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Senate Enquiry: The Abbott Government's Attacks on Australia's Environment and their Effects on our Natural Heritage and Future Prosperity

This submission has been prepared in consultation with the membership of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Qld Fraser Coast Branch Inc (Wildlife Fraser Coast). The objectives of Wildlife Fraser Coast are:

- (1) to preserve the fauna and flora of Australia by all lawful means;
- (2) to educate by all means possible all sections of the community, particularly the young, in understanding the principles of conservation and preservation of the natural environment;
- (3) to discourage by all legal means possible the destruction, exploitation or unnecessary development of any part of the natural environment;
- (4) to encourage rational land use and proper planning of development and use of the natural environment and management thereof.

Wildlife Fraser Coast is an apolitical organisation which is not dependent on government funding. We have a membership of some 60 people, whose voting patterns would cross the political spectrum.

Nevertheless, our membership is unanimous in their concerns about the short-sighted actions and decisions taken by the current federal Government which we are convinced will have an overwhelmingly negative impact on both our natural heritage and Australia's future prosperity.

The Government's own website states that Australia is home to between 600,000 and 700,000 species, many of which are found nowhere else in the world. About 84 per cent of plants, 83 per cent of mammals, and 45 per cent of birds are only found in Australia. Our unique flora and fauna is in steep decline, with negative trends accelerating. Australia has the highest rate of extinctions in the world, while a very large number of flora and fauna species and ecological communities are 'threatened'.

Our environment delivers many 'ecosystem services', directly or indirectly, including clean air, clean water, food and fibre, sense of place, community and individual health and well-being, recreational opportunities and tourist draw-cards.

Threats to our environment are increasing at an unprecedented rate from land clearing and habitat fragmentation, development, invasive plants, feral animals, grazing in national parks, and port development and shipping in sensitive areas such as the Great Barrier Reef.

The Abbott Government has ignored overwhelming scientific evidence that our climate is changing very rapidly. Rainfall is decreasing, climate extremes are becoming more common, with records being set almost every year for hot and cold temperatures, floods and cyclone intensity.

A sustainable future for Australia depends on long-term vision, transcending the three-year federal election cycle. It also depends on achievement of 'triple bottom line' objectives: social and environmental, not just economic. Importantly, a vibrant economic future for Australia depends on diverse industries. Quite simply, the Abbott Government has shown a complete disregard for all sectors of the economy other than the mining sector. Without a healthy environment and a broad-based economy targeting future needs in a post-industrial world, our communities and personal well-being, and our economy overall, will inevitably suffer.

What is particularly depressing is that the Abbott Government has seen fit to turn its back on well-respected scientific evidence and advice and many excellent decisions and actions taken by the former Howard Government. It did not have a mandate for most of these changes.

Terms of reference

- a. **Attacks on carbon pricing, the Clean Energy Finance Corporation, the Australian Renewable Energy Agency and the renewable energy target, the Climate Action Authority and the Climate Commission**

Climate change and climate adaptation are two of the biggest global challenges in the twenty first century. We are appalled that the Government has chosen largely to ignore these challenges and to ignore its international responsibilities. Its policy and program responses such as its Direct Action Program are inadequate. We are embarrassed that Prime Minister Abbott chose not to attend the recent international Climate Summit attended by other world leaders, aligning himself instead with 'rogue states' like North Korea. The Abbott Government is condemning Australia to on-going crippling economic costs of extreme weather events and bushfires by its failure to address the reality of climate change.

A healthy economy is built on diverse industries and services which are forward-looking. On-going investment in the coal and fossil fuel industries, instead of renewable energy, is investing in nineteenth century technology and markets that are at best short-term. After 30 years of economic growth, China, the major importer of Australian coal, has 'created a virtual hell-hole for its 1.4 billion people, with polluted air, water and food' (Prof Anne McLaren, China scholar, Asia Institute, University of Melbourne, December 2013, personal communication). Australia's coal has been a significant contributor to China's environmental pollution and toxic smogs.

Rather than investing in renewable energy development for a post-fossil fuel world, the Abbott Government has chosen to ignore the market mechanism of setting a price on carbon, and effectively shut down investment in alternative, clean and renewable energy. It has demonstrated a spectacular lack of vision and a lack of commitment to its own mantra of economic development. It has also failed to take into consideration the impact of its 'mining at all costs' policy on other industries such as tourism, agriculture and fishing.

By cutting the Renewable Energy Target from 41,000 to 28,000 gigawatt hours by 2020, the Government has effectively killed the renewable energy industry in Australia and removed our global 'competitive edge' in this important industry of the future. The reality is that the Renewable Energy Target and the Clean Energy Finance Corporation catalysed billions of dollars of investment and created thousands of jobs. The Abbott Government's legacy will be the loss of this investment and the loss of sustainable jobs.

