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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
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Re: Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Amendment (Great Barrier Reef) Bill 2013

North Queensland Conservation Council (NQCC), based in Townsville and established in 1974, works to protect the environmental values of the region (extending from Ingham to Bowen and from the coast to the border with the NT), largely by means of education, undertaken by way of community activities, public awareness campaigns and contributions to debate on environmental issues, including responses to calls for input on proposals that have an impact on such issues.

NQCC welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the debate on this important issue and thanks for the Committee for its approval of this late submission.

NQCC writes to support the above-mentioned Bill.

Being based in the port city of Townsville, in the northerly region of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area (GBRWHA), home of the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS), of James Cook University (JCU) and of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) and Reef HQ, NQCC takes an exceptionally keen interest in all matters impinging on the GBRWHA.

The development at Abbot Point and the proposed expansion of the Port of Townsville are but two current issues that have the potential to impose long-term negative impacts on the Reef.

Given the massive decline in the health of the Reef identified earlier in the year by AIMS scientists, and the extreme concern about the future of the Reef detailed in GBRMPA's 2009 Outlook Report, it is only prudent to introduce the proposed amendments to the EPBC Act.

It is pertinent to note that, while the recommendations of UNESCO may be the trigger for the proposed amendments, they are not the sole driving force. The 'warnings' sounded by AIMS, JCU and GBRMPA provide a solid scientific basis to the recommendations of UNESCO, and essentially would support the proposed amendments.

It seems that all associated with the GBRWHA lay claim to 'best practice'. Nevertheless, the health of the GBRWHA continues parlous. The AIMS research provided evidence of

a 50% reduction in coral cover over a 27-year period; the recent Reef Check report admits that, despite efforts, improvements in the quality of water flowing to the Great Barrier Reef have improved not by the target 50% but by a mere 4-8%.

The argument about 'who is to blame' (farmers or ports) is irrelevant and unhelpful. What is apparent is that the Reef cannot survive continued additional stresses. As pointed out in GBRMPA's 2009 Outlook Report, the job at hand now is to build the resilience of the Reef. That job falls to all users and, unless it is embraced by all users, the future of the Reef remains uncertain. Prevarication and unwillingness to take strong action will see the death of the Great Barrier Reef.

As an aside, on the point of responsibility, the Outlook Report notes that the greatest threat to the Reef is climate change. The current expansion of ports in Queensland is in order to export coal – the greatest contribution that Australia makes to climate change. The ports cannot claim relative innocence when it comes to causes for the degradation of the Reef.

Furthermore, NQCC draws attention to the negative impact of the expansion of the coal industry – the raison d'etre for much current port development – on other Australian industry (particularly, manufacturing and tourism), especially as a result of the high exchange rate that it causes. The expansion of the ports for the purpose of assisting the mining industry is not necessarily to the net benefit of the Australian economy as claimed by some.

Finally, NQCC notes the importance of ports to Australia's social and economic status. However, it points out that both the wellbeing of society and financial prosperity are essentially based on a healthy economy. Damage the environment and society and the economy are inevitably diminished.

In the light of the above, NQCC strongly supports the proposed amendments, warranted as they are by the proven health of and threats to the Reef. They represent an undeniably sensible way of helping to save 'Australia's' Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.

Wendy Tubman
Coordinator