

28/02/2006

SUBMISSION FOR THE INQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL PARKS, CONSERVATION PARKS AND MARINE PROTECTED AREAS

Committee Secretary

Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts.

I would like to start by highlighting one of the most significant threats to our protected area estates; NATIVE TITLE. The massive weakening in the current level of protection, and the future impacts relating to the aspirations of indigenous groups are not being adequately addressed. If anything, the opposite is the case, manifesting through the political facilitation of these impacts.

Generations of Australians have grown up believing in the sanctity of National Parks. In a vast and diverse country like Australia, many people take comfort in the belief that these are "SANCTUARIES" for the natural environment. This is typified by a "TAKE PHOTOS, LEAVE FOOT PRINTS" mentality. Native title has changed this and threatens this premise.

If we look at the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park we will see that the general community agrees with a minimum of 33% green area protection. If this is contrasted against the protection obligation of Indigenous groups, then we see that only .02% is protected from hunting and gathering. In the remaining 99.98% we then allow the virtually unregulated killing of flora and fauna, this even includes rare and threatened animals and plants e.g. dugongs, and marine turtles.

Next we can look at the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area and we will see that not even .02% is fully protected. The attitude seems to be that the best way is to allow Native Title to go through unopposed, and then try to negotiate the proper level of protection some time in the future. To demonstrate the vastly conflicting concepts we can focus on the status of the estate now. Our Wet Tropics area has World Heritage listing for its NATURAL values. Even this listing does not protect the area from the killing of plants and animals by native title claimants. Most Australians would see this as an absurd fault that needs to be rectified. Why have small fragments of biodiversity being portrayed as protected when even the most vulnerable species within them are not? To add insult to injury we now see that the Natural Resource Management Board have just acquired 1.3 million dollars to list the same area for its cultural values, though in most ways this directly opposes the listing and protection it should have now for its natural values. We can't properly protect the biodiversity within the area now, and this is without even thinking about climate change, so why would we facilitate another potential impact?

National Parks and protected areas are under attack from a wide range of human impacts we must not reduce the level of protection when these future impacts will only increase and become more complicated.

Do we now need to accept that National Parks are no longer our premier protected areas and develop a new land tenure of "Sanctuaries", where all Australians agree to value and protect the plants and animals and biodiversity within these areas. The present day reality is that Native Title cannot be simply superimposed over our dramatically altered natural landscape, just as it is accepted that it cannot be applied to our urban areas. The primary goal of Departments charged with environmental protection must be just that, ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION, not politically guided social justice experiments.

This is a very brief synopsis of this significant threat to our protected areas. I would be happy to expand on this in the future, to make sure that this inquiry is properly informed.

Below are just a few of the controversial issues,

- Claimants wanting to perform cultural revitalization inside protected areas.
- Claimants wanting to move onto,"country"" inside protected areas.
- Claimants calling for exclusive economic rights within protected areas e.g. building commercial enterprises, agro forestry, gene technology.
- Claimants wanting exclusive access to some protected areas.
- Claimants wanting to use modern technology in traditional activities within protected areas, e.g. guns, power, roads.

Yours Sincerely
Marcus Bulstrode