

The Outer Sanctum – a snapshot of the *Vegetation Management Act 1999* review April 2013

Background

This is a personal account, for anyone interested, following my attendance at the Queensland Parliamentary Committee hearings on 17th April 2013 (and on-line observation 22nd April) for the review of the *Vegetation Management Act 1999* (VMA). I'll summarise this complex issue as best I can. This relates to just one of the many Acts currently being reviewed and I am very concerned about the collective impact these changes will have on natural areas and species decline. Video and audio archive of the VMA hearings can be found here:

http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/work-of-committees/broadcast-committee/archive?address=mms%3a%2f%2faux.parliament.qld.gov.au%2fCommitteesArchive%2fSDIIC%2fState_Development%2c_Infrastructure_and_Industry_Committee_20130417_091920.wmv&broadcast_accept=1

http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/work-of-committees/broadcast-committee/archive?address=mms://aux.parliament.qld.gov.au/CommitteesArchive/SDIIC/State_Development_Infrastructure_and_Industry_Committee_20130422_125620.wmv

Many concerns about the protection of natural areas were raised at the hearing while many more were brushed over and missed altogether. Witnesses in most cases had just 2 minutes each to state their case and the timing was strenuously adhered to, in most cases...

The issues are complex (see the submissions) but here are key points that stood out for me:

- Many important terms used in the review have no definition e.g. '*sustainable land use*', "*high value agriculture clearing*" and "*environmental clearing*".
- The government freely admits there has been insufficient time for the necessary modelling to estimate the full impact of these changes, other than "*streamlining and cutting green tape*".
- As highlighted by the Queensland Conservation Council (QCC), the government hasn't followed their own "*Regulatory Assessment Guidelines*" which details the process to carry out economic feasibility and community engagement etc. Where is the due process?
- The increase in Lot size from 2 to 5 hectares as a trigger level for assessment (under the guise of '*streamlining*'), combined with clearing exemptions for infrastructure, roads, state projects and mining etc. could cause clearing of large tracts of connected vegetation and already fragmented landscapes including endangered regional ecosystems and critical regrowth habitat.
- Many thousands of hectares of vegetation (>750,000) could be cleared which is currently protected including along watercourses, remnant and regrowth vegetation and threatened vegetation and includes critical habitat for iconic endangered species such as Koala's, Cassowary's, Dugong's and Turtle's. [Hello, anyone hearing this? Why wasn't this reported?]
- Jacky Trad (Member for South Brisbane) said there is a distinction between changing the laws and correcting current inefficiencies. Good point.
- The proposed changes appear to be reckless and could result in a significant hit to the triple bottom line, not just the environment.

Despite obvious differences between groups, a few things were agreed across the board:

- Incredibly short notice to assess the review(s).
- Many important terms within the new *Vegetation Management Framework Amendment Bill 2013* have not been defined.
- There has been no modelling or feasibility study to determine the impact of these changes.
- There is far more work required including broad community/stakeholder consultation.
- Land clearing and species decline will be increased.

The review of this and other Acts refers to the Newman government's "*Four Pillar Economy*" of construction, agriculture, resources and tourism. At first glance this is one better than the globally accepted three pillars (triple bottom line) which considers social, economic and environment outcomes. But in the "*Four Pillar Economy*", the environment is missing. In my presentation I said: "*The environment should be a foundation to those four pillars or they might just collapse*".

Illogical to self-assess clearing applications

It was claimed that it is a “*long and painstaking process... to find out about our biodiversity*”. No surprise there, but does that mean we shouldn't bother? On the contrary, finding out about biodiversity before it is cleared should remain as a mandatory requirement.

More than 50 new plant species a year are discovered in Queensland (source: Qld Herbarium) as a result of survey carried out for various applications including for land clearing. There is currently no other systematic way for Queensland to gather information about our biodiversity other than to undertake this “*long and painstaking process*”.

One farmer said (with a grudge) that expert ecological consultancy was needed to “*find out about our biodiversity*” and it is “*skimming thousands of dollars out of landholders just to fill out some paperwork*”. Just to fill out some paperwork?

Another freely admitted he didn't know what remnant vegetation was, saying “*it's all regrowth to me*”. Can I presume then he wouldn't know what an endangered ecosystem was, or which plant species might be threatened? It was also asked if farmers thought they were better educated now and could therefore “*hold themselves to a higher standard*” and they all said yes. This is illogical.

If farmers love and want to care for their land as stated, don't presume to know all about it. If it hasn't been surveyed and mapped by professional ecologists, how could they know what's there?

Certainly some operational farm based activities can be self-assessed, but not broad-scale clearing, which has the largest environmental impacts. Hundreds of stakeholders spent thousands of hours agreeing on the current codes. As a minimum, most activities must be Code Assessable.

With regard to mapping, the stated ignorance of mapping, terminology and inadequate computer skills, these can be overcome and are not an excuse to ‘*simplify*’ or ‘*streamline*’ legislation. If the students I teach (from a range of backgrounds and ages) can understand the concepts and are required to obtain computer literacy to do so, so can farmers and other landholders who are responsible for vast tracts of vegetation.

