



## *North Queensland Wildlife Care Inc.*

PO Box 1446, AITKENVALE Q. 4814

23 April 2016

Research Director  
Agriculture and Environment Committee  
Parliament House  
BRISBANE QLD 4000  
Email: [vminquiry@parliament.qld.gov.au](mailto:vminquiry@parliament.qld.gov.au)

Dear Chair and Committee Members,

### **Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2016**

North Queensland Wildlife Care Inc (NQWC) is an organisation with around 250 members who are involved in the rescue, care and release of a variety of wildlife species in the Townsville region. Each year we care for close to 3,000 orphan and injured animals.

NQWC members are concerned by the massive amount of vegetation clearing that has taken place since the previous government weakened the *Vegetation Management Act 1999* (VMA). On behalf of our members, I wish to express our organisation's support for the strengthening of native vegetation protection that will flow from the enactment of the Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2016. Our support for the Bill is based on the following:

#### **Impact on wildlife**

- Vegetation clearing is a leading cause of habitat loss for a variety of wild animals. Most animals whose habitat has been destroyed are unable to survive without the food and shelter that their habitat provide. It has been estimated that during the period 1997-99 at least 100 million native mammals, birds and reptiles were dying each year as a result of broad-scale clearing of remnant vegetation in Queensland - at the time, the average annual clearing rate of remnant vegetation was 446,000 hectares per year.<sup>1</sup> Whilst the rate of land clearing has fluctuated since, owing to the strengthening and then weakening of vegetation clearing laws, we understand that it reached 296,000 hectares per year in the period 2013-14 and that it probably spiked further in 2014-15.<sup>2</sup> At this rate, this means that at least 66 million animals are dying each year in Queensland. This is unacceptable.
- Whilst large numbers of wild animals die immediately, some survive but, as they search for an

<sup>1</sup> Dr H.Cogger, Pr H.Ford, Dr Ch.Johnson, J.Holman, D.Butler, WWF-Australia (2003) *Impacts of Land Clearing on Australian Wildlife in Queensland*.

<sup>2</sup> According to Minister Steven Miles, quoted at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-25/illegal-land-clearing-prosecution-queensland-figures/7201246>

alternative habitat, they are more vulnerable to predators, road accidents or simply death from starvation. The RSPCA recently indicated that the number of animals coming into its care in the South East of the state has tripled over the past three years, mostly owing to habitat loss, and the World Wildlife Fund has reported that the same trend is being experienced throughout the State.<sup>3</sup> We are fearful that, without the imposition of stronger restrictions on vegetation clearing, wildlife care organisations including our own will not be able to cope with the resulting dramatic increase in our workload.

- Wild animals that survive habitat loss often have no choice but to migrate closer to urban areas, a situation which can cause conflict with and increase problems for people. For instance, macropods are more likely to be found on the roads and can cause vehicle accidents, whilst flying foxes increasingly roost in urban parks and gardens as a result of destruction of their roosting and feeding habitats.<sup>4</sup> We strongly believe that it would be in everyone's interest to reduce vegetation clearing in order to avoid further flying foxes establishing in urban areas.
- Wildlife species rely on remnant vegetation when they can find it but can also benefit in areas where regrowth has been established. In some areas, it may even be crucial to the survival of wildlife. See for instance the regrowth of rainforest on an ex cattle property in Ella Bay which is now providing a safe habitat for cassowaries.<sup>5</sup> We therefore strongly support any amendment that restores protection of old regrowth.

### **Impact on climate change**

Tree clearing has been identified as one of the major contributors to climate change. It is likely to have major impacts on our way of life and on the survival of wildlife. Australia's record of tree clearing is appalling and Queensland needs to share the responsibility to address this problem. Australia is unlikely to meet its targets under the Paris Agreement unless it significantly reduces tree clearing. It appears that emissions from tree clearing in Queensland in 2013–14 were 36 Mt CO<sub>2</sub>e, and that at this rate, it will take just 18 months for tree clearing in Queensland alone to negate the entire abatement achieved to date for the Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry sector by the Emissions Reduction Fund.<sup>6</sup>

### **Impact on Queensland rivers and on the Great Barrier Reef**

We are concerned that tree clearing in riparian areas, as is currently allowed, is leading to increased erosion, sedimentation and pollution of our rivers and eventually of the Great Barrier Reef. In its *2014 Outlook Report*, The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority referred to the *2008 Scientific Consensus Statement on Water Quality* which concluded that implementation of the *Vegetation Management Act 1999* (Qld) was responsible for reducing extensive land clearing and was a critical element in beginning to address the impacts of land use on Reef water quality. It

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<sup>3</sup> ABC News (5 April 2016) *Spike in native animal injuries caused by land clearing and habitat destruction, RSPCA says*, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-04-05/spike-in-native-animal-injuries-land-clearing-habitat/7301942>

<sup>4</sup> Department of Environment and Heritage Protection, *Flying Foxes*, <https://www.ehp.qld.gov.au/wildlife/livingwith/flyingfoxes/index.html>

<sup>5</sup> As identified by the proponent in the Ella Bay Integrated Resort's EIS (Executive Summary - 8.6).

<sup>6</sup> The Wilderness Society (2016), *Climate Change and Australia's Tree Clearing Crisis*.

also warned about the risks associated with the weakening of these laws. The *2013 Scientific Consensus Statement - Land Use Impacts on Great Barrier Reef Water Quality and Ecosystem Condition* presents additional evidence that retaining tree cover in riparian areas contributes to a decrease in the runoff of suspended sediments.

We are particularly concerned by the impact of poor water quality on the survival of riverine and marine species and support the reintroduction of the prohibition of clearing along watercourses under the *Water Act*.

### **Conclusion**

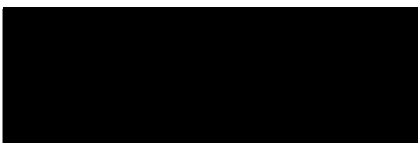
We support the Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2016 as it will reverse the unacceptable rate of vegetation clearing in the State and the impacts that this clearing has on our environment and wildlife. We therefore encourage the Agriculture and Environment Committee to recommend that the Bill be passed.

We further support retrospective application of the Bill to 17 March 2016 to avoid panic clearing. Some of us remember the frantic land clearing that took place upon the introduction of strengthening amendments to the VMA in the past and we would be concerned if this was to happen again.

Finally, we respectfully remind the Committee that even strengthened laws will not address excessive clearing unless the responsible agency, the Department of Natural Resources and Mines, is appropriately resourced to investigate and prosecute offenders.

Please do not hesitate to contact me at the above address or on 0438 513 750 should you require further information.

Yours sincerely

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Clare Baldwin  
President  
North Queensland Wildlife Care Inc.