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31st January 2008

Office of the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure

Attn: Mr Rob Giles, Chief of Staff

13th Floor, Dumas House
2 Havelock Street
West Perth 6005

Dear Mr Giles

Your ref: 02-034409

Thank you for your letter dated 13 December 2007 regarding the Pastoral Leasehold Land along the Ningaloo Reef Coast. Your clarification of a number of points has helped to improve my understanding of the situation. I have in addition reviewed the WAPC website as suggested in your letter.

However the core problem of the conflict between the current unspoilt natural beauty of the area and developing it for Tourism remains unresolved.

Unspoilt Beauty

The WAPC Planning and Environment Guidelines document describes:

“the unspoilt, natural and remoteness values of the area and its incredible natural beauty”

I agree. Having travelled around the entire coastline of Australia, including the Great Barrier Reef coastline of northern Queensland, the Ningaloo Coast is the most unspoilt, beautiful and natural area of tropical reef coastline remaining in our country.

High Sensitivity to Changes

The WAPC Planning and Environment Guidelines also notes how sensitive the Ningaloo coast is to any changes, no matter how minor:

“a visual landscape that is highly sensitive to changes. Already, minor tracks, small telecommunication towers on the Cape Range, and gravel pits are highly visible when viewed from Yardie Creek Road...Even essential standard road signs indicating speed, direction and hazards have landscape impact.”

Again, I agree. There are very few trees and the landscape is stark and exposed. Any man-made structures, no matter how small, have an immediately unattractive visual impact.

Development¹ - by government bodies and private operators

Despite the *Unspoilt Beauty* and *High Sensitivity to Changes* noted by the WAPC above, the WAPC wishes to develop the area for Tourism.

Section 1.3 Coastal Tourism Framework describes these plans in detail. The overall thrust of these tourism development plans is summarised in section 3 Governance and Implementation:

“Both government bodies and private operators will provide these tourism opportunities, which will be developed as part of the implementation of the strategy. This may include staging within identified coastal tourism nodes, and staging of development opportunities along the Ningaloo coast.”

Development and Preservation - irreconcilable goals

Preserving the natural unspoilt beauty of the area on the one hand, and Tourism development by government bodies and private operators on the other hand, are irreconcilable goals.

As stated by the WAPC themselves (see *High Sensitivity to Changes* section above), any development within visual range of the beaches and cliffs along the coast will adversely impact, and eventually kill, the unspoilt beauty of the Ningaloo Reef coastline contained in the pastoral leasehold areas.

This is particularly tragic in the case of Australia, since there is no tropical coast wilderness like this left anywhere else in our entire country. Having driven more than 30,000km around Australia over the past twelve months, I can personally attest to this.

Two groups of visitors

There are two separate groups of people that may wish to visit the pastoral coastline areas:-

1. Self-sufficient Campers

They bring in and take out everything they need including food, water, power, tent, toilet etc. **They don't need, or want, anything built on the land.**

2. Tourists / Eco-Tourists

They expect to arrive at a place with already-built facilities including shelter, electricity, cooking facilities, rubbish bins, water taps, showers, toilets, basins etc. They have typically flown into WA and cannot be expected to bring all those things along with them. They expect smooth roads and good communications infrastructure such as telephone and internet access.

Current situation in Pastoral Leaseholds

The current situation is that low numbers of self-sufficient campers (category 1 above) visit the pastoral leasehold coastline each year. Almost no tourists or eco-tourists (category 2 above) visit the pastoral leaseholds currently.

The impact of the self-sufficient campers has been very light to-date, as the WAPC themselves describe:

“the unspoilt, natural and remoteness values of the area and its incredible natural beauty”

There have been very minor environmental impacts due to the self-sufficient campers, with unauthorised tracks and similar. As further discussed below, it would be easy for the WA government and the Pastoralists to work together with a relatively low level of funding in order to fix any minor issues and minimise any ongoing environmental impacts caused by the self-sufficient campers, since their numbers are very low.

¹ The Town Planning and Development Act 1928 defines development as including any demolition, erection, construction, alteration of or addition to any building or structure on the land and the carrying out on the land of any excavation or other works.

