



Speech by

Dr LESLEY CLARK

MEMBER FOR BARRON RIVER

Hansard 18 August 1999

CASSOWARY PROTECTION

Dr CLARK (Barron River—ALP) (11.23 p.m.): The majestic cassowary is the symbol of the Wet Tropics World Heritage area but is listed as an endangered species by both the Queensland and, more recently, the Federal Governments. It is estimated that there may be as few as 1,500 birds left, but nobody is really sure because of the difficulty of accurately surveying them in their forest habitat.

Why has the cassowary reached this dire situation? The answer is simple, yet complex. It is people—people who have cleared their lowland forest habitat, people who let their dogs roam free or who go pig hunting with their dogs, people who drive too fast and people who feed cassowaries, attracting them into urban areas where these dangers abound. Of all of these threats, habitat destruction is undoubtedly the most significant, however, particularly in areas such as Mission Beach, where it is estimated that 42% of critical cassowary habitat on freehold land has been cleared since 1992, primarily for residential development.

Over the past two years the Commonwealth and State Governments have established a community based program to implement urgent on-ground action to minimise the risks to individual cassowaries known to be located in specific hot spots. This program has pooled the skills and resources available in our community to implement measures which improve the survival chances of cassowaries living close to human habitation. These measures include traffic calming initiatives, dog control programs in four shires, providing rescue kits to wildlife groups, developing a safe and effective sedative for use on injured birds, training of local vets and detailed surveying of cassowaries in the Kuranda, Daintree, Mission Beach, Innisfail and Cairns hillslopes areas.

A regional road signage program is being developed and trials to improve the accuracy of surveys by extracting DNA from cassowary dung are under way. The program is coordinated by the Wet Tropics Cassowary Advisory Group, which includes representatives from councils, conservation groups, wildlife parks, conservation agencies, research institutions and, recently, the Department of Main Roads.

I pay tribute to the committee chair, George Mansford, and all of those community groups and individuals who have been responsible for implementing these critical management measures, including the Community for Coastal and Cassowary Conservation, known as C4, in Mission Beach, Envirocare in Kuranda and the Daintree Cassowary Care Group. There is no doubt that the cassowaries' chances of survival would be significantly less without the time and effort put in by dedicated volunteers and professional officers associated with the Cassowary Advisory Committee, particularly John McIntyre from the Wet Tropics Management Authority.

Continuing road deaths in Mission Beach and a series of recent events point to the need to improve our efforts still further. Henry, a well-known and well-loved cassowary at Lake Barrine, had to be put down after he was injured by a vehicle. Three juvenile birds in the Kuranda area were found in a small pocket of rainforest adjacent to a residential area, where they were at risk from dogs and cars. Just last week another juvenile bird had to be relocated from a residential area at Lake Placid near Cairns to the Barron Gorge National Park because the threats to its survival there were judged to be too great.

The Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service needs to fast-track a strategic plan for cassowary conservation first put forward in February this year. The broad strategy objectives are: identify priority areas for cassowary habitat protection; reduce loss of critical cassowary habitat; reduce known

threats to cassowaries by continuing the program of community action; and gather essential information for management. The implementation of actions to achieve these objectives over a four-year period requires a budget of some \$300,000 and the appointment of a cassowary project officer dedicated to coordinating and progressing the strategic plan. The strategy also includes the formation of a cassowary recovery team and the preparation of a formal cassowary recovery plan.

The threats to cassowaries are undoubtedly greatest in the Mission Beach area. A State lands strategy was released in 1995 which took account of the views of stakeholders and recommended reserving some State lands as national park. Land was also proposed to go into reserves of various kinds, including strategic land management reserves, which simply hold the land until further investigation determines its most appropriate use.

The Environmental Protection Agency has just completed a report entitled the Importance of State Land at Mission Beach and Cassowary Habitat, which highlights the recent habitat loss and increased need for conversion of unallocated State land to protected area status.

As a result of this report, the Department of Natural Resources has decided to initiate a full review of the original 1995 strategy involving all of the original stakeholders. Whilst this may ultimately result in more State land being recommended for national park status, the local conservation group C4 is extremely concerned about the DNR review.

I share the concern of C4 because the Cardwell Shire has indicated to the Department of Natural Resources that it considers that the review of this strategy should be undertaken as part of its planning scheme review process, due to be completed in three years' time. This move will clearly significantly delay the review and may be used to question the national park proposals in the original 1995 land strategy. It is essential that the Department of Natural Resources either rejects this delaying tactic on the part of this council and completes the review in a timely fashion or else immediately gazettes as national park those areas recommended in the 1995 strategy and then deliberate over the most appropriate use for the strategic land management reserves and other reserves.

At the very least, the Minister for Environment and Natural Resources needs to send a clear message to the community that the areas of critical cassowary habitat already proposed for national park in the 1995 strategy will not be up for grabs for other uses in the current DNR review.
