



Four Wheel Drive Queensland

Incorporated as
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FOUR WHEEL DRIVE CLUBS INC."

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17th February 2006

Four Wheel Drive Queensland Submission to the Senate Inquiry into "Australia's national parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas"

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Background	3
4WD Recreation Movement	3
Terms of reference	4
Consideration of Terms of Reference	5
Current Management of Public Land	5
Closure of Public Land to Recreation	6
Cooperative Management Strategies	7
Users Pay	7
Fire Prevention and Management	8
Feral Animals and Weeds	8
Public Liability Insurance	9
Responsible Users of Parks	9
Conclusion	10

Introduction

Four Wheel Drive Queensland (incorporated as Queensland Association of Four Wheel Drive Clubs) is the peak body representing over 60 affiliated four wheel drive clubs with combined financial membership of approximately 2600 individual members and their immediate families as well as de facto representation of the other estimated 25,000 recreational 4WD users within Queensland and Northern New South Wales who for one reason or another do not belong to an affiliated club. We promote four wheel driving as a legitimate recreational activity and as such have specific interests in the manner in which our public land and national parks are managed and controlled.

We support the committee's role in investigating the efficient and effective management of the National Parks, Conservation Areas and Marine Protected areas and hereby present the following submission. We request that 'Four Wheel Drive Queensland' be included as an interested body to participate in the ongoing consultative process.

Background

Over the past 20 years, there has been a major shift in the management of public land including National Parks and State Forest areas which has seen a significant downturn in access for recreational purposes. The majority of this shift has been in the name of conservation, intended to allow these treasures to either return to their natural state (prior to European habitation) or at least to restrict the perceived deterioration caused by man. The secondary cause of reduced access is from inappropriate management strategies which reduce access in the hope that costs can be saved through reduced maintenance costs.

All of this happens in a decade which has seen the 4WD recreation boom as a direct result of the stress and workload in our modern society. As such the 4WD recreational users cross Australia have witnessed lockouts and access restrictions that result in less places to go and fewer authorised tracks in the areas that are open. It is not difficult to notice that the exclusion policies established by the management authorities have done little to achieve their aims yet they still do not seem to be willing to work with the recreation community to develop modern strategies involving cooperation and support achieving a win/ win situation.

4WD Recreation Movement

4WD enthusiasts have been travelling through on public land for many decades, gaining experiences that benefit them in their day to day lives. It is only in the past couple of decades that the 4WD movement numbers have increased to a point where they could now be seen to be a major movement in the community. During the 80s Australians took to 4WD as a recreation as it provided a mechanism to enjoy the outdoors and provide relief from their stressful lives. Every person has their own reasons for using 4WD for recreational purposes but the following is the most popular:

- Family time. Spending time with family members, finding new places and experiencing nature without the stresses of telephones and television competing for their attention.
- Nature. Travelling to isolated locations areas to see a wide variety of flora and fauna in different environments, allow us understand more about our environment and teaches our children what Australia was like prior to European occupation.
- New Experiences. One of the most common reasons for people to participate in 4WD recreation is to have new experiences and see more of this great land.

- Conservation. There are very few people involved within the 4WD recreation movement who does not consider themselves as a conservationist as it is important for us to maintain our environment in as natural a state as possible so that our children can enjoy the same areas when they grow up as we do now.
- Personal Challenges. There are many 4WD recreation members who enjoy the challenge presented by manoeuvring their vehicle across uneven or difficult terrain presented in isolated natural areas like forests and national parks. Where these activities are in conflict with sound environmental practice (such as in off road races/ competitions) then they are conducted in specially constructed areas (private land).

Our modern lifestyles have become busy and filled with more work and social pressures than ever before. Although the working week has reduced in hours it has been replaced by considerable overtime fuelled by a requirement to earn more money in order to survive as the cost of living has increased out of proportion. The avenues available for our generation to recuperate from the hectic pressures of daily work are diminishing as even our private lives are becoming busy due to the increased communications and technology taking its toll on us. Nature based recreational pursuits are one of the few available to us which are not enhanced by computer technology or mobile communications and gives us peace and quiet, allowing us to truly relax. The availability of sufficient public land in proportion to the number of users to enable us to conduct our recreational pursuits is the least that we can do for ourselves and our children.

