



Speech by

Hon. R. WELFORD

MEMBER FOR EVERTON

Hansard 20 October 1998

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Riversleigh Fossil Area

Hon. R. J. WELFORD (Everton—ALP) (Minister for Environment and Heritage and Minister for Natural Resources) (9.55 a.m.), by leave: One of the most unique areas in Australia is the Riversleigh section of the Lawn Hill National Park in northern Queensland. This fossil-rich, World Heritage listed area is recognised internationally as one of the few remaining places on earth where we can look into our past with any certainty. For the past three years, unsuccessful attempts have been made to acquire some 800 hectares of land surrounding the Riversleigh homestead to add to the World Heritage listed area. Not only is this proposed additional area fossil rich, but it contains many important Aboriginal cultural sites, including rock art, burial, spiritual sites and dreaming tracks.

Last month I visited the Lawn Hill National Park and met with tribal elders from the Waanyi people, whose links with this land can be traced back some 17,000 years. The Waanyi people currently own 49% of this tract of land. The other 51% is owned by the Pasminco mining company. Just prior to my visit, the sixth meeting of my Waanyi ministerial advisory committee was held at Musselbrook to discuss, amongst other things, the Waanyi people's attitude towards the management of this land—land which has considerable history and significance for these people. The meeting of this advisory committee advanced the possible sale considerably, with a leading role played by Waanyi tribal elder, Peter O'Keefe.

When I arrived at Lawn Hill National Park, Mr O'Keefe and other members of the Waanyi tribe welcomed me onto the land and we spent considerable time discussing the Aboriginal people's great affinity with this part of Queensland. I am pleased to inform the House that the Waanyi people have now agreed to negotiate the sale of these 800 hectares surrounding the Riversleigh homestead to enable the land to be added to the World Heritage estate. This is a considerable breakthrough after many years of talks. In addition, the chief executive of Century Zinc, Mr Ian Williams, has indicated his company will not stand in the way of the sale if that is the desire of the Waanyi people.

I now anticipate this land will be purchased for protection by the State and added to the World Heritage estate. At the same time, it is my intention that the Waanyi people play an active and key role in the management of this land. Scientists have dated Aboriginal occupation of this part of Queensland back some 17,000 years and the Waanyi's deep affinity with and understanding of the cultural significance of the land is a rich resource for all Australians.

In my discussions with Mr O'Keefe, we agreed there would be opportunities for Aboriginal people to act as cultural rangers in the proposed new section of Riversleigh to pass on their vast knowledge of and connection with this land to both international visitors and Australians who visit this unique part of Queensland. I have also advised the Waanyi people that we would assist them in their plan to settle back on this land. Mr O'Keefe expressed the hope that many of his people, currently living at Doomadgee, would be able to renew their cultural ties and return to live at Lawn Hill and Riversleigh. The Waanyi elders see this as an important step in giving their younger generation a better understanding of the land, of the spiritual sites, the story places and the dreaming tracks.

Our Government sees this as a significant symbol of reconciliation. The purchase of the land surrounding Riversleigh homestead will provide protection for the future. It is a unique site where conditions have been ideal to preserve fossilised samples of species long since extinct. But it is equally

significant that we are able to negotiate this purchase and involve the Waanyi people. They have a very deep and very real understanding of this land, this part of Queensland.

We expect that in the next six months we will formalise purchase of this land. With the help of the Waanyi people, we will develop a management plan that protects its important values while enabling the economic potential of the region to be fulfilled. I have also indicated to the Waanyi people that I will review the name of the Lawn Hill National Park to give it an Aboriginal name appropriate to the region, which is of such significant importance to the Aboriginal people.

There is an opportunity for environmental and cultural interpretive tourism and, similarly, enormous potential for employment for young Aboriginal people. This is a unique opportunity to complete the landscape and involve the local people in protecting and managing this land.
