (TN), total Kjeldahl nitrogen (TKN) and oxidised nitrogen (NO _x) on daily flow.....	38
Table 3.5	Results of non-parametric ANOVA (Wilcoxon/Kruskal-Wallis test) on the loadings of suspended solids (SS), total phosphorus (TP), filterable reactive phosphorus (FRP), total nitrogen (TN), total Kjeldahl nitrogen (TKN) and oxidised nitrogen (NO _x) between flow rates classes and years.....	39
Table 3.6	Percentage of suspended solids (SS), total phosphorus (TP), filterable reactive phosphorus (FRP), total nitrogen (TN), total Kjeldahl nitrogen (TKN) and oxidised nitrogen (NO _x) retention within six different flow classes of the Cox Creek wetland system.....	40
Table 3.7	Relationships between concentrations of suspended solids (SS), total phosphorus (TP), filterable reactive phosphorus (FRP), total nitrogen (TN) and oxidised nitrogen (NO _x) on daily flow.....	48

Table 3.8	Results of non-parametric ANOVA (Wilcoxon/Kruskal-Wallis test) on the concentrations of suspended solids (SS), total phosphorus (TP), filterable reactive phosphorus (FRP), total nitrogen (TN) and oxidised nitrogen (NO _x) between sites (inflow-outflow) and years.....	48
Table 3.9	Annual suspended solids (SS), total phosphorus (TP), filterable reactive phosphorus (FRP), total nitrogen (TN), total Kjeldahl nitrogen (TKN) and oxidised nitrogen (NO _x) budget for the inflow and outflow of the Cox Creek wetland from 2007 to 2009. Note that inflow site were recorded at the Brookes Bridge sedimentation basin and outflow site were recorded at the Woodhouse wetland.....	50
Table 3.10	Results of non-parametric ANOVA (Wilcoxon/Kruskal-Wallis test) on the loadings of suspended solids (SS), total phosphorus (TP), filterable reactive phosphorus (FRP), total nitrogen (TN), total Kjeldahl nitrogen (TKN) and oxidised nitrogen (NO _x) between sites (inflow-outflow) and years.....	51
Table 3.11	Result of post-hoc comparison (Tukey-Kramer HSD) on the loadings of suspended solids (SS), total phosphorus (TP), filterable reactive phosphorus (FRP), total nitrogen (TN), total Kjeldahl nitrogen (TKN) and oxidised nitrogen (NO _x) between years.....	51
Table 4.1	Above ground (Above), below ground (Below) and total plant biomass (Total) of <i>Schoenoplectus validus</i> and <i>Phragmites australis</i> in Reed Bed and Pond 1 of the Cox Creek wetland system in spring 2008 (Spr 08), summer 2009 (Sum 09), autumn 2009 (Aut 09) and winter 2009 (Win 09).....	64
Table 4.2	<i>P</i> -values obtained for the effects of plant species, wetland pond and season (and interaction) on above ground, below ground and total plant biomass. Interaction effects between these parameters denoted with *.....	65
Table 4.3	Result of post-hoc comparison (Tukey-Kramer HSD) on above ground, below ground and total plant biomass between seasons.....	65
Table 4.4	<i>P</i> -values obtained for the effects of plant species, wetland pond and season (and interaction) on above ground and below ground nutrient contents. Interaction effects between these parameters denoted with *.....	70

