

Shooting down some Wild Rivers myths

Wilderness Society campaign manager Lyndon Schneiders writes:

Lionel Elmore has provided some interesting perspectives on environmental matters on previous occasions, however his latest effort, panning the protection of rivers on Cape York, is full of holes.

I certainly concur with Elmore that Cape York is a national natural treasure. It is unique, it is under threat from a range of insidious problems such as feral animals and introduced plants. The traditional owners of the region have a deep love and knowledge of the country and should be front and centre in the future management and protection of this remarkable place.

However, the remainder of Elmore's comments are way off the mark. In the interests of balance, I'll explain how.

He claims that the Queensland Government's commitment to employ 100 full time indigenous ranger positions to protect and manage rivers is akin to the creation of "green native police". This is deeply offensive to those indigenous people already employed in this successful program, and is otherwise a load of ill-informed claptrap. The river ranger positions, which already operate in a number of communities on the Cape and in the Gulf Country, undertake the very land management activities that address what Elmore claims are the biggest single threats to the Cape, namely land and fire management and weed and feral animal control. These are real and funded jobs.

By implication Elmore also suggests that protecting rivers on the Cape is all a bit of a beat up by the uneducated city based greenies. Perhaps Elmore somehow missed the recent "develop the north as the foodbowl of Asia" push that was most enthusiastically championed during the dying days of the Howard Government through Big Bill Heffernan's Northern Australia Land and Water Taskforce. A taskforce which, incidentally, included Noel Pearson as a central member, and which sought to respond to the reality of climate change by moving the failed agricultural and irrigation practices that crippled the Murray Darling river basin into northern Australia, including Cape York.

Elmore might also consider the future of the magnificent Wenlock River in central Cape York which is also proposed for protection as a wild river. The Wenlock is home to the highest recorded number of freshwater fish species in Australia, but Country-Liberal party Government of the 1960s granted 80% of its water flows to the bauxite mining industry. And in the absence of protections in place, new and current bauxite mining applications in the catchment will dramatically impact on the ecology of this magnificent river.

Elmore also suggests by implication that The Wilderness Society seeks to use National Parks to exclude Aboriginal people from their country and restrict their customary hunting and fishing activities. Once again, perhaps he should avail himself of a few facts including our strong support for Cape York's recently created Aboriginal owned and managed National Parks (Cape York Aboriginal Land). These have been created as a direct result of lobbying and advocacy by traditional owners, The Wilderness Society and others leading, through dialogue and negotiations, to the *Cape York Peninsula Heritage Act* – breakthrough legislation in Queensland on Indigenous rights, conservation and sustainable development. Amongst many other good initiatives achieved through the Heritage Act negotiations, and in a first in Australia, wild river declarations are now required under law to make provision for "indigenous" water allocations.

Elmore makes the outrageous claim that traditional owners will lose their native title and their customary rights to bush tucker despite the explicit statutory protections of native title rights offered by both the *Wild Rivers Act 2005* and supported by the associated *Cape York Peninsula Heritage Act*

2007. In fact, those rights are enhanced through the ability to declare Indigenous Community Use Areas on Aboriginal Freehold lands to achieve explicit economic development outcomes.

Furthermore, Elmore may like to examine some recent history that led to the creation of Cape York's first Indigenous Protected Area in 2008. This fantastic outcome was the result of years of pro-conservation effort by the Chuulangun traditional owners on the upper Wenlock and Pascoe Rivers, and with lobbying, advocacy and technical support provided by The Wilderness Society through a formal cooperation agreement between our two groups.

Finally, Elmore regurgitates the myth that economic opportunities, such as tourism, grazing and fishing will be closed down by wild river protection. There is no other way to describe this: absolute bollocks. And if you want the evidence acquaint yourself with the Wild Rivers Act and Code and the various guides for landholders including indigenous landholders.

Wild river protection supports sustainable development opportunities and the exercise of native title rights. What it does not support is the failed development model of big dams, irrigation and broadscale tree clearing -- a model that we have been told numerous times Traditional Owners do not want.

We have to question the motives of anyone who disagree with this legislation.

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