

Inquiry: *Wild Rivers*

Tabled Document

By: *CLCAC*

Date: *13 APRIL CAIRNS*



## CARPENTARIA LAND COUNCIL ABORIGINAL CORPORATION MEDIA RELEASE

# Senate inquiry into Wild Rivers moves to Cairns

12 April 2010

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The Senate is conducting an inquiry into the *Wild Rivers (Environmental Management) Bill*, introduced by Opposition Leader Tony Abbott on March 8. A hearing was held in Canberra on March 30, with a second scheduled for April 13 in Cairns.

The Chairperson of the Carpentaria Land Council Aboriginal Corporation, Mr Thomas Wilson, says the traditional owners and native title holders of Gulf of Carpentaria do not support the Opposition's bid to overturn Queensland's Wild Rivers Act.

Opposition Leader Tony Abbott and Noel Pearson have said that the *Wild Rivers Act* denies Aboriginal people the right to use their land for their own benefit.

Mr Wilson asserts that Mr Abbott has failed to consider the real advantages that had been gained by the implementation of the Wild River ranger program in the southern Gulf through which the CLCAC employs 10 Indigenous rangers and carries out a range of activities that include weed control activities, feral animal control and management and wild fire management.

Mr Wilson said: "The CLCAC's Ranger program has emerged as one of the most successful employment programs in the Gulf in terms of enthusiasm for work and low attrition rates. The Rangers have taken advantage of the opportunity of learning a wide range of new skills and now have the ability to implement high quality land and sea management work."

"It is a shame that the Commonwealth chooses to play a game of rudimentary politics with the support of a handful of Indigenous representatives instead of focusing on supporting and expanding the implementation of very successful Indigenous ranger employment program."

"Mr Abbott's approach has been clumsy, that his stance lacks credibility and that he has failed to consider the views of Indigenous people in the Gulf where four Wild Rivers declarations have already been made following overwhelming support from the traditional owners".

Mr Murradoo Yanner, a representative of the Gangalidda People, whose traditional lands and waters are covered by two of the Gulf declarations, said that although his community had no objection to the Bill appearing to provide traditional owners in the Cape with the right to veto a proposed Wild River declaration, he had deep concerns about the one-sided myopic argument that had been used by Mr Abbott and Mr Pearson in seeking to abolish the *Wild Rivers Act*.

“Preserving the Wild Rivers and promoting Indigenous jobs and economic development is not a dichotomy. We want to avoid unsustainable short-term economic growth and instead focus on long-term developments that are also environmentally sustainable“, he said.

Mr Yanner also challenged Mr Abbott and Mr Pearson to provide one real example of a community supported economic development project that had actually been abandoned as a result of a Wild Rivers declaration. Mr Yanner said:

“We do not want to stifle economic enterprise and we too want our people to break out of the insidious cycle of welfare dependency, but what is wrong with having to require development proposals to be located 200 metres from a pristine river? How exactly does this requirement make those proposals unfeasible? “

The CLCAC will be appearing at the Senate inquiry in Cairns on April 13.

**Media inquiries:**

**Murradoo Yanner 0437 500 247**

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“Vanrook Station Pty Ltd”  
“Dorunda Station Pty Ltd”  
“Inkerman Station Pty Ltd”

PMB 2  
CAIRNS 4871

M.HAYES  
Group Manager

Helen,

By way of introduction, my name is Mick Hayes. I am the Group Manager of three cattle properties in the Gulf of Carpentaria. Vanrook, Dorunda and Inkerman. I represent the owner of these properties.

In the past few days, the Wild River Rangers from Normanton have conducted a pig eradication program on Dorunda and Vanrook Stations, under the supervision of Ranger Co-Ordinator, Mark Hogno. An estimated 3,700 pigs were destroyed within a week on coastal country.

Feral pigs have caused the following problems on company properties :

- destruction of swamp habitats
- destruction of vast areas of marine plains, in particular, marine cooch. ( If, for instance, one pig roots up 10 sq mtrs per night, multiply that by 3,700, the area of destruction soon adds up).
- As surface water dries up the pigs climb into cattle troughs, breaking floats and making the water a soup of mud, faeces and urine.
- The pigs locate minute leaks in poly pipe, dig the pipe up and chew through it.
- The magpie geese and other wading bird populations have been steadily decreasing due to pigs destroying their food source and eating their eggs and young
- Within days of turtles laying eggs on the beaches, the pigs locate the eggs and eat them.

The cost of labour resources and capital expenditure repairing pig damage is enormous, let alone the diminishing of viable and productive grazing country.

When Mark Hogno first contacted me regarding Wild Rivers Rangers conducting the eradication program I was reluctant to jump into the program. This was due to the fact that the Wild Rivers legislation in its' original format was viewed as an anathema to the grazing industry due to some of its unrealistic 'guidelines'.

After communicating with Mark, and voicing my concerns, I was relieved to find that there were no hidden agendas on the Governments' behalf and their objective was "to assist landholders in the eradication of feral animals and weeds in the Staaten River area."

The dealings I have had with Mark and his Rangers have shown to me that they are a dedicated, well organized, professional and efficient team, who work with you in all aspects of their operations..