Table 4.5	Result of post-hoc comparison (Tukey-Kramer HSD) on above ground and below ground nutrient contents between seasons.....	70
Table 4.6	Mean nutrient storage (gP m ⁻² and gN m ⁻²) of <i>Schoenoplectus validus</i> and <i>Phragmites australis</i> for Reed Bed and Pond 1 of the Cox Creek wetland system. Spr 08, spring 2008; Sum 09, summer 2009, Aut 09, autumn 2009; Win 09, winter 2009.....	72
Table 4.7	<i>P</i> -values obtained for the effects of plant species, wetland pond and season (and interaction) on above ground and below ground nutrient storages. Interaction effects between these parameters denoted with *.....	72
Table 4.8	Result of post-hoc comparison (Tukey-Kramer HSD) on above ground and below ground nutrient storages between seasons.....	73
Table 4.9	<i>P</i> -values obtained for the effects of wetland pond and season (and interaction) on sediment redox potential. Interaction effects between these parameters denoted with *.....	75
Table 5.1	Sediment total phosphorus (TP), total nitrogen (TN), total carbon (TC) and organic matter (OM) contents of the reed bed and pond 1 of the Cox Creek wetland in spring 2008 (Spr 08), summer 2009 (Sum 09), autumn 2009 (Aut 09) and winter 2009 (Win 09).....	89
Table 5.2	<i>P</i> -values obtained for the effects of wetland pond and season (and interaction) on total phosphorus (TP), total nitrogen (TN), total carbon (TC), organic matter (OM), loosely sorbed P (NH ₄ Cl-P), hydrochloric acid bound P (HCl-P), sodium hydroxide bound inorganic P (NaOH-iP), labile organic P (NaOH-oP), residual P (res-P) and equilibrium phosphorus concentration (EPC). Interaction effects between these parameters denoted with *.....	95
Table 5.3	Result of post-hoc comparison (Tukey-Kramer HSD) on on total phosphorus (TP), total nitrogen (TN), total carbon (TC), organic matter (OM), loosely sorbed P (NH ₄ Cl-P), hydrochloric acid bound P (HCl-P), sodium hydroxide bound inorganic P NaOH-iP), labile organic P (NaOH-oP), residual P (res-P) and equilibrium phosphorus concentration (EPC).....	95

Table 6.1	Mean total phosphorus (TP), total nitrogen (TN), total carbon (TC), ratios by molar, organic matter (OM) concentrations and particle size distributions of deposited sediment samples collected using sediment traps during three flow events. Flow event 1: 24 September 2009 to 5 October 2009; flow event 2: 7 October 2009 to 16 October 2009; and flow event 3: 19 October 2009 to 28 October 2009. Error bars represent standard errors.....	112
Table 6.2	<i>P</i> -values obtained for the effects of sampling site and flow event (and interaction) on sedimentation rate (SR), P accumulation rate (PAR), total phosphorus (TP), total nitrogen (TN), total carbon (TC), organic matter (OM) and particle size. Interaction effects between these parameters denoted with *.....	115
Table 6.3	<i>P</i> -values obtained for the effects of years on the annual sedimentation accumulation rate (SR _{accum}) and P accumulation rate (PR _{accum}). Significant differences are recorded when <i>p</i> -value less than 0.05.....	115

List of figures

Figure 1.1	Conceptual diagram of phosphorus mass balances in the water column and sediments in the Cox Creek wetland.....	8
Figure 2.1	Location of the upper Cox Creek sub-catchment within the Onkaparinga River catchment.....	12
Figure 2.2	Location of the Cox Creek wetland system within the Cox Creek sub-catchment and path of flow from Piccadilly valley to Mount Bold.....	14
Figure 2.3	Conceptual diagram of phosphorus sources and transport within the Cox creek wetland.....	16
Figure 2.4	Aerial photo of Brookes Bridge sedimentation basin, located upstream of the bridge on Swamp Road. Note that arrows represent flows of water through the sedimentation basin from the upper Cox Creek sub-catchment...	20
Figure 2.5	Aerial photo of Woodhouse wetland. Note that arrows represent flows of water through the wetland system from the downstream of the Brookes Bridge sedimentation basin.....	21
Figure 2.6	Photo of the offline Brookes Bridge sedimentation basin. Note that arrow represent the inflow of water through the sedimentation basin from the upper Cox Creek sub-catchment.....	22
Figure 2.7	Photo of construction of concrete weir from the offline Brookes Bridge sedimentation basin. Note that similar construction of a concrete weir within Woodhouse Wetland allows water to bypass the wetland during high flood levels.....	22
Figure 2.8	Photo of Reed Bed within Woodhouse Wetland. Note that Reed Bed only recieves intermittent flow from the outflow of sedimentation pond during high flow events and was placed parallel to Pond 1.....	23
Figure 2.9	Photo of Pond 1 within Woodhouse Wetland. Note that Pond 1 receives water from both the outflows of sedimentation pond and Reed Bed.....	23
Figure 3.1	Rainfall for the Cox Creek sub-catchment from the year 2004 until 2009. Note that the meteorological data was collected at the Piccadilly (Woodhouse) rainfall station in the Mount Lofty Ranges watershed.....	29

