

Local Government Perspective on Wetland Conservation

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I will try and address the questions that have been put before us. The first one is the interest in wetlands. Local government is the key player in wetlands conservation and this can be achieved through both regional and local initiatives.

At a regional level, local government have been part of a Regional Environment Strategy, part of the FNQ2010 Regional Plan, and it has mapped all of the significant wetlands, established mechanisms for their protection, but lacks any real teeth in terms of statutory controls. However, the Regional Environment Strategy has been developed; it's just been completed and it is going to be on public display in the not too distant future. I hope everybody reads it carefully and makes their comments on it.

At another level, North Queensland Joint Board, for which I am chairman, is involved in quite a few programs that are either directly or indirectly of benefit to wetlands. Sue Visor is the acting Chief Executive Officer; Colin Creighton has unfortunately left us for a bigger and better job. Sue will be developing a vegetation policy with all the member councils. We are in the process of developing catchment rehabilitation plans. The Joint Board runs the Wet Tropics tree planting scheme which is now to be funded under the National Heritage Trust and we were the group that initiated the Community Rainforest Reforestation Program.

However, I don't believe that there's a great deal of awareness at the local government level of the need to protect wetlands. I think it's generally poorly understood, is seldom discussed and is not high on the list of priorities with the local government agenda. There are some future commitments in terms of vegetation protection. Cairns City has vegetation and protection laws although I do not know how well they work. Today the Douglas Shire's interim vegetation protection laws come into place with some commitment to develop some permanent laws. I understand Cardwell has a number of policies to do with wetland protection – they don't look as if they work terribly well from what Ross Dignam has said and I've yet to be convinced that our vegetation laws will work well; it will depend on how well they are enforced.

Other issues in which Councils have some involvement in wetland protection include tertiary treatment of sewerage – our Shire has just agreed to go ahead with tertiary treatment of sewerage and irrigation. Cairns City is looking at it but I don't know of any other councils that are. There is the Regional Waste Management Strategy, which is under way at the moment. The Douglas Shire's dump, for example, is in the mangroves. I am embarrassed about it, but it's true, and a lot of others are in the mangroves too. I feel that local governments are deficient in their understanding of, or attempt at understanding, the off-site cumulative impacts of development and growth, such as water extraction for urban and agricultural growth, sewage discharge, waste disposal, urban run-off, low land drainage, over-fishing etc. And that is probably the big issue that we are all facing. Hopefully, the regional plan will start to address that but I'm not aware of any effective implementation strategy of that plan. I hope that does come into place and it's important that you people look at it, study it and make comment on it.

There is real willingness to cooperate – I would like to read out a resolution in a moment, and I think we can put that back to local government. I'd be happy to carry that back to the Regional Organisation of Councils to see if they're prepared to support it and also test the commitment of State and Federal Governments to assist local government in terms of resources, expertise and so on to try to produce some better land use management practices.

It's fairly clear that good land use management practices require a mix of education, incentives and regulation. CSIRO in their studies have shown that none of those things work on their own and unless you're committed to all three, you won't have effective vegetation management policy. Councils are really the key, in my view, to making land use management systems work. Even if State and Federal Government required them to work, if you don't get the cooperation of local councils or they resist them I can tell you they won't work. So local councils must be involved. They probably have to be the body at the end of the day who implements these things and if they're not philosophically on board it won't work. Our powers are quite extensive, for example, local laws. I'm not aware of any State or Federal Government ever implementing vegetation protection policies. Local governments do it around Australia with mixed success. They're a fairly new innovation to north Queensland and I'm not yet convinced to how well they're going to work. They are quite capable of working well but it depends on the commitment and understanding of the local government that's implementing them.

Local government is the principle body who manages land use through its planning schemes. The planning schemes can have quite extensive powers if local governments choose to put them in there. When the regional plan is in place all local government plans will be required to comply with the regional plan. And before the Minister approves the local government planning scheme he will make sure that it complies with the regional plan. That is another reason to make sure that the regional plan is a workable document that is capable of being implemented to produce real outcomes. I'll give you an example. Local governments could define vegetation clearance or drainage as a development that requires the consent of council. This is a very powerful tool to implement and a very effective means to manage land use. If you combine that with local laws, zoning powers, and if you add to that education incentives we can do it. But local governments have to be better informed than they are now.

A good example of local government working on environmental regulations is the Environmental Protection Act. Now that was a requirement of State government for local government to implement it. We complained fairly strongly that they made us implement it and gave us no resources to do it and that's fairly typical. However, we've done it and speaking for my Shire, we've done it well. All businesses now that discharge waste are on a register, they all have to have management plans; they put in sumps, no longer does the stuff go down the drain as it used to. Not many businesses knew the differences between the stormwater drain and a sewer – the level of understanding was very poor. Our local government predicted dire consequences in terms of business viability when this was enforced. We went through a process of calling public meetings, we got all the businesses into a room and said we have to do this, we're going to charge you a fee. That fee is going to cover the cost of us inspecting your premises and you're going to have to comply with these regulations. Surprise, surprise, all of industry said that's not a problem, we understand that we've got to stop tipping stuff down the gutter. What we want local government to do is to implement the law equitably. We did that, we made sure that our inspection fees/registration fees only covered the costs of us to go out and inspect the sites and we justified that to our community and they have accepted it. There have been no problems, they are all starting to comply. It has been a major success that's quietly gone through.

That is just an example of what local government can do with a little help from State and Federal Government. We can do with more in terms of resources.

I'd like to put forward a resolution today and I'd like it to be a part of a number of resolutions: 'That this conference request that the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority in partnership with Environment Australia, the Queensland Department of Environment and the Queensland Department of Natural Resources conduct and run a two-day workshop with each local government in the wet tropics region individually tailored to each area seeking the following outcomes:

1. an assessment of the area of wetland existing prior to European settlement and the amount lost since that time, in each local government area;
2. an understanding of the values of wetlands and fisheries and related ecosystems;
3. the consequences of wetlands loss;
4. evaluation of the threat to wetlands;
5. a strategy for the restoration of wetlands;
6. recipes and formulas for conversion of drainage systems to healthy habitats;
7. model local laws which local governments could adopt to halt further loss of wetlands and to address the management of degraded systems; and
8. funding opportunities to resource local governments to undertake community education and remedial measures.'