



## Gladstone Conservation Council Inc.

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9<sup>th</sup> May 2014

### Extinction is forever

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To: The Senate Standing Committee on Environment

Re: Inquiry into environmental offsets

I would like to thank the senators for having giving me the chance to speak at the enquiry, although I must admit that I left the session with a sense of unease, perhaps my unfamiliarity with processes of this kind. I am certainly used to more conventional transactional analysis.

My frustration bordered on despair when after having read out a [quote](#) derived from J.E.N. Veron, a man compared to Charles Darwin in intellect, that possibly as early as 2050 we could be facing catastrophic shifts in the ocean's, to then have to deal with one senator postulating the inevitability of mining for hundreds of years to come. Clearly the message of events potentially within 30 years dwarfing the concept of mining seemed to have been lost on that senator.

*"Already the oceans, the planet's usual absorber of CO<sub>2</sub>, have reached a third of their capacity to soak them up and balance them chemically. Stealthily, the oceans have begun the process that scientists call commitment, the unstoppable inevitability of acidification that presages destruction long before it is clearly visible. Eventually—possibly as early as 2050—we will have reached the point where coral skeletons become soluble in seawater. Carbonate rock, including reefs, will start dissolving, like "a giant antacid tablet," as Charlie describes it. Phytoplankton, the food of tiny krill, a key element in the food web of the southern oceans, will be equally affected by acidification. And who knows what terrible chain of ecological consequences will follow? The earth's sixth mass extinction event will have arrived."*

Concatenating that with that same senator's "pet hate" of country "locked-up" in National Parks, indicated to me that I was dealing with some very poor levels of understanding of the principles of biodiversity offsets.

In one element of my submission I point out that as a nation we have failed our obligation under the biodiversity convention to formally protect 10% of our ecosystems by 2010. Rather than to acknowledge this fact that 3.6% of Australia covered by National Parks falls short of our obligation, the senator instead derides the existence of National Parks. His behaviour did not reflect that in my submission I actually flag the work by others showing failure of some of our most iconic National Parks, including the GBRMP. There is no doubt, more needs to be done.



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There was a suggestion that “locking up” ecology in protected areas is doing more damage than good and perhaps, that without protective covenants these areas would somehow be better managed. Exactly how this happens was far from clear. This logic defies the fact that biodiversity has managed to sustain itself in many areas without our help in the past. Areas of significance we have identified and designated for protection in many cases just need to be left alone.

The object of this inquiry was to get a view of the effectiveness of offsets in achieving no-net-loss in biodiversity where endangered ecology may be impacted by development actions.

My position on the idea of offsets was questioned and by me rejecting the use of offsets, an accusation was levelled that my stance would see all developments refused. This I did not adequately deal with. In the context of offsets we are considering a sub-set of the ecological systems, those deemed endangered. Where we have determined that a system is endangered, we should refuse an action if such action will result in damage to that system. This of course does not preclude actions where ecosystems are not deemed at risk.

The very strong case I make is that unless we have robust systems of ascribing appropriate merit to ecological values on the one hand, so that we can compare them to the merits of an action on the other hand, discounted by the costs of that action, we should refrain from taking such action in areas of high significance. What is clear is that within society our perception of relative merit is far from uniform. We lessen this ambiguity where we put in place special covenants such as National Parks and dugong protection areas. Whether we individually agree with their existence or not, we need to respect them in civil society. Dumping dredge spoil in a Marine Park set aside to preserve in perpetuity, the unique and outstanding universal values of a designated world heritage property is incompatible with civil behaviour. Erasing the most contiguous area of seagrass from within an area specifically set aside for the protection of endangered species is incongruous with civil behaviour, irrespective of offsets.

To play two ecologically significant areas off against each other in offsets horse trading is ethically deprived.

Sincerely,

Jan Arens

President – Gladstone Conservation Council.