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**Senate Environment and Communications References Committee Inquiry into the adequacy of the Australian and Queensland Governments' efforts to stop the rapid decline of the Great Barrier Reef**

North Queensland Conservation Council (NQCC) is the regional conservation council covering the vast area from Bowen to Caldwell and from the Reef to the Queensland border with the Northern Territory. Its role is to act as the voice for the environment in the region in order to help protect the important but fragile natural ecosystems on which we depend.

NQCC was established in 1974 and incorporated in 1984.

Given its location, NQCC is closely involved with many, if not all, issues pertaining to the Great Barrier Reef. It is, of course, one of four organisations (environmental, tourism, fishing and business) taking action against the Federal Minister for the Environment's decisions to allow dredging and dumping of dredge spoil in the GBRWHA (in the case of dumping, the GBRMP) off Abbot Point.

Given time constraints, this submission deals with the issue in summary form. I would be happy to expand on issues raised herein were this to be helpful.

**1. Abbot Point**

By reason of the fact that NQCC has felt impelled to take legal action in the Administrative Appeals Tribunal against the decision to approve of dumping of dredge spoil in the GBRMP off Abbot Point, it is apparent that it is not satisfied with government management of the GBR at this location.

NQCC's legal case will focus on the inadequacy of the assessment undertaken by the proponent and the failure to take into account adequately the London Protocol, which is incorporated into Australia law via the *Environment Protection (Sea Dumping) Act 1981*. We will be presenting strong arguments in relation to these issues in the Tribunal later in the year.

There has developed in Australia (at the Federal and Queensland State government level) an ambience in which the approval of development applications is virtually automatic; in which economic development is seen as the be-all-and-end-all. Even this bias has an internal bias, with exploitative resource development being regarded as more important than other forms of economic development (such as manufacturing or agriculture or scientific or technical development).

In many fora, reference is regularly made to the environmental *approval* process rather than the environmental *assessment* process. Yet, despite attacks by government and the mining industry on those who recognise the benefit of other types of development, there is no evidence to back the views that resource exploitation does, in fact, deliver large numbers of jobs, great tax income or great social benefit.

Further comment on Abbot Point will be largely withheld pending any full Tribunal hearing. Suffice to say, the depth and breadth of challenge to the Abbot Point development demonstrates the very substantial concerns associated with the governments' approaches to this issue and its management of the GBR region.

## **2. Agricultural run-off**

NQCC does not refute the fact that the impact of agricultural run-off into the GBRWHA is massive, contributing to the major problems of Crown-of-Thorns Starfish (CoTS) and water quality. However, the impact of other actions, does not mean that additional insult is acceptable. As I wrote in a letter submitted to the Townsville Bulletin in August 2013:

"Mr Roche (TB, 20 August) is correct in saying that Crown of Thorns starfish (COTS), cyclones and coral bleaching have been the main causes of loss of coral cover on the Great Barrier Reef over the last 27 years.

But the question, Mr Roche, is what do these three have in common (and, no, the answer is not that they all start with the letter 'C')?

Major outbreaks of COTS are associated with nutrient- laden sediment being washed out to the reef in major floods – anticipated to increase with climate change; cyclones are also anticipated to increase in intensity with climate change; and coral bleaching is associated with rising temperature – again climate change related.

And what is the major contribution that Australia makes to climate change? The export and burning of coal.

Need to look beyond the symptoms Mr Roche. Coal is a key Contributor to, if not the Cause of, Climate Change, which leads to COTS, Cyclones and Coral bleaching. C?"

NQCC is concerned that the rate of improvement in water quality in the GBRWHA stemming from the actions designed to slow agricultural run-off is, to use the words of JCU water scientist, Jon Brodie, 'too little, too late'. Brodie has estimated that something in the order of 360,000 tonnes of sediment has been prevented from entering the GBR lagoon over a period of five years and at a cost of \$200 million. It is laudable that attempts to reduce sedimentation are being made, but the amounts are minute compared with the size of the problem. To date, action by landholders to limit run-off has been undertaken on a voluntary basis, with financial input from landholders and government. Many landholders have shown great commitment and responsibility in embracing sediment reduction techniques. However, more must be done if we are not to lose the Reef.

Kicking the hornets nest, NQCC queries whether or not it may be time to consider using more stick than carrot. Just as motorists cannot, legally, allow excessive exhaust fumes to be released into the atmosphere, so too all farmers must be required to ensure that poor practices do not result in pollutants entering the GBR area.

