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The Research Director
State Development, Infrastructure and Industry Committee
Parliament House
George Street
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Regional Planning Interests Bill 2013

I would like to commend the Queensland Government on its initiative in proposing new legislation which will declare the Steve Irwin Wildlife Reserve (SIWR) and the Wenlock River on Cape York as Queensland's first ever "strategic environment area", and by so doing protect these areas from open cut and strip mining in perpetuity.

I am a Professor in Zoology and Deputy Head of Biological Sciences at The University of Queensland and have been conducting scientific research in Far North Queensland for more than twenty years. My research focus has been directed towards the physiological ecology and conservation of fishes, amphibians and reptiles, and I am regarded as international expert on crocodiles.

I have had extensive experience working on the Steve Irwin Wildlife Reserve and I have been the Director of Research for the SIWR for the past 7 years. In this role, I oversee the various research projects conducted on the SIWR. It is pleasing to see that the Steve Irwin Wildlife Reserve is playing an important role in research and discovery, having become the research hub for environmental and biological research on the Cape. The Reserve with its Coolibah Research Base and attached permanent staff provides a logistical and support base year-round for researchers, scientists and students.

My own research on SIWR and Wenlock River is focused on the on estuarine crocodile and together with Australia Zoo, led by Terri Irwin, we are engaged in the largest tracking study of its kind on any crocodilian and have over 100 crocodiles fitted with acoustic transmitters that will be monitored and movements mapped for the next 3-7 years.

The unique position of the SIWR and the facilities on offer at the Coolibah Base have attracted scientists not only from Australia but also from overseas institutions and is fast gaining international attention. Researchers from The University of Queensland, CSIRO, Australian National University, James Cook University, the Queensland Museum, Queensland Herbarium, The University of Adelaide and many other research organisations and individuals are already carrying out solid and novel research programs on the Reserve: all are highlighting the immense ecological and conservation significance of this region.

From these research studies there is now a substantial body of scientific evidence which identifies the Steve Irwin Wildlife Reserve and the Wenlock River as containing some of the highest natural values in Australia. As such I would propose that SIWR is important enough to warrant direct nomination in the Bill. I think the current proposal does not adequately recognise the wider importance of Reserve and its ecological and scientific values and thus I am of the opinion that SIWR should also be directly nominated in the Cape York Regional Plan and thus aligned with the Bill.

More broadly the natural values of Cape York Peninsula are immense and nicely summarised in *"The Natural Heritage Significance of Cape York Peninsula"*(Mackay et. al. 2001):

"Cape York is of national, regional and global significance as an area of outstanding biodiversity in a largely intact landscape and as a largely intact bridge retaining valuable evidence of the evolving and ongoing fragmentation of the biomes of Northern Australia and New Guinea".

I would also like to draw particular attention to the Wenlock River as one of Australia's most ecologically significant perennial rivers. It is also one of the few near pristine tropical river systems in the world and is the stronghold in Queensland for the estuarine crocodile. Furthermore, the Wenlock River/Port Musgrave is home to a number of threatened/endangered species, including marine turtles, freshwater sawfish, the speartooth shark and the snubfin dolphin.

I wish to endorse the announcement by the government that any activities that risk irreversible, or widespread impacts to the ecological integrity of the natural values of the Wenlock strategic environmental area as identified in the Draft Cape York Regional Plan, will not be allowed.

Legislation leading to this outcome will be seen as safeguarding this ecologically significant part of Queensland for future generations.

Sincerely



Craig E. Franklin