



Speech by

Marc Rowell

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

Hansard Tuesday, 7 March 2006

RECREATION AREAS MANAGEMENT BILL

Mr ROWELL (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (4.33 pm): I rise to speak to the Recreation Areas Management Bill. This is a particularly important bill for Queensland. There are many recreation areas throughout the state, such as Fraser Island, Moreton Island, Green Island, Bribie Island and Inskip peninsula. While they are restricted at the present time, I believe that there is the prospect of other things happening to recreation areas in the future. To some degree, that raises concern for me.

It is difficult to understand why the repeal of the Recreation Areas Management Act 1988 has to occur. It was brought in by the National Party. I think people should find it interesting that we were very concerned about what was happening on Fraser Island. Of course, at the time there was a high level of four-wheel drive activity over there.

The intention of the National Party was to ensure that good and safe practices were adopted in important recreation areas. The act that this legislation will supersede was brought in by a party that many members on the other side of politics say has no interest in the environment. That puts the lie to that opinion. In fact, we were concerned to ensure that the right thing happened in many recreation areas.

The Queensland Recreation Areas Management Authority Board, and its functions and responsibilities, will be abolished under this legislation. That was a facility where people were administering the act and, unfortunately, it will be abolished. As I understand this legislation, the bill vests those powers within the Minister for the Environment, Local Government and Women and the chief executive of the EPA. That seems restrictive.

It is not clear in the bill how much more input there will be into decision making about recreation areas. It appears to be very limited. I can only say that many local authorities throughout the state, and no doubt within areas that the bill now covers, will be extremely interested and will want to participate in matters affecting the future direction of recreation areas. I can only hope that common sense will prevail.

There are elements within the legislation that appear to be very restrictive. It states that local laws will be recognised but that they must be consistent with this bill. There needs to be a lot more consultation. I do not see that happening as far as local authorities are concerned. They have a very keen interest in what happens in their local areas.

There is the reversal of the onus of proof. Many members on this side have expressed concern about that provision. For a person working for an organisation conducting tours, or for the organisation itself, to prove they are not guilty under the reversal of the onus of proof will be very detrimental and goes against many principles of democracy. It concerns me greatly when this type of legislation is brought in.

I find the signage provisions relating to the use of signs quite amusing. I know of the difficulties there have been of people adhering to the signage requirements that are set down by the national parks. An incident occurred at Crystal Creek, not too far from where I live, in a national park area. People were not taking much notice of the signs placed there.

I was asked by the *Townsville Bulletin* for a comment. I said that it is difficult to put a sign up for everything, whether it is lighting a fire—which is fair enough—or slippery rocks, which was the particular

case with this incident. At Crystal Creek, a person fell some distance and ended up on some boulders down in the creek itself. It is unreasonable to have to place signage to a level that protect people against themselves. This legislation contains particular references to the issue of signage. I am a little amused by that and I want to know just how all of this will work. The cost of implementation will be met by the EPA.

Difficult situations exist with pigs, pests, sicklepod and hymenachne, and all those sorts of things in national parks. We had a meeting with the minister about this particular issue. The damage done by pigs in national parks and in recreation areas is very, very significant and particularly detrimental. Very often if a recreation area or national park adjoins a freehold property that grows crops that are conducive to attracting pigs, it is particularly hard.

I hope that the minister will find some resolution to that through the ministerial council, through World Heritage listing and through national parks.

The people who have approached us are very professional. They are very dedicated. I only hope that we can find some resources and do some professional trials so that we can deal with pests—pigs in particular—and other pests of a vegetative nature such as sicklepod and hymenachne within national parks that then flow on to private property and have a severe impact.