Figure 3.2	Daily flow rate (ML day ⁻¹) recorded at the upstream of Brookes Bridge sedimentation basin (A) and downstream of Woodhouse wetland (B). Note that the composite sampling station was installed for continuous monitoring of water quality from the upper Cox Creek sub-catchment.....	30
Figure 3.3	Total number of days within each flow rate classes (ML day ⁻¹) for the Cox Creek wetland system.....	31
Figure 3.4	Total annual flow (ML/yr) within the flow rate classes (ML day ⁻¹) for the Cox Creek wetland system.....	32
Figure 3.5	Suspended solids concentration (mg L ⁻¹) and flow variabilities (ML day ⁻¹) recorded at the upstream of Brookes Bridge sedimentation basin (A) and downstream of Woodhouse wetland (B).....	43
Figure 3.6	Total phosphorus concentration (mg L ⁻¹) and flow variabilities (ML day ⁻¹) recorded at the upstream of Brookes Bridge sedimentation basin (A) and downstream of Woodhouse wetland (B).....	44
Figure 3.7	Filterable reactive phosphorus concentration (mg L ⁻¹) and flow variabilities (ML day ⁻¹) recorded at the upstream of Brookes Bridge sedimentation basin (A) and downstream of Woodhouse wetland (B).....	45
Figure 3.8	Total nitrogen concentration (mg L ⁻¹) and flow variabilities (ML day ⁻¹) recorded at the upstream of Brookes Bridge sedimentation basin (A) and downstream of Woodhouse wetland (B).....	46
Figure 3.9	Oxidised nitrogen concentration (mg L ⁻¹) and flow variabilities (ML day ⁻¹) recorded at the upstream of Brookes Bridge sedimentation basin (A) and downstream of Woodhouse wetland (B).....	47
Figure 4.1	Macrophytes sampling strategy for Reed Bed of the Cox Creek wetland. Arrow denotes flow direction of water.....	62
Figure 4.2	Macrophytes sampling strategy for Pond 1 of the Cox Creek wetland. Arrow denotes flow direction of water.....	62
Figure 4.3	Mean total phosphorus (A) and total nitrogen (B) contents in above ground biomass of <i>Schoenoplectus validus</i> and <i>Phragmites australis</i> for Reed Bed and Pond 1 of the Cox Creek wetland.....	68

Figure 4.4	Mean total phosphorus (A) and total nitrogen (B) contents in below ground biomass of <i>Schoenoplectus validus</i> and <i>Phragmites australis</i> for Reed Bed and Pond 1 of the Cox Creek wetland.....	69
Figure 4.5	Comparison of sediment redox potential between Reed Bed and Pond 1 of the Cox Creek wetland system.....	74
Figure 5.1	Conceptual diagram of phosphorus sedimentation and sorption process in the wetland sediment of the Cox Creek wetland.....	81
Figure 5.2	Schematic protocol for analysis of sediment core samples collected from Reed Bed and Pond 1 of the Cox Creek wetland.....	84
Figure 5.3	Sequential phosphorus fractionation scheme used to differentiate phosphorus forms in the sediment samples collected from the Cox Creek wetland.....	86
Figure 5.4	Sediment phosphorus content of different fractions for Reed Bed (A) and Pond 1 (B) of the Cox Creek wetland in spring 2008, summer 2009, autumn 2009 and winter 2009.....	91
Figure 5.5	Example of fitted P adsorption isotherms for Reed Bed sediments of the Cox Creek wetland in spring 2008.....	92
Figure 5.6	Measured equilibrium phosphorus concentration (EPC) for Reed Bed and Pond 1 of the Cox Creek wetland in spring 2008 (Spr 08), summer 2009 (Sum 09), autumn 2009 (Aut 09) and winter 2009 (Win 09).....	93
Figure 5.7	Measured equilibrium phosphorus concentration (EPC) across distance for Reed Bed (A) and Pond 1 (B) of the Cox Creek wetland system.....	94
Figure 6.1	Hydrograph showing three flow events at the Cox Creek wetland during study period (September 2009 to October 2009).....	103
Figure 6.2	Illustration of sediment trap design constructed for the experimental study of sedimentation process within the Cox Creek wetland. The traps were deployed at 10 cm above the sediment/water interface.....	104
Figure 6.3	Photo of the sediment trap used for the experimental study of sedimentation process within Cox Creek wetland. Note that each cylinder was placed at the inlet and outlet of both Reed Bed and Pond 1.....	104

