



Dr Russell Reichelt
Chair, GBRMPA
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20 February 2014

Dear Dr Reichelt

Re: the Abbot Point decision and GBRMPAs role in fisheries management in the WHA

The Cairns LMAC met on Tuesday 18 February 2014 and allocated much of the meeting to discussing the various implications of the Abbot Point dredge disposal decision. We appreciated the detailed briefing and responses to our concerns from the General Manager of Operations, Andrew Skeat, and we were confident that the views expressed at the meeting were taken on board. However, I present a summary of our discussions directly to you.

Public perceptions that have emerged from the multiple compass points of our community were given voice at the LMAC. It was noted that, from a community point of view, the decision emerged almost "out of the blue". Given that everybody in our community has a view on the value of the Great Barrier Reef, whether they are users or whether they appreciate an intrinsic value applied to it just being there, it was noted that the absence of information in the community about the decision to be made led to simplified responses, many of which were extremely negative and that these responses were worldwide.

A member from the agricultural sector questioned the point of many years of land management reforms at a farm-by-farm level to reduce sediment and nutrient export to the Great Barrier Reef when a single decision seemingly rendered these efforts useless. This member reported that this sentiment is now widespread following attendance at industry conferences addressing the export of nitrogen from agriculture to the Great Barrier Reef.

Our region has been identified as a hotspot in Queensland for Dissolved Inorganic Nitrogen export from our catchments contributing to infestations of Crown Of Thorns Starfish so it is critical that such gatherings are not distracted from the task of reducing exports to the Reef.

It was concluded that the GBRMPAs position as gatekeeper of the Great Barrier Reef has taken an enormous hit within the community both in Australia and internationally. The ramifications for the tourism industry that underpins our regional economies are not lost on anybody.

It was noted that, given the decision by the Department of the Environment to approve the port expansion in isolation of the GBRMPA permit decision, the Authority needed to be proactive and inform the community of the context within which such a decision would be made. It was concluded, fairly or unfairly, that the GBRMPA apparently failed to grasp the ramifications of the position within which it found itself and, as a consequence, must now rectify greatly reduced confidence from the community to carry out its mandate.

The Cairns LMAC wants a strong and trusted advocate for the health and resilience of our Great Barrier Reef and we are concerned that the reputation of the Authority has been badly damaged. We believe that this could have been mitigated with the application of a little more foresight. Discussion in the media and more broadly in the community is now grossly over simplified and the Authority is being viewed poorly. The LMAC is exasperated that this situation was not foreseen and acted on.

We sincerely hope that this situation is rectified prior to any decision that is made around the expansion of the Cairns port. The augmentation of dredging activity in Cairns crosses jurisdictions but our community is concerned that decisions to be made within the jurisdiction of the GBRMPA remain divisive within our entire community. The Abbot Point situation cannot be replicated in our community where our economy functions on the domestic and international perception that our natural environment is in great condition and that we have world class management overseeing its well-being.

The LMAC was also dismayed that, given the number and magnitude of future port expansion decisions to be made, there was an absence of coordination between the decision to approve the port expansion at Abbot Point by the Department of the Environment and the subsequent decision to approve the permit for dredge spoil disposal within the marine park by the GBRMPA. The LMAC was concerned that this could signify isolation of the Authority by the Department, a situation that would be an unwelcome distraction from the vital work that the Authority undertakes as overseer of our World Heritage property on our behalf.

Fisheries Management in the World Heritage Area

The existing role that the GBRMPA plays in the management of fishing in the World Heritage Area is an important issue for the Cairns LMAC, including the impact of fishing in inshore areas and on coral reefs, and how this could be strengthened.

The Cairns LMAC understands that the conservation of biodiversity within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park is achieved to some extent from existing zoning arrangements. However, as more evidence emerges of the impacts of declining water quality and coastal development on inshore habitats, coupled with anticipated changes to our environment in the future, it has become critical that the management of fishing in these areas reflects these challenges.

It is time that the GBRMPA played a more assertive role in the management of fishing activity within the marine park. It is well understood by LMAC participants from the commercial fishing sector that the Authority plays a contributing, collaborative role in the development of Ecological Risk Assessments and other processes that lead to the management arrangements for commercial fisheries on the Great Barrier Reef and the Federal Government standards that apply for export eligibility from those fisheries. However, it is the opinion of the Cairns LMAC that the Authority needs to subject critical inshore areas within its jurisdiction to differential management arrangements designed to conserve biodiversity in these areas.

Members expressed dismay that, despite the Outlook Report 2009 stating that “the remaining impacts of fishing and illegal fishing and poaching” was as a priority issue for the Authority in the subsequent five years, little progress had been visibly achieved in this period. The most pointed example presented was the manner in which inshore areas of the Great Barrier Reef were managed for the conservation of biodiversity by the Authority and how this meshed with the management of fisheries production by the Queensland Government. This extended to other critical habitats that supported both commercial and recreational fishing, including coral reefs.

The Cairns LMAC has grown weary of declarations that cross-jurisdictional issues will be addressed to accommodate regional issues etc. We are seeing numerous reports of the impacts of declining water quality on inshore habitats in addition to the longer-term impacts of reclamation and coastal development. These are clearly issues for the Queensland Government and hopefully will be addressed in the Long Term Sustainability Plan. However, issues surrounding the management of fishing in inshore areas remain unresolved and are becoming the cause of considerable frustration in our community.

Yours faithfully

Ryan Donnelly, Chair