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13th January 2006

The Secretary
Senate Environment, Communications Information
Technology and the Arts References Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

CONFIRMING ORIGINAL

Refer Email 06.03.06

Email – ecita.sen@aph.gov.au

RE: Inquiry into Australia's national parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas.

The opportunity to make this submission to members of this enquiry is appreciated.

The matter I wish to bring to your attention is the present and ongoing situation of

The Australian Wet Tropics World Heritage Areas in Far North Queensland

The present management arrangements and structure of the Wet Tropics Management Authority.

By way of background, I together with my wife and family have lived on our present rural property adjoining the Wet Tropics World Heritage area since 1968.

I was appointed to and have been a member of the Wet Tropics Management Authorities statutory Community Consultative Committee since 1998. My appointment is as a representative to present views of Landholders and Neighbors of this World Heritage Area. This is the third term of my reappointment

The Community Consultative Committee of the Wet Tropics Management Authority is a Statutory Committee established by the Wet Tropics Management Plan and is appointed by the Management Authority Board. Members are chosen to represent all sectors of the Community and areas of the Wet Tropics management area between Cooktown and Townsville. The Committee is charged to advise the Board and the Authority management on matters relating to the objectives of the Management Plan, signed and approved by Federal and State Governments. Members do not receive any remuneration other than payment of expenses to attend official meetings.

During the period of my involvement in this organization along with other and previous members of our Committee and other advisory groups we have been disappointed that to a major degree the objectives of the Management Plan approved, legislated and finally adopted in 1998 are not being achieved.

It is clearly apparent funding to establish and continue programs deemed necessary by the Authority on the advice from the specialist representative organizations and scientific

bodies has not been forthcoming to advance the objectives of “Preservation, Enhancement, Rehabilitation and Presentation” that are the fundamentals of the “Management Plan”.

Along with other representatives and concerned members of various communities I believe we have seen drastic reductions of effort for the control and eradication of weeds, plants and feral animals. I have constantly been made aware of uncompleted programs instigated to meet the challenges of these problems only to be discontinued or uncompleted due to funding shortfalls or discontinuance.

Whilst the situation remains as present whereby, as I understand, the Queensland Government’s contribution to available funds is directed to the Authority through the Qld. Environment Protection Agency, the priority of allocation for project funding has seemingly become highly politicised with the majority of allocations directed by the Qld Parks and Wildlife Department to fund their normal management budgets. It appears very little has remained for the specific programs identified by the Management Authority.

In February last year, 2005, at the quarterly meeting of the Consultative Committee we were informed of a program instigated by the Authority during the 1990’s to control an introduced plant, *Harungana madagascariensis*. This, scientific experts deem has the ability to completely decimate huge sections of the Wet Tropics World Heritage forests, given the right circumstances such as major canopy damage caused by natural disasters such as cyclones. This plant has rapidly spread into the forest verges between Innisfail and Babinda.

The Management authority after conducting surveys believed a control program could be successful and allocated, I understand, some \$600,000 for the project. Unfortunately on ground work identified further expansion of the plant and although it was estimated approx 70% was brought under control further funding was unavailable and work discontinued. No further funds were ever made available for the necessary moping up of regenerated seeds. The present inspection has now revealed after some ten years regrowth is rampant and nearly to the situation as it was prior to the uncompleted control program. The Qld. Environment Protection Agency have refused to refund or approve any allocation for further work on this problem “claiming other priorities.”

This is only one of the many matters that our Committee members witness, observe and bring to the attention of the Management Authority at each of our quarterly meetings. However it is quite apparent under the present structure the Authority are unable to operate independently and effectively in the management programs and projects.

It is clear after a study of the documented “Service Agreement” between the Wet Tropics Management Authority and the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service the “On Ground Managers” funds budgeted and allocated to the Management Authority are being claimed back by QPWS to finance their core operational expenses. It was even noted QPWS claimed the expenses for their staff to attend meetings with the Management Authority and the various committees.

