10 November 2011

Impacts to Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area

Dear Minister Burke,

On behalf of the Australian Coastal Society, we would like to voice our grave concerns about the cumulative impacts of increased coastal development on the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.

The World Heritage Committee decision of July 2011 in which they raised extreme concerns has, we believe, placed the reputation of the World Heritage Area and the role of the levels of Government charged with its management in jeopardy.

The cumulative impacts of development – for example through ports expansions - will have significant detrimental effects on both the ecological and socio-economic life of the region and has the capacity to impact on the long-term sustainability of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park World Heritage Area.

Of current concern are the projects at Gladstone, Abbot Point, Port Alma, Port of Townsville and Bathurst Bay with marine development directly impacting on water quality and coastal and marine ecosystems, and post development set to drastically increase vessel traffic over the next 10 years (further increasing the chances of oil spills, anchor damage, introduced pests and direct collisions with marine wildlife).

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority's Outlook Report 2009 clearly stated that the Reef is already at a cross-road and the decisions made now will determine its future prospects. We implore the Federal Government in its decision making, to think beyond the short-term to consider the long-term protection of the Great Barrier Reef for the benefit of generations to come.

Feedback from our Queensland members is that not everyone believes they will benefit from increased development with many alarmed at the potential impact on the liveability of their towns and on the Great Barrier Reef, which is the source of recreation and/or industry (both fisheries and tourism) for thousands of residents.

Following the recent ABC Four Corners Program Great Barrier Grief (aired November 7) our main concerns include:

- Ecological impacts from dredging, increased shipping and other infrastructure pressures
- Impacts on water quality
- Impacts on species of conservation interest such as EPBC-listed marine turtles, dugongs (which have already been severely affected by recent flood events) and the Australian snubfin dolphin and habitats such as mangroves, soft bottoms, seagrass and coral reefs.
• Socio-economic impacts on adjacent communities (including the boom / bust fly-in populations that are also being driven by Queensland resources boom).

We welcome the strategic assessment of the World Heritage Area, and request that it identifies ways to manage cumulative development in the region more effectively. However, we’re concerned that while this process is undertaken, there is potential for a number of projects under discussion to be submitted for assessment (and hence covered by law) that may further impact on the World Heritage Area.

We urge the Federal Government to reconsider their current position, further demonstrating their commitment to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the World Heritage Committee, and put in place a moratorium on all green field projects until the strategic assessment has been completed.

We are concerned that the short-term economic opportunities being driven by the current resources boom will drive the Great Barrier Reef into further decline despite $200 million of Australian Government investment through the Reef Rescue funding, when it is already suffering the impacts from degraded water quality and Climate Change. Whilst these economic opportunities provide obvious value to Queensland and Australia’s economy for the next 30 to 50 years, they do not provide the long-term security or environmental sustainability.

We urge you to act now, not for short term economic gains, but for the benefit of the World and future generations of Australians.

Yours Sincerely

[Signature]

Bruce Thom
President