



Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
Parliament House
Canberra
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2 June 2014

Dear Senators

Submission to Senate Inquiry into the management of the Great Barrier Reef

The Cairns Local Marine Advisory Committee (LMAC) was established to provide advice to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) and other management partners on issues and policies relating to the Great Barrier Reef.

Our membership represents a wide range of community viewpoints, including Traditional Owners, commercial fishers, farmers, local Councillors, conservationists, tourism operators, recreational reef users, shipping and port representatives. As you can imagine, our views are diverse.

Our members have contributed to the development of the strategic assessment and provided comments on the draft reports. We have also separately written to the GBRMPA Chair on matters of concern to us including fisheries management, port expansions, and recreational infrastructure and management. Please find attached a summary of these concerns in the context of the Inquiry's terms of reference.

The Cairns LMAC remains committed to communicating local concerns and providing advice to GBRMPA, however we are closely monitoring whether GBRMPA has the resources and political independence to make the decisions needed to ensure our Great Barrier Reef remains great.

Yours faithfully

Ryan Donnelly, Chair

a) Management of the impacts of industrialisation of the reef coastline

- Mines, ports and associated coastal development have previously been concentrated in the southern Great Barrier Reef catchments. However, Far North Queensland is now facing unprecedented large-scale development proposals. This includes a proposed expansion of the Cairns port to allow large cruise ships to directly access the city wharf. Initial capital dredging of five million cubic metres would be required, followed by annual maintenance dredging of 580,000 cubic metres. Ports North is expected to release an Environmental Impact Statement in September 2014. The Cairns LMAC eagerly awaits the EIS and is equally keen to see that lessons are learnt from the Abbott Point decision process and that it is not repeated here in Cairns. 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 wellbeing. The health of the Great Barrier Reef should be paramount in any decision-maker's deliberations and is the fundamental remit of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority.

b) Management of impacts of agricultural runoff and c) non-agricultural activities

Addressing water quality

- Water quality is one of the key issues discussed by our committee over the past five years. The Cairns LMAC has raised concerns with relevant authorities about the health of the Barron River and Trinity Inlet, and problems with the current water testing regime. We support the strategic assessment's recommendations to better coordinate water quality testing. The LMAC also supports recommendations to expand the focus of Reef Plan to non-agricultural sources of pollution and would like to see adequate resourcing go to local Councils to improve sewerage treatment upstream from Cairns.
- Following the Abbot Point decision, a committee 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. Other committee members report this sentiment is now widespread among local farmers. Their frustration is understandable, given the industry has been working hard to mitigate its impacts on water quality. In the past five rounds of Reef Rescue grants to our farmers, the Government has provided funding of \$18.8 million in the Wet Tropics region, but it should be noted the farmers themselves have contributed close to an equivalent amount in cash and an additional \$7 million of in-kind support. Our region has been identified as a hotspot in Queensland for Dissolved Inorganic Nitrogen export from our catchments, which contributes to infestations of crown-of-thorns starfish. It is critical that our farmers are not distracted from the task of reducing such exports.
- The Cairns LMAC supports the continuation and expansion of stewardship programs with farmers, however some of our members would also like to see improved regulation and monitoring of chemical application and runoff. The LMAC does not want to see onerous requirements placed on our farmers, however the issue of water quality is critical enough for a simple requirement for farmers to register the chemicals they are using, backed up by random tests for compliance.
- The LMAC has been lobbying for some time for sewage pump-out facilities to service the large tourism and recreational fleet based in Cairns. It is unacceptable that Great

Barrier Reef regulations lag behind the rest of Queensland. It is time to review inconsistencies in state and federal legislation and fund the facilities required to ensure sewage is not dumped at sea, but properly treated on land.

d) Ensuring GBRMPA has the independence, resourcing and capacity to act in the best interest of the long-term health of the reef.

- The LMAC is dismayed that, given the number and magnitude of future port expansion decisions to be made, there was an apparent 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 GBRMPA. The LMAC questioned whether this signified 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 the World Heritage property on our behalf.
- Given the apparent decision by the Department of the Environment to approve the Abbot Point port expansion in isolation from GBRMPA's spoil disposal permit decision, the Cairns LMAC believes the Authority needed to be proactive and inform the community of the context within which its decision would be made. It was concluded that GBRMPA either failed to grasp the ramifications of its position, or for political reasons could not speak out about the situation. As a consequence, GBRMPA is faced with 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. Discussion in the media and more broadly in the community is now grossly over-simplified and the Authority is being viewed poorly. Our members believe that GBRMPA's 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 economy are not lost on anybody.
- The Cairns LMAC is concerned that significant additional resourcing will be required to implement the recommendations of the strategic assessment. How will resourcing be achieved given recent cuts to GBRMPA's budget and staffing levels? Given the extent of corporate knowledge set to leave the organisation with voluntary redundancies, there is a question mark over the capacity of the Authority to deliver existing programs to a meaningful and worthwhile extent.

g) Whether the strategic assessments are likely to protect the reef from further decline

Failure to address ports and shipping issues

- The Queensland coastal program report does not deal effectively with the issues of port development, instead deferring to the draft Queensland Ports Strategy. This document does not achieve the stated objective of "consolidation of port development around long-established major ports in Queensland" due to loopholes in relation to exceptions and developments that have pending approvals. This is symptomatic of the overall 'business as usual' approach of the strategic assessment which repeatedly points to other plans, strategies or documents without proper consideration of their effectiveness or required improvements. The community had much loftier expectations of the Strategic Assessment than what was delivered by the Queensland Government.

