

**From:** [Bimblebox Nature Refuge](#)  
**To:** [Committee, EC \(SEN\)](#)  
**Subject:** Submission - EPBC Act (Retaining Federal Approval Powers)  
**Date:** Friday, 18 January 2013 3:39:50 PM

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Dear Sir/Madam,

At the end of last year I wrote the following article for The Australia Institute newsletter. It fleshes out some of our on-ground experience of protecting our precious place (Bimblebox Nature Refuge) in central-west Queensland. I cannot emphasise strongly enough how Australian Federal laws that attempt to protect threatened species should not be downgraded by relinquishing them to the States. In Campbell Newman's Queensland 'environment' is irrelevant and apparently an irritating road-block on the march to evermore mining and development. It would be a tragedy to leave environmental decisions in his hands. Bimblebox Nature Refuge would likely be just one of the many casualties.

Yours sincerely,

Paola Cassoni

## Eco-volunteers exploited in biodiversity game

Who had heard of Bimblebox Nature Refuge before it clashed with the whims of an ebullient billionaire? For the first seven years of its existence this refuge was quiet and mostly unknown; a peaceful infancy soon shattered.

We know that landholders have absolutely no choice when mining moves in, yet many still don't know that Nature Refuges (NRs) can also be mined. Founding NRs allowed our governments to parade in front of the international community and pretend that Australia was doing well in protecting threatened species.

Economic growth has taken its toll on our ever-shrinking natural heritage. NRs were established in Queensland as key instruments to counter the decline in species. However, a critical flaw left their tenure not secured from mining. They are exposed to the very fate most would expect they were designed to avoid, industrial exploitation. In the case of Bimblebox, threatened by the industry which is the major driver of global warming, not to mention the immediate impact to a vulnerable Australian ecology.

In their eager support for the mining industry, Federal and State ministers use the catch phrase 'we need to strike a balance' between development and environment and play the make-believe game of 'offsets'. The ecological balance has been in the red for many decades and the aptly named offsets do just that: so conveniently setting the need for redress off to another time and place.

Remnant vegetation is so called for good reason: it is *all that remains*. So when protected areas are destroyed, that's it; they're gone, it's a net loss. Slick cartography and fancy language do no more than offset our guilt for cheating on biodiversity.

Our society functions not only because many work for hard cash but also because of those who voluntarily care for their fellow humans and our environment. They work in Meals on Wheels, spend their evenings counselling at Lifeline, sorting clothes in charity shops, reading books to dyslexics in schools, and stirring the pots in hot soup kitchens. They are the people who keep their heart, and often their house, open to the homeless, to street kids, day after day, year after year.

Similarly, landcare volunteers weed in national parks on weekends, pick up cans, bits of plastic and nets on the beach. Others stitch up and nurse back to health wounded koalas. Likewise, caring property managers destock a paddock that could have been extra fodder for their cattle, to benefit the wildlife instead. They control invasive weeds and work to counter destructive grazing and farming practices. They buy a 'bush' block to keep it safe from clearing, and this was the beginning of Bimblebox.

Signatories to NRs and other conservation covenants commit themselves to minimal land-use but do much more to protect and enhance the welfare of local ecosystems. They give countless hours to maintain much needed habitats. NR work is not as simple as to fence and forget! A small army of helpers would be needed to control both the feral animals that decimate our wildlife and the weeds that choke native grasses and to assist with firebreaks to protect against devastating bushfires.

At Bimblebox we had our hands full already but for five years now we have also had to struggle with the on-going threat of a huge coal mine. While spending thousands of hours lobbying to save what was supposed to be protected **forever**, we have seen the dark side of our democracy. Any landowner unwilling to relinquish their life's investment is confronted with double-speak and alienated by political games.

The dedicated work of eco-volunteers comes at a very low cost to the taxpayer. They significantly improve our society with their work driven by an altruistic passion rather than economic self-interest. They want to be recognized for their valuable contribution to this country and, logically enough, they want NRs and other conservation areas to be provided with secure land tenure, so that all their work is not in vain.