Terms of Reference

The terms of reference for the submission are taken from (Appendix B) and are as follows:

The funding and resources available to meet the objectives of Australia's national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas, with particular reference to:

- (a) the values and objectives of Australia's national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas;
- (b) whether governments are providing sufficient resources to meet those objectives and their management requirements;
- (c) any threats to the objectives and management of our national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas;
- (d) the responsibilities of governments with regard to the creation and management of national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas, with particular reference to long-term plans; and
- (e) the record of governments with regard to the creation and management of national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas.

Consideration of Terms of Reference

The funding and resources available to meet the objectives of Australia's national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas, with particular reference to:

- (a) *the values and objectives of Australia's national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas;*

Australia's national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas are a statement of the country's natural identity in that they contain natural assets that require sustaining and protecting. Hence the objectives should be to do just that. A carefully developed strategy, including the designation of areas, on the basis of their natural, cultural, historical, recreational values, to be protected should be produced.

At the same time, provision of access to areas where people can take advantage of these natural characteristics, without degrading them, should also be a primary objective and outcome. The Australian tax payer has through the tax system provided the financial resources to manage these areas, and should therefore be allowed to enjoy them and gain more than a warm fussy feeling about having millions of hectares of land locked up.

The means of achieving these objectives should, itself, be an objective.

Current Management of Public Land

The responsibility for the management and maintenance of public lands usually falls on state governments. All state and territory governments have differing policies, procedures and preferences for the management of public land. Unfortunately there is evidence to suggest that many of these governments and some government agencies have managed these lands with more emphasis on their value as natural resources to be used to supplement their budgets than on their usefulness to society as national treasures to be experienced and appreciated. Once the land has out served its financial usefulness and/or the pressure from conservation groups is heightened, these governments seem to transfer it to the National Park tenure and establish restrictive management strategies to avoid having to maintain the areas for public access.

Whilst the government usually allow access to state forests whilst being utilised for forestation they often close many of them off to user groups, or restrict the access within them. Mostly the rationale for closure of forestry areas is conservation and reforestation and yet we have time and time again found that closed off areas are still being harvested using physical techniques which cause significant damage to tracks, fauna, water courses and regrowth. The very cynical amongst us have suspicions that state governments are more interested in maintaining financial advantage than serving conservation objectives let alone being concerned about the recreational pursuits of those interested in enjoying the areas.

The current Land Management plans and strategies employed by the state bodies appears to many within the community to be nothing more than "Lock it up" – Keep people out – Mentality. We see week after week newspaper reports of major drug plantations being found in many parts of these locked up areas, providing the point that there is no management in place just a 'lock it up and leave it attitude'.

A recent newspaper story – Brisbane Courier Mail, dated Tuesday 7th February 2006 Page 15. Headlines – **"Our Open spaces up for grabs"**

The story was:- *'In a secret deal, the state Government is trying to sell off land brought 10 years ago to create more recreational space for the increasingly populated southwest. When 6300ha Glen Rock Regional Park, 43 km south of Gatton was brought for \$1.68million it was heralded as the "Jewel in the crown" of the Regional Open spaces scheme (ROSS). It is proposed that the remainder will be "Locked up" as an extension of the Mount Mistake National Park, according to the Glen Rock community advisory committee's deputy chairman Russell Torkington.'*

This is another example of the lock up and forget *miss*-management practices of our National parks and recreational areas.

Closure of Public Land to Recreation

Unfortunately for the 4WD recreation movement time has worked against us with public lands in the form of National Parks and State Forests increasingly being fenced off and gated, locking them away to stop access for vehicles. Although this has invariably been done in the name of conservation, it has not usually resulted in an improvement to the natural environment, with many of these areas now over run with weeds of all descriptions. Although there have been few funded studies established to highlight the failures of lock up management strategies, there is considerable anecdotal evidence which indicates that problems such as those below outweigh the benefit of the extreme measure:

- The continuation if not escalation of weed infestation to the detriment of domestic species,
- Degradation of fire trail quality reducing potential access in case of emergencies such as bush fires,
- Reduction in the awareness of nature and conservation issues by the public at large, and
- Resultant over use of the remaining public areas available for recreational access due to increased demand and reduction of accessible areas.