### **3. Non-agricultural activities**

Run-off from non-agricultural, in particular urban, activities would appear to be the blind spot when it comes to protecting the Reef.

In Queensland, vegetation management laws are being rolled back. Removal of vegetation from urban blocks remains uncontrolled. Residents, even those within the GBR catchments are free to remove vegetation as they wish. Stormwater from many urban settlements is free to drain into the GBR waters, and plastic bags are still permitted.

NQCC suggests that, even though these sources of pollution may be small compared with agricultural run-off and coastal development and dredging and dumping, but they need to be considered, especially given that they relate to the majority of people living by and having an impact on the Reef.

### **4. GBRMPA independence**

Having been privy to much information relating to governmental decisions about the GBRMP by way of FOI and OPD, NQCC believes there is good reason to be concerned about the independence of the GBRMPA.

Having been involved in public education in relation to marine issues in Townsville, we can attest to the fact that very, very many in the community feel let down by the action of GBRMPA in providing permits to allow the dumping of dredge spoil in the GBRMP at Abbot Point.

The agency that was seen as 'the good guys' 'on the side of the Reef' is now, sadly, regarded as an agency that can be swayed by the government of the day.

One anecdote comes to mind. NQCC staff and volunteers spent 8 hours (over two Sundays) in the local weekly CBD market. During that time locals and visitors signed a petition asking for the dumping not to go ahead at the rate of one every 21 seconds. All signed, assumed that the GBRMPA would say 'No'. Comments continue to be heard to the effect that GBRMPA had been overruled by the government of the day on the matter of sea dumping. NQCC is aware that many GBRMPA staff did not agree with the dumping decision and are sad, mortified and angry that their expert advice was not accepted.

At high levels of GBRMPA there appears to be confusion about how the objects of the GBRMP Act should influence the use of the MP. The MP is regularly referred to by both Federal and State governments as a 'multiple use park', without acknowledgment of the fact that the Act allows uses only to the extent that they are consistent with the main object of providing for the long term protection and conservation of the Great Barrier Reef Region. Greater emphasis on the primary object is needed if the GBR region is to survive.

And on that point, the use of the ports is as important as the ports themselves. If ports are expanded in order to allow for the export of coal (the driver of climate change, which is, according to the GBRMPA Outlook Report 2009, the number one threat to the GBR,), they are surely in contravention of the primary object.

## **5. Adequacy of science**

It is arguable that, until reasonably recently, the level of hard science needed to manage the Reef has been smaller than it is now. The increased demand for coastal development, increased runoff and increased pressures associated with port development and use has increased the demand for scientific knowledge. The draft Strategic Assessment also points to the emerging realisation of the lack of science.

Its recommendations *include* commitments to:

- Support research on critical ecosystem thresholds
- Improve understanding ... of the impacts of noise on species
- Improve alignment and coordination of strategic research priorities and strengthen partnerships between the Authority and research institutions to facilitate the delivery of critical research needs.

GBRMPA and related research organisation need to be funded at a level to ensure that all necessary research is undertaken as a matter of priority.

## **5. Precautionary Principle**

Despite being embedded in the EPBC Act and in the London Protocol (which relates to sea dumping), approvals were given to allow sea dumping at Abbot Point even in the absence of much of the information that would be deemed necessary to make that decision. Further details of these will be provided in the Tribunal hearing.

However, other decisions related to other developments in the GBR region, or related to the GBR thorough cumulative impact assessment, are made in conflict with the precautionary principle. Examples also relate to the approval of the Alpha mine, Kevin's Corner mine and, in the past, Nelly Bay. In the case of China First mine, one of the approval conditions was for surveys of threatened species to be conducted. This is AFTER approval had been given.

Indeed, it is hard to identify one development application that has been refused on the grounds of the precautionary principle. It is all too often assumed that yet to be prepared mitigation and/or offset plans will do away with any uncertainty.

## **6. Strategic Assessments**

I attach for the consideration of the Committee, the [NQCC response to the Strategic Assessment of the GBRWHA](#). The State government document was reviewed at the request of the Federal government by SKM and found to be sadly lacking.

In summary, had the management of the GBR region been satisfactory, we would not have seen the continuing downward trend in GBR region health, as documented by GBRMPA.

On behalf of NQCC, I commend this submission to you.

Wendy Tubman  
Coordinator