



The Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
By email: ec.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam,

RE: Submission on Senate Inquiry on Abbott Government's Performance on the Environment

I have been directed by the State Council of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland (Wildlife Queensland) to avail ourselves of the invitation to forward comments for consideration by the committee on performance of the Abbott Government. Wildlife Queensland is one of the longest established and most respected wildlife-focused conservation groups in Queensland. With over 5500 supporters spread across branches throughout the State with supporters interstate and overseas, Wildlife Queensland is a strong voice for our wildlife and its habitat.

Wildlife Queensland is apolitical. Our aims include;

- Preserve the flora and fauna of Australia by all lawful means
- Educate the community in an understanding of the principles of conservation and preservation of the natural environment
- Discourage by all legal means, the possible destruction, exploitation and unnecessary development of any part of the natural environment.
- Encourage rational land use and proper land planning of existing and future development and the use of the natural environment and its management.

Wildlife Queensland appreciates this opportunity to make comment on the performance of the Abbott Government since coming to power in 2013. Wildlife Queensland has perused the Terms of Reference. It is noted that in the Terms of Reference for the Committee that certain aspects that impact our natural heritage and future prosperity are delineated but there is a catch all term 'any other related matter' that can be addressed.

Wildlife Queensland's position

Wildlife Queensland has major concerns and is deeply worried about the actions and apparent current attitudinal trend of the current Abbott Government towards our environment and our biodiversity. Wildlife Queensland desires the government of the day to act in the public interest implementing regulations and policy that conserves and protects our natural heritage.

It is an established fact that the natural environment is in a declining condition and the flora and fauna are subject to many threatening processes. (Natural Resource Management

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Ministerial Council 2010, Taylor *et al* 2011, Department of Environment and Resource Management, 2010). The recent assessment report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change clearly sounds a warning that action is required immediately for the benefit of future generations. Wildlife Queensland strongly supports the need for action as called for by the great majority of climate scientists. As at April 2014 the official global portfolio of nationally designated terrestrial protected areas covered 12.5% of the terrestrial realm. This is well short of the current target of 17% set by the Convention on Biological Diversity strategic plan. Australia is a signatory to the Convention on Biological Diversity and has as yet not met the target. In addition inadequate financing of protected areas is becoming increasingly prevalent in Australia. Furthermore legislative and policies changes have undermined the cardinal principle of management of national parks in Australia and Queensland in particular. Addressing our concerns more specifically;

- Threats to our environment are on the increase from feral animals, invasive plants, land clearing and grazing in national parks
- Rainfall is on the decrease and recent droughts are wide spread
- Our biodiversity is in decline and the trend appears to be accelerating
- A balance among sustainable development, society needs and protection and conservation of our natural heritage is not being achieved. The pendulum has swung to development and certainly many developments are unsustainable.

When will the Government appreciate that a healthy environment leads to a healthy society which in turn will result in a healthy economy. The natural places across our broad landscape underpin our living ecosystems providing the air we breathe and the water we drink and ensures people can commune and enjoy nature.

These natural landscapes are valued by many, support a large component of the tourist industry and must be protected by sound and appropriate legislation.

Since the Abbott Government won the 2013 election, for some reason the coalition Government has attacked the environment and many of the laws and regulations that once protected the environment and its biodiversity. Did the legislation require review? Certainly but strengthening regulation should have been the option not weakening it. The approach adopted by the Abbott Government flies in the face of established fact.

Wildlife Queensland is so dismayed with the performance of the Abbott Government with regard to the environment it was difficult to know where to start. Wildlife Queensland elected to take guidance from the Senate Terms of Reference.

(a) Attacks on carbon pricing, the Clean Energy Finance Corporation, the Australian Renewable Energy Agency and the renewable energy target, the Climate Change Authority and the Climate Commission;

The State of the Climate Report 2014 details a list of factors that will have a range of economic, environmental and social impacts upon Australian communities. These impacts include but are not limited to impacts on tourist sites, changes in ecological function that will place pressure on plants and animals and potentially more intense droughts and higher risk of more severe bush fires. There are indications that there will be health impacts for various sectors of the community. The Abbott Government has responded to these challenges by axing a price on carbon, attempting to repeal or at least reduce the renewable energy target and attempted to abolish the Climate Commission.

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The Government continues to provide tax incentives and special tax treatments to fossil fuel-based and mining industries. These backward steps taken by the Abbott Government are a major concern.

(b) Attacks on federal environmental protection through handing approval powers over to state governments, which have poor track records and recent environment staff cuts;

The ongoing move by the Abbott Government to devolve Commonwealth environmental powers under the EPBC Act to the States and Territories is a retrograde step. Wildlife Queensland is not opposed to regulatory reform but not at the expense of the environment. The rhetoric that there is nothing to be concerned about because the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process is in place is cold comfort. In Queensland the EIS is a developers dream and the environments nightmare.

