

9.08am ABC Local Radio with Pat Morrish

## **WILD RIVERS BACK ON THE AGENDA**

Frustrated Land Holders took their concerns to their community cabinet meeting in Atherton. As you know Wild River is state legislation controlling development in the catchments of 19 Rivers throughout Queensland and 13 of the rivers being on the Cape York Peninsula.

Land Holders believe it will stifle economic development and lower property prices amongst other things and indigenous communities have joined the chorus of concern saying that the consultation process has been appalling.

Gerhardt Pearson is the Executive Director of Balkanu Cape York Development Association and is with me today.

Pat: Is it the right description that indigenous communities do believe that it's been appalling consultation process.

GP: Certainly the consultation is not up to standard and we believe it does not really represent real consultation. There are many issues that land holders, both black and white in Cape York, are faced with and to date the consultation has been by way of government officials traveling into the Cape and providing, one side of the information and that side of the information is obviously weighted towards the support of government policy and the implementation of wild rivers. It does not provide for an informed decision of Cape York residents. That has been the argument of both black and white people on Cape York for quite sometime.

Pat: what are your concerns with the legislation itself?

GP: There are two primary concerns we have. One is the impact on Native Title. It is our legal view that the legislation does affect Native Title. That is once rivers are declared and management plans are put in place over these rivers, those acts will actually affect Native Title. Now the State differs in its opinion with us on that.

More importantly though we believe that both indigenous people and white people on Cape York will be locked out of future economic development opportunities. You see who is to say what is going to happen in terms of economic opportunities in 10 or 15 years time. We are locking up those opportunities to future generations and these are economic opportunities that provide real jobs they provide for the welfare of communities and so our central concern is that this legislation does not take into account the future needs of communities on the Cape York Peninsula.

Pat: So the legislation as it actually stands, what are some of the things that you think need to be changed? I mean if you can implement some changes what would they be?

GP: Look we have put our proposal to government and we've actually gone public about these changes but I want to talk a bit more about the broader issues here. You see only a couple of weeks ago there was an announcement that the Humane Society has lodged an application with the Federal Government for the National Heritage Listing of the Cape York Peninsula.

You see our concern is that wild rivers is merely a stepping stone towards the ultimate heritage listing of the Cape York Peninsula. The ultimate listing of Cape York for World Heritage would result in the absolute disenfranchisement of aboriginal and white peoples from opportunities for future economic and social advancement.

Pat: The consultation process has upset land holders to the point of them discussing a class action with the state. Will indigenous people be apart of the class action?

GP: We have a number of options available to us we're obviously currently pursuing some form of legal action whether or not it's joined up or it's a legal action on behalf our Native Title holders is certainly on the table. But the story is that not properly being understood here is that for the past nearly 20 years Cape York Aboriginal people have been forth right and upfront about the need for conservation management of our lands in Cape York.

I personally have been involved in many negotiations for most of the national park declarations on the Cape York Peninsula. Currently we are negotiating for separate parcels of land with the state government for the settlement of national parks.

We on the Cape York Peninsula are mindful of the need to have lasting protection of our lands and what is concerning to us is that the government has tended to provide more weight to fringe conservation elements in the community like The Wilderness Society.

You see over 16 years ago The Wilderness Society undertook a massive campaign in on the eastern seaboard of Cape York to save the Starcke lands from sale. It promised many people in Sydney and Melbourne and Canberra that the reason we need to save this land is to provide for the economic and social welfare of traditional owners connected to Starcke. Now more than a decade later what do we see with these people connected to Starcke - nearly 100% of those individuals on welfare. Not one of those elders are alive. They've died. Their children suffer from alcoholism and the family violence that have been portrayed in the media for the last two years. This particular

group associated with Starcke has been the worst. They have had the worst outcome.

Now the position of The Wilderness Society is an absolute lie. It is an absolute lie to the public. They went out and said we need to protect these lands, we need to get these lands back to the traditional owners so that they can have jobs, they can have the responsibility of managing these lands. Well don't come back to my community and talk to the people, the Jacko family and the Naylor family. You will not find one individual who has or enjoys a full time job.

Pat: GP you say the position of The Wilderness Society is an absolute lie. That's a very strong word isn't it, lie, what about if these people are well meaning?

GP: Initially when I was involved as a little boy in that campaign and my appreciation of the facts at that the time was, yes, I thought many people in the conservation movement were well meaning that they had their hearts in the right place. Decades on I look back and I think we lost all of our old people and all of these young people are on the grog. None of them have jobs and I say what happened? Where are the conservationist concerns now for the actual people who own these lands, who are living on this country - they've disappeared! They disappeared to embark on new and better things - that is the greater world heritage listing of the Cape York Peninsula.

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