




Speech By
Dale Last

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

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NATURE CONSERVATION AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr LAST** (Burdekin—LNP) (9.00 pm): I rise to speak against the Nature Conservation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2015. The proposed bill raises many concerns, particularly the exclusion of leases used for agriculture, grazing or pastoral purposes on protected areas from the rolling term lease provisions under the Land Act 1994. Queensland has the largest area of agricultural land of any Australian state and the highest proportion of land area in Australia dedicated to agriculture. Agriculture is certainly a major component of the patchwork sugarcane fields, horticultural and grazing lands which make up my electorate of the Burdekin. About 30,500 businesses carry out agricultural activity in Queensland, with these industries contributing more than \$10 billion to the state's economy each year.

This change is yet another attack on our already stressed agricultural sector and will potentially result in the loss of up to 78 agricultural leases across Queensland. Many of these leases have been run in a sustainable manner by farming families for generations and there is no justification for the proposed change to the existing legislation. This change will only make subservient other current important objectives such as land management, input from local Indigenous people and the use and enjoyment of protected areas by the community. These changes will be detrimental to the long-term viability of national parks because traditional owners' input regarding national parks land management and the use and enjoyment of protected areas by the community, particularly when it comes to education and recreation, are not subservient to preservation but are vital to it. Indeed, the preservation of our national parks should not mean that we shut the gates and stop Queenslanders, tourists and schoolchildren from experiencing and enjoying the remarkable experience nature has to offer. After all, how can people be encouraged to protect and preserve something if they cannot experience it first hand.

Mr Costigan: If it's locked up like Fort Knox then they can't.

Mr LAST: That's true. The future preservation of our national parks is reliant on the proper education of our younger generations and this cannot be done by showing pictures in books, it has to be taught by immersing them directly in nature. We have numerous excellent school camp and tourist operators working within our national parks and if the proposed changes go ahead many of these operators will be forced to shut down and there will be job losses. Queensland is known for its remarkable tourist experience and we cannot afford as a state to restrict existing operations further. We should be supporting and helping these businesses to grow, not restricting their futures.

The proposed changes which state, inter alia, that the deciding power on whether leases are renewed will now rest solely with a department head with absolutely no right of appeal for the leaseholder is of particular concern to me. I have firsthand experience of national parks which have been poorly managed and simply become sanctuaries for feral animals and noxious weeds. Lakefield National Park in Cape York is a prime example of a large area of land, largely inaccessible to the general public, which is overrun with feral animals. If we are to preserve our national parks and ensure that they

are maintained and operated in an appropriate manner then it is vitally important that the appropriate resources are provided to ensure this occurs. As a former police officer who worked closely with National Parks staff, I can attest to the threat our parks are under from illegal activity such as the growing of drugs, fishing, hunting and bird smuggling. A key component of any management plan is local input from residents, graziers, tourism operators, National Parks staff and local Indigenous groups who live in the area, understand the area and are best situated to provide the necessary advice on how the park should be managed, not some bureaucrat in Brisbane.

I have the Wongaloo Regional Park, encompassing the Cromarty Wetlands, in my electorate—a park, I might add, that has been visited by the minister who has witnessed firsthand the benefits that grazing cattle in conservation areas can have. I have an article here from the *North Queensland Register*, with the headline ‘Cattle have come to the rescue of Australia’s most important bird habitats.’ I table that document.

Tabled paper: Article from the North Queensland Register online, dated 9 September 2015, titled ‘Cattle rescue NQ’s birds’ [\[654\]](#).

Cattle are being utilised to control invasive weeds that would otherwise destroy the habitat for breeding and nesting birdlife. The critical issue for this area is that a part of the Cromarty Wetlands complex has been turned into national park: that part of Bowling Green Bay National Park east of the Australian Institute of Marine Science road. There are many references to the need for this area, approximately a thousand acres, to be grazed and it is now effectively lost as a viable water fowl grazing, feeding and breeding ground through the overgrowth of exotic aquatic weeds—hymenachne in particular.

The national park area is that area where broilgas commence their annual congregation and then they gradually move on to the Bowling Green Bay Conservation Park and Wongaloo. This area is the site of the largest ever accredited congregation of broilgas ever recorded in Australia. In recent years this congregation has diminished and without question the diminution has been as a result of the loss of habitat at the northern end due to uncontrolled weed growth. The only effective means of combatting these weeds is by grazing cattle—using one exotic to control another exotic. There should be the capacity to use such practical means where no other means exist. In effect, the legislation is protecting exotic weeds not wildlife simply because of a lack of understanding and a disconnect with practical land management issues.

The ongoing management of our national parks is contingent upon the allocation of appropriate resources. Our national parks should not become private fishing and hunting grounds for all and sundry, and it is imperative that our parks are properly managed with plans in place for controlling weeds and feral pest animals. I note the proposed amendments which will improve the rights of leaseholders, ensure that access to national parks is preserved for educational purposes and also for ecotourism operations. This is particularly relevant for areas such as the Wongaloo Regional Park, which has so much educational value by virtue of its accessibility and proximity to Townsville.

There is no point in locking up our national parks where the general public cannot access them. We need to open them up to the community so that we can educate visitors on the critical importance of maintaining our native flora and fauna. They need to experience it—to see it, to smell it and to listen to it—for only then will they truly appreciate the value of preserving these areas in a responsible manner. It is for that reason that I cannot support the bill before the House.