



## **Question on Notice from Senate Inquiry into the Abbott/Scullion anti-Wild Rivers Bill**

### **Question (from transcript) taken on notice:**

Is it correct that you met with (Minister Robertson) before 1 April in the days prior to the briefing note being signed by Minister Robertson regarding the declaration for the relevant wild rivers; and when was that meeting? ... If you could advise us of the meetings and the points and discussions that you had with the minister in terms of, specifically, the Lockhart, Archer and Stewart Basin declarations.

### **Response:**

The Wilderness Society notes that this question has nothing to do with the Bill from the Opposition Leader, introduced separately by Senator Scullion into the Senate, or with any of the issues related to the Senate's two Inquiries' Terms of Reference, nor with those of the House of Representatives' Inquiry into the same bill (and sustainable Indigenous economic Development in Queensland).

We note that during the 2009 state election, Queensland Labor publicly recommitted to the Wild Rivers program, including the Lockhart, Archer and Stewart Basin declarations, and other river nominations. In the media statement that accompanied the Premier's speech at the launch of the Labor campaign on 15 March 2009, the Labor Party stated:

“Ms Bligh said a re-elected Labor Government would also finalise its wild river commitments on Cape York Peninsula.

“This year, we will complete the gazettal of the Stewart, Archer, Lockhart and Wenlock rivers as wild rivers and start consultation for the Ducie, Watson, Olive, Pascoe and Jacky Jacky rivers,” she said.

“Then in 2010, we will nominate the Jardine, Holroyd, Coleman and Jeanie river basins for gazettal.

“To manage these extra wild rivers, we reaffirm our commitment to employ a total of 100 wild river rangers.”

*Policy Media Release: Wild Rivers Head West (15 March 2009)*

The Wilderness Society also notes that the same speech and public statements indicated:

“We will now extend our protection program to the south-west, where the channel country is home to an extensive river system, wetlands and waterbirds.

“The rivers in this area have been subject to little development over the past 100 years, apart from some cattle grazing.

“As a result, they are still in much the same condition as they were when our early explorers first saw them.

“This makes them ideal candidates for Wild River listing.”

Ms Bligh said the western waterways to be nominated were the Diamantina and Georgina rivers and Cooper Creek.

“These waterways rate as some of Australia’s greatest rivers,” she said.

“When they are in flood, they flow for thousands of kilometres from north-western Queensland to Lake Eyre in north-eastern South Australia.

“At these times, they transform the usually arid outback into a spectacular kaleidoscope of channels and waterholes that are teeming with birds and other wildlife.”

*Policy Media Release: Wild Rivers Head West (15 March 2009)*

This was the third consecutive election that Labor had gone to the polls with a clear commitment to Wild Rivers. We further note that the Queensland Liberal Party voted for the Wild Rivers Act 2005, and that the National Party did not vote against it. We are disappointed that the Federal Coalition, from the Leader of the Opposition down, has sought to party-politicise the Wild Rivers issue.

In common with many other environmental NGOs, and Indigenous representatives and lobbyists, the Wilderness Society from time to time meets with Government Ministers and MPs, and Opposition Shadow Ministers and MPs, and other elected representatives, to discuss a range of conservation issues. There was a meeting with the newly appointed Minister for Natural Resources, the Hon Stephen Robertson MP on 30 March 2009. This meeting related primarily to the recent election commitment to move forwards on protecting Western Queensland rivers, specifically as to what sort of time frames and consultation processes would be applied. It is understood that a question about the progress of the Lockhart, Archer and Stewart Wild River nominations was raised at the meeting, but no definitive statement about the timing of any declarations was made by the Minister or other officials present.

As Senator Barnett may be well aware, this meeting with Minister Robertson has already been the subject of a Right To Information (cf Freedom of Information) application, and the Wilderness Society had no objections to this information being made available at the time.

The Wilderness Society has no idea when “the briefing note being signed by Minister Robertson regarding the declaration for the relevant wild rivers” was signed, so we are unable to indicate whether our meeting was before or after such processes took place.

The Wilderness Society would be interested to know whether Coalition Senators have asked similar questions about when representatives of the Cape York Land Council, Balkanu, Cape York Institute or Cape York Partnerships have held meetings with Federal and Queensland Government and Opposition representatives or Independent MPs, to discuss Wild Rivers.  
END.

*Dr Tim Seelig, on behalf of the Wilderness Society (Queensland) Inc.*