The continual unresolved problems of under resources and I believe the lack of effective work being undertaken to protect and manage this World Heritage area promoted me to present to our Committee the attached statement suggesting a resolution be recorded of **“No Confidence in the ability of the Agencies of the Queensland State Government to discharge their obligations”** .

This the Consultative Committee unanimously accepted as a Resolution of the Committee without any amendment .

No doubt this unprecedented action of our Committee created unrest within the administration.

This was shown when the minutes of that meeting recorded the above event as ***“Norm Whitney expressed his frustrations with the ability of the State and Federal Governments to fund the environment adequately (see attachment 3 WT Plan Review. All agreed with Norm’s comments.”***

After contacting the Agency the Chairman of Consultative Committee wrote to me also refusing to accept and acknowledge the matter as a resolution of the Committee.

Realising that some persons were trying to bury a decision of the Committee I wrote to the State Environment Minister, Desley Boyle, attaching the original statement which the Committee formally accepted. Her reply however did not accept my wording but referred to that set out in the draft minutes that had been sent to her of the meeting.

At the next meeting of the Consultative Committee., May 2005, I asked that the erroneous wording of the previous minutes be corrected and again presented to members the original statement and document. Again there was unanimous acceptance and members spoke voicing their concern ensuring the vote be recorded as a resolution of the Committee. After draft minutes of that meeting were again twice amended the correct and complete resolution was recorded . Members at the August 2005 meeting reconfirmed that.

These instances are brought to your attention in order that you can identify some of the problems in the management of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area administered under the present structure of the Wet Tropics Management Authority.

Under the present operating structure officers and staff of the Management Authority mainly are seconded from permanent positions in State Environment Protection Authority. It is therefore understandable that they are unwilling to or under pressure to remove or minimize any criticism or matters prejudicial to their prime employer and that may reflect on their future career opportunities.

I have detailed only these two instances, as they appear to be indicative of many other problems members of my Committee consider are jeopardizing the desirable ongoing and future management of this the World recognized Wet Tropics World Heritage area.

CONSIDERED SUGGESTIONS

The following have been the consensus views from many discussions between members of the Wet Tropics Management Authority Consultative Committee.

1. Effective and efficient Management, Protection and Enhancement of the Wet Tropics World Heritage area as set out in the Formal Signed Agreement and Gazetted Management Plan can only be achieved if the Body charged with the administration of the Plan remains headquartered within the management area.

2. The present structure of the Wet Tropics Management Authority must be revisited and reorganized. The Management Authority should be totally independent and free of connection by budgetary, staffing or other attachments to any State or Federal Agency. The Board must be autonomous and should only be answerable directly to a Minister. (*similar to that of Great Barrier Reef Management Authority*)
3. Any changes to the present management structure must ensure that the roll of a Community Consultative Committee remain similar to the present. This has been proven as a true representation of the many thousands of concerned citizens in every social and environmental sector. It is the avenue that Management decisions can be made to reflect Community expectations (rather than any possible short term political advantages) and allows the Management staff to draw upon the expertise, again, on the many Thousands from the widest sections of the Community.

CONCLUSION

Together with many other members of the Consultative Committee and members of the public expressing openly, we believe that under the present situation we are witnessing an ever-increasing decline in the values of Wet Tropics World Heritage area compared to that when originally listed.

Clearly evidence given identifies increasing problems with feral and introduced plants and animals, losses and downgrading of previously established assets, closure of established roads and tracks used by visitors and very little being done to comply with the Management Plan regarding "Presentation and Enhancement"

Under the present structure responsibility and lack of action on these matters are continually blamed on under resources from one or the other Governments, Federal or State and party political priorities. Not Good Enough.

I have previously submitted all these matters together with copies of supporting documents to both Federal and State Environment Ministers which both have acknowledged. All documentary evidence has also been given to Hon. Warren Entsch, Federal Member for this area, Leichhardt, and the Qld State Opposition leader and Shadow Environment Minister. Although I understand from that information matters were raised in the State Parliament I do not believe any changes are being considered by the Queensland State Government to the present operations. These documents can be forwarded to you if required.

Yours sincerely

Norman Whitney