

Submission on Nature Conservation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill (No. 2) 2013

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This submission focusses primarily on the impact of the Amendment Bill on National Parks and Reserves.

It is important to bear in mind that National Parks and Reserves are owned collectively by the people of Queensland, having been purchased through their taxes by the State or Federal Governments, or set aside from Crown Lands. The National Parks were declared to preserve and protect the natural environment in perpetuity, as defined in the existing Object of the Act in Section 4. This status should be retained so that we and succeeding generations can be guaranteed their benefit, without repeated campaigning. There should be no possibility of encroachment or degradation by any sectional interests, powerful individuals or companies, or a government of the day.

In his introduction to the Bill the Minister, Hon. SL Dickson, presented the amendments as being mostly "consequential or minor". However, their intentions and implications are profound and far reaching. The political commitment to "improving access" can translate into potentially destructive policies.

Considering only approximately 4.8% of Queensland land area is set aside as National Park, it is vital to retain the primary objective as the conservation of nature. If we had vast tracts protected, then our policies could perhaps be different. Nearly all National Parks have been declared on land that is unsuitable for cropping or pasture, or land that has already been selectively logged. It is often remote, steep and inaccessible. Some parks are just tiny picturesque features, or protection for a remnant plant species. Where farms have been deemed valuable to add to this estate, it is due to the previous farmers stocking conservatively, and clearing natural vegetation lightly. In many cases this was deliberate, as they understood the value of the natural environment to the health of their farming. Thus these areas are able to regenerate from reservoirs of native plants and animals. Another feature of our relatively tiny National Park Estate is that most parks are small in biological terms, exceptions being some desert areas. They will not function as sustainable natural areas if fragmented further by development within their boundaries. They are already vulnerable to natural events like storms, fires and floods.

It needs to be acknowledged that natural environments have a significantly different value compared with say forestry plantations, or parks, gardens and golf courses. Immersion in the natural environment allows us to witness other living things functioning and thriving in their own self sustaining state. It allows us to experience being a part of the natural world, temporarily replacing our accustomed focus on ourselves. This real immersion cannot be substituted by books or films or art. It is a profound experience which is increasingly rare for too many modern people. It is an experience which engenders mental, emotional and spiritual health. (physical health and exhilaration too if combined with the effort of some walking). In summary, the natural environment is a powerful force for human wellbeing - a more economical and happier preventive measure than later medical remediation!

The political commitment to "improving access" needs to be carefully formulated so as not to endanger the very values of our National Parks. It obviously is not intended to mean more or better paths! There is already very good road or river access to parks, which is probably what the average voter would have had in mind. The intention seems rather to be serving sectional and governmental interests for commercial exploitation of our parks. There is already no impediment to cultural and educational uses of the parks, except in the form of commercial enterprise. In general the objections to commercial exploitation are that in our limited area of Parks these enterprises would almost certainly conflict with the natural value of the areas.

The promotion of "ecotourism" in National Parks by the government implies that special concessions, therefore new laws, are required. On the contrary, there are already numerous successful tourism facilities bordering or close to National Parks, a few examples being the Lamington Plateau, at Carnarvon Gorge and in the Stanthorpe region. None of those National Parks are big enough to withstand developments inside them. And the tourist facilities bordering them often have spare capacity.

It is a fallacy that tourism can make National Parks "pay". Their value for conserving the small amount left of our

natural environment and for the benefit of our own population should be paramount. In other countries and states the most successful tourism is to places which the local population values and visits. (An example is the Overland track in Tasmania which has a system of public and private huts, as well as camping facilities, catering for a range of income groups. That is 80km long and surrounded by large tracts of wilderness, making each days walk as long as the total size of most of our parks).

Once the purpose of the Act has been changed by amending the Object, there could easily be repeated incursions of grazing, logging, building, motorised recreation and horse riding in Parks. This is even more likely if Management Statements, without a public consultation process, replace Management Plans.

To date there have been well documented cases of damage to Parks by motorcycles. The cost of repairing the walking tracks is huge, and there are not enough parks staff employed to do the work. This is a case of a small interest group damaging a community resource, and we should be clear that there are lots of roads they could use. There are also farms and plantations with roads which could be safely used. That interest group should take the initiative to negotiate these.

Problems of weed spread by horses are very well documented too. Again, there are many venues other than National Parks for horse riding.

"Hardship grazing" has clearly shown the problems with over riding the basic principle of National Parks, in this case somewhat clouded by some of the Parks having been purchased, but not yet declared. Yes, there is a drought, but most farmers are not neighbours to Parks, so cannot have the free agistment, nor the fences erected at public cost (\$500,000 to date). While this is publicly advertised as "short term", some farmers clearly intend it to be long enough to invest tens of thousands of dollars to provide watering points inside the Park. If it is a temporary measure, there will be a further public cost to ensure that all escaped stock is removed, weed control carried out, and fences removed. The recovering vegetation and native fauna will have been set back many years. This is a commercial use of a public facility, which is not making any money for the government, but rather a cost to taxpayers. The proposed category of Regional Park, rather than National Park, will allow much more of this sort of use, without general public knowledge.

The delay in declaration of some Parks and the proposed abolition of Forestry Reserves are indication that the Government does not intend these areas to become National Parks at all, or at least would like to exploit them to maximum commercial advantage by grazing and logging first. The "minor" amendments to the Act could have the effect of compromising or even deleting the natural values of these areas, so removing their desirability as National Parks.

In summary, this Amendment Bill will cause increased vulnerability to National Parks at a time when we should be working to extend the protection and extent of our natural estate. With a rising population and loss of rural land to urbanisation, mining and drilling, our National Parks are a State Treasure.