

EDITORIAL: "TIME TO ACT IS NOW" – PARLIAMENTARY COASTAL INQUIRY



Barry Sammels

Chair National Sea Change Taskforce
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The report of the inquiry into climate change and environmental impacts on coastal communities, which was released in Federal Parliament yesterday, represents one of the most important steps towards the sustainability of the Australian coast and its communities for decades.

The Inquiry, which was conducted over a period of 18 months by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Climate Change, Water, Environment and the Arts, Committee, has made 47 recommendations, which if adopted would help to address many of the challenges currently facing our coastal councils and their residents. Key recommendations include:

- Establishment of a new Coastal Zone Ministerial Council to develop an Intergovernmental Agreement on the Coastal Zone endorsed by COAG;
- A separate funding program for infrastructure enhancement in coastal areas vulnerable to climate change;
- 2012 be declared as the national Year of the Coast to build community awareness of climate change and other coastal issues;
- An Australian Law Reform Commission inquiry into the liability issues facing public authorities and property owners in respect of climate change;
- A Productivity Commission inquiry into insurance cover for coastal properties;

The Inquiry report urged the need for national leadership in better managing the Australian coast, especially in the context of climate change. "The Taskforce endorses this view and strongly supports the report's recommendations," said Barry Sammels. "We call on the Rudd Government to act decisively and to provide the leadership necessary to more effectively manage the coast by adopting the report recommendations. This is an historic opportunity for the Government to ensure the sustainability of the nation's coastal zone which is without doubt our most highly valued natural asset."

The Inquiry was conducted by a bi-partisan committee which included representatives of all three major parties. "The committee is to be applauded for considering the major issues facing the coast and coming up with practical recommendations on how they can be addressed," said Barry Sammels. "Apart from challenges such as climate change and population growth the report also tackles key emerging issues, such as the legal dilemma facing coastal councils trying to prepare for the impact of rising sea levels and the vexed question of insurance cover in vulnerable coastal areas.

"On behalf of the nation's sea change communities I congratulate Jennie George and her fellow committee members on the enormous effort they have made to find solutions to these complex challenges. We look forward to the Rudd Government's response." The Taskforce has had extensive input into the Inquiry, and will provide more detailed analysis shortly. The full report can be found at <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/ccwea/coastalzone/report.htm>

Need for National Leadership: Inquiry Chair

Jennie George MP (right), Chair of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Climate Change, Water, Environment and the Arts, which conducted the coastal inquiry, said one clear message that emerged from the inquiry was the need for national leadership in managing the coast.



In the foreword to the inquiry report she writes as follows:

“When the Committee received the terms of reference for this inquiry, little did we appreciate the level of interest and engagement it was to generate. Although it has taken some 18 months to conclude our report, it was time well spent.

The issues of concern raised in over 100 written submissions and 180 exhibits are reflected in the contents of our report. Our appreciation goes to everyone who engaged in that process either by written submissions or as witnesses at one of the 28 public hearings held around Australia. We also thank those who took the time to organise a range of informative site visits.

One clear message emerged—and that is the need for national leadership in managing our precious coastal zone in the context of climate change. I am optimistic that the Australian Government will meet that challenge. Indeed, many of the initiatives already instituted by the Department of Climate Change head in that direction.

Our 47 recommendations go to the heart of how national leadership can be provided in a collaborative framework with state and local government and how we can better engage the community in this endeavour.

I thank Committee Members for their bipartisan support on an issue of such national importance. The Committee secretariat, headed by Julia Morris, provided excellent administrative and research support. Thanks go to Dr Kate Sullivan, Inquiry Secretary, for her commitment, knowledge and enthusiasm.

It’s one thing to read about the science but another to see first hand, as we did, the obvious and early negative consequences of climate change on our coastal zone. We trust our recommendations chart the way forward in better managing our coastal zone and giving practical expression to the theme: ***‘The time to act is now’.***

Jennie George MP Chair

What happens next?

The Government responds to such committee reports by way of a written statement to the House. In recent years it has been government policy to respond to a report within three months of its presentation to the Parliament although it may be longer before a response is provided. The Government may accept, or partially accept, a committee’s recommendations, and announce its intention to take certain action. Some recommendations may be rejected, while the Government may announce that it wishes to give further consideration to others. Sometimes the Government may implement recommendations made by a committee through changes in legislation or government administration or policy without a formal response having been published.

SOURCE: <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/info/infosheets/is04.pdf>

DATES FOR 2010 CONFERENCE: TUESDAY 2 AND WEDNESDAY 3 MARCH

Byron Bay Conference to Focus on Key Challenges

Following the release of the Parliamentary Sitting Dates for 2010 last Friday, the Taskforce can announce that the Australian Coastal Councils Conference will be held at Byron Bay on Tuesday 2 and Wednesday 3 March next year. The Welcome Reception will be held on Monday 1 March 2009.

The conference will focus on a range of complex issues facing coastal LGAs. These challenges include sea level rise, legal and insurance implications of climate change, ageing populations in coastal communities and housing affordability.



CAPE BYRON LIGHTHOUSE
PHOTO: Courtesy Northern Rivers Tourism

Treasurer Wayne Swan recently identified the two most daunting challenges facing Australia as climate change and the nation's ageing population. Coastal councils and communities are at the forefront of having to deal with both these issues and accordingly the conference at Byron Bay will provide a focus on these matters.

