



Speech by

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DUGONGS

Mr TURNER (Thuringowa—IND) (10.16 a.m.): It is in the interests of commercial fishermen probably more so than anyone else in the community to keep our oceans healthy and productive. Dugong numbers have dropped dramatically, but Dr Hale, of the Centre for Conservation Biology at the University of Queensland, has stated that the dugong was not considered to be of conservation concern. He added that conservationists have blamed gillnetting but have conveniently forgotten the other causes. Fishing is not the only or necessarily the major activity to have had an impact on dugong populations.

This year, 25 dugongs have been found dead along the east coast. Many died from disease or old age, several died from shark nets put in place for the protection of swimmers and only a couple have died from fishing nets. Up to 4,000 are caught by our indigenous population. Regulations are necessary, but they attack the problem in only a very small way. We should be considering the entire ecosystem to protect all marine life. The plight of the dugong is by no means a solo battle. The damage that is costing the lives of dugong is also costing the lives of other marine life. The problem is the destruction of habitat. If food is scarce, dugong will wait years longer to bear calves, resulting in lower numbers over time. In addition, many starve to death.

The single biggest contributing factor to the destruction of our reef lagoon is mud. Mud, nutrients, fertilisers and poisons included in the run-off from land remain suspended in the ocean and settle on our foreshores and reef. An estimated 22 million tonnes of sediment and fertilisers are dumped onto the reef each year. A comparison of a study done in 1929 with a study done in 1993 found that turbidity had increased by 60%.

Once any species of wildlife is considered endangered it is difficult to reverse the situation. Due to heavy agriculture and development right to the edge of our waterways, the Great Barrier Reef is receiving a continual assault from run-off and is dying. To save the dependent marine life we need better farming and development practices. We must halt the clearing of vegetation on the banks of rivers and creeks. All buffer zones are critical habitat areas for threatened species, from the mahogany glider to the coral polyp. This is probably the most important environmental issue that we have in this country. We are the problem, but we can also be the solution.
