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Submission

to

Standing Committee on the Environment

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on the

New inquiry into the Register of Environmental Organisations

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For the Clarence Environment Centre

Date: 30th April 2015

Submission to Standing Committee on the Environment on the New inquiry into the Register of Environmental Organisations

Introduction

The Clarence Environment Centre (CEC) has maintained a shop-front in Grafton for over 26 years, and has a proud history of environmental advocacy. The conservation of the Australia's natural environment, both terrestrial and and marine, has always been a priority for our members, and we believe the maintenance of healthy ecosystems and biodiversity is of paramount importance.

General comment

Given the on-going lobbying of Government by the mining industry, and it's various funded 'mouth-pieces', and the current Government's anti-environmental stance, this Inquiry was predictable and inevitable. Organisations such as The Minerals Council of Australia, along with right wing media, have lined up to rail against the environment movement's efforts to hold the mining industry environmentally accountable. Therefore we believe this Inquiry is just another step in the Government's campaign to suppress all opposition to it's fossil fuel support agenda.

Australia's insistence on expanding the use and export of fossil fuels, while doing all it can to quell the rise in renewable energy production, in the face of overwhelming evidence for the need to reduce CO2 emissions to avoid catastrophic climate change is, to logical-thinking persons, utterly inexplicable.

It is hardly surprising therefore, as common citizens contemplate the future we are going to bequeath to our children and grandchildren, that there has been a steep rise in environmental awareness and activism in recent years. To combat this, the mining industry is using its enormous wealth and influence to pressure Governments to 'crack down' in every way possible. This has been seen in NSW where, despite overwhelming opposition to mining of fossil fuels, particularly gas, the Government has been prepared to send in riot police against peaceful, non-violent protesters.

The run-of-the-mill “green” group has no access to the level of funding available to pro-mining lobby groups, and has to raise what money it can through membership fees, market stalls, raffles etc. so the obvious way to 'attack' them is to make it even more difficult to raise the money necessary to fund effective campaigns.

As we see it, the claim that the Standing Committee is enquiring into “the administration, transparency, and effectiveness of the Register of Environmental Organisations” is a very non-transparent way of saying the Standing Committee is looking for ways to cut the ability of environment groups to raise money. The fact that the Inquiry will focus on the charity status of environment groups, and what activities are funded by charitable donations, confirms that this a politically driven exercise.

The Minerals Council has already publicly complained about groups on the Register of Environmental Organisations being able to claim charity status, and therefore accept tax-deductible donations, claiming the money is being used to mount campaigns against proposed mining operations, and mining current polluters.

The reality is a successful fund-raising campaign by an environment group would be lucky to raise \$2,000. Compare that with the many millions of tax-deductible dollars that were spent by the mining industry in advertising alone, against the proposed mining tax. **So let's put things in perspective.**

It is predictable that one of the terms of reference for this Inquiry is to investigate “*activities undertaken by organisations currently listed on the Register and **the extent to which these activities involve on-ground environmental works.***” The notion that people must spend all their spare time planting trees or picking up garbage to qualify as an environmentalist, has long been part of populist right-wing rhetoric. The Howard Government used it to justify cutting GVEHO funding (Grants for Volunteer Environment and Heritage Organisations) to groups that were not actively engaged in bush regeneration works. Our organisation was one that was forced to forego the meagre payments on offer (average \$1,500) despite many of our members separately participating in LandCare and other bush regeneration type projects.

The anti-environment movement would like nothing more than have all “greenies” focussing their energies on repairing some patch of river bank, or removing rubbish from a local park, while allowing mining companies to bulldoze massive swathes of bushland across the country without interruption.

Ultimately though, the Standing Committee must accept the 2010 High Court finding which confirmed the right of DGR listed groups to engage in political debate and advocacy.

Are environment groups charities?

The dictionary definition of a charity is “*An institution, organisation or fund established to help the needy or carry out **other socially useful work***”.

We underline “**socially useful work**” because the **conservation of biodiversity** is a core aim of any environmental organisation. We also point to the opening paragraph of the Government's own “**National Strategy for the Conservation of Australia's Biological Diversity**”, which states: “*Biological resources provide all our food and many medicines and industrial products. Biological diversity underpins human well-being through the provision of ecological services such as those that are essential for the maintenance of soil fertility and clean, fresh water and air. It also provides recreational opportunities and is a source of inspiration and cultural identity.*”

In short, the survival of the humans race is totally dependent on the eco-services provided by biodiversity. To say that any organisation, whose aims are to protect those elements that we humans depend on for our very existence, is carrying out “**socially useful work**”, would be a gross understatement. In our view, that work is an “essential service”, because governments at all levels are abrogating their responsibilities to properly maintain a healthy environment for their citizens. Therefore, there is absolutely no doubt that the vast majority of environment groups should be classified as charities.

We also believe that, because of the essential nature of the service provided by environment groups, those groups should be provided with funding opportunities to support their work, and funding to essential support services, such as those provided by the Environmental Defenders Office, should also be reinstated.

