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Protected Areas welcome: *with conditions*

Northern Gulf residents and producers have been invited to comment on the Queensland Draft Protected Areas Strategy. This document will guide the State's policy toward new and existing public parks and private reserves. Land designated as "protected areas" in Queensland is currently just under 8%, and the target is to reach 17%. Northern Gulf Resource Management Group has considered the policy and provided extensive feedback (see submission: [<http://www.northerngulf.com.au/news/2017/244>]).

John Brisbin, Chairman, summarises: "Overall, we are very supportive of greater protections for the Northern Gulf's ecosystems and high conservation value areas. Everyone I have spoken to in our communities has a deep respect and love for this country. They know it's vital to protect natural values. Healthy country is not just good for the soul, it's essential for primary production and profits too. A sensible, well-managed approach to Protected areas is vital. We're not convinced that this draft Strategy hits the mark."

Where is the budget?

In critiquing the draft Strategy, the biggest question marks are over proper funding and management.

The State is looking for ways to make protected areas pay for themselves, and this is a sensible move. However, a user-pays model risks putting economic value ahead of ecosystem value.

Mr Brisbin explains: "Moving to a user-pay system can be the right solution for some areas. But it's not clear that this will ever be sufficient to pay for proper management. And some high-value conservation areas will simply not be economic. We would have expected the Department to do some of the modelling required and provide that along with the draft Strategy. When you see the numbers, it can really inform a better level of public discussion."

The underlying issue is that Parks and protected areas have been poorly funded for decades. As a result, park areas become refuges for feral pests and seed banks for economically significant weeds. Neighbouring land managers are left to pick up the tab for the damage and increased costs to their operations.

"This is not an indictment of the Queensland Parks & Wildlife: it's just a fact that QPWS have not had the budgets they need. Management of these big properties takes big money.

"Governments struggle to find adequate budgets to manage these areas properly. Because we lack a State or national levy, and we have no habit of re-investing in ecosystem services, there is simply not enough funding for vital public assets like protected areas.

We think of these special areas as national treasures that contribute toward public good. Ironically, in many cases, the land was healthier and better managed under private ownership--before it gained 'protection'."

High-profile success stories like Undara and Cobbold Gorge have happened largely through the stubborn persistence of very competent local land managers and a supportive community. There are other areas ready for innovative public-private partnerships and local management.

Certification programs such as Savannah Guides show how industry can contribute toward appropriate reserve management without expensive government oversight.

"We welcome an open and constructive dialogue about how to get the best protected areas outcomes for the least load on the public purse. All options need to be on the table, and local realities need to be respected."

Local rate payer impacts?

The draft Strategy also fails to explain how protected area designation impacts the local council rate base. Under current arrangements, when a park is gazetted, the local council loses the rates but retains the obligations to maintain roads and infrastructure. This shifts costs onto the local community without due compensation.

"We would have been much more impressed had the Department done some figures on how this Strategy would impact the shires in our region. It would not be hard to estimate, given the amount of prior work that various agencies and organisations such as ours have already done in the past."

Advancing Indigenous interests?

The draft Strategy broaches the issue of Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) and suggests that they might be counted toward reaching the State's Protected Area goals.

There is a big difference in the legislation for how these two designations function. An IPA has a lot more freedom: it is designed to allow the local landowners to change their minds and utilise that land in other ways at any point.

"We understand and support all local communities having the right to seek economic gain from their country, within proper environmental constraints. Our only objection is that this freedom comes at a price: you can't simultaneously count that country as a 'protected area' and also make it available for resource extraction at any point."

Staying up with best practice?

The State has committed to a Comprehensive, Adequate, and Representative (CAR) approach for all of Queensland's biogeographical regions. However, the draft Strategy appears to be aimed at accumulating acreage without deep consideration of the dynamic nature of ecosystems or the network-wide effects of moving areas in and out of their protected status.

"Recent world-leading research, conducted right here in Australia, has shown there's a question mark at the heart of current protected areas accounting. Meaningful conservation is more complex than just grabbing some big cattle stations and racking up the hectares. We are looking for a more well-documented strategy from the Department. We think they could go a lot further even at draft stage.

We support a strategy that draws on their own data as well as work done in neighbouring agencies and research communities.

This is a chance to leapfrog the problems of the past and put the State's Protected Areas strategy right to the front of best practice. A proper strategy would help deliver better outcomes for the ecosystems we depend on, and that means healthier communities and healthier economies as a result."

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About Northern Gulf Resource Management Group

As one of Australia's 56 NRM Regional Bodies, the Northern Gulf Natural Resource Management Group is a community-led, non-profit organisation concerned with the people and environments of our regional area.

The Northern Gulf region encompasses the catchments of the Norman, Gilbert, Staaten and Mitchell river systems, covering a land area of approximately 196,000 km².

Our Northern Gulf Regional Plan and delivery programs support healthy and productive country, viable communities, and sustainable industries. We work from the paddock to the regional scale to address issues that require a long-term, holistic perspective. Our approach enables community and landcare activity to better address strategic issues of national importance.

As administrators of both State and Commonwealth government funding programs over the past two decades we have developed strong working partnerships with the people and industries that support this natural and cultural landscape.

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