



Speech by

Robert Messenger

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

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ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

Mr MESSENGER (Burnett—NPA) (12.00 pm): There has been an unfortunate and sad breakdown in the relationship between the Queensland community and officers of the EPA. This breakdown and resulting dysfunctional relationship between campers, four-wheel drivers, wildlife carers, small businesses, conservationists, local community, EPA rangers and Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service officers has come about because of this government's policy of community disengagement.

On unofficial directions from the environment minister, her rangers have been forced to withdraw their contact from local communities. This policy of community disengagement has hurt the reputations and good standing of rangers; it has hurt the local communities, as witnessed in the Fraser Island and Rainbow Beach fiascos; and, perhaps most sadly, this Labor government policy of community disengagement has hurt the environment. It has meant that the unique Queensland flora and fauna has had to suffer as well.

Over the recent Christmas break and new year holiday period, I visited the communities of Rainbow Beach and Tin Can Bay to investigate the issues of concern—camping and dolphin feeding. It was in these communities where I witnessed firsthand the dysfunctional nature of the relationship and lack of trust between the local community and rangers, which prompted me to write a letter to the *Gympie Times*. In that letter I made the points that our environment minister had not even taken the time to visit and see firsthand what was happening and that she is clueless when it comes to understanding issues like dolphin feeding and camping closures at Inskip Point and Tuncumba. That can be best demonstrated by her famous comment, 'We don't want fat dolphins,' and the subsequent dolphin feeding backflip.

My letter also made the observations that, if the minister took the time to talk with the communities, she would realise that she has a crisis on her hands. The relationship between communities, EPA and Queensland Parks and Wildlife officers is dysfunctional. It was made very clear to me, in both Rainbow Beach and Tin Can Bay, that the locals believe that the officers are lazy and do little. The environment will be better protected if the minister listens more to local wisdom and less to her incompetent advisers and politically correct spin doctors.

The Chair of the Queensland Rangers Association, Frank Mills, recently contacted me and informed me that my letter and comments were, as the minister pointed out this morning, accusatory and inflammatory statements that are disobliging at best to those rangers described. He also pointed out to me that these officers perform a difficult job in trying and unsafe circumstances. Mr Mills asked that I apologise for these statements in the *Gympie Times*.

In a recent phone call to Mr Mills, I apologised for the distress my comments caused to his members, who I know, and acknowledge, are very professional and are performing a difficult job in trying and unsafe circumstances. However, Mr Mills also acknowledged that I was faithfully and truthfully reporting community sentiment and feeling and that he was concerned and surprised about that feeling, that reality.

The truth of the matter still remains that the relationship between the community and rangers has broken down. It is dysfunctional. There is a lack of trust, and that lack of trust is because of this government's policy of community disengagement.

A conservative government will work with rangers and local communities to build relationships that will restore trust and implement an optimistic environmental policy. A simple and cost-effective method of restoring community confidence is to direct senior EPA officers to meet with and visit community groups such as wildlife carers, even Neighbourhood Watch. An officer's first task would be to listen to the community's environmental concerns and rebuild those relationships. Relationship building reports detailing local community issues and concerns would be an integral part of an EPA officer's job. These reports would be sent to the environment minister and would ensure that the government of the day was aware of local issues and able to implement a systemic approach to proactive and flexible problem solving. A conservative government will repair and strengthen the relationship between community and ranger.

Because of the government's ignorance and divisive environmental policies, our rangers are the meat in the sandwich. Because of this government's ignorance and divisive environmental policies, our communities are being disempowered and their wisdom is lost.

Time expired.