Tourism and recreational activities within national parks and certainly through the recreation areas is one of the key aspects of the bill. We are witnessing the requirements that relate to camping, the walking tracks and those sorts of things. I can relate to what is happening in relation to the Wallaman Falls to Blencoe Falls walking track and of course the east coast walking track. I am not quite sure if it is the future intention of Parks and Wildlife to make them recreation areas so that people will have to pay charges to enter the national parks. Currently people pay small fees for a permit and so on to get into some of these areas. Places like the east coast walking track are world renowned. In fact, many Europeans are saying that it is probably one of the best walking tracks in the world. We want to enhance these areas as much as possible and keep them in good condition. We can certainly limit the amount of traffic, for want of a better word, the number of people who use these walking tracks, to ensure that their use does not do damage to them. That would certainly not be in the best interests of imparting the value of our national parks and allowing people to enjoy the experience.

I believe that the management plan is out of kilter. I understand that it is approved by the Governor in Council and the plan is then gazetted. It is not tabled in parliament. It is not subject to subordinate legislation and we cannot move a disallowance motion against it. So it virtually has no scrutiny whatsoever by the parliament. I believe this goes against the principles about which many members on this side have spoken. I believe it is not fair to have a management plan with no way for all sides of parliament to examine it via a disallowance motion or some other input. It is not reasonable. It is this type of thing that makes it very difficult for me to support the legislation.

There will be guidelines for the use of recreation areas and they are going to be declared by regulations. In that particular case there will be a chance to move a disallowance motion if there is concern about the fees that are going to be set down by the regulations. I believe the issue of fees is going to be quite an interesting one. I will be interested to see whether it is just cost recovery or a little bit more than cost recovery that is going to be woven into the fees that will be charged in relation to recreation areas.

I want to speak briefly about private land and property holders and the dedication of areas for recreation areas. I have a few questions on which I would like a response from the minister. Who is going to be paying the rates if it is a freehold area? What will be the remuneration? Will there be any remuneration paid to those people who either willingly or forcefully have their areas included in a recreation area plan—and I hope forcing them is not an option. Then there are the indemnity issues relating to people transgressing and using those areas. If they are on private property, will the indemnity issues be covered by the government? We would not want to see a private landholder who has a freehold or leasehold piece of land under his jurisdiction being sued because of something that may have occurred. I hark back to the rocks at Crystal Creek. If a landholder had an area such as that and a person fell down and then decided there was not adequate signage in that particular area, would the indemnity be covered by the government or would the liability stay with the person who owns the property? Then there are other issues such as will he be able to control pests, weeds et cetera on that particular tract of land. If they are not looked after they will get out of control. Will Parks and Wildlife, the rangers or those people involved in the recreation areas look after those types of things and make sure that we do not have weed and pest infestation in these areas?

The periods of commercial agreements are quite interesting. There has to be adequate time for commercial enterprises to sign an agreement because often there is the need for them to invest finances in a range of things—it could be boats, camping gear, et cetera—to allow people to have an experience. I am not absolutely clear. I know there is a very long section in the legislation dealing with it. I find it a little bit difficult to pick up exactly where a commercial enterprise stands in relation to this.

Community fees are a very interesting item, too, because there are schools and other community groups that want to go and spend some time in these recreation areas as against the likes of commercial

fees by which somebody might conduct a tour. There would be a differentiation between the fees paid by the average person who wants to spend time in a national park as against the commercial activity. While I cannot see it in the legislation, I believe that may well come in by way of regulation. It certainly is a major item. We would not want to see the recovery of costs being sheeted home to the average person who wants to have some recreation time in these areas.

Generally I have some major concerns about the legislation and I find it difficult to support. The legislation is very wordy. There is a degree of conflict involved in it—

Mr Lawlor: Did you say there are a lot of words?

Mr ROWELL: Yes. The member opposite would be the one to bring up words, because he would not know which way is up. I think it is important that we recognise that people are greatly concerned by the onus of proof, the fees that will be charged, the conflict about operations and what they actually will mean at the end of the day. Unfortunately, many of these aspects will only be seen when we have a look at the regulations that will be brought in as a result of the bill that is being put before us today.