

Conservation at any cost

Neil Hewett

In the name of 'conservation', Australia offsets hardships imposed upon timber communities with the reassurance that, after all, it is for the greater good.

When the wet tropical rainforests of north Queensland were inscribed within the World Heritage estate in December 1988, affected landholders and communities were promised that tourism would not only replace, but also greatly exceed, the economic returns of timber extraction. They were also assured that with World Heritage listing there would be no buffer zones, yet, over the past ten years, millions of dollars have been spent acquiring privately-owned lands outside the World Heritage area, purportedly for the protection of outstanding World Heritage values on adjacent property.

Those assurances began to unravel as environmental bureaucrats advocated a more holistic approach to the protection of World Heritage values of the ecosystem against what they described as a fragmented, piecemeal approach that failed to address biological interactions outside World Heritage boundaries.

The 90,000-hectare Daintree rainforest in tropical north Queensland is regarded as the closest living counterpart to the ancient rainforests of Gondwana. Its World Heritage values are internationally renowned and tourism alone is estimated to be worth \$400 million per year. It attracts half a million visitors annually and is home to some 600 residents who operate around 60 businesses on 7,500 hectares.

For my part, it is home and hearth. My immersion and personal investment in the Daintree rainforest is absolute. As a freehold land-manager of a World Heritage Nature Refuge, I interpret an ecotourism economy as intended to conserve the environment and sustain the well-being of my family. User-pays

fully-finances the conservation management of the land without any cost to the taxpayer. This contrasts starkly with taxpayer-subsidized tourism on adjacent National Park, which provides sanctuary to 10,000 feral pigs that are driving the endangered southern cassowary (and the 37 species of plant that rely solely upon its survival), resolutely towards extinction.

The local community regards the extraordinary natural and cultural values of the freehold portion as inherent assets that form the foundation of its socio-economic potential. Efforts to secure protection of critical habitat values outside World Heritage boundaries are supported through inclusive solutions that maximize returns and minimize costs for local landholders.

Antagonists, however, argue for an exclusionary solution that slates landholders as the threat from which the environment requires urgent protection. 'Conservationists' rattle the sabres of environmental outrage and march to the drum of green politicians, championing the cause of protection through emotive undertakings to buy back all land for conversion to National Park.

Many landholders would jump at the chance to recover a reasonable return on their investment, but are invariably offered far below what they paid decades earlier. A genuine undertaking could have been achieved in the mid-1990s, when \$23 million was allocated for this purpose, but history has shown that the available political will was directed elsewhere.

Landholders are left wondering why the urgency is so capricious, unless of course the urgency in itself is of paramount political value. Building upon the illusion of desperate concern and fanning the flames of public enthusiasm allows for the achievement of a preconceived political agenda. Indeed,

the greater the public perception of concern, the more urgent the mandate for intervention. Political careers are built upon such choreography.

In this frenzy of public environmental concern, government intervention has drifted into the realm of illegality and the undemocratic, despite decades of environmental activism and a plethora of studies, consultancies and multi-million-dollar rescue programmes. The Daintree rainforest, we are told, remains desperately unprotected.

A levy for entry into the local community to accumulate funds for land acquisition has been imposed, which not only plunders the sole ecotourism economy, but has also been deemed illegal by the Queensland Ombudsman—yet visitors continue to be taxed, nonetheless.

In this era of political correctness, it is hardly surprising that affluent, well-educated middle-Australia shares a common concern for loss of biodiversity, pollution, global warming, water shortages and famine.

We must be vigilant, however, and ensure we do not blindly follow popular environmental war-cries when to do so would deny the constitutional rights of landowners and create financial hardship and disadvantage.

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