- How can a State make a decision on matters of national environmental significance?
- What about conflict of interest when States are proponents of projects?
- Is there the appropriate legislation in the State laws to satisfy international obligations?
- Will there be varying standards addressing matters of national environmental significance between states?
- Who will be the umpire and will community concerns and rights be further eroded?

(c) Attacks on funding for community environment organisations and the Environmental Defenders Offices, abolition of the Biodiversity Fund, and cuts to programs including, Landcare and Caring for our Country;

Budget after budget the percentage of funds allocated to the environment portfolio compared to the budget as a whole continues to decline. Such action results in less funds available to address an ever increasing challenge. The big loser is the environment and its biodiversity. Wildlife Queensland is fortunate as our organisation does not depend on Government funding for our operations. However our Society views with concern the action taken against the Environmental Defenders Office an organisation that not only served the conservation movement but assisted many sectors of the broader community ensuring access to their legal rights. Another blow to community rights by Government. When a Government moves in any direction to curtail the democratic rights of its citizens we should all be worried, very worried.

(d) Undermining Australia's compliance with the World Heritage Convention, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the Ramsar Convention, in particular by attacking the Great Barrier Reef and the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Areas;

It is well established that the management performance by Governments of one of our 19 World Heritage Listed Areas is such that it was and continues to be under consideration of being listed as 'in danger' by UNESCO. The Great Barrier Reef is the one at risk. Not only that, the Abbott Government endeavoured to have 70 000 ha of forest in Tasmania's World Heritage Area delisted. Such action drew international

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criticism and rightly so. Furthermore Governments have been very tardy and reluctant in listing new or additional areas. Cape York is screaming out for listing and also significant additions to Fraser Island World Heritage Area are required. Governments raced to develop plans that may convince UNESCO not to list the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area as in danger but the plans fail to take the known bold steps required to provide absolute certainty. The tragedy is the bold steps required are known and have been for some time. Certainly the significant investment strategy that would be required to underpin a halt to the degradation let alone a reversal of the trend has yet to be developed.

(e) Any other related matters

The Abbott Government has not left other marine environments from the Great Barrier Reef alone. A review has been launched on the recently declared Commonwealth Marine Reserves. While statements by the Government appear sound 'ensuring that management arrangements for the reserves reflect genuine and through consultation with stakeholders and are informed by the best available science' the consultation by the previous government was extensive and the community spoke. Although the findings are yet to be finalised the review is underpinned by a Government's election commitment for a more competitive and sustainable fisheries sector. Wildlife Queensland will be astounded if what environmental protection currently afforded to the marine reserves is not weakened.

Although yet to be actioned, there are 30 sites on the Coalition's dam-building shortlist. This is part of a plan to boost agricultural production and mining output in northern Australia and to reinvigorate rural economies in New South Wales and Tasmania. Again the environment will be the loser with inadequate environmental flows and known threatened species put at risk. Associated with this announcement, attention was drawn to the Agricultural Competitive papers where the Government is advocating the reduction in regulation and green tape. Again an attack on two environmental fronts is foreshadowed. Potentially a review of vegetation management guidelines and also biosecurity regulations are raised. Effectively managing environmental biosecurity threats and impacts from invasive pests, weeds and diseases is critically important for maintaining Australia's way of life according to CSIRO's submission to the Senate inquiry into Environmental Biosecurity. There are suggestions that biosecurity should be reviewed. Wildlife Queensland certainly agrees that biosecurity regulations should be reviewed but tightened not weakened. Over 40 incursions have occurred since 2000 that have resulted in the establishment of organisms likely to cause environmental harm. Obviously all such events cannot be attributed to the Abbott Government but the Abbott Government needs to take positive action to address this threat.

Conclusion

The submission has raised issues that clearly demonstrate the negative impact on the environment of the Abbott Government's actions to date. In addition other matters that will negatively impact our natural heritage if implemented have been outlined. Borrowing words from a USA state Governor 'Our generation is the first generation to feel the impact of climate change and the last one that can do something about it' clearly indicates the direction the Abbott Government should be taking. The required direction is diametrically opposed to their current thinking as demonstrated by actions to date as well as those proposed. The Commonwealth government must implement actions that will achieve the balance among sustainable development, meeting society needs and

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conserve and protect our environment. Now is the time for action, their current thinking must be changed or history will view the Abbott Government as environmental vandals who failed not only this generation but those generations yet to come.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Yours faithfully

Des Boyland, Policies and Campaigns Manager
7th November 2014