Whereas development to cater for much larger numbers of tourists / eco-tourists (category 2 above) - namely 200 tourists per night at each of the Minor Tourism Nodes as proposed by the WAPC and 100 tourists per night at each of the Ecolodges as proposed by the WAPC - requires most or all of the following to be built:-

- soil hardening and foundations
- permanent covered accommodation of some kind
- drain pipes and stormwater dispersion
- wider gravel roads (and accompanying road-making vehicles to build and maintain these, plus gravel storage areas and pits)
- water extraction, pumping, tanks and piping
- toilet blocks, piping and sewerage disposal
- electricity generation, cabling, earth stakes, circuit breakers and safety equipment
- telecommunications equipment, masts and power equipment
- fencing, lighting, signage, bollards, rubbish bins and similar small structures
- tools, vehicles, personnel and suitable roads to construct the above
- tools, vehicles, personnel and suitable roads to repair and maintain the above in good working order

It becomes *immediately obvious* that tourism development will destroy the natural unspoilt coastline that now exists. This is self-evident since all the above man-made structures will appear in formerly pristine coastal areas.

Can the WA Government not see this? That by developing the pastoral coastline to cater for tourists and eco-tourists (category 2 above), the very environment we are seeking to protect, will be destroyed? It will no longer be remote and pristine. It will be visually polluted with man-made infrastructure.

Or, worse still, does the WA Government know this and simply choose to ignore it?

Proposed Solution

Instead of *developing* the pastoral coast for Tourism, may I suggest we encourage tourists to make *day trips* to the "Wild Coast" via boat, just like they do to the reef itself.

They can land on a suitable deserted beach for the day. They can swim, snorkel, enjoy a picnic lunch and take photos of the coral coast in its wild and natural state. At the end of the day, they can return to the comfort of their resort accommodation in Coral Bay. The tour operator is held responsible for making sure no rubbish is left behind, nothing except footprints in the sand.

I understand that a 4WD operator currently operates a low-key, low-impact camping experience on one of the beaches. Again, this could be advertised as experiencing the "wild" side of the Ningaloo coast. Again, the 4WD operator would be held responsible for making sure that they left behind only footprints in the sand.

In this way, we could capitalise on the point of difference of the undeveloped coast for visiting tourists, without destroying it through development.

Ordinary Australians – the self-sufficient campers

Those ordinary Australians that don't mind the lack of facilities and have been camping on a "take-in, take-out" basis for decades should continue to do so as before. They demand no infrastructure of a visual impact or permanent kind and leave only footprints in the sand.

The Pastoralists can assist the WA Government with addressing all of the major environmental issues associated with ordinary Australians camping on their land:

1. Protecting the fish stocks of the Ningaloo Reef waters
2. Protecting the ocean from polluted runoff
3. Keeping the land looking pristine and natural
4. Protecting the native flora & fauna

How they can do this, is already described in detail in my earlier letter dated 10th October 2007. It would be cheaper and more effective to work through the Pastoralists, since they already have the infrastructure and detailed knowledge of the land.

Conclusion

As can easily be concluded from WAPC documents, tourism development and preserving the natural beauty of this special coastline are **irreconcilable goals**, since the landscape is:

"a visual landscape that is highly sensitive to changes. Already, minor tracks, small telecommunication towers on the Cape Range, and gravel pits are highly visible when viewed from Yardie Creek Road...Even essential standard road signs indicating speed, direction and hazards have landscape impact."

The pastoral leasehold system has been largely successful in deterring development for tourism. For the sake of our future generations, I urge the government to:

Expressly forbid any development that is within visual range of the beaches and headlands of the pastoral leasehold coastline.

Luckily there is another way to satisfy the needs of the tourists and ecotourists. The environmentally responsible alternative is for the WA Government to:

Promote Day Visits by Government-Approved Boat Operators or 4WD Operators from the tourist hubs of Coral Bay/Carnarvon/Exmouth.

Otherwise, if the WA Government continues on its current course of tourism development, the very last remaining priceless jewel of pristine reef coastline will be lost to Australia forever.

Yours sincerely,

Derek Recsei