Figure 6.4	Sedimentation rates ($SR, g\ m^{-2}\ day^{-1}$) at the inlet and outlet of Reed Bed and Pond 1. Flow event 1: 24 September 2009 to 5 October 2009; flow event 2: 7 October 2009 to 16 October 2009; and flow event 3: 19 October 2009 to 28 October 2009.....	110
Figure 6.5	Sediment accumulation rate ($SR_{accum}, kg\ m^{-2}\ yr^{-1}$) of the Cox Creek wetland from the year 2004 to 2009.....	110
Figure 6.6	Total phosphorus accumulation rate ($PAR, g\ P\ m^{-2}\ day^{-1}$) at the inlet and outlet of Reed Bed and Pond 1. Flow event 1: 24 September 2009 to 5 October 2009; flow event 2: 7 October 2009 to 16 October 2009; and flow event 3: 19 October 2009 to 28 October 2009.....	114
Figure 6.7	Total phosphorus accumulation rates ($PR_{accum}, kg\ P\ m^{-2}\ yr^{-1}$) of the Cox Creek wetland from the year 2004 to 2009.....	114
Figure 7.1	Conceptual model of phosphorus mass balances in the Cox Creek wetland system. Results were determined using the average of P inflow-outflow from 2007 to 2009.....	121

List of abbreviations

Aluminium	Al
Analysis of variance	ANOVA
Calcium	Ca
Carbon dioxide	CO ₂
Dissolved inorganic phosphorus	DIP
Dissolved organic phosphorus	DOP
Dry weight	DW
Equilibrium phosphorus concentration	EPC
Filterable reactive phosphorus	FRP
Hydraulic loading rate	HLR
Iron	Fe
Organic matter	OM
Particulate inorganic phosphorus	PIP
Particulate organic phosphorus	POP
Phosphorus accumulation rate	P _{accum}
Phosphorus	P
Sediment accumulation rates	SR _{accum}
Sedimentation rate	SR
Subsurface flow	SSF
Surface flow	SF
Suspended solids	SS
Total nitrogen	TN
Total phosphorus	TP
Water residence time	WRT

Declaration

I declare that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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Abstract

The Cox Creek sub-catchment is located in the Piccadilly Valley, South Australia. It exports disproportionately high loads of nutrients and sediment to the downstream Mount Bold reservoir. The excessive application of inorganic fertilisers to agricultural land in the Cox Creek sub-catchment has enhanced nutrient exports downstream. This has led to eutrophication and algal blooms in Mount Bold Reservoir, an important water supply for the city of Adelaide, which has a population of approximately 1.3 million people. The Cox Creek constructed wetland includes a sedimentation basin and a series of constructed wetland ponds, which were implemented to reduce nutrient loads passing downstream. The objective of this research was to evaluate the capacity of the constructed wetlands to retain nutrients and better understand key processes for nutrient retention such as macrophyte uptake, sediment sorption and sedimentation in the Cox Creek wetland system. How different flow regimes influence these processes was also investigated.

Based on historical inflow and outflow data from 2004 to 2009 for the Cox Creek wetland system, six different flow rate classes were classified and the nutrient loads delivered by each of these flow rate classes were calculated. It was hypothesized that the higher the flow class the shorter the water residence time and so reduced opportunity for nutrient retention through processes such as sedimentation. The very dry flow class (0 to 1 ML day⁻¹) had the longest water residence time (14.8 days) and contributed the lowest total phosphorus (TP) and total nitrogen (TN) loads (TP: 10.2 kg yr⁻¹ and TN: 81.0 kg yr⁻¹). In comparison, the high flow class (46 to 300 ML day⁻¹) had the shortest water residence time (0.1 days) and contributed the highest nutrient loads (TP: 433.4 kg yr⁻¹ and TN: 1726.2 kg yr⁻¹). The percentage of TP and TN retention (TP: 60 to 69% and TN: 18 to 76%) showed that nutrient loads at the inflow were greater than that of the outflow after the construction of the wetland in 2006. Therefore there was a net retention of nutrients in the Cox Creek wetland system during the study period, suggesting it is effective at reducing nutrient loads passing downstream.

