

SUBMISSION

Transport and Resources Parliamentary Committee Inquiry

Economic and Regulatory Frameworks for Queensland Island Resorts

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My wife Leigh and I are the owners of Lot DW (vacant land purchased in 2005) and Lot E (formerly the Keswick Island Guest House and BnB).

We are members of the Keswick Island Progress Association (KIPA) and the Basil Bay Residents' Association (BBRA).

My employment background centres on journalism (ABC Radio News and Current Affairs, print media; public relations and marketing and of the past 15 years industrial real estate and development.

Rather than addressing each individual heading (terms of reference) pertaining to the parliamentary inquiry, I would rather give a general commentary on the 'highs and lows' Leigh and I have experienced over the past 17 years.

A more detailed outline addressing the key areas under investigation by the committee can be found in the extensive submission by the Keswick Island Progress Association (KIPA), who I might add is not recognised by the head lessee.

The bottom line to Keswick Island residents' woes has been the lack of action and meaningful and sincere communications between the State Government (NLP and Labor when in power), Mackay Regional Council, and the head lessee.

It's easy to reflect on past injustices but as with most issues there are always two sides to every argument.

Unfortunately, these injustices have included:

- The barricading of roads to key island attractions, such as Basil Bay, Connie Bay and the National Park.

- Spying on residents undertaking lawful, everyday activities – this included “security guards” submitting daily updates to island management and the Chinese head lessee on residents’ movements and activities
- Signage discouraging people from visiting the island
- Attempts to prevent boaties from visiting popular Basil Bay, with ‘Keep Out’ signs on pontoons in the bay and on the foreshore.
- Closure of the public barge ramp and community lay-down, storage area for small vessels
- The construction of an illegal and dangerous boat ramp as an alternative to the barge ramp. This facility was even labelled “not fit for purpose” by DNR inspectors
- Construction of Illegal roadways that led to the silting and destruction of fringing coral reef
- Axing of commercial air access which after complaints saw helicopter flights to the island increase to \$1200 and fixed wing \$750. In some circumstances it was cheaper to fly to Bali with accommodation provided for a week or a return ticket to London!
- Head lessee China Bloom threatening homeowners with legal action if they continued to use their residences as BnBs or rent them in anyway
- In our case threats of forcing us out to turn our home into a “tea house” for the expected wave of Chinese investors/visitors
- Preventing all non-approved businesses from operating on the island – particularly lot clearing and fire hazard reduction activities
- Ridiculous claims that turtles hadn’t nested on Keswick Island for 10 years.
- Rejection of offers by residents to join the Mackay turtle watch group to monitor turtle nesting and numbers on Keswick Island.
- The destruction of turtle habitat and nesting dunes in Basil Bay under the banner of “beach modelling”
- Unexplained acts of vandalism – including damage to boats, water tanks, tampering with power boards and power being switched off to homes while the owners were away. You can imagine the smell and damage caused to ‘white goods’ when the owners came home to weeks of rotting food in freezers and fridges.

I could go on, but I will leave this to others – I would prefer to focus on the future and a way forward for the island

Positive moves

In my opinion, the island has enjoyed and experienced a dramatic turn around since the appointment of new management early in 2021. The vibe on the island continues to improve attracting more boaties, visitors and tourists.

Positive action includes:

- The public barge ramp has been reopened to residents for launching and retrieving small boats, until a safe and approved facility is constructed.
- Island management has been willing to engage with residents in a bid to reach positive outcomes on day-to-day issues
- A bi-weekly ferry service is available to residents on Monday and Friday (subject to weather and unfortunately break down).

- Roads have been reopened and offensive signage removed
- Boulders blocking road access have been removed, with residents now gaining easy access to Basil Bay and national park areas.
- Management has been willing to work in with residents to resolve issues that previously fell on deaf ears (unfortunately, not always successfully)
- Improvement in the general appearance and presentation of the island
- Reopening of the island kiosk – even though on very ad hoc basis

As previously discussed, the new island management under Mr Scott Wilkinson has endeavoured to reach common ground on many basic issues that were formally off limits.

Many people, including Leigh and I, have invested our life savings in the island. We simply want to live in harmony with nature and protect this wonderful asset for all Queenslanders and visitors to enjoy.

We don't want to be treated as foreigners in our own back yard, bullied into accepting whatever is thrown our way by government departments or the head lessee.

Keswick Island residents clearly support sustainable development provided our natural assets are protected and the island remains accessible to all Australians and overseas visitors alike.

We desperately need a safe, all-weather public boat ramp and jetty facility as per the deed of agreement between the State Government and the head lessee. This is the catalyst for further investment and tourism.

(See the KIPA submission that clearly outlines responsibilities, regarding the boat ramp, jetty and marina facilities).

Government needs to stop buck passing; council needs to be more proactive in enforcing regulations and the head lessee still has a long way to go to deliver infrastructure and improve communications with residents.

Hopefully, as part of this inquiry, the committee will have the opportunity to hold public meetings in Mackay to collate more information on how our islands, particularly Keswick Island, have been mis-managed and neglected in the past.

The committee should not under-estimate the anger and disappointment many residents and lot holders still harbour at the way they were treated by the head lessee China Bloom. Plus the inaction of State government departments, local government and other individuals over a long period.

It is hoped committee members will have the opportunity to visit Keswick Island as part of this inquiry. It is only then you will understand and appreciate why it is important to protect and properly manage Keswick Island for future generations.

Keswick Island is a valuable, community and environmental asset that has been entrusted to a foreign, Chinese-controlled shelf company.

Committee members need to see for themselves what is being put at risk – and ask as we do – WHY.

Finally, it would be remiss of me not to mention the outstanding community and public support nation-wide, residents have received in their fight to keep Keswick Island “open and free” for all Aussies to enjoy.

The media has also played its part, plus support from a variety of politicians including Member for Mackay Julieanne Gilbert, former Federal Member for Dawson George Christensen, Member for Whitsunday Amanda Camm, and One Nation senator, Senator Malcolm Roberts to name just a few.

The list could go on to include a handful of bureaucrats – who witnessed injustices but were only able to offer moral support.

Keswick Island is a valuable, community and environmental asset that has been entrusted to a foreign, Chinese-controlled shelf company.

Committee members need to see for themselves what is being put at risk – and ask as we do – WHY?

Thank you.

Col Wilson

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