




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR MAIWAR

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**NATURE CONSERVATION (SPECIAL WILDLIFE RESERVES) AND OTHER
LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Mr BERKMAN** (Maiwar—Grn) (4.22 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Nature Conservation (Special Wildlife Reserves) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2018. It is vitally important that we expand and better manage the protected area estate in Queensland. This bill does go some way to achieving those dual outcomes.

Queensland is underperforming in terms of our national objectives for the creation and management of national parks. Commonwealth environment department figures show that less than nine per cent of Queensland is part of the national reserve system, which is, on their figures, the lowest proportion of any state or territory in Australia. Clearly we have lots to do in terms of not just improving the management of existing national parks but also expanding the national parks estate to meet those targets.

Preservation of our extraordinary biodiversity relies on Queensland doing a better job to develop a truly comprehensive, adequate and representative national parks estate. Our unique, endemic species in ecosystems are reliant on this. We need to bear in mind that this task is against the backdrop of climate change, which, as it takes hold, is going to drive landscape-scale change in ways that we cannot yet properly understand. That only increases the scale of the task that we have to deal with in ensuring preservation of our natural environment in Queensland.

I commend the government for taking steps to formally and permanently protect areas of outstanding natural value and for creating the mechanisms that we have not enjoyed previously. The bill provides stronger environmental protections than nature refuge status has previously. This is absolutely a positive step.

It is important that these protections are established in perpetuity to the greatest extent possible. I do believe that more could have been done to ensure this though. For example, the power to revoke a special wildlife reserve declaration could have been subject to further conditions that limit the revocation of a declaration. I acknowledge the amendments to the Land Act and the Land Title Act go some way towards safeguarding and continuing these protections.

It is also important to recognise that while private reserves like nature refuges and special wildlife reserves can play and will play an increasingly important role in meeting the challenge of establishing a truly comprehensive, adequate, representative national parks estate, this task absolutely requires government to play a primary role. The statistics I have just mentioned suggest that we are failing at that task.

I support the amendments to the EP Act that will allow Queensland to regulate environmentally relevant activities occurring in GBR catchments. As custodians of the reef, we have a responsibility to protect it. I will always welcome legislation that reflects this responsibility.

There are some concerns I have about the bill and some missed opportunities. Given the declaration of a special wildlife reserve is theoretically intended to be similar to a national park declaration, it follows that this new type of declaration should also require the consent of traditional owners. This should be sought through existing native title procedures—for example, by negotiating ILUAs to enable consistency with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. It is important to note that the omission of native title holders in the definition of landholder in this bill and the Nature Conservation Act more broadly are problematic features.

I share the views of a number of submissions made on the bill that it falls short in terms of transparency and accountability. Audits of the effectiveness and compliance with management plans for special wildlife reserves, I would suggest, should be conducted at least every five years. These audits should include regular on-the-ground conservation audits by appropriately qualified officers.

The bill provides for landholders to receive public funding to assist in conservation. There are no penalties for landholders who do not adhere to commitments in relation to special wildlife reserves. At a minimum, the public should be able to access and scrutinise management programs and conservation agreements and information on how they are being honoured and maintained over time. This could be done by including the material on the public register under the Nature Conservation Act.

Conversion of nature refuges to special wildlife reserves is also something that could, and I would suggest should, be better facilitated. The ecological values of nature refuges are already established by their very status as a nature refuge. This bill does not appear to me to take advantage of that fact to the extent it could. A number of submissions point to the need for a mechanism to promote the conversion of existing nature refuges to special wildlife reserves, extinguishing existing incompatible use and providing for rehabilitation.

New reserves are an improvement on nature refuge status because they exclude logging, mining and grazing activities. A number of submissions on the bill proposed further exclusions that would be more consistent with protection and conservation values, such as excluding all grazing not just commercial grazing, petroleum and pipeline leases which are notorious for their tendency to fragment habitat and introduce weeds into national parks and areas of ecological value and also the exclusion of private tourism activities on these reserves.

The bill's explanatory notes point to private protected areas forming an increasingly important part of the system in the future and also endorse public and private investment in this. The preference for private management of our precious natural environment over publicly owned management is part of a worrying trend that we are seeing. There is good reason to endorse the objective of the bill to give these new reserves equivalent conservation merit and protection to that of a national park, but the state cannot abrogate its own responsibilities to expand and manage national parks in accordance with the cardinal rule—that being the conservation of nature.

Reliance on private contributions to the national parks estate does reflect a tendency of this government to permit and even encourage private ecotourism activities in protected areas. For example, there were recent offers of long-term, exclusive leases of publicly owned national park land to private ecotourism operators in Hinchinbrook, Cooloola and Whitsunday. This was considered by many to be a method of privatisation by stealth, and I find it hard to disagree with that. Indeed, it appears to be quite contrary to the cardinal principle of national parks management. Responsible ecotourism can be a positive, but it should only be allowed outside, even adjacent to, high-level protected areas. This should include special wildlife reserves as well as national parks.

Briefly, in terms of funding, it is incredibly important that this initiative is adequately funded. Our national parks estate falls well below the federal target of 17 per cent, or our equivalent contribution to that. Given that they represent such a small area to avoid in terms of tourism, it clearly indicates that more needs to be done to expand and protect it. It is vital that the public costs for administration and financial incentives for special wildlife reserves receive special Treasury allocation over and above existing allocations for national parks management. Quite simply, these initiatives cannot be at the expense of national park management and expansion efforts already underway which are grossly underfunded. That said, I do support and endorse the bill. I commend the government for bringing it before the parliament and encourage further efforts as I have described.