

Importance of the Northern Wetlands

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We have, we believe, lost around 60% of our coastal marine and freshwater wetlands since 1951 and while there was some small justification in the early years for this loss due to ignorance of their importance, this is not now the case. However, the destruction is still going on and with increased efficiency. I would ask the question. In light of our present knowledge of the critical importance of these wetlands, why is this being allowed to continue?

We have a combined fishing industry with an economic value to this State equal or greater than the sugar industry, yet that industry and other upstream industries, such as the agriculture and mining industries are impacting hugely on our fishery. Never mind the piddling developments such as the Williams development in Cardwell, or the canal and urban developments along the coastal areas. While these are bad enough and need to be urgently addressed, they pale into insignificance alongside the destruction being wrought by agricultural interests.

If we look at some of the wetland areas being cleared between Ingham and Cairns, we see the remaining creek and river riparian strips being cleared of rainforest. The wetland filled in and destroyed, rivers straightened and de-snagged, deep drains dug through these areas for drainage, rain forest destroyed and *Melaleuca* forests pushed and destroyed. All to allow more marginal cane land to be utilised for short-term gain. Even the farmers acknowledge that these areas are marginal at best.

The whole coastal strip from the border to the Cape is sitting on a time bomb, and that time bomb is acid sulphate. We do not know in Queensland for sure the exact areas where these acid sulphate areas are. But in the northern wetlands in the strip between Ingham and Cairns, acid sulphate areas abound. We need an urgent assessment of specific acid sulphate areas and that should be done through detailed mapping of the whole coastal strip. It is or has been done in New South Wales where they have recognised the destructive potential of acid sulphate for years. I believe there was a mapping program in Queensland from the border to Bundaberg. Whether this is ongoing I do not know but I would suggest that if it is not, it should be.

One tonne of iron sulfides can produce about 1.5 tonnes of sulphuric acid when oxidised. I would hate to guess the tonnage of iron sulfides in the northern wetland region. The other thing we should realise is that this is an ongoing problem. It is probably second only to nuclear waste as to its time frame. It is believed it may take hundreds of years to dissipate, and it is hugely costly to rectify.

It is recommended that drainage be not more than 1 metre deep and be in the form of spoon drains. In the Murray-Tully region the drains I saw were in excess of two metres deep and had a 1 to 1 batter, a classical vehicle for transporting sulfuric acid in huge quantities to the downstream areas.

Sunfish North Queensland has had diseased fish from the Hinchinbrook area, suffering from red spot lesions, analysed in New South Wales. These fish were suffering from red spot disease and it was consistent with contact with acid sulfate run off. It appears that the affects of the drainage of these wetlands are already being felt in these regions.

We mustn't lose sight of the impact that upstream industries are presently having on the Great Barrier Reef. We are already running untold tonnes of sulfuric acid, pesticides, fertilisers and other nutrients into the Reef lagoon. This will certainly have a big impact on the wellbeing of

the reef, and if this happens, it will become a national concern with all the serious concerns that will entail.

We are in a unique position - we've heard about the economy of a whole range of tourist activities and also the cane farmers. We don't gain from product sale and we don't get any money from subsidies. All we do is pay and pay very, very dearly for everything we do. We are a very major player in the Australian economy. With that payment our members have some very high expectations. Ours are a social community value based on recreational fishing. Everybody in the community does that. So I'll put it in perspective for you and all due respect to previous speakers who have come up with figures. They have been totally and grossly underestimating the value of recreational fishing. Last year 882 000 people went fishing in Queensland. They're locals. In this area alone from Mackay to Cairns, 171 000 people went fishing last year. This generated over 5000 jobs in the area and was worth \$160 million locally, \$1.4 billion for the Queensland economy. That's more than the sugar cane industry is worth in Queensland. We're now worth in excess of \$4 billion nationally, twice what the cane industry's worth. So let's get things in perspective when we're talking about what's worth what.

Working out initiatives, compensation planning, all takes time. We've been going down this track for 20 years and we still haven't done anything. The CRC for Sustainable Sugar Production's Research Station has the answers; Ross Digman (local cane grower) has the answers; why are we playing around forming more committees and doing more things that aren't necessary. We don't want any more talking or delaying tactics; we need action in the form of total protection of our wetland and we want it now and the State Government needs to get that message. There's an election coming up next year. As somebody talked about - who's not taking the fish? Each fish produces millions of eggs. If they've got nowhere to lay them and the fish have nowhere to grow, no sanctuaries, no natural areas, then it's not much point. Take away our wetlands and you've got nowhere for them to live. Take away your house and go and live in the open if you want to. What we've done here is we've generated some great things around the north. Senator Macdonald would be very pleased to buy another computer to put them all in because that's what you're going to need by the time you've finished here. If you come out of this meeting with more than three resolutions and action plans then you've wasted my time and you've wasted everybody else's time here. Our collective message to the politicians, both State and Federal, should be **DO IT NOW**, not later.

No one has the right or the might to destroy an industry with the economic and social value of the fishing industry. The general public is saying, 'Be careful for you know not what you do.' Sunfish is saying, **ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!**