Media

The public have little idea of what's happening to Queensland's environmental laws as a result of very poor media with much of it blatantly biased. For example: “*Mr Burke said it's offensive that environmentalists don't trust them (farmers)*”. Pardon? Who said that?? It wasn't environmentalists! http://www.goldcoast.com.au/article/2013/04/17/450475_gold-coast-news.html

Here's what happened: the Chairman said: “*The committee has received submissions, though, that are quite critical of the self-assessment provisions. In fact, if I was to sum it up, they are saying, 'We can't trust farmers'.*” He was alluding to concerns that many farmers don't have the wide range of expertise required to ‘*self-assess*’ a clearing application. My analogy is this: I wouldn't trust my family GP to give me brain surgery, but that doesn't mean I don't trust my family GP.

Of all the critically important factors that were touched on, this one-liner is what the media ran with. Brilliant political spin, these politicians are good at what they do. But the phrase is not based on fact. The Chairman is the only one who said “*can't trust the farmers*”, not the environmentalists as was reported. No mention of accelerated loss of species and vegetation communities, or higher sediment loads further threatening the Great Barrier Reef. This mustn't be newsworthy...

Here's a related article with some good facts

<http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/queensland/lnp-tree-clearing-plans-too-much-for-some-to-bear/story-e6freoof-1226622016032>

And another which should be rebuked:

<http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/queensland/green-light-for-farmers-to-clear-land-under-vegetation-management-laws/story-e6freoof-1226601498328>

I'm sure there are plenty more. There seems to be a steady roll-out of spin from politicians with complacent journalists appearing to appease the government, take to their spin like a child to candy with no apparent concern for stating the facts about the consequences of these changes and how it will affect not just the environment but also social and economic values.

Where to from here

Even with the current regulations there has been a 50% decline in coral and significant declines in turtles, sea grass and dugongs. Not to mention Koalas, Cassowary's and many other threatened species and vegetation communities. Despite the governments' lack of data, WWF estimated that these changes would put at risk over 700,000 Ha of remnant and high quality regrowth vegetation and reminded us that Koala's have lost 43% of their population in the last 20 years. The protection provisions in the Act will be lifted and replaced with "*sustainable land use*" and "*high value agriculture clearing*" for which there are no definitions. Protection for remnant and regrowth vegetation and land subject to degradation, the very foundations of the Act, will be removed.

Discussions with a few people seem to concur that the green movement in Queensland (generally speaking) has become complacent as a result of the gradual (but not perfect) improvement in environmental law. Now there is a sudden and dramatic change taking place which has caught many off guard. No-one, including the government, knows what the impact of these changes will be. The potentially disastrous outcomes to our biodiversity are not being reported.

As a result of these reviews, what is at risk in Queensland is much more (for example) than the issues resulting from the Franklin Dam campaign in the early 1980's, both in area of land affected (including the Great Barrier Reef) and in the area of vegetation and number of species likely to be impacted. A concerted effort is needed to bring the facts to the community and it will need focus, a clear direction and strong leadership. It will also need proper scrutiny and reporting by the media.

I don't propose for a minute that I am a 'front man' or could lead such a campaign, as an individual I don't have the resources, but I propose a few ideas anyway, as follows:

- Let's provide the government with the definitions for their key terms.
- Key points need to be identified and researched including correlation to other Act reviews and the facts made clear regarding the real impacts that are likely.
- Let's initiate a community forum and debate (maybe several, and encourage wide media coverage) with key politicians and conservationists including guest presentations from both scientists and farmer groups. Invite those that have been involved in the Parliamentary Committee hearings where (like me) most were given just 2 minutes to state their case and many critically important topics were not discussed.
- Demand a 'right of reply' from the media to counter the political spin which needs to be challenged with the truth. A few '*readers comments*' on-line are not enough.
- Enlist the support of investigative journalists to help turn the spin tide around.
- Bring the situation to the attention of TV media e.g. Insight, Dateline, Q&A and Four Corners.
- Reply with open letters in key newspapers.
- Encourage a parody in the form of a "*Chaser*" style show.
- A mascot could be a Koala hugging a tree with the title of "*Elitist tree hugger*" (see below).

I am certainly not a campaigner and these are just a few ideas from a concerned citizen but I know there are many other people and groups out there with similar concerns and ideas.

In summary

Many of you are already aware of some of the issues; for those who aren't, I encourage you to become informed, watch the archive footage of the VMA review hearings and read some of the submissions (mine is No. 37). Remember too, the VMA is just one of many Acts being reviewed by the Queensland government.

<http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/work-of-committees/committees/SDIIC/inquiries/current-inquiries/10-VegetationMgmtFramewk#link3>

While it is agreed that agriculture and conservation are not mutually exclusive, the result of this Act review will see primary production values placed over and above environmental values. It will allow vegetation to be cleared which is, for good reason, currently protected. This is a blatant breach of Campbell Newman's election promise that: "*The LNP will retain the current level of statutory vegetation protection.*" There is too much at risk to allow these bills to proceed with such shortcomings and a clear lack of information.

As WWF stated, no-one has a right to accelerate extinctions.

Yours in conservation,

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Photo: David Jinks

In response to: http://www.goldcoast.com.au/article/2013/04/18/450532_gold-coast-news.html