In Queensland alone there are 2600 financial members (families) of the 'Four wheel Drive Queensland' Association who actively participate in 4WD recreational activities. Although the reasons are not known, it is estimated that only 10% of the total 4WD recreational users in Queensland become members of clubs. This means that more than 25,000 Queensland families actively seek to access public land including State Forests and National Parks in pursuit of their recreational interests. This can put significant strain on the remaining accessible areas of public land.

A case in point is a popular State Forest (Beerburrum), parts of which have had the tenure recently reclassified as National Park. The whole area is now covered under a management plan which includes restrictions on group activities including one 4WD activity each month (no more than 15 vehicles per group). This means that this very popular recreational area can host no more than 12 4WD group visits a year (180 vehicles/ families). Just taking into account the financial members of our association each family will be able to attend a club trip to the Beerburrum Forestry area every 14 years. The unfortunate aspect of this policy is that this management strategy was developed by authorities at the same time as user group consultation meetings but without their input. When the above figures were presented the author of the strategy could not present a rational argument for the restrictions except to say that he felt that it was considered to be sustainable based on his common sense.

Cooperative Management Strategies

For the past decade or so FWD Qld has been managing an annual roster for the coordination of 4WD Group activities within State Forests to assist Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service with the group activities' applications process. This allowed our organisation to manage the expectations of 4WD clubs to ensure that they had fair and adequate access to the limited areas they wanted to visit. During 2005, QPWS informed us that they no longer wanted our organisation to conduct this coordination and wanted each of the clubs to simply apply directly to the QPWS within certain time limitations.

For a number of years on numerous occasions FWD Qld has suggested to the QPWS, a more cooperative approach to managing public lands that would allow the 4WD community to assist forestry personnel to maintain key areas of public lands. The suggestions were often met with enthusiasm from the field staff just to be dropped at a later date by office staff. Although no formal plans have been developed for cooperative management strategies, there are several other state 4WD clubs and associations that have had close relationships with forestry field personnel to clear fallen trees from tracks, remove wrecks, maintain isolated tracks and collect information on track conditions. 4WD Clubs have consistently provided volunteer labour to assist the wider community in many endeavours from transporting hay for drought stricken farmers to cleaning up public land.

The 4WD recreation movement has recognised for many years that in order to be sustainable we needed to be more involved in conservation activities and reduce our impact on the environment. There has been a greater focus on utilising privately run 4WD parks to conduct activities which may adversely affect the condition of tracks, where they can be maintained through a commercial user pays approach. Regardless of this, there still needs to be public land that remains open to the 4WD community for recreation purposes. With the cooperation and support of the recreational users, including the 4WD recreation movement we could revolutionise land management principles by developing alliances that ensure access to the community and environmental education which is based on sustainable use – not lock up and forget.

User pays

The inability of Governments and the departments charged with the duty of care of these national resources often resort to the User Pay concept. User pays is a common reason given for charging fees to use Parks. There is no justification whatsoever for doing so. The inability of the bodies charged with the care and maintenance, of these areas and then resorting to the user pay system is clearly further evidence of the failure of these land managers to use the tax payer funds in a responsible manner.

- Taxpayers are entitled to have access to Parks for which they pay taxes
- Governments have their budget priorities wrong
- Land managers have proven themselves incapable of managing both the land and the funds provided for that purpose.
- Fees which should contribute to fund improvements to parks are often not used for those purposes

If there is to be a User pay system then the fees collected in a Park should provide funding for the Park where the fees are collected and not be added to government consolidated revenue or departmental general coffers, which is of course the current state of affairs.

Fire Prevention and Management

In Queensland some Parks use controlled burns as a means of limiting the extent of damage during wild fires (bushfires). This strategy is not a guarantee, particularly in relatively large Parks where the fuel is very flammable. There is need for more research, education on fire prevention and safety, more spot or strip burns and overall funding. Other states, particularly certain areas in the Southern Eastern states, have different, even more severe, conditions and the above issues are more significant.

