



Australian Floodplain
Association



THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY

*Cooper's
Creek
Protection
Group*



Friday, 18 February 2011

Inquiry Secretary
House Standing Committee on Economics Inquiry into Indigenous economic development in Queensland and review of the Wild Rivers (Environmental Management) Bill 2010
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Economics
Australian Parliament House
Canberra
ACT

Dear Secretary,

This submission is made on behalf of the Western Rivers Alliance. The Alliance is made up of the Cooper's Creek Protection Group, the Australian Floodplain Association, the Wilderness Society and the Pew Environment Group Australia. This Alliance has been formed to support and advocate for the protection of Queensland's Lake Eyre Basin rivers under the Queensland Wild Rivers Act.

The Western Rivers Alliance would like to invite the Committee to come to western Queensland to meet key stakeholders and hear their views on river management. There is an overwhelming majority view, specifically that;

- Irrigation is not appropriate nor welcome in such fragile desert rivers,
- The current mining boom that is being experienced in western Queensland threatens river values through water extraction, diversion and pollution,
- The parlous state of existing environmental regulation, aside from the Queensland Wild Rivers Act, does little to protect globally significant ecosystems, and
- The likely social, economic and cultural impacts of doing nothing are likely to be significantly adverse.

The Western Rivers Alliance has been working with Indigenous stakeholders over many years and strongly encourages the Committee to come to western Queensland to meet key Indigenous leaders to hear their views on river management, regulation and Indigenous economic development. Without coming to western Queensland, these views will not be heard.

In response to key elements of the House Standing Committee on Economics Inquiry into Indigenous economic development in Queensland and review of the Wild Rivers (Environmental Management) Bill 2010 terms of reference, please see broad points made in response below.

Please note that the Wilderness Society and the Australian Floodplain Association have both made separate submissions.

Queensland Wild Rivers Act 2005

The purpose of the Wild Rivers Act 2005 is to protect rivers that have most or all of their natural values intact, and follows from States' responsibilities under the National Water Initiative to protect and manage high-conservation-value aquatic ecosystems. The Wild Rivers Act was introduced by the Queensland Government following a 2004 election commitment, and was passed at the time with the support of the Queensland Liberal Party.

The Act operates as a planning and management approach to conservation, regulating new developments in declared "wild river areas", and setting a baseline for ecologically sustainable development that is sensitive to maintaining the river's values. The Act does not create a new level of red tape, but uses existing legislation to regulate development. Only in regard to feedlots and cropping are there new development approval requirements. Native Title rights are expressly protected in the Wild Rivers Act (and under the Native Title Act), and water reserves for Indigenous social and economic aspirations are allocated. Traditional practices and cultural uses of the rivers are strongly supported.

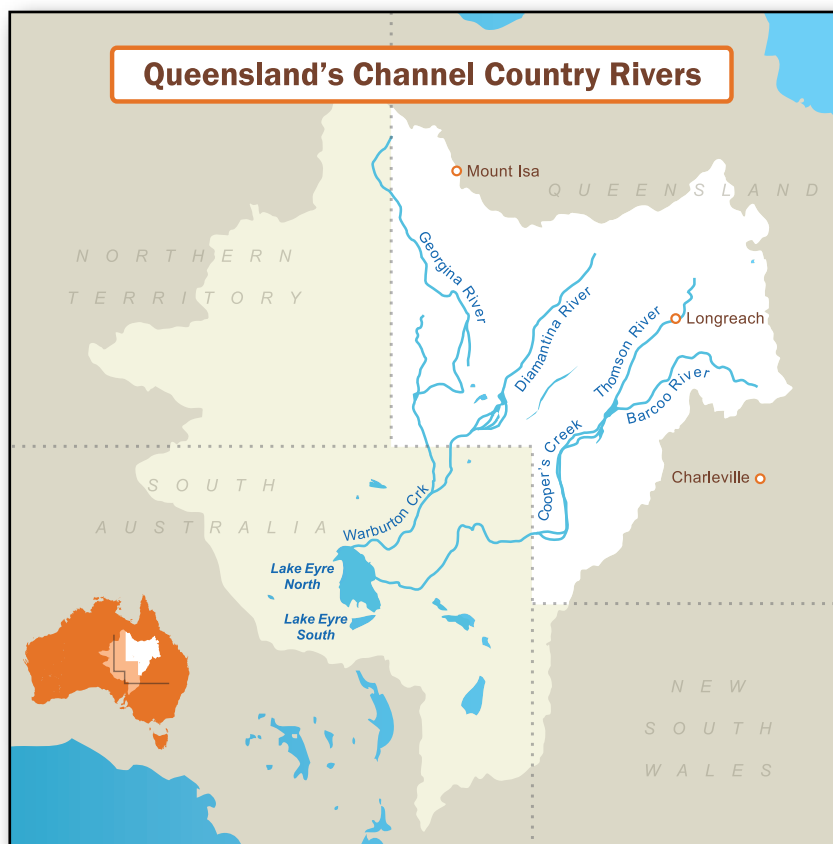
The Act was amended in 2007, in parallel with the enactment of the Queensland Cape York Peninsula Heritage Act 2007, to enshrine economic development rights specifically for Indigenous communities. In an Australian first, Indigenous communities on Cape York have special access to Indigenous Water Allocations in addition to land clearing rights for economic development.

