



Speech by

Hon. R. WELFORD

MEMBER FOR EVERTON

Hansard 15 April 1999

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Whale Watching

Hon. R. J. WELFORD (Everton—ALP) (Minister for Environment and Heritage and Minister for Natural Resources) (9.59 a.m.), by leave: A couple of years ago the coalition Government attempted to introduce a total of five new whale-watching permits in Moreton Bay. This was contrary to departmental advice and contrary to the best independent scientific advice. It was also well before the finalisation of the conservation plan for whales and dolphins—a requirement of the Nature Conservation Act. This demonstrated the contempt the coalition had for Queensland's environment and unique and precious wildlife. This irresponsible push threatened our valuable tourist industry in Hervey Bay and was roundly condemned by both industry and conservationists, and rightly so.

Prior to coming into Government we researched the scientific advice and campaigned against the move, both in this House and through the media.

Opposition members interjected.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! I wish to hear this statement.

Mr WELFORD: Unlike those on the other side of this Chamber, we consulted the people who have the knowledge and the expertise. The result was a reduction in the number of permits issued, from five to three. We should keep in mind that this was a whale species that was at that time listed by Commonwealth authorities as an endangered species.

We went to the June State election last year with a clear commitment to reverse the decision in an attempt to reposition the Queensland whale-watching industry on a sound scientific basis. We determined not to issue further whale-watching permits in Moreton Bay unless and until further scientific evidence supported such a shift. Out of fairness to the operators, a decision was taken to allow the existing permits to run their course while we looked at all available evidence.

Towards the end of last year I opened the Australia and New Zealand Humpback Whale Research and Conservation Seminar, held here in Brisbane, which brought together pre-eminent marine biologists with an interest in humpback whale research. Participants came from as far away as the USA, South Africa and the south-west Pacific. Papers from that seminar advanced the scientific advice on which we have based our policy. We have not just made a knee-jerk political response like that of the coalition.

The Federal Government has since downgraded the risk status of the humpback whale from endangered to vulnerable. These two factors—the scientific advice and the Federal Government recognition of the gradual recovery of the humpback whale populations—have meant that the evidence on which to base policy decisions has now been updated. We have always said that we will listen and make decisions on what we learn. A refusal to adjust policy on the basis of sound scientific evidence does not stand up to scrutiny.

For these reasons, Cabinet has decided to further limit whale-watching permits in Moreton Bay to just two—not the five the Borbidge Government wanted. This will provide for a viable industry in both Moreton Bay and Hervey Bay. We will also put in place stringent monitoring programs, in both Moreton Bay and Hervey Bay, to ensure there will be no impacts on migrating humpback whales from existing

operators. This is in keeping with the precautionary approach to whale management being promoted by whale scientists. Research by Queensland Tourism indicates that a Moreton Bay industry of this size poses no threat to the Hervey Bay industry. Hervey Bay jobs will not be jeopardised. And Redcliffe jobs—in your electorate, Mr Speaker—will be secure.

This is a genuine win-win outcome. The Moreton Bay operators can continue to employ locals. The whales will be protected and their recovery monitored, and Hervey Bay will continue to prosper.
