



Speech by

Mr. R. CONNOR

MEMBER FOR NERANG

Hansard 17 May 2000

NATIONAL PARK ESTATE

Mr CONNOR (Nerang—LP) (6.33 p.m.): I speak to this motion mostly from my electorate's perspective, in that more than half the electorate of Nerang is either national park, State forest or Crown reserve. What has instigated this motion before the Parliament is a damning report recently released by the Local Government Association of Queensland. The report clearly shows chronic under-funding of Queensland's national parks. But it goes much further than that, and I will detail that briefly. I then wish to relate these issues to my electorate in particular.

Firstly, I want to refer to a few relevant sections from the report. The report stated—

"The evidence presented to the inquiry paints a clear picture of a chronic, under-funded national parks system in the 1990s and further, the on the ground resources are not sufficient to effectively maintain the conservation values of the estate and maintain existing capital assets, let alone provide the visitors experiences, which are an integral part of the internationally recognised role of national park."

Secondly, and of particular relevance to the hinterland of the Gold Coast, the report stated—

"The view was expressed that the organisation culture encourages a focus on protection of the environment with visitors being looked on as a burden to management."

I wish to deal with this last point in detail. The hinterland of the Gold Coast is in the process of establishing fledgling ecotourism. More and more international tourists have expressed the desire to have environmental experiences on their travels.

The Gold Coast hinterland is in such close proximity to other Gold Coast accommodation and facilities that this puts it in a unique position to take advantage of this potential in tourism numbers and the jobs that go with it. That being said, it is essential that Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service has a more progressive culture when dealing with matters of this type. I am not suggesting that the environment should be compromised because, let us face it, that is what the tourists are coming to see. Quite clearly, the report has found that moves to change the culture to a more visitor focused one are being frustrated from within.

The report went on to say that there needed to be more community consultation and involvement in the management of these parks to allow a greater "ownership" by the community of this resource. In recent times on the Gold Coast, and in particular in the Nerang State Forest—I know it is not a national park, but it is similar—I have often come across a less than adequate response by departmental officers in response to community expectations. Often, major changes in usage have been made to these areas with no consultation and no understanding of what the local community is looking for.

On another matter within the report, there is one area that I strongly disagree with and that is the report's recommendation that a greater use should be made of user-pay approaches. In particular, it targets independent day trippers as the area that must be focused upon within this group.

I have no problems with charges being made for car parking, camping or other more intensive uses of national parks. However, to charge an entrance fee, which is what this report is proposing, is totally unacceptable in the national parks in my electorate.

As I said before, we have a fledgling tourism industry developing around the national parks. All an entrance charge would do is kill that growth. If this Government wants to increase its revenue from national parks, it should look at value adding to the experience with other less than conventional amenities for which it can charge. However, an entrance fee for conventional uses such as walking and sightseeing within the national parks is simply not on.

I have little doubt that if a user-charge of this type was instituted, national parks such as those in my electorate which are close to tourism facilities, would simply end up being milch cows for the Government.

Quite clearly, however, as the Local Government Association report shows, there is chronic under-funding within these parks. With community involvement, a range of alternatives for maintaining our parks can be developed. Work for the dole, combined with innovative concepts or approaches, could very easily be used to deal with some of the results of this chronic underfunding. Properly maintaining the facilities and ensuring safety issues are dealt with can be effectively handled with more innovative approaches.

I would like to add a couple of comments on Nature Link, in that the Nature Link issue is a major issue within my electorate. It would be remiss of me not to comment on this matter in this debate. The issues surrounding Nature Link are obviously controversial. I want to put on record exactly what is my position.

Firstly, it must be clearly understood that the proposed project is at a very early stage and that many of the assessments are yet to be completed. But I want to make it clear that I will support any project in my electorate that creates jobs for local youth, that has minimum environmental impact and that is sustainable. Clearly, a project such as Nature Link, properly handled, can deliver jobs for our local youth. The question is: can it do it with minimal environmental impact and with sustainability? That question has not yet been answered and I reserve my final position in relation to Nature Link until this work has been done.