The Lake Eyre Basin

The Lake Eyre Basin is an expansive Outback region in near natural condition covering one sixth of the country that extends across New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and the Northern Territory. The Lake Eyre catchments are a large terminal drainage system, one of the very few such systems in the world, with the rivers of the system flowing into Lake Eyre, a giant inland lake, and many smaller wetlands and floodplains. More than 80 percent of the water in the lake Eyre Basin comes from three Queensland river catchments: the Georgina and Diamantina rivers and Coopers Creek. The lower catchment areas is known as the Channel Country due to the thousands of small braiding river channels in the river systems. This is some of the most productive cattle country in Australia.

The sporadic floods that originate from northern coastal monsoonal rains drive most of the ecology of the Channel Country and provide a periodic abundance of water and food for migrating birds and mammals. A reduction in these flood waters would affect the wildlife and the ecology of the central and eastern parts of the continent. These vast clean floods also support very large beef enterprises serving significant international markets, including organic businesses. A reduction or pollution of flows would greatly diminish the value of these businesses and their contribution to local, regional and state economies. Developing mining to the degree that is currently being contemplated is causing significant community anxiety and protective legislation is required to provide the balance between mining and ecological, social, cultural and

existing business needs. This protective legislation does not exist outside of the Queensland Wild Rivers Act.



Queensland Lake Eyre Basin Wild Rivers Community Forum

In the Queensland state election of March 2009, the Queensland Premier Anna Bligh made a commitment to consider Queensland's Lake Eyre Basin rivers for protection under the Wild Rivers Act.

Since that announcement, there has been two years of extensive community discussion on the potential protection of these rivers under the Wild Rivers Act. This culminated in a series of meetings convened by the Central Western Queensland Remote Area Planning and Development Board (RAPAD). RAPAD is an alliance of seven local government shires that cover most of the area under consideration. A ground-breaking communiqué (attached) came from a community forum held in Longreach on May 4 2010. This communiqué identified areas of consensus agreed by landholders, Aboriginal groups, local government, Agforce, environment groups and catchment bodies. The forum was the result of 18 months of determined work by key individuals in a number of sectors engaged in dialogue establishing common ground on land and water management issues. This communiqué is without precedent in Australia.

The forum agreed on the following principles;

- Indigenous economic development should be provided for

- There should be no expansion of irrigation in these rivers
- Mining must be properly regulated and new mines set back from watercourses and floodplains
- Existing vegetation management practices should continue
- A support package should complement any wild rivers declarations
- Towns and small businesses should be allowed to grow
- Wild river rangers should be employed and funded by Government

A key uniting issue in the forum was a significant concern over the impacts of mining on rivers, wetlands and pastoral enterprises. There has been extensive work between pastoralists and environmental groups in demanding proper regulation of mining. Only the Wild Rivers Act can properly deal with this issue in regulating future mining development.

An organisation representing a largely grazier membership, the Australian Floodplain Association, in its submission to the Inquiry into Indigenous economic development in Queensland and review of the Wild Rivers (Environmental Management) Bill 2010, makes the following comments;

The Australian Floodplain Association believes existing environmental regulation, especially in regard to preventing large scale irrigation and minimising the toxic impacts from mining is weak and inadequate. The Wild Rivers legislation is appropriate as it raises the bar on future development, in a manner that current legislation is unable to do.

Floodplain graziers welcome the impact of legislation which will ensure that the water which flows down the inland river system in Western Queensland can continue to flood out across floodplains as nature intended it to, and will not be taken by irrigation or mining. The pastures that result from overland flows can grow livestock and produce quality meat. Floodplain meat production is one of the few food producing industries which coexists with the river and does not take or divert water out of the system.

Wild Rivers (Environmental Management) Bill 2010

Deficiencies of the Bill;

- Why pick on environmental regulation in seeking Traditional Owner endorsement on what occurs over Aboriginal lands? Why not mining and other developments? Why limit it to Queensland?
- The Bill does not adequately identify what person is regarded as a Traditional Owner.
- The Bill seeks to allow individual tenure holders to determine whether Wild Rivers protection is to be accepted or rejected within a six month timeframe. Failure to reach agreement within this period sees Wild Rivers protection automatically rejected in its entirety. Rivers cannot be managed on an opt in / opt out basis. If 9 out of 10 catchment communities decide to preserve a river and the 10th decides to develop, all communities must bear the environmental, social and cultural costs imposed by this development. The Murray Darling Basin is a tragic case study in this reductionist form of natural resource management.

The Western Rivers Alliance would like to re-emphasise its invitation to the Committee to come to Western Queensland to hear these views in person.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require further information.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping loops and a horizontal line, set against a light blue background.

Rupert Quinlan
Channel Country Campaign Manager
Wild Australia Program,
Pew Environment Group - Australia
c/o PO Box 5427
West End, 4101
(07) 3278 0449
0408 987 101
rupert.quinlan@bigpond.com

For and on behalf of:

Glenn Walker
Wild Rivers Campaigner
The Wilderness Society Inc
PO Box 5427
West End, 4101
(07) 3846 1420

Angus Emmott
Board Member,
Australian Floodplain Association
07 4658 5953

Dr Bob Morrish
President,
Cooper's Creek Protection Group
07 4656 4759