

The Department of Environment's Approach to Wetlands

Lindsay Delzoppo

Representing the Hon. Brian Littleproud, Minister for the Environment, PO Box 155, Brisbane Albert Street Qld 4002

Ian McPhail mentioned that the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority is in a strange position in that they have the major responsibility of managing the Great Barrier Reef and its uses and yet they have very little, or no, control over what happens on the land. Yet that is probably one of the major potential causes for damage. So I'd like to reassure Ian that the State of Queensland does take the responsibility for managing the environmental effects of activities on the land in Queensland very seriously. That involves not only being policemen but working with communities, and I think this sort of function is an answer to that.

The Department of Environment has a lead role – in a sense – it is a beaurocratic term but it means that we have responsibility for coordinating the efforts of a number of government agencies in the management of wetlands, something we do take seriously. One of our goals, one of the visions we have, is to try and create a system whereby we have no further loss or degradation of natural wetlands. It's a high, lofty ideal which we would love to work with you and others to achieve.

One of the things about Queensland is that it has an amazing array of wetlands, an amazing diversity of wetlands. This is due to its incredible rainy climates. The Minister mentioned that he's never seen stormwater and yet there's a place about two or three kilometres down the road here that's been known to get 10 metres of rainfall a year. It shows the variation of climates that we deal with in Queensland, and consequently the range of associated habitats.

The Senator referred earlier to the publication of the directory of important wetlands in Australia. I understand that many, about 46, of the important wetlands mentioned in that document are located adjacent to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park – which shows how profound the relationship between the wetlands and the Great Barrier Reef is.

So what is the role of our Department then? As I said earlier, we are the lead agency for wetlands in Queensland. We work with other government departments and Queensland government agencies are currently looking towards a joint strategy which will not only use the rules and regulations of legislation such as the Environmental Protection Act and Nature Conservation Act, but adopt a broad holistic view that would produce better outcomes. If you just use the letter of the law, as all of us know, things often fall through the cracks. When land holders, local government and government agencies work together those cracks are more easily filled and more cooperative outcomes achieved. Under that strategy, action programs will be arranged and set out for each government agency and others to deliver in an appropriate length of time.

When this draft strategy on Wetland Management in Queensland was first being written, there was a review of the government legislation that effects wetlands. There were about 26 pieces of legislation that had an impact on wetlands. They weren't necessarily designed specifically for wetlands but they all have potential to impact indirectly on the ecology and the wellbeing of wetlands. Legislation that is absolutely silent on environmental matters is a problem that we deal with often. If the senior beaurocrat, or a middle-age beaurocrat in my case, makes a decision that takes into account environmental matters, you run the risk of pushing the law more than it warrants. It becomes a review, an appeal in court, and you're put in an ambiguous position. Perhaps a more holistic approach will help us get around this problem.

The Fisheries Act is one of the few pieces of legislation in Queensland that specifically deals with the protection of wetlands. While this focuses on production there is the benefit that in protecting the habitat for the primary production of prawns, fish and other things, it also protects the habitat for ecological purposes – the outcome is better water quality, food resources and enhanced tourist potential; in effect a win-win situation.

Under the Nature Conservation Act, we're responsible for managing something like 100 National Parks in my area north of Cardwell. Today, while we were showing off some of our parks' beautiful attributes I noticed that Sheriden Morris wasn't particularly impressed when we went out to an area of lush national park with our cameras only to see that our on-ground rangers had burnt much of the place to a shrivel. Nonetheless, such action is an important part of the effort involved in managing the diversity of a place like that – because our protected areas are a small part of the State, we have to put in a fair bit of effort to maintain that diversity. Such effort includes fire management, the removal of weeds, and such.

We also manage Marine Parks under the Marine Parks Act. Under the Nature Conservation Act there are opportunities for us to deal with private land and work with people. There have been lots of studies around which have shown that National Parks on their own are often not enough to maintain a healthy, dynamic ecosystem, that there is a real need for us to work closely with landholders and to try to come to some arrangement with them. To work closely with landowners is to achieve a much better environmental outcome.