The Taskforce is currently lining up key speakers on these topics and already has acceptances from Minister for Ageing Justine Elliot, the CEO of the innovative Brisbane Housing Company, David Cant, and affordable housing expert Judith Stubbs. Deb Cox, the creator of the ABC-TV series 'Sea Change' and 'East of Everything', has also agreed to be a speaker on the contribution creative workers can make to local economies.

Details of the conference program and registration details will be distributed to members soon.

NSW to Give Property Owners Right to Build Sea Walls

A nation-wide debate over the rights of coastal property owners to build sea walls and other barriers to protect their properties from coastal erosion and sea level rise is looming in the wake of a controversial decision by the NSW state government.

On 19 October the NSW government announced plans to give property owners such rights and named 19 coastal 'hot spots' in the state where the new provisions would apply, including Belongil Beach in Byron Shire, Batemans Bay in Eurobodalla Shire and Narrabeen on Sydney's northern beaches. The new plans would enable property owners to appeal to the State Government if a coastal council refuses permission for them to build sea walls or other barriers. The *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) reports the owners would be required to pay for the protection measures and for any impact on other residents.

The move has been criticized by a number of council representatives and coastal environmental experts, including Professor Andy Short of the University of Sydney, who said it would be very difficult for property owners to build a sea wall without impacting on other property owners and public beaches. "We faced this issue in Narrabeen when the council proposed to build a sea wall along Collaroy beach and the community came out in their thousands to protest against a wall that would have severely degraded the amenity of one of Sydney's most popular beaches," Prof Short told the SMH.

Climate change adaptation expert A/Prof Peter Waterman, of the University of the Sunshine Coast, also criticised the NSW government announcement. He told the Sunshine Coast Daily the decision meant 'those with enough money will spend up big to defend their assets but those without will be left vulnerable'. Prof Waterman described the NSW decision as 'very foolish'. "Why should everyone else pay because you wanted to live on an eroded sand dune?" he asked.

Geoff Withycombe of the Sydney Coastal Councils Group told the SMH the plan would come at a cost to public beaches. 'Allowing beachfront property owners to defend their properties at their cost will only result in transfer of the real costs of such intervention to the community, tourism and the environment, resulting in the loss of public beach amenity to the short term benefit of a few property owners,' he said.

Simon Smith, the deputy director of the NSW Department of Environment and Climate Change, denied that beachfront property owners would be allowed to build barriers at the expense of public beaches. He told the SMH that owners would have to ensure the works did not transfer the erosion from one spot to another and would have to make a commitment to permanently paying for sand replacement.

Writing in the *Illawarra Mercury*, Cate Faehrmann, executive director of the Nature Conservation Council of NSW, said the NSW government's move was 'short sighted'. She said the 'natural movement of sand is critical to the maintenance of beaches and foreshore areas. Structures such as sea walls can redirect the flow of sand or stop it entirely, causing the loss of sand from beaches and shorelines and foreshore vegetation to recede'.

In Brief...

Application for Removable Housing Estate

A NSW company has submitted a development application to Greater Taree Council to build an entire estate of removable kit homes at Old Bar beach in an area subject to severe coastal erosion. The application lodged by Olmwood Pty Ltd specifies that an encumbrance will be provided on the title 'that would require the dismantling of residences and their removal ... in circumstances where the coastal recession [erosion] comes to within 50 metres'. Earlier this year the Council approved an application by Olmwood to build 90 manufactured homes on the site. The company has now lodged an application for an additional 201 homes, some of which are proposed to be located closer to the waterline in an area of land zoned for environment protection. A spokesperson for the company said the sites are considered safe for at least 100 years and are 135 metres further from the sea than three houses lost to inundation in recent years.

Queensland Coastal Plan 'will put persons and property at risk'

The Draft Queensland Coastal Plan will put lives and property at risk because it fails to deter development in endangered areas, according to an assessment by Sunshine Coast Regional Council. The *Sunshine Coast Daily* reports that a council submission on the draft plan argues that the failure to allow past decisions to be overturned "is likely to result in lost opportunity and greater cost in the long term and may even prove dangerous to persons and property". Queensland Coastal Plan will put lives and property at risk because it fails to deter development in endangered areas according to an assessment undertaken for the Sunshine Coast Regional Council at the failure to allow past decisions to be overturned "is likely to result in lost opportunity and greater cost in the long term and may even prove dangerous to persons and property". A core policy that "previous planning decisions can't be overturned" will mean that if council makes planning amendments in response to natural disasters and climate change science that erode previous decisions, it risks compensation claims from developers. The author of the report, Dr Steve Skull, told the *Sunshine Coast Daily* that with a large percentage of the Coast's population living just behind the dunal system or on canals and a lot of council infrastructure also in the firing line, there was much at stake. Dr Skull acknowledged that the issue was complex but said careful consideration would need to be given to what to defend and where to retreat in a disaster.

The Department of Environment and Resource Management has extended the closing date for submissions to Monday 30 November 2009. The draft plan, frequently asked questions, and explanatory notes are available online at www.derm.qld.gov.au/coastalplan. Further information can be requested from coastal.support@derm.qld.gov.au

Gold Coast Faces Extreme Erosion Threat

An expert on coastal environmental management has warned that the Gold Coast is facing a significant threat of coastal erosion this summer from severe storm activity. Dr Peter Helman, of the Griffith Centre for Coastal Management at Griffith University, predicts that south-east Queensland is likely to experience extreme storm activity this summer in combination with the effects of rising sea levels. He told ABC Radio the region had already experienced sea level rise but the full impact would only be felt when storms hit the area. 'When we do have a big storm we can expect very serious erosion right along wherever the storm hits,' he said.

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