The objective was achieved, and the results are already evident on the ground. On-going programs are essential in order to keep on top of pig numbers.

I would also like to point out what an excellent job Mark Hogno has done in opening up the line of communication with graziers in the area. If this implementation of the Wild Rivers Ranger program was not handled so honestly and efficiently by someone of Marks' expertise, the results may have been different.

I would like you to thank Mark and his team of Rangers and helicopter pilots from Cloncurry Mustering, and look forward to continuing to work together.

Yours Sincerely,

Mick Hayes

# Waterbird breeding colonies – wet season surveys, 2009

## Report to indigenous ranger communities in the Gulf Plains region, north Queensland

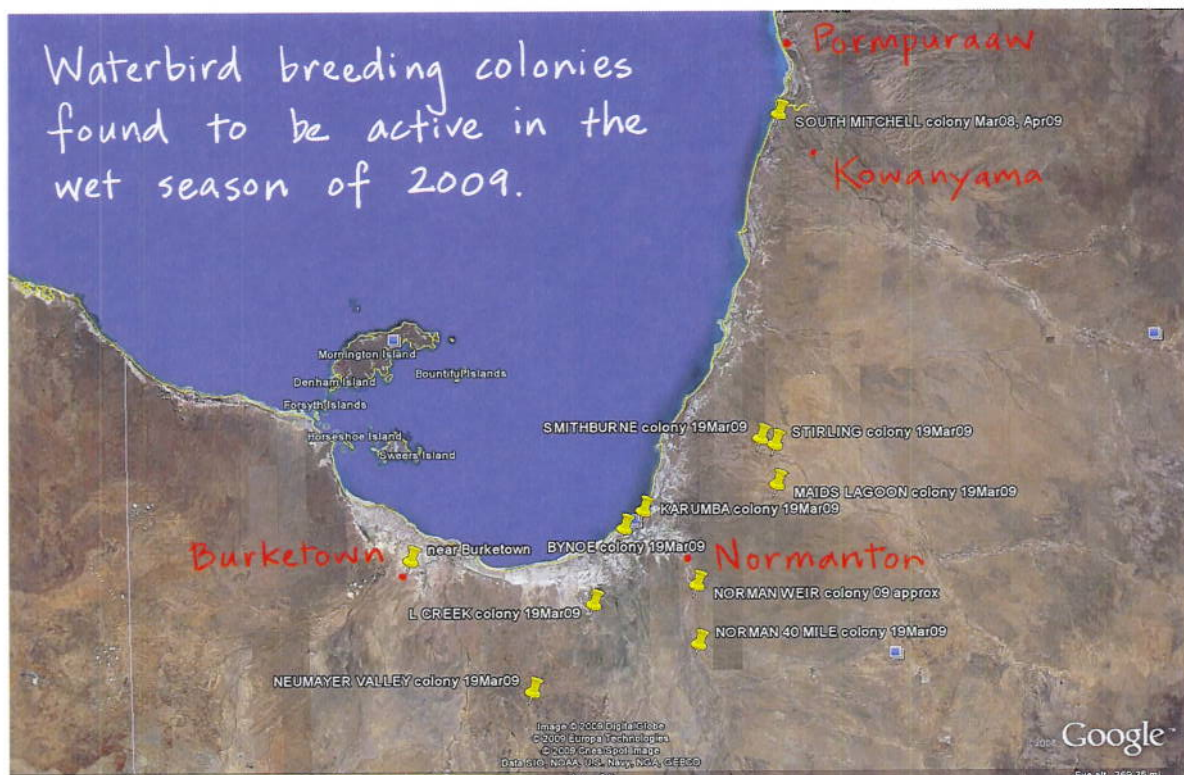
Certain waterbirds such as egrets, herons, ibises, spoonbills and cormorants breed in dense clusters (colonies) – not like the other waterbirds that breed as dispersed pairs at low density across the landscape.

Until recently, scientists knew of only a few waterbird colonies in the Gulf Plains region, but the vast extent of wetland habitat in the wet season suggested that many more colonies must exist.



Starting in the 2008 wet season, Wetlands International – a conservation NGO interested in waterbird populations – started a cooperative partnership with indigenous ranger teams in the southern Gulf, to search for additional colonies. Rangers from the Carpentaria Land Council Aboriginal Corporation and the Pormpuraaw and Kowanyama communities, some of them funded under the Wild River Rangers program, started to keep an eye out for breeding colonies in the wet season and some surveys were conducted specially for this purpose.

From small beginnings last year, the effort was bigger in 2009 resulting in a great increase in knowledge. Colony sites for 2009 are on the map, and data are shown in the table, below.



