

The Importance of Wetlands to the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area

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I'd like to officially welcome everyone here, in particular Senator Ian Macdonald, Parliamentary Secretary to the Commonwealth Minister for the Environment, Senator Robert Hill, and Mr Howard Hobbs, the state Minister for Natural Resources. I think we are particularly honoured to have both these senior members of the Federal and State Governments present here today and we look forward to their participation this afternoon. I think it's very important that their being here recognises the issue that we are dealing with: how do we provide for prosperous and growing rural industries while at the same time protecting not only the Great Barrier Reef in the general sense but protecting the industries that are based on the Great Barrier Reef – such as the inshore fisheries, for both commercial and recreational use, and also of course the natural features of the inshore area which are a tourist attraction in themselves? So it's how we balance out the needs of the upstream industries with the downstream industries as well as, of course, the intrinsic value of the Great Barrier Reef as a World Heritage Area, that we hope to resolve.

It's also very gratifying to myself and my colleagues from the Marine Park Authority that so many people from so many different interests have come to this workshop. I am delighted to welcome the Chairs of our RMRACs (our Regional Marine Resource Advisory Committees) that are advisory committees to the Authority; and we have the Chairs from as far north as Port Douglas to Mackay in the south.

We also have a wide range of people representing other interests: conservation interests, agricultural interests, and could I in particular express my appreciation to Harry Bonanno for his attendance this afternoon. Harry has had a number of consuming issues to deal with recently and it is an indication of the importance of this issue that Harry has been able to make the time to participate in this workshop.

I really look towards this as being a constructive, positive approach to talking through issues related to the maintenance of wetlands while at the same time being sensitive to the concerns of both upstream and downstream industries and also sensitive to the broad environmental concerns related to the Great Barrier Reef.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority is in an interesting position in that we have an obligation under our legislation to protect the Great Barrier Reef. The Marine Park Authority is vested with that responsibility but because we live in a parliamentary democracy the Authority is responsible to the Commonwealth Minister for the Environment. The Authority also operates in a unique partnership arrangement with the Queensland State Government and I think it's important to stress that the Authority has a senior appointee from the Queensland Government. The Queensland Government is invited to nominate not less than one third of the number of members of the Great Barrier Reef Consultative Committee.

The day-to-day management of the Great Barrier Reef is carried out by the Queensland Government and it is a partnership arrangement which has worked, and is working, well on the water – but it becomes more difficult when we move upstream. The Authority's statutory rights end at the low water mark. Now if somebody wants to develop a plant producing toxic materials and pump waste materials through a straight pipe into the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, our legislation would allow us to do something about that. But our legislation doesn't allow our intervention, or it would be particularly difficult, when we are talking about diffuse sources of pollution. In a sense that is also a healthy thing as it requires us to work very closely with the Queensland authorities and the Queensland industries in the management of the land.

Because what you do to the land is what you do to the water. I spent seven interesting but difficult years as a Commissioner at the Murray-Darling Basin Commission where in fact that hard lesson had been learnt. And that also what you do to the land can sometimes come back and bite you very severely, illustrated by the penalties of salinisation, water logging and broken down irrigation infrastructure and so on that are being dealt with in the Murray-Darling Basin. I lived in Adelaide for 18 years. I had to drink water which of course came down from the Murray River and we were always very grateful in Adelaide because we knew the water had passed through several towns on its way to us. But even though I draw on that example, I think it does underline the reality that a marine area is dependent to a very large extent on the way in which land is managed.

Australia as a whole has a relatively healthy marine environment but not because we are necessarily particularly good managers. It has a relatively healthy marine environment because we don't have the population around the Australian coast that other countries have. But Australia on the other hand has gone to some considerable lengths in recent years to coordinate and cooperate with the States to start developing not only strong coastal programs but also programs such as 'Landcare' that are as significant for the health of the marine environment as any other program. Programs, such as in South Australia and other States, designed to manage the clearance of native vegetation so as to avoid riparian loss, gully erosion and all those other problems of over clearance. It is those programs of State Governments that are just as important for the health of the marine environment, as those concerned with what happens right on the coastline. So it's bringing all of those programs and the Commonwealth Government and the State Governments together, to coordinate and to have them working effectively so the downstream effects of land use are minimised.

We are here today in particular because we are interested in the issue of coastal wetlands. People have given me notes with a certain anatomical approach to them – they describe the wetlands, I think very accurately, as the kidneys of the natural system. The wetlands are the filters. The wetlands are nature's way of removing, if you like, non-flood levels of silt, of nutrients, of other contaminants in the water. Now that of course was part of the natural environmental scheme prior to European use. We can now imagine the pressure that has been put on those wetlands. They have been used as rubbish dumps – most evident around metropolitan areas. You will find that they have been seen as wasteland and it's always a very difficult thesis to make that 'your swamp is my wetland'. Swamps are seen as untidy. They are seen as places where large mosquitoes grow. They are seen as places that are wasted land which should therefore be converted into much more productive uses.

What we have, however, discovered is that in fact those wetlands are of major economic value to us. And it's maintaining the economic value of those wetlands (that is, the way in which they help maintain the health of that natural system upon which the marine based industries depend) that I think we would see now a common need to remove wetlands from the 'must clean up' list and recognise their function in the maintenance of the natural system. And it is very important for the Authority that we are able to cooperate closely with other Commonwealth agencies and with the State Government in ensuring that programs are in place; or when developments are being effected, that those developments are done in such a way that they meet the economic objective, that is, supporting the farming industry but at the same time not affecting the natural system by removing those filters from it.

This is a great opportunity for everybody who has an interest in the protection of wetlands. There is also the interest in economic use of those lands and the sea. At the conclusion of the workshop we will hopefully have arrived at a strong common view about the value of the wetlands and a commitment to their protection.