Feral Animals and Weeds

There should be a concerted effort to eradicate feral animals and noxious weeds from Parks with resources provided to do so. Why is it that the Local authorities can issue notices to private land owners (Farmers) to rid their property of noxious weeds whilst across the fence, in a state forest, national park or conservation areas are teeming with the same noxious weeds - left totally uncontrolled. There is not a state Forest, National Park or Conservation Area in Queensland that does not have an out of control noxious weed problem. However the current land management plans simply have the lock it up leave it and no one will know mentality.

Investigate weed eradication and control techniques, e.g. Lantana in the south-eastern parts of the state, Cactus & various South African feral plants rampant in Outback Queensland to name just a few.

Recommendations

1. There is need for more research, education on fire prevention and safety; more spot or strip burns with overall funding to do so. It is much better to burn off in cooler months and have a cool fire under control than a hot, out of control fire with the resulting loss of property and life.
2. There should be a concerted effort with funding to research and eradicate feral animals and noxious weeds from all State Forest areas, National Parks, and conservation areas.

The responsibilities of governments with regard to the creation and management of National Parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas, with particular reference to long-term plans, there should not be any more areas taken over and the tenyer changed from State Forest to National parks or conservation areas unless it can be proven and shown that this is sufficient long term commitment and funding for the proper maintenance and retained access to these areas.

Public Liability. Must be changed (Urgently) to place onus on “user being responsible for his own actions” thus making it less of an issue for land managers. The current public perception that ‘everyone else is to blame except me’ must be changed. You should only be permitted to bring legal action against a land manger if they have contributed in some way to the result of the incident.

Responsible Users of Parks. Damage by irresponsible users of parks constitutes a serious threat to sensitive areas. A strategy must be developed to counter such activities rather than close the areas to all users, including many, who do the right thing and appreciate the parks for there natural characteristics. Park Rangers are not the most effective form of policing infringers. Rather, State Police are probably the most effective. I have seen first hand where land managers (park rangers) have been reluctant to bringing legal action (prosecution) against unlawful behaviour in fear of retaliation.

Responsible groups, such as clubs affiliated with ‘Four **wheel Drive Queensland**’ (who is also affiliated with the ‘**Australian National Four Wheel Drive Council**’) should be provided access to tracks, which are currently accessible by parks management vehicles only.

Four wheel Drive Queensland is a Registered Training Organisation and through its various clubs conducts a nationally accredited Driver Training course. The result of which is that many of the club members are more qualified in off road driving than the park rangers and current land managers.

A process must be implemented where the relevant club would get permission from the appropriate ranger for the club to access these tracks during a certain period. This would assist the land managers in keeping tracks clear and open for times of emergency such as fire fighting.

This would give the parks the flexibility to restrict access to these tracks during periods where it is not prudent but allow access when appropriate. The club members would obviously not be able to make any claim against the park as a result of any damage the vehicle(s) may sustain. Clubs in Queensland already endorse state forest parks and the land managers under their own club insurance policy (Public Liability) and this could easily be undertaken for the other areas of concern.

Conclusion

Not only in Queensland but across Australia, 4WD enthusiasts have been portrayed as enemies of the environmental movement, yet they have the most to gain from sound environmental strategies and the most to lose from extreme public land management.

All the affiliated clubs in Queensland must ensure that their aims and objectives are consistent with those of "Four wheel Drive Queensland" and of course our main objective is to enjoy the Australian environment and be able to take our children there for those purposes, and for our children to take their children n to the same areas for the same enjoyment and experience. This simple objective clearly shows that four wheel drive clubs and members are not be feared in allowing access to these vital areas of Australia.

Clubs are strictly controlled and there for the risks of unruly and destructive behaviour is almost non existent, unlike with the general population.

Many State Governments have questionable methods and strategies for the management of public lands which often restrict or exclude access to the public for recreation yet allow primary industry, access allowing non indigenous wild life in to the areas bringing with them weeds and other issues.

We have at our disposal a significant portion of the community, a true cross section of society, whose members are keen to assist authorities to manage these lands to ensure the survival of their preferred recreation. Rather than allow a continuation of the lock and forget management strategies that have been proven to fail in delivering environmentally sustainable outcomes, let us move into a new era of cooperation and user contribution rather than just user pays. Four Wheel Drive Queensland looks forward to the recommendation from your inquiry and hope to have more input into the National Park management strategies in the future.