



Nature Conservation and Other Legislation Bill 2012 Sub# 41

Introduced to State Parliament by Hon. SL Dickson (Buderim-LNP) 13th November 2012

Submission from Save the Bush Alliance, 18 December 2012

The Protect the Bush Alliance (PTBA) was established in July 2012 to facilitate improved communication and understanding between member organisations concerned and involved with conservation in Queensland. Groups that have joined the Alliance have a collective membership in excess of 10,000 people.

The Alliance is gravely concerned about the intent of this retrograde change to the governance of National Parks throughout Queensland. Significantly, we acknowledge and understand that the purpose of National Parks is the conservation of nature; a valuable reservoir for all species whatever their classification, which are represented in regional ecosystems. That National Parks are accessible to everyone seeking the wilderness experience, and the desire to be holistically at peace with nature, is of paramount importance. With only 5% of this state conserved in National Parks, Queensland lags behind other states in Australia and indeed globally. Our state has the highest biodiversity in the nation (Australia is one of the six most biodiverse countries in the world), but due to inappropriate management, our species are disappearing at an alarming and unprecedented rate.

For over 50 years, the cardinal principle for managing National Parks in Queensland has been:

To provide, to the greatest possible extent, for the permanent preservation of the area's natural condition and the protection of the area's cultural resources and values.

These changes are therefore of concern, and we note and question the following:

- ***The primary role of National Parks is to conserve nature:***
On ground work in National Parks management has been historically under-funded. Many programs for control of feral species, both weeds and animals, have been sporadic and have lacked ongoing financial commitment to achieve adequate monitoring to measure successful outcomes.
In what way would the legislative changes proposed improve National Park management? What proportion of the lease income would be designated to improve on ground works to ameliorate further negative impacts?
- ***Tourism is a major contributor to the Queensland economy and is one of the government's four economic pillars;***

It is agreed the tourism sector currently within National Parks is struggling with operators entering liquidation over the past financial year and that unnecessary bureaucracy has not been helpful. We would argue any ecotourism facility provided within National Parks could equally be successful as many resorts are now – close to and abutting National Parks. ***What is the imperative that eco-resorts be placed within National Parks placing an unnecessary financial burden in this grossly under-funded sector?***

- ***Under the proposed legislative provisions, the Nature Conservation Act will allow ecotourism facilities to be authorised in a range of national parks and notes casinos and golf courses would not be allowed.***

Currently many national parks are plagued by inappropriate leisure activities such as trail biking and 4WD enthusiasts are going off track with little respect for either the park as a conservation zone or as a refuge for wildlife. It is accepted by parks users now that rarely will such behaviour be the subject of effective policing.

What proportion of lease income will relate back to improved governance of these activities and provide for substantial litigation that may act as a deterrent for these individuals and their unsuitable conduct?

- ***Will the proposed legislative changes adhere to the official definition of ecotourism as stated by the World Conservation Union (IUCN)?***

"Environmentally responsible travel to natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and accompanying cultural features, both past and present) that promote conservation, have a low visitor impact and provide for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local peoples."

As stated by one of the world's most authoritative conservation bodies, The Nature Conservancy: Most tourism in natural areas today is not ecotourism and is not, therefore, sustainable. We request that the legislation take into account the fact that ecotourism is distinguished by its emphasis on conservation, education, traveler responsibility and active community participation. And we stress that the legislation needs to ensure that the following characteristics are prevalent in any ecotourism venture approved by this government:

- Conscientious, low-impact visitor behaviour
- Sensitivity towards, and appreciation of, indigenous culture and biodiversity
- Support for local conservation efforts
- Sustainable benefits to local communities
- Local participation in decision-making
- Educational components for both the traveler and local communities

- ***The legislative provisions within this bill will address key government commitments to provide increased access to national parks including the Destination Q commitments to improve access for ecotourism.***

National Parks are currently welcoming and inclusive to anyone either national or international wishing to visit them. In doing so, visitors accept the concept of an experience without commercial intrusion; admittance to areas of wilderness, pristine and sacred for all species dependent on that environment. This is a unique experience which defines our iconic National Parks as significant natural places removed from the constraints of commercial value.

Will commercial ecotourism developments be accessible to any visitor?

- ***This bill will enable pre-existing infrastructure approvals on national parks to be streamlined under the NCA.***

Many areas of previous State Forest now within national parks are being accessed by extractive industries. Of major concern is the rapid expansion of coal seam gas, its associated water infrastructure and related habitat destruction, particularly in the Brigalow Belt (listed as an endangered ecosystem under the EPBC Act). Any such action contributes further to the degradation of our greater landscape and therefore to a loss of biodiversity in Queensland, and indeed affects the movement of species across our broader landscape and inter-state.

How will the Department of National Parks, Recreation, Sport and Racing monitor these statements:

- ***Managed in a way to ensure no significant change: who defines 'significant', under what criteria and how will this be enforced?***
- ***Protect its cultural resources and values to the greatest extent possible: how will 'extent possible' be defined to ensure consistent and appropriate application of legislation?***

Observation of the land's previous natural condition will most likely allow for considerable alteration before acknowledgement of the need to ameliorate disturbance. The effects of negative disturbance may not be witnessed or assessable for a considerable period of time, after which remediation may present considerable difficulties and expense. Increased infrastructure may well be suitable in areas of degraded forest selectively designated for pursuits not commensurate with the ideology of time enjoyed within national parks as we currently understand them - as areas of pristine wilderness.

In conclusion, lessening of bureaucratic governance that encourages new development should apply to expanding ecotourism on private tenure.

It is totally unsuitable for either the tourism or mining sector to be self assessable. In this respect, it would be reasonable to expect that any further financial advantage to the Department of NPRSR be reflected in close scrutiny of intended 'best practice' of developments across our landscape, especially should they inappropriately occur within national parks.

Queensland's reputation for extinctions is unsurpassed in Australia. Despite being one of the six most diverse countries in the world, we have earned the reputation of allowing the highest mammal extinction rate in the world. The proposed requirements for approval of ecotourism projects are not sufficient to ensure biodiversity protection.

We would ask that every consideration be given to retaining and protecting our special wilderness areas. The wellbeing of our biodiversity is vital to the wellbeing of Queenslanders and to our state's economy, much more so than short-term unsustainable, polluting and destructive industrial or commercial ventures.

Yours faithfully

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Protect the Bush Alliance