

31 May 2007

To whom it may concern

I am writing in a private capacity to urge the Senate to retain an Indigenous member on the board of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority. Prior to assuming my present role in the Torres Strait in January 2007, I was GBRMPA's Regional Liaison Manager for Cape York Peninsula in which capacity I worked very closely in the field with Indigenous communities on the eastern side of Cape York.

Approximately 70 groups of Traditional Owners between the Torres Strait and Gladstone have asserted rights and interests over parts of the Great Barrier Reef for tens of thousands of years. Accommodating Traditional use of marine resources, including the Traditional hunting of turtle and dugong, with the other values of the marine park is a critically important and demanding aspect of the work of the Authority, requiring a high degree of cultural sensitivity.

I submit, from long experience in the field, that most non-Indigenous Australians do not understand the issues involved. Dr Evelyn Scott has been no token member of the Authority Board. She has quietly played a very important role in ensuring that significant Traditional values have been understood and accommodated by the Authority staff and its Board in the past. Dr Scott has been a critical conduit of information between the GBRMPA and Indigenous people. It is essential that this vital work is not undermined in the future.

GBRMPA has a long association with the Traditional Owners of the Great Barrier Reef catchment. Doing away with Indigenous representation on the Authority will send a strong negative message to Indigenous people all along the GBR that the Australian Government no longer considers their role in the management of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park to be important. It will make it much harder for the GBRMPA to engage effectively with Indigenous people, especially at a senior policy level. It will mean that the voice of Indigenous Australians is no longer heard in key meetings between Australian Government and the State of Queensland.

Eliminating Indigenous membership from the GBRMPA would be a retrograde step. It will increase the feeling of alienation amongst Indigenous people. It is unnecessary and should not be allowed to happen.

Simon Towle