

Wetland Protection – RMRAC Views

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The Regional Marine Resource Advisory Committees (RMRACs) are here to assist with the management of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. Conservation interests, maintenance of biodiversity, ecologically sustainable commercial and recreational fishing and tourism are all part of the picture.

It appears to us that as far as coastal development goes you have the sugar industry, the grazing industry, the banana industry, urban expansion, sewage treatment plants, mariculture, canal estates and marinas – everybody pushing their barrow wanting their bit of coastal development, nobody appreciating that each time they fill in a wetland or use it for something else, that we're losing something from the Great Barrier Reef. This is what the RMRACs are all about, along with the Department of Environment and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority.

What we believe is that there's got to be room for everyone because we not only have a big sugar industry and grazing industry but also a very valuable tourism industry, commercial fishing and recreational fishing. We've all got a monetary interest in getting protection of wetlands up and running.

Some of the RMRAC members were somewhat disappointed yesterday when Ministers and representatives gave what I'll call a rose tinted view of this issue and promptly departed before we got down to the plain speaking and showing what really is happening out there. The current management system is breaking down. This was recognised at the April workshop of the RMRACs. One of the major initiatives which came out of the workshop is this very gathering here today. This was a RMRAC initiative. The Authority, to their credit, leapt in and organised it and everyone from the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and those associated with that should be congratulated.

At the same time as this was going on, the Townsville RMRAC put up a resolution basically about extending the moratorium which came up earlier this year for development in the Hinchinbrook Channel. Some of the specific points we made were that there should be a moratorium on further agriculture, mariculture developments, a moratorium on coastal developments including marinas and canal estates, sugar cane expansion and flood mitigation and drainage channel. We've heard 'moratorium' mentioned a few times today and yesterday, and that's a moratorium until we've got some decent planning processes in place. I support Andrew Johnson's (CSIRO) framework and it's a good framework in which to act. RMRACs are already providing a community consultation tool and we've been in existence for about three years now and despite the diversity of views, the RMRACs are successful in getting the people around the table talking and actually finding out that they do have common ground. That's a really positive example that I can give to the meeting for us to go forward to work through the issues so that we can get some decent planning. Part of that planning is preserving what we've got left in the way of wetlands and maybe looking at rehabilitating some others. Certainly just to avoid the confusion, I think it is true that it is very difficult to do that – it is very difficult to redo the original biodiversity of a virgin wetland compared to a rehabilitated one but that's not to say rehabilitating a wetland isn't a worthwhile exercise. As Anne Clarke said yesterday, we might have a lot of ugly looking drains but we can do small things to those drains to make them into fish habitat.