



Speech by
Lesley Clark

MEMBER FOR BARRON RIVER

Hansard Thursday, 20 May 2004

NATURE CONSERVATION AMENDMENT BILL

Dr LESLEY CLARK (Barron River—ALP) (4.24 p.m.): I am pleased to rise to support the debate for the Nature Conservation Amendment Bill. As with other members, I would like to congratulate the minister on his elevation. I look forward to next week when the minister makes his first visit to far-north Queensland, where he will be meeting with a whole range of people and coming to grips with some of the many issues that we have in far-north Queensland.

It is a pleasure to support this particular piece of legislation because it was an election commitment to introduce additional categories of protected wildlife to the Nature Conservation Act consistent with those recognised by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. This bill will also facilitate managing wildlife in Queensland by providing a consistent, explicit, objective framework for the classification of species according to their extinction risk. There was considerable consultation carried out in the preparation of this bill and there is great support for it. I am pleased to see the opposition also providing support.

As a result of that consultation, the following IUCN wildlife categories are being proposed for the Nature Conservation Act: extinct in the wild, endangered, vulnerable, near threatened and least concern. These categories are based on population size, extent of distribution and rate of change in population size. There has been mention of only five of the nine IUCN wildlife categories that have been proposed for this bill and the minister will take up and explain that further, but we believe that it would have made it unnecessarily complex and would not provide any additional advantage to the conservation or management of wildlife in Queensland.

I would like to particularly mention the new conservation category of near threatened because I think that is of particular importance. I think quite often we can wait until it is too late, until something is almost extinct, before we put sufficient resources into it. It makes sense to act when we identify a species as near threatened to prevent it moving further along the extinction route. There is no doubt that is a much better kind of management for wildlife, and it is good to see that category included in the bill.

It is intended to retain the rare category which is our own for the time being, although it is inconsistent with IUCN categories, because it will take us time to reassess the 843 species currently listed as rare and assign them to one of the other categories.

I would like to make particular mention in my contribution to the debate of an animal that there is no doubt is endangered. It is listed as endangered in both Queensland and the Commonwealth. That is the cassowary, an icon species for far-north Queensland and one that until recently was on the emblem of the Wet Tropics Management Authority. It has been changed and I just want to assure members that it has not been changed because the Wet Tropics Management Authority did not think it was important or endangered. It was found through research that Japanese tourists thought it was a turkey of some sort. They were quite bewildered about what this animal was. It really was not a species that conveyed the importance of protecting our endangered species. They have moved to something more clearly identifiable across all cultures, and that is a green tree frog. The cassowary is very vulnerable. There are only, it is suggested, something like 1,500 of those animals left in the wild and possibly less. We do know that the

major threat is habitat destruction, although cars and dogs do a fair amount of damage as well. There was, back in 2001, a recovery plan produced for the cassowary that went from 2001 to 2005 and at that stage it was identified that only 22 per cent of the remaining habitat had no conservation protection.

There is no doubt that, since that time, more has probably been lost. On the plus side, we have protected a lot more of its habitat with the Vegetation Management Act. I was pleased to see an election commitment of this government was an additional \$5 million for buying back critical habitat in the Daintree. I hope the federal government will meet its obligations and match that amount. Five million dollars will come from the levy funds raised with people going across the Daintree River.

Mr O'Brien interjected.

Dr LESLEY CLARK: As the member for Cook knows, that is a very important area and he is working very hard to ensure that there are excellent conservation outcomes in the Daintree.

The Australian Rainforest Foundation is also involved there. It is involved in buying back parcels of land, amalgamating those, putting conservation protection across them and then selling them so as to retain many of the blocks Quaid subdivided back in 1980s. The one hectare blocks were totally inappropriate in a magnificent place like the Daintree.

I mention the wonderful conservation organisations and groups that are particularly focused on cassowary conservation. Enviro Care is based in the Kuranda region. It has been doing wonderful work revegetating a cassowary corridor on the tablelands. TREAT, Trees for the Evelyn and Atherton Tablelands, does magnificent rehabilitation work.

Mission Beach is where the largest number of cassowaries still remain. C4 does incredible conservation and education work. I want to commend it for what it does. In the Daintree there is another group called Cassowary Care which is also doing excellent work. We understand that we have to work with voluntary organisations on the ground that are compassionate and committed and doing wonderful work.

In terms of research, great work is being done by the rainforest CRC which, as we know, is under threat. I was pleased to read in the *Cairns Post* this morning that there is some suggestion that those two CRCs—the reef and rainforest CRCs—might be amalgamated and retained. It is just as well, because the federal government is making a terrible mistake by not funding those CRCs. I am sure that all members in this House would agree that that is something that needs funding.

As I have mentioned, the Wet Tropics Management Authority does excellent work in terms of education—particularly education in schools. It has kits for primary schoolchildren whereby we can actually put the effort into educating children as to how important it is to preserve and protect species such as the cassowary.

The Department of Main Roads has done its part in far-north Queensland, particularly in the Mission Beach area where people are travelling along the roads quite quickly. With the size of the signs that we now have on the main roads into Mission Beach, nobody could be under any doubt of the need to slow down.

An opposition member interjected.

Dr LESLEY CLARK: They are in the endangered category. It took a little while for the Commonwealth to list them as endangered. Now both the Commonwealth and Queensland have them listed as endangered. We are consistent in our approach and recognise the importance of cassowary protection.

Sadly, they are no longer close to Cairns. There was one in Mount Whitfield Conservation Park a few years ago, but dogs were responsible, I am afraid, for finishing that one off. There have been suggestions of sightings, but no-one is really sure. We certainly would like to think there are cassowaries there. Certainly they are within my electorate in the Kuranda area. The Black Mountain Road is an area where we have many cassowaries. Cars and bikes are an issue in terms of the speed they go along Black Mountain Road.

I notice that the recovery plan is due to be reviewed in July of this year. I think obviously that does give us another opportunity to re-evaluate how successful our strategies have been up to this point in time. It is proposed that there will be another recovery plan that will be finalised by December of this year. I look forward to the consultation that will be involved in that and formulating another recovery plan because obviously there is still more work that needs to be done.

The cassowary is a species that we cannot let go. We cannot obviously ever allow this species to become extinct. It would be a travesty to lose such an icon of the Wet Tropics. Obviously, I want to encourage everybody, wherever they are in far-north Queensland, to do their part to preserve this wonderful species. I commend the bill to the House.