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17 January 2013

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment & Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

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Dear Secretary,

Senate Committee Submission on Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Amendment (Retaining Federal Approval Powers) Bill 2012.

The Townsville Branch of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland (also known as Wildlife Queensland) has been an active voice for the conservation of wildlife, wildlife habitat, vegetation communities and marine ecosystems in our region since the branch was established in 1968. We have had a long history of involvement in the protection of areas, such as the Wet Tropical Rainforests and the Great Barrier Reef, which are now recognized as sites of national and international significance and value, and which form part of the World's natural and cultural heritage.

We have had a similar involvement in the protection of threatened and endangered species in our region, including the mahogany glider, southern cassowary, dugong and snub-fin dolphin. In the 1960s and 1970s our long-term president, Dr George Heinsohn, was a pioneering campaigner for the protection of marine mammals, especially the dugong, which were falling victim to shark nets, boat strike and contemporary fishing practices. His early scientific investigations were instrumental in the 2005 identification of the snub-fin dolphin (*Orcaella heinsohni*) as a distinct, previously unrecognized, species. Also in our region one of Australia's rarest birds, the southern sub-species of the black-throated finch (*Poephila cincta cincta*), finds refuge on the edges of our city.

All of the above have contributed to our profound understanding that North Queensland's natural environment, and its terrestrial and marine wildlife, are of such significance that they warrant gold-plated standards of protection *at a national level*. We have been dismayed by the prospect that the Commonwealth's powers under the EPBC Act could be seriously weakened, allowing State Governments to make decisions impacting on areas or species of such national and global importance, without any reference to, or intervention from, the national government. We are well aware of occasions when it has only been Federal Government action that has saved ecosystems and species under threat: the Great Barrier Reef is a case in point. We share the widespread view that weakening the current laws would be turning back the clock on environmental protection and responsibility by several decades.

It is important to recognize that our wildlife, rivers, wetlands, forests etc are not contained by State boundaries. Migratory species are not even contained within national boundaries. What is allowed to happen in one state can have devastating effects across the border. In so many respects Australia is supremely fortunate in that it is both an island continent and a nation continent, unlike Africa, Asia, Europe and South America where land mass and coast are shared (or splintered) among many national jurisdictions. Here we have the opportunity to give the environment of an entire continent a uniform, consistent, high level of protection. Why on earth would we let that opportunity slip from our hands?

Do we also need to point out that Australia, as a sovereign nation, is signatory to many international treaties, conventions and agreements relating to protected areas, wetlands, migratory and threatened species? How can we be certain that these international obligations are being met if the national government retreats from its present role? There are too many instances of State Governments failing to even enforce their own environmental laws, let alone abiding by international agreements. Sadly, experience shows that it is unrealistic to expect State Governments to take national, international and long-term interests and impacts into account when they are focused on local, short-term 'benefits', and are often under pressure from industry, big business and local government for whom environmental risk or damage is a minor concern. In Queensland the situation is potentially worse because there is no parliamentary upper house which might act to review or restrain an environmentally irresponsible Government, of whatever political colour. Just a few years ago Federal intervention protected south-east Queensland's Mary River and its unique wildlife from an ill-advised project of the then ALP State Government. Now we see an LNP Government issuing permits to shoot threatened wildlife species, proposing to open up uranium mines, and overseeing a massive and rapid expansion of the coal and CSG industries (begun under the previous Government) which is having, and will continue to have, major impacts on land and sea – especially the waters and wildlife of the Great Barrier Reef. The cavalier attitudes expressed by one or two Queensland ministers towards the World Heritage Committee and Australia's international obligations to protect the Reef, are most disturbing. Can anyone seriously suggest that the Federal Government should relinquish its guardianship role and responsibility to this, or any, State government?

As Australia's biodiversity struggles against "the death of a thousand cuts" arising from the expansion of industry and population, as well as the momentous impact of climate change; when we face the possibility of a "tsunami of extinctions" and relentless changes to our landscape, it is surely a time for unflinching responsibility and leadership from the top. This can only come from our national government.

Our Branch commends the initiative of Senator Waters in introducing the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Amendment (Retaining Federal Approval Powers) Bill 2012, and wishes to give it our strongest support.

Thank you for the opportunity to give our views on what we believe is a very important Bill.

Yours sincerely,

Liz Downes
for the Management Committee, WPSQ Townsville