Today we visited Wyvuri Swamp which, although of high ecological value, there is only 5% of that swamp protected. After a lot of discussion with landholders I am very pleased to report that they have agreed to have a conservation agreement, a voluntary conservation agreement under the Nature Conservation Act, over a large part of the land, thereby enhancing the ecology and the protection of both the national park and the environmental values of the area as a whole. That is a really positive outcome. We need to work closely at working those things around further. One of the difficulties is that while a dollar is a dollar for a farmer, it's just as true that a lost dollar is a lost dollar to a farmer. If we are to ask people, who are involved in primary production and often heavily in debt, to make some sort of sacrifice for our environmental acts, for community good, we as a community have to work out ways of giving them some recompense or acknowledgment. In this workshop we will need to work out how to accomplish our objectives in a fair as well as accurate way, which is not easy. We deal a lot with conservation agreements yet we don't have a big pot of gold and it is very hard to map those things out that are fair to the primary producer, who will be relied on to get the better environmental outcome for the community, and I am sure that will come a number of times later on in the discussion.

The Environmental Protection Act was introduced in the last couple of years. I feel it has had a positive impact on water quality and wetlands and, for example, Trinity Inlet. By using the Environmental Protection Act (State legislation) we've been able to work very closely with local governments, Cairns City Council in this case. There has been a great deal of improvement in the discharge quality in the sewage treatment plants and a detectable increase in water quality in that area. That's a sign of local government really realising that if they want tourism and don't want to limit population growth, they need to do something about it – they need to protect those special places, like Trinity Inlet. Another example is seen with Douglas Shire Council who have introduced tertiary treatment to their sewage treatment plant and maximising the step which seems to be getting rid of wastewater to land. These are the sort of things that help the Great Barrier Reef and they're pushed by the local people who are paying more than they otherwise would have to do, in their rates, to have that benefit that we all gain by. I think again you need to acknowledge that people do make those commitments or sacrifices.

Another example in recent years is seen with sugar mills. They've done an amazing job in the last five years, in increasing their environmental performance and putting in safety practices, so that if something goes wrong, it won't go in the creeks or down the drain. It is really astonishing what they've done and the money they've committed – in the order of five to ten million dollars per mill in some cases – to improve their performance over the last few years. Now that is big, that's from their shareholders and local farmers.

Finally, I would like to mention the Coastal Protection and Management Act which was passed a couple of years ago. In the next month, two months, I'm optimistic that there will be a planning exercise started here. There will be one south from Cardwell and one from Cardwell north to the Bloomfield River. It will be a planning exercise to look at planning along the coast to try to avoid some of the mistakes that perhaps were made in the past. We have places like Flying Fish Point, where people have developed in an erosion prone area or on a wetland area that is inappropriate. So we're hoping that that planning exercise will start very shortly and will support local incomes. I think the last thing we need is to have the feeling that people in Canberra or Brisbane are deciding these things, imposing on local people. This planning exercise will be done through a local community group, with local people directing the scope. I am optimistic that this should be starting soon. I hope that our Minister will be able to commence this in the next month or so. This will encourage local involvement. Any effected landholder will be contacted directly and be given a chance to discuss, involving them in the decision making as opposed to being told the decision and asked to comment on it, which is a very different thing indeed.

There was mention made earlier to Wetlands Strategy, or draft Wetlands Strategy. It's at a draft stage and hasn't yet been adopted by Government, but it indicates the high ideals we are aiming towards:

- To avoid the forever loss or degradation of natural wetlands. We all support this in principle but realise that it is a high ideal.
- To base the management use of natural wetlands on the principles of ecologically sustainable development and integrated catchment management. Again, the local people, through catchment management exercises, need to be involved in the decision making.
- To development community awareness and respect for values and benefits of wetlands.

Finally I would just like to thank you again for inviting us here. On behalf of the Minister, I'd like to say that I hope Senator Hill and I can offer you some help here. There are some Environment Department staff here and I hope we can offer something in the workshop and I wish everyone every success in the next couple of days.