In order to investigate the ability of macrophytes to store nutrients, the seasonal TP and TN storage by *Schoenoplectus validus* and *Phragmites australis* were compared between Reed Bed and Pond 1 of Cox Creek wetland system. The TP and TN storage were significantly higher in Reed Bed (TP: 22.0 gP m⁻² and TN: 118.5 gP m⁻²) than in Pond 1 (TP: 1.0 gP m⁻² and TN: 10.3 gP m⁻²). TP storage peaked in spring 2008 for *S. validus* and *P. australis* in Pond 1. This was also the case for *S. validus* in Reed Bed, but TP storage peaked in summer 2009 for *P. australis* in Reed Bed. TN storage peaked in spring 2008 by both species in Reed Bed. This was also the case for *S. validus* in Pond 1, but TN storage peaked in summer 2009 for *P. australis* in Pond 1. Based on the results, it appears that the presence of macrophytes can reduce nutrient loads passing downstream, with the amount of nutrients stored highest during spring and summer. Therefore, the best timing for harvesting for removal of wetland nutrients is after spring, when nutrient storages are expected to be highest, preferably in mid summer season.

The sediment redox potential was higher in Reed Bed than in Pond 1, suggesting macrophytes may have the ability to release oxygen from roots and increase phosphorus (P) adsorption in Reed Bed. Using P adsorption-desorption experiments, the equilibrium P concentration (EPC) was calculated as a measure the P adsorption capacity of sediments in Reed Bed and Pond 1. EPC is used to identify sediment as a source or sink of P. When P concentration of porewater is greater than the EPC, then the sediment will adsorb P and vice versa. The EPC values were lower in Reed Bed than in Pond 1, indicating greater P adsorption capacity of Reed Bed sediment than Pond 1 sediment. Phosphorus fractionation of the sediments showed that of the inorganic forms of P (loosely sorbed-P, Ca/Mg-P and Fe/Al-P) and the Fe-P was consistently higher in Reed Bed than in Pond 1. Under oxidised conditions, the ferric ion complexes adsorb P, reducing the amount of P available for diffusion to the overlying water. Therefore, it appears oxygen release by macrophytes in Reed Bed may promote P storage in sediments, with greater P-binding capacity in Reed Bed than Pond 1.

Sedimentation was determined as the main process that determines the nutrient retention capacity of the Cox Creek wetland system. Based on measured sedimentation rates at the inlet and outlet of Reed Bed and Pond 1 in three different flow events, the average of sedimentation rate across the study was $2.2 \text{ kg m}^{-2} \text{ yr}^{-1}$. Even though the presence of vegetation has been shown to enhance sedimentation elsewhere, P accumulation rates were greater in Pond 1 (0.4 to $4.6 \text{ kg m}^{-2} \text{ day}^{-1}$) than in Reed Bed (0.3 to $2.0 \text{ kg m}^{-2} \text{ day}^{-1}$). This is likely a result of greater inflowing loads of sediment and nutrients in Pond 1 than in Reed Bed. Pond 1 receives water from both sedimentation pond and Reed Bed whereas Reed Bed only receives overflow from the sedimentation basin.

In order to quantify the performance of the Cox Creek wetland system for reducing P exports, a P mass balance was calculated. This study found that 281.6 kg yr^{-1} of P is retained in the wetland. Although there is an unaccounted amount of P in the mass balance (112 kg yr^{-1}), the relative contributions of uptake by macrophytes (36 kg yr^{-1}), sediment P adsorption (43.5 kg yr^{-1}) and sedimentation (90.1 kg yr^{-1}) are believed to be the most important mechanisms in P removal. Consequently, wetland design and operation should aim to promote these processes to maximise P removal. This should include increasing macrophyte diversity, using nutrient-poor sediments as substrate and increasing residence time of water to create favourable conditions for sedimentation in the wetland.