



Speech by

Hon. D. WELLS

MEMBER FOR MURRUMBA

Hansard 9 September 2003

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Migaloo Research Project

Hon. D. M. WELLS (Murrumba—ALP) (Minister for Environment) (9.59 a.m.): Last year I released a state government report highlighting the recovery of the humpback whale. Five hundred whales were recorded in the early 1960s and more than 4,000 were recorded in 1998. The eastern Australian group is increasing by around 11 per cent each year. Since 1997 the humpback has been managed in Queensland waters under a conservation plan and management policy for whales and dolphins, and I acknowledge the bipartisan origins of that plan.

Humpback whales travel along the east coast of Australia from June to November each year. This year a white humpback, Migaloo, was recorded travelling along the east coast. This white whale was first sighted in 1991. He is not seen in Queensland waters every year. There is still a lot that we do not know about this white whale, because Migaloo is a bit of a paradox. Migaloo is an albino. In most species albinism is usually associated with early death or infertility, but Migaloo is an adult singing male. That means that Migaloo is looking for romance. So the question is: is this white whale capable of siring children? Is Migaloo a daddy or does Migaloo simply want to be a daddy, or is it the case perhaps—and this is a most interesting scientific hypothesis—that albinism, which prevents reproduction in smaller species, is irrelevant to larger species?

An opposition member interjected.

Mr WELLS: I hate to think what would happen to the Smart State if somebody with so little interest as that in science actually found himself on the Treasury benches.

Last month I gave permission for scientists to make a close approach to Migaloo. Biological information is to be obtained to check his health after a recent collision with a vessel. I gave permission to the scientists to enter the 500-metre exclusion zone which I have declared around Migaloo as a special interest whale because I believe that we could learn valuable information that could assist in the management of whales in Queensland.

The scientists are particularly interested in taking a skin sample to test Migaloo's DNA. This non-invasive procedure will involve the collection of skin cells from around the whale. Whales shed fragments of skin the size of a hand when they break the surface of the water. The samples will enable researchers to record Migaloo's DNA and determine if he is parenting offspring. Together with samples from other whales, the research will give us an insight into the population dynamics and robustness of the whale herd. The project is a collaborative effort. Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service researchers will collect the samples while specialists in modern DNA analysis will test the DNA. This is obviously an important project for whale conservation and management in Queensland and something of world scientific interest.

Our task is to locate Migaloo. Last week my department had a positive sighting of Migaloo off the central Queensland coast. We will proceed with the scientific mission I have referred to the moment Migaloo appears in suitable waters. Also, sightings are helpful for tracking his progress. I invite honourable members to encourage their constituents to report any further sightings of Migaloo to my department.

Mr SPEAKER: I call the Minister for Public Works and Minister for Housing.

Mr Seeney interjected.