

Parliamentary Inquiry Hearing into Public Land Management

On the 5th October 2012, The Parliamentary Committee Inquiry into the Management of Public land held a public hearing in Grafton. The Committee was formed at the initial suggestion of the Shooters and Fishers Party with support from some National Party Members. It is Chaired by the Hon Robert Brown, Shooters and Fishers, and the other Committee members consisted of 2 Labor Party Representatives, 2 liberal, 1 National and one Greens member.

As the Clarence Environment Centre had sent in a submission, we were invited to address the committee and answer questions. On the day I represented the CEC and shared the 'stage' with Leonie Blain, representing the Clarence Valley Conservation Coalition.

At the outset, we were allowed to make a statement, the following is the CEC's:

Statement to the Public Land Management Inquiry

“THE amount of bushland being cleared by logging in NSW soared last year to the highest level since state-wide records began in 1988”. That statement was made in the SMH on December 21, 2011, and was reporting from figures released by the Office of E&H. The Clarence Environment Centre understands that 2011 saw our local LGA topping the State for the loss of native vegetation for the second consecutive year, which reinforces our observations that our natural environment is under pressure as never before.

The vision of Australia’s Biodiversity Conservation Strategy 2010–2020 aims to ensure that: “Australia’s biodiversity is healthy, resilient to climate change and, importantly' valued for its essential contribution to our existence.”

In that respect the strategy, and also biodiversity management plans at all levels of government, identify that:

- Biodiversity is essential for our existence and is intrinsically valuable in its own right.***
- Biodiversity contributes to the healthy environments, clean air and water that support human life.***
- Biodiversity provides all the critical processes that make life possible.***
- Biodiversity is the basis for healthy, functioning ecosystems that are necessary to maintain essential ecosystem services like soil formation, nutrient storage and cycling, plant pollination, and pollution breakdown (NPWS 1999).”***

Under those circumstances, biodiversity protection and enhancement would seem to be a 'no brainer', and the management of public land in NSW, primarily national parks, conservation reserves, and state forests, all have biodiversity protection mandated as a core function.

In our submission we made the point that healthy ecosystems are essential to maintain resilience, particularly in the face of climate change. Therefore it was gratifying to read the CSIRO's recently released report calling for more conservation reserves to create greater resilience through a network of vegetated corridors.

It is important to understand that a properly functioning ecosystem takes hundreds of years to develop. The damage from clearing forests for mining, loss of habitat through excessive logging, or the negative impacts of other activities that destroy biodiversity, cannot be undone in an instant by rehabilitation of the site once the damage is done. The simple fact is, as pointed out by the IEA in January this year, and the CSIRO, we do not have the luxury of 200 years in which to act to contain climate change within levels where human life on earth can be

sustained. Therefore, we strongly believe that any activity that destroys forests or has the potential to pollute water cannot be justified unless there is an exceptionally high level of need.

We also echoed the “Australian Biodiversity Conservation Strategy's observation that it is important to place a value on native forests for the eco services they provide, rather than only the timber volumes that can be extracted, as is the current case.

Calculate if you will what it would cost to capture and store the carbon sequestered in a single old growth tree, and what it would cost us to mechanically separate life supporting oxygen from carbon dioxide. What would be the additional cost of filtering the water we drink if forests did not effectively do the job for us?

We should not forget the other function of a healthy ecosystem, that of protecting biodiversity which, as already stated, provides us humans with everything we eat, much of what we wear, and many of the medicinal products we currently enjoy.

The Clarence Valley alone is home to 206 threatened species, including 113 fauna, all of which are facing decline and possible extinction through habitat loss. Almost half the land-based animals listed as threatened on the north coast, are tree hollow dependent. Therefore, in terms of maintaining biodiversity, consider what it would cost to design, construct and install, a dozen fire resistant nest boxes in a tree, and maintain them for 200 years.

All these functions and more are provided to us free by our forests, and those are the values we currently ignore in our blind pursuit of unsustainable economic growth. We believe therefore it is imperative that native vegetation on our public land be valued appropriately, effectively managed, and fully protected.

Thank you.

We always knew that the Shooters and Fishers, and National Parties' agenda was to open up national parks to logging, grazing and Mining. The former make no secret of these ideals, which are all listed on their web site, and include hunting and a range of other high impact sporting and recreational activities. The Nationals on the other hand have not been quite so forthcoming, and in fact took me to task at the hearing over my claims in our submission that they had the same desire to open up national parks to exploitation.

I had based my claim on two things, an interview I'd attended with the previous National Party member for Clarence, Steve Cansdell, who openly stated that he believed that some parks should be rescinded, and similar remarks he made subsequently at a public meeting at Bungawalbin a year ago.

Secondly, a questionnaire to his successor, Chris Gulaptis, earlier this year, asking if he would support logging, hunting and grazing in national parks, received the following response: “*There is currently no proposal before the Government or the National Party to allow (these activities) to occur in any national parks in the Clarence electorate.*” His complete avoidance of the specific question and the limiting of the response to the Clarence Electorate led us to read between the lines and judge that he too would support a range of hitherto unacceptable activities in national parks.

Over all I found the hearing very disappointing, mining, hunting, climate change and fire regimes were clearly matters the Committee did not want to discuss, although both Leonie and I specifically touched on those matters in our opening addresses, and the entire question time was devoted to logging which was clearly what the majority of the panel wanted.

The level of understanding of the impacts of logging, and indeed the entire concept of healthy ecosystems can be summed up by a question asked of me by Dr Peter Phelps which went something as follows: *“If you clear a certain area of forest, and replant the same area of forest elsewhere, you end up with the same area of forest so what is the difference?”* My response that: *“The difference would be about 3 or 4 hundred years”*, appeared to baffle him, so I then had to explain how a healthy functional ecosystem operates, requiring a comprehensive multi aged mix of species from grasses to 300 year old hollow-bearing trees.

Regrettably, it was clear to us that we were talking to a majority of closed minds that will not have remembered our responses beyond that evening.

It is now up to the people of NSW to make their views known in the strongest possible terms, because, if this government has its way, not only will we have shooters running amuck in our national parks, but the chain saws will be roaring, cattle will be trampling vegetation and defecating in once pristine waterways, and giant excavators will soon be clearing great swathes of forest in the short term quest for mineral wealth.

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