Meanwhile, the Government continues to provide tax incentives and special tax concessions to fossil fuel-based and other mining industries.

b. Attacks on federal environmental protection through handing approval powers over to state governments, which have poor track records and recent environment staff cuts

Environmental protection is a national challenge and a national responsibility, demanding national leadership and national solutions. Matters of national environmental significance do not fit neatly and conveniently into State borders.

The following questions must be asked:

- How can a state make a decision on matters of national environmental significance?
- How can a state deal effectively with international matters such as migratory species?
- How will conflicts of interest be managed when the State itself is the proponent of a 'major project'?
- Will there be varying standards between States in addressing matters of national environmental significance?
- Who will be the umpire?

- Will the Abbott Government take responsibility for the failure by the States to properly address community concerns and protect the rights of all stakeholders?
- How can this duplication of national functions at State level be justified or cost-effective?

In choosing to water down its own legislation (the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*) and hand approval powers over to state governments, the Abbott Government is abrogating its national responsibilities and undermining our international obligations. In the case of Queensland, the State Government's laws are hopelessly weak, and its processes rife with conflicts of interest.

c. Attacks on funding for community environment organisations and the Environmental Defenders Offices, abolition of the Biodiversity Fund, and cuts to programs including Landcare and Caring for our Country

With environmental needs increasing, not decreasing, the cuts to funding for environmental organisations such as the Environmental Defenders Offices and the Queensland Conservation Council, and cuts to or abolition of environmental programs sabotage the investment in our environment by the tax-payer and the community over the last 25 years. Like health and education, the environment requires on-going investment. These cuts also undermine our democracy.

d. Undermining Australia's compliance with the World Heritage Convention, the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Ramsar Convention, in particular by attacking the Great Barrier Reef and the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Areas

Wildlife Fraser Coast is particularly disappointed that the Government has undermined its international commitments through the World Heritage Convention, the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Ramsar Convention. The Great Barrier Reef is now clearly under severe threat, and its status will deteriorate further through the Government's failure to take the threats of climate change and agricultural run-off seriously. The Government's commitment to on-going development of ports and mining within Great Barrier Reef and associated catchments will further exacerbate the threats to the Reef.

The recent attempt by the Government to rescind the annexation of 74,000 hectares of land only recently added to the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area as a result of negotiations over several years between the forest industry and the conservation sector shows contempt for these groups and for its obligations and commitments under the World Heritage Convention. Worse, the Government's actions have made Australia a laughing stock on the world stage.

e. Any other related matters

In just over a year, the Abbott Government has turned back the clock on numerous other important environmental actions and policies:

1. It has approved several 'major projects' that will result in major environmental harm:
 - Approval of the Carmichael coal mine, and rail and sea transport of the resulting coal through vulnerable environments including the Great Barrier Reef. In addition to mining coal, the Carmichael mine will also mine 'fossil water' from underground aquifers.
 - Approval of dredging at the Abbott Point coal terminal. The dumping of dredge spoil on land or at sea will inevitably have a significant impact on the Great Barrier Reef.
2. It has abolished the National Water Commission which provided independent assessments and independent advice on water development. Further development of large dams, particularly in northern Australia, will have devastating impacts, including loss of 'environmental' flows in rivers, siltation and salinity. Failure to recognise the interconnectivity between ground water and surface water will result in the depletion of both resources.
3. It has weakened the national network of marine reserves and the marine bio-regional planning process that was initiated by the former Howard Government.
4. Notwithstanding the Prime Minister's recently announced prizes for science, it has deemed science to be of little use to Australia's future by cutting funding savagely for CSIRO and failing to appoint a Minister for Science. Downgrading science in this way does not give Australians or the international community the impression that Australia is planning effectively for a sustainable future.

Other policy changes will have indirect negative consequences for the environment. A focus on upgrading road infrastructure, while apparently worthy, comes at the expense of investment in public transport. Increased road use will have environmental impacts through the increased consumption of fossil fuel and yet more clearance of vegetation.

Concluding comment

No doubt the Abbott Government will claim that all its funding cuts are reducing its 'budget deficit'. Governments collect taxes to ensure the delivery of 'public good' outcomes and meet community service obligations. However, the Government's budget is a matter of prioritisation. The Abbott Government is abrogating its national environmental responsibilities, which are of public benefit at national and international level, while channelling funding into countless areas that are essentially matters of a private nature, and that deliver private benefits.

Yours sincerely

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