

Wetland Preservation – RMRAC Views

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Regional Marine Resource Advisory Committees (RMRACs) were established to advise the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and the appropriate agencies such as the Department of Environment, Department of Natural Resources etc. and to provide public information concerning the local marine and coastal management of our areas. The role of RMRACs is to facilitate communication between user groups and resource managers in the local community. Approximately half of the membership is comprised of user groups including the agricultural industry, commercial operators, recreational interests, conservation groups and the other half, various government agencies, local, state and commonwealth government departments.

Now in addressing the issues of water quality and wetland management it must be recognised that the interests of the various groups are extremely complex and in some cases literally miles apart. Bringing these various user groups to work together towards a common goal is an extremely difficult task. Not only is each user group strongly motivated by personal issues, for example in the case of the agricultural industry, many smaller properties see no option but to primarily focus on the economic survival of their families. They have little time or resources to consider the implications of their activities even on the neighbouring property let alone what might be happening 50 km out to sea. Even the various government departments seem unable to consider the big picture and coordinate their activities to work together to achieve a ecological sustainable common goal. A simple example is the infestation of the coastal wetland by the exotic grass *Hymanachne*. This plant has the potential to out-compete most native wetland plants and literally chokes to death wetlands, drains, creeks and other fish habitat areas. *Hymanachne* is also a serious threat to the sugar industry, especially on wet low land areas where it will out compete sugar cane. Now it seems almost ironic that *Hymanachne* was originally promoted to the cattle industry by the Department of Primary Industries. To the graziers of the upper Herbert River catchment, in the dry areas west of the Great Divide, 100 km from the coast, *Hymanachne* has really meant salvation. To many marginal grazing properties facing falling prices and reduced demand for beef, *Hymanachne* has substantially improved productivity and literally met the difference in economic survival for those people. And then at the other end it's almost understandable why a local sports fishing club who worked for months running raffles and other fund-raising activities for a wetland fish stocking program feels so frustrated by these pig-headed, ignorant so and so's who don't give a damn to the apparent damage they're doing to the coastal wetlands. So of course there's a lot of conflict there and I guess these opinions and comments, on the part of the sports fishing club, are relatively mild and iniquitous in our meetings compared to the discussions at some meetings attended by groups of commercial and recreational fishermen. But then even commercial and recreational fishermen can occasionally get together and reach common ground in their dealings with conservation groups.

Now the role of the RMRACs in facilitating communication between these various user groups is a very difficult task and even though we may not often reach unanimous agreement on issues, at least our members gain some understanding of different perspectives of how the other user groups feel. We do rely heavily on the technical briefings by various resource management staff that present the facts and the government position on a lot of these issues, and I guess one of the problems with anecdotal evidence is that it usually relies a fair bit on selective memory. People tend to remember the things that they want to remember, about how good the barramundi fishing was at a certain place etc. The Mission Beach RMRAC recently facilitated a special meeting to discuss the sugar industry expansion into the fish habitat wetlands and the Tully-Murray region. Invited guests represented a wide range of interest groups and it was a truly excellent meeting. And while it clearly demonstrated the widely differing and strong opinions of the various user

groups the final outcome was agreement on a fundamental principle. There was unanimous support for the sugar industry's recognition for their responsibility for the environmental impact in development of the coastal plain and that meeting was a very small step in the right direction towards all user groups and resource managers working together towards common goals and I guess this workshop today is another step.

Those RMRAC members who donate their personal time and energy in attending these workshops and meetings to address these issues do so because we really believe that through positive communication we can achieve real outcomes.