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

I congratulate the Newman Government for its initiative in proposing **new legislation which will declare the Steve Irwin Wildlife Reserve 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.**

There is already 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.

My field of scientific study is animal behavior, with a Bachelor of Science (First Class Honours) in Zoology, Evolution and Ecology from the Australian National University. My current PhD research investigates palm cockatoo behavior and meta-population dynamics on Cape York Peninsula. The research is supported by an Australian Postgraduate Award Scholarship and funding from Birdlife Australia, reflecting the importance of this species to Queensland and Australia as a whole.

As part of my PhD research I have spent several months conducting fieldwork at the Steve Irwin Wildlife Reserve. My experience at the Reserve, and subsequent scientific analysis, involves spending prolonged periods of time observing palm cockatoos in their breeding habitat near the edge of the forest that lines the Wenlock River (known as gallery forest).

Having the threat of mining hanging over the reserve, it has always been difficult for me to dispel uncertainty about the protection and preservation of this iconic environmental asset. Firstly, palm cockatoos depend so greatly on nesting hollows, which are a limited resource. Suitable nest hollows are found in larger trees, and thus take many years to produce. The total and severe clearing conducted by mining operations could remove large numbers of nest trees from affected areas, and has the potential to seriously reduce palm cockatoo numbers. Secondly, mining at the Steve Irwin Wildlife Reserve could seriously impede the natural function of the Wenlock River ecosystem, thus affecting the gallery forest ecosystem which depends on it. Troublingly, one population at the Iron Range (Eastern Cape York Peninsula) is believed by experts to be in serious decline due to anthropomorphically induced habitat changes. Palm cockatoos are most likely to be very poorly adapted to rapid environmental change given the population trend at Iron Range. It would be wise not to repeat similar management mistakes regarding this sensitive and iconic environmental asset.

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.

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