South Mitchell colony, April 2009 (Warren Lee Long)

Table of results from indigenous ranger surveys of waterbird breeding colonies in the Gulf Plains in 2009

colony	BU	AR	LC	BY	KA	NW	NR	ML	SB	ST	SM
ranger group (observers)	B	N	N	N	N	O	N	N	N	N	K
waterhole (w-h), estuary (est)	est	w-h	w-h	est	est	w-h	w-h	w-h	w-h	w-h	est
estimated number of nests	S	HH	HH	S	HH	S	TTT	S	TTT	HH	TTT
Great Egret											
Intermediate Egret											
Little Egret											
Pied Heron											
Nankeen Night Heron											
Australian White Ibis											
Royal Spoonbill											
Little Pied Cormorant											
Pied Cormorant											
Little Black Cormorant											
Australasian Darter											

BU = near Burketown; AR = Alexandra River; LC = L Creek; BY = Bynoe estuary;

KA = Karumba mangroves; NW = Norman River Weir; NR = Norman River at 40 Mile Hole; ML = Mays Lagoon;

SB = Smithburne River waterhole; ST = waterhole near Stirling; SM = South Mitchell estuary.

Ranger groups: B = Burketown; N = Normanton; K = Kowanyama; O = Other people.

Number of nests: S = less than 100; HH = hundreds; TTT = thousands.

Teams from Burketown, Normanton (CLCAC), Kowanyama (KALNMO) and Pomppuraaw were involved in surveys. Some of this work was done as part of patrols for other purposes, whereas some was done as surveys (by helicopter) just for this purpose. Not all groups had active colonies in their area and the type of data recorded was variable. But all of this information is very useful to form a better picture of what is happening with waterbirds in the Gulf Plains.

It is worthwhile and necessary to conduct surveys over more than one year, because wetland conditions vary so much, year-to-year. A change in number of nests between years could reflect local conditions or issues, or more enticing habitat elsewhere despite good conditions locally.

Eleven colonies were visited in March-April 2009; some known colonies (eg. Mitchell River) were not visited this year. All but one was associated with a major river system; there were at least three colonies on the Norman River, for example. To some extent we can expect the location of colonies to match the biggest floods of the year, because more extensively inundated floodplains can support higher numbers of feeding egrets and other waterbirds. And because every wet season is a little (sometimes a lot) different to the next, we can expect some differences in where waterbirds are breeding, and how many, each year.



Smithburne River colony, March 2009

It is very difficult to estimate the number of breeding efforts (nests) in a colony, especially where nests are in several layers in the trees and hence the lowest nests remain hidden to an overhead observer. Also, it is difficult to count nests late in the season when nestlings are well grown, whereas earlier we can assume about one or two adults attending each nest.

Nevertheless, from notes on the survey datasheets and examination of photographs taken during the surveys, it seems that the largest colony surveyed in 2009 was on the Smithburne River, some distance from the coast (in riverine trees, in and beside a freshwater waterhole). Other large colonies, on the Norman and South Mitchell rivers, also contained thousands of nests. Seven colonies were in the inland freshwater habitat whereas the other four were in mangroves near the sea mouth of tidal rivers.



Norman River colony, March 2009 (also at top of page 1)

At least five of the colonies were 'new to science' although local people, especially indigenous communities, graziers and helicopter pilots, may have known about them.

Up to 11 waterbird species were confirmed nesting in the colonies. Data on species was limited at some colonies but typically each colony included about eight nesting species.

Intermediate Egret was the most widespread breeding species and also by far the most abundant. Other commonly encountered nesters were Australian White Ibis, Royal Spoonbill and Little Black Cormorant. Straw-necked Ibis, which rarely breeds in far northern Australia, may have been nesting at the Norman River and South Mitchell colonies; it tends to nest low at the base of inundated trees and so nests often can't be seen easily from the air.



Alexandra River colony, March 2009

As a result of this work in 2008 and 2009, we are better able to plan for management and conservation of the colonies. Firstly, local people and land managers can now be more aware of the natural assets in their country. Secondly, they can see how their assets fit into the bigger picture of natural resources across the Gulf Plains region. It seems that the Gulf Plains makes a substantial contribution to maintaining the populations of several Australian waterbird species, and colonies of some species (eg. Little Egret, Pied Heron) may be among the most important in Australia. After nesting and once the floodplains and swamps have dried up, it is likely that many of the waterbirds move to other regions such as upper Cape York and even New Guinea.

Although direct threats to the colonies may be few, we are now better informed in case of future development proposals that may affect the flooding of river systems or directly impact colony sites. At least two more years of 'exploratory survey' for colonies will be needed in order to fully identify the baseline situation and plan longer-term monitoring of this asset.



L-Creek colony and Mays Lagoon colony, March 2009

Photos by CLCAC's ranger coordinator Mark Hognio and the Normanton ranger team unless otherwise indicated.

Report prepared by Roger Jaensch, Wetlands International [roger.jaensch@wetlands-oceania.org](mailto:roger.jaensch@wetlands-oceania.org) , August 2009.



# CARPENTARIA GULF REGION

## NATIVE TITLE APPLICATIONS & DETERMINATION AREAS

As per the Federal Court (30 September 2008)

### NON FREEHOLD LAND TENURE

This map is a summary of the land title information available in the Queensland Land Title Register as at 30 September 2008. It is not a legal document and should not be relied upon for legal purposes. For more information, please contact the Queensland Department of Natural Resources and Environment.

Legend and Scale: 1:100,000. North arrow pointing up.

