

## **Local Knowledge – Some Anecdotal Evidence of Change**

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I have lived in this region for more than 20 years; I have travelled extensively within Australia and have been fortunate to have experienced living in many other countries. This region is unique and still has the potential to remain the best place on earth. Many who live here do so because they prefer the life style associated with natural values. There are some who still take it all for granted – they do so in blissful ignorance of the alternatives.

There are multitudes of thoughts and words which have come to mind when thinking about how to best express the passion which most people I know harbour for this region and its environment. This passion is often honed and focused when one is overseas or stuck in Sydney or Melbourne traffic. I can recall many such moments particularly while travelling overseas, and have developed a great sense of gratitude that this is my country and this is where I live.

I, like many others who appreciate and understand that what we have is a unique and rapidly diminishing national and international treasure, accept a responsibility to seek recognition that all is not well in paradise and the prognosis is dismal. I believe many of us share a genuine empathy with our environment and experience equally powerful passions as traditional aboriginals describe.

We who are making representations here do not suggest that all commercial fishermen, farmers, miners, tourism operators and property developers be burnt at the stake or boiled in oil; in fact, most of us are those people or work in occupations supported by them. However, we can see the inevitable outcome of not responding to the need which exists to avoid squandering a very real and infinitely valuable resource that is a major factor in the diversity of Australia and the Australian way of life.

I heard statistics quoted on a reputable TV program last month that we are clearing more vegetation pro rata than is being cleared in the Amazon. Australia has a history of environmental disasters and in the 200 years we've been here the list of casualties is well known and would be impressive if they were a management target.

The following words are not all my own – they are from a letter many of you will already have, or will soon get, from the Cairns RMRAC. These words are from a group of people who represent a broad cross-section of the community and who have taken time and made an effort to understand the issue before firing a shot.

The pace and extent of coastal development has overtaken the ability of current management structures to achieve intended outcomes. Management structures have evolved in large numbers, they have failed to integrate and interact in a way which effectively deals with the escalating demand for development of new areas which when modified for intended use have an impact on the environment. There are many areas which are managed well if that management is measured on the basis of local on site impacts. There is, however, currently no really effective management of the cumulative effect of all these situations.

If you were to take a snap shot of the far north Queensland coast 200 miles out to sea and 200 miles inland you would observe an increasing number of activities which ultimately and cumulatively impact on the marine environment. The managers of the marine environment are in many cases not linked or influential within agencies which manage these activities. If there is to be a long-term sustainable and acceptable outcome regarding the environment generally,

and the marine environment specifically, then there needs to be an audit of current management arrangements.

For example, there is little point in the Marine Park Authority creating protected habitat areas for important and endangered species if they have little, or no, influence on activities elsewhere which have potentially disastrous consequences down stream. We lose count of the number of times we've heard in response to questions, suggestions and concerns 'the legislation won't allow it'; 'that's not our Department's responsibility'; 'the lawyers would have a ball with that'; 'the system won't allow it'; 'it's simply not possible'; and so on.

There is need for a common sense overhaul of the system to provide practical, effective, dynamic and equitable management in an environment free of political and personal expediency. This need is critical if environmental values, which are being compromised daily, are to be considered in a big picture audit of goals for long term outcomes and management arrangements to achieve them. Managers must have clear goal posts out front and operate without politically or personally motivated deviations. There is no shortage of environmental outcomes preceding these sentiments.

We are already seeing speculative clearing of vegetation, particularly wetlands, as the need for controls is debated. Stop fiddling and attend to the fire!

We now have enough knowledge to know how little we know to support the escalating modification of important and sensitive areas which will prove to be a more valuable resource than anything they may irreversibly become in the very short term.

The following is a brief summary of the action which was called for from the Marine Park Authority in response to concerns relating to matters within the Marine Park by RMRACs and in some measure lead to the recently released plans of management. They seem to fit this scenario equally well.

1. Level the development curve in critical areas by appropriate effective action until such time as the following task is completed (moratorium on some activities in some areas).
2. Assess the impact of current levels of exploitation (this has not been possible in most areas because of continuously increasing pressure). Stabilise and take a look at a situation other than a growth curve.
3. Set goalposts – that is, identify values and balances to be maintained in the region and subregions together with associated appropriate future levels of exploitation and timing to maintain these values. Consider a future for all the critters, fish and plants that don't get to vote but which are vital to maintaining an acceptable outcome by any measure future generations may judge us.
4. Develop equitable management strategies and effective capability to achieve these goals from in front of development within a structure which continuously monitors performance and has the ability and the will to respond dynamically to requirements.

Remember we've only been here for 200 years and only had D9 bulldozers for around 40. What then is your vision for the next 200 years? When you extrapolate current levels of development, it's scary.

Above all, there must be a clear understanding that ecological natural resources are absolutely finite. There are limits to levels of exploitation which must be observed in order to achieve long term outcomes. Degradation following excessive and/or inappropriate exploitation may take

longer than one political term to become evident. Perhaps even longer after the activity responsible has been abandoned.

Surely now we must take heed of the lessons in our short history and demonstrate that we really are not raving lunatics who will squander assets which, it is my unshakable belief, can be a great and uniquely sustainable source of wealth and pride to this country and its diversity. Values which cannot be revisited are at stake here – they are no longer esoteric; they are crystallised in my mind as a result of the threat. I, and many others like me, believe it is essential to prioritise and take stock of the situation; take a long and hard look at where we are heading and what being an Australian will mean to future generations. Will Australia offer the diversity of environments and culture to attract visitors and for Australians to make lifestyle or incountry getaway choices we have today, and if not, will it be problem? Or will it indeed be *the* problem...?