And the GBRMPA assessment report was not well received at a joint meeting of the LMAC Chairs and the Reef Advisory Committees.

- The Cairns LMAC is concerned the strategic assessment does not adequately address the related issue of shipping, instead deferring to the draft North-East Shipping Management Plan, a document that falls short in addressing issues such as sediment plumes from shipping movements (under-vessel clearance), noise pollution and the expected increases in size and number of vessels both visiting Queensland ports and travelling past without coming ashore in Queensland.
- It is difficult to see how the recommendations in the strategic assessment will be actioned in the Program Report. For example, underwater noise is rated as a 'high' risk to biodiversity, yet a relatively long two-year time frame has been allocated to "strengthen guidelines". The Program Report states that the Authority will encourage and support research into noise impacts, but no timeframe is provided.
- The Cairns LMAC recognises and commends the staff who put a great deal of work into the strategic assessment reports. However, we seek to ensure the Federal and Queensland Governments move beyond the strategic assessment's broad statements and work together to adopt an ambitious and clear plan forward that recognises the gravity of the situation facing the Region. As stated in the *Outlook Report 2009*, the Reef is at a crossroads and we need bold decisions to ensure cumulative impacts don't lead to its long-term decline.

Failure to address fisheries management

- The Cairns LMAC was very disappointed the issue of fisheries management was not adequately addressed in the strategic assessment documents. Issues surrounding the management of fishing remain unresolved and are becoming the cause of considerable frustration in our community. 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 GBRMPA played a more assertive role in the management of fishing activity within the marine park, as an equal partner with Queensland Fisheries.
- GBRMPA should play a greater and more authoritative role in all commercial fisheries operating in the marine park. This is particularly frustrating given that the "remaining effects of fishing, illegal fishing and poaching" were identified as priority issues for the Authority in the 2009 Outlook Report. The LMAC believes the Authority needs to subject critical inshore areas to differential management arrangements designed to conserve biodiversity in these areas.

Failure in development assessment processes

- The draft strategic assessment recommendations include streamlining assessment processes. Some of our members have deep reservations about a "one stop shop" approach. The Queensland Government is either a vocal supporter of major economic developments or the actual proponent (in the case of the Cairns port, the government-owned corporation of Ports North). The Cairns LMAC believes delegating the assessment of projects that may significantly impact the Reef to the Queensland Government could result in a conflict of interest. We have little confidence the

Queensland Government will allocate the resources, or have the appropriate culture, to impose and enforce the conditions necessary to protect the Reef.

- The Cairns LMAC contends that a better approach would be to improve the efficiency of the existing EPBC Act assessment and approval processes. The Federal Government has successfully provided an independent check on major projects over a number of years. On occasions, projects are refused but more often valuable extra conditions are imposed that ensure positive environmental outcomes. We believe the continuing involvement of the Federal Government, GBRMPA and/or an independent referral agency is absolutely necessary to counterbalance the self-assessment and decision-making power of a single Queensland Government agency.

Failure to address marine infrastructure needs

- The Cairns region is a popular area for recreational boaters, and the pressures on related infrastructure highlight some gaps in planning and management. The Cairns LMAC has written to GBRMPA on these issues and hoped they would be dealt with by the strategic assessment. The LMAC considers that additional public moorings are required in the Cairns/Cooktown area in order to reduce anchor damage to the benthos and provide opportunities for reasonable use by the growing number of recreational boaters. A number of public moorings were installed over a decade ago, and while boat ownership has increased during this period there have been no further public moorings installed.

j) The extent to which government decisions impacting the reef involve genuine, open and transparent consultation

- Following GBRMPA's decision to allow Abbot Point dredge spoil to be disposed in the marine park, it was noted by our committee that, from a community point of view, the decision emerged almost "out of the blue". Everybody in our community has a view on the value of the Great Barrier Reef, whether they are users or whether they appreciate the intrinsic value of it "just being there". The absence of information about the decision to be made led to simplified responses in the community, many of which were extremely negative, and these responses were replicated worldwide.
- Best practice environmental frameworks require affected communities to be consulted and to participate where there are environmental risks that might affect them. For an open and accountable system, our communities have a role to play to ensure the rule of law is respected. This means the public should have access to information and the right to be involved in assessment, review and enforcement processes.
- At a local level, our members have witnessed a genuine willingness by GBRMPA to engage with stakeholders and community members and actively seek input to policies and management decisions. We also recognise that managing the reef is becoming an increasingly complex task. However, we are acutely aware of the flawed decision-making processes and subsequent flawed management of industrial developments in the southern Great Barrier Reef. We will be seeking to ensure that the Cairns community is clearly heard and the health of the Great Barrier Reef is paramount in any decision-maker's deliberations.