



Speech by

Hon. D. WELLS

MEMBER FOR MURRUMBA

Hansard 31 October 2002

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Whale Watching

Hon. D. M. WELLS (Murrumba—ALP) (Minister for Environment) (10.02 a.m.), by leave: The Hervey Bay Marine Park is a popular stopover for the humpback whales during their northern and southern migrations that follow the east coast of Queensland within 10 kilometres of the shore. I went to Hervey Bay in August for the launch of the whale watching season this year, which continues until the end of November.

The Hervey Bay and Moreton Bay marine parks are the only two areas where the Environmental Protection Agency allows commercial whale watching to take place. A total of 18 permitted operators conduct activities in Hervey Bay while two operate in Moreton Bay. A general code of practice has been developed for both recreational and commercial whale watching operators and Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service rangers monitor the whales and their interactions with people. Education programs have been instigated in an attempt to protect the whales from harassment and to ensure the safety of people who have close encounters with these magnificent animals.

Recent research indicates that there are no signs that whale watching has resulted in any changes in the rate of recovery of this species. In fact, there has been a significant recovery in the population of eastern Australian humpback whales, with numbers increasing from about 500 in the early 1960s when commercial whaling was stopped to more than 4,000 in 1998, the last time a census was carried out. The rate of population increase has been estimated to be in the order of 11 per cent a year and there are no indications that this trend is slowing. The remarkable increase has resulted from international bans on whaling.

I have said to honourable members before that the more intelligent a species is, the easier it is to manage them if we do the right thing. There is a lot of science in ecology, but there is also a lot of commonsense. The whales know from experience that the boats that come out with human beings seeking to observe them are no longer a threat to them. They do not stress them, provided people do the right things and do not harass them. Consequently the tourist industry, which is increasingly basing itself on whale watching, is not any threat or any inconvenience to the whales and will not slow down their breeding recovery rate. I am pleased to report to honourable members that record sightings of whales were achieved off Point Lookout at North Stradbroke Island and at Moreton Island.

The Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service produces an annual strandings report that documents all cetacean and marine whale strandings. Since the start of the whale watching season this year, there has been one recorded humpback stranded. Another whale was caught in a shark net in Queensland and subsequently released. I am also pleased to report to the House that during the whale watching season, the public, including recreational fishermen, observed the distances that they needed to observe to stay away from the whales. The rangers in Hervey Bay and Moreton Bay reported general compliance with the laws in observing whales from safe distances. As a result, there were no prosecutions necessary this year. This is something of which the public of Queensland ought to be proud. The Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service will continue to promote safe whale watching practices and encourage more people to see and learn about these superb creatures.