A case study

For the purpose of this exercise we will use our own organisation, The Clarence Environment Centre (CEC), and its activities as an example of a fairly typical environment group. We stress that the Centre is run entirely by volunteers, with no salaries paid, or expenses reimbursed. We are incorporated, are listed on the Register of Environmental Organisations, and have the ability to receive tax-deductible donations (it should be noted that we have received less the \$1,500 under that arrangement in the past 10 years, hardly a drain on the public purse).

We currently have about 100 paid up members, and many more past members that probably believe they still are. We rent a small space in a South Grafton building where we interface with the public, operating an op-shop to recycle clothing, books, and bric-a-brac to help pay the rent, phone etc, as well as offering a drop-off point for recycling of used batteries, mobile phones and printer cartridges. We run a web site, YouTube site and facebook page, and send out quarterly newsletters to members.

The CEC has maintained that shop-front presence in Grafton/South Grafton for the past 26 years, dispensing valuable advice to members of the community on a whole range of environmental issues; writing letters and submissions; providing members to sit on various council and government agency committees; providing comment, and articles to the media, as well as participating in land care type activities.

We need not itemise all that we have undertaken over the years, but will detail what we are currently doing, and have done over the past 12 months.

1. The CEC is the local coordinator for the national Land for Wildlife Program, with now over 100 properties signed up in the Clarence Valley. Each property is assessed by our volunteers, and the owners receive a full report including a comprehensive flora species list, with recommendations on how to best manage their properties for biodiversity conservation. This well-received program signed up a further 8 properties this financial year.
2. Over the past 12 months we have written more than 20 submissions on a diverse range of subjects from, the proposal to allow native forest timber to be burned to produce electricity; to the Planning Department's proposed Gateway Process; and Council's decision to rezone parts of Harwood Island as an industrial zone, just to name a few.
3. Our members have contributed a column for the local newspaper's weekly environment page, and have done so for the past 6 years.
4. Our members have been active on various Council committees, 5 are on Council's Climate Change Committee, 2 on Council's Water Efficiency team, and 1 on their River Monitoring Committee. We also have 1 member on the North Coast Weeds Advisory and Bushfire Advisory Committees, and 2 members on the CMA's CAP2 (Catchment Action Plan) Working Group (since completed).
5. We have been lobbying on the subject of light pollution from public lighting, organising petitions, and writing to councillors, pointing out the potential savings that could be achieved by reducing glare in the night sky.
6. We successfully applied for two small grants to purchase equipment which allowed bush regeneration work to take place on three properties, all undertaken by our volunteer bush regeneration group, all trees planted were propagated by our volunteers.
7. Our roster of volunteers has kept our shop and office open 6 days a week in order assist and advise members of the public, and to raise money from sales to pay the rent, phone, internet and other expenses.
8. We offer a free plant identification service, and also undertake free property ecological assessments for members. We also undertake occasional paid work for Council, Department of Environment, and some individual property owners, all of which is undertaken voluntarily, with any funds raised going towards keeping the Centre open and for campaign support.
9. We have strongly campaigned against proposals to turn the Northern Rivers into a gas field, and provided a lot of volunteer support to other groups as requested.

10. Our advice is often sought by business. This last year, Visy Australia consulted directly with the CEC as part of its application to gain Forest Stewardship Council accreditation.
11. We have formed a small but effective film production unit, with a view to presenting informative videos on a range of environmental matters. We have also undertaken filming of events organised by other self-funded volunteer community groups including shows presented by a theatre club and a local women's group. In the last 12 months we have been compiling a series of instructional bush regeneration videos, demonstrating latest techniques for noxious weed control. Many of these available for viewing on our UTube site.
12. Many of our volunteers are single pensioners, widows, widowers and divorcees, some of whom are handicapped, and all of whom enjoy the company and camaraderie provided through our daily gatherings and working bees, providing a much-needed social service in the same way as Mens Sheds, only without any sexual discrimination.
13. Last, but far from least, the CEC is a partner in a \$1.5 million, Federally funded, biodiversity project that is currently employing about 10 persons. In an area that is recognised as having one of the lowest socio-economic communities in Australia, this is significant, and again the administration is fully undertaken by CEC volunteers, with the organisation taking a mere \$100 a week administration fee to cover cost of auditors, additional insurance, phone use, stationery etc.

In-kind contribution is an unwritten requirement for receiving the grant, and our volunteers are expected to make note of time spent on the project. My expertise is provided as part of that requirement (I'm now retired), and to give an indication of the value of volunteers' contribution, I attach a copy of my personal time and travel sheet from the beginning of operations, which show 18,806km of travel and 1,296 hours of work contributed in just the first 18 months of the program. At a very conservative 30c per km travelled, and \$30 per hour (most ecologists charge over \$100 an hour), that contribution amounts to \$48,153 dollars – all contributed in what I strongly believe to be charitable work, trying to keep the environment healthy for future generations.

I stress that my personal contribution is just one of many other volunteers who are contributing their time and energy free of charge.

We believe that most environment groups across the country undertake similar essential work, trying to ensure that the world we pass on to future generations is, at the very least, in as good a shape as we inherited it. Therefore, do environment groups undertake charitable works? YES!

We thank the Standing Committee for the opportunity to make this submission, and we can only hope that you understand the merit of our argument.

Yours sincerely

John Edwards
Honorary Secretary.