

28 September 2005

Dr Diana Wright
Executive Policy Advisor
Department of the Environment and Heritage
GPO Box 787
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Re: Review of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act

Dear Dr Wright,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on the review. As a marine biologist, I have been involved with research on the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) and with the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) since 1979.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority is known world-wide as **the** leader in sustainable management of marine resources due to its exemplary zoning and management of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (GBRMP). The present governance structure has enabled GBRMPA to achieve world-class results in conducting and facilitating research as well as providing educational, advisory and information services. In short, it is doing a very good job.

The GBR is one of the most complex ecosystems on earth and it is critical that Australia maintain strong focus on its management and ultimate sustainability. GBRMPA has followed an exemplary path showing along the way that expertise, structure and consultation with stakeholders can lead to excellent policy and results, some of which are internationally recognized as setting best practice for managing marine environments. Integrated coastal-zone management is difficult to achieve, particularly when it involves Federal, State and local governments. Installing another layer of Federal Government management in Canberra above GBRMPA will make the task of GBRMPA more difficult. It will render GBRMPA unable to respond effectively to issues, and inevitably, the response will be slower and more conservative. Many of the issues confronting GBRMPA require detailed local knowledge and these are best dealt with by the Authority 'on the spot' in Townsville.

The recent rezoning of the Reef was a direct result of careful planning over several years that included broad consultation with scientists and other stakeholders. Submissions from 22,000 stakeholders were received and considered. Early drafts of the zoning plan had wide circulation to stakeholders for input. Public meetings were held and presentations by GBRMPA staff at international and national conferences sought expert opinion. The protection of 33% of the park representing 70 bioregions was the final world-leading result. This constitutes one of the broadest stakeholder consultations in Australia, and one of the greatest 'wins' for the environment anywhere. It is close to an ideal

model for such a complex issue. In short, GBRMPA has an enviable track record of communication both upward, downward and laterally.

This rezoning was based on the best available science, and has been recognized both in Australia and overseas as representing 'world best practice'. This acknowledges the achievements of GBRMPA in integrated coastal-zone management on a scale not undertaken anywhere else.

I was involved in commenting on the various stages of the recent rezoning of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and have participated in and commented upon all zoning plans since 1979. I have had regular contact with the Authority and have found it always responsive to requests to meet to resolve various issues regarding management and conservation of the Reef.

The Director of GBRMPA <text deleted> is close to the ideal head of a public service organization that deals with scientific and conservation issues. Her advice should be sought by all those in similar positions.

The location of the main GBRMPA office in Townsville has facilitated its excellent performance. It is critical that GBRMPA and its Director remain 'on the spot' to ensure that its staff have access to the range of institutions involved in the reef, many of which are based in Townsville, and to ensure close interactions between scientists and managers. Aside from its proximity to the reef and its principal stakeholders, Townsville is a major hub for coral-reef research and management – further reasons why GBRMPA must continue to be located there. This close proximity ensures that the best possible expertise is readily available almost in real time. Canberra-based decision-making would weaken the willingness and ability of communities and scientists to engage with any remaining local GBRMPA staff because they would be seen as having no direct link to decision-making

Importantly, GBRMPA, in large part due to the RAP process, has provided Queenslanders with a sense of stewardship and ownership of the reef: a result few conservation agencies can claim. Effective management and policing of the GBRMP can only occur if the stakeholders feel that they are responsible for the reef, and want to 'do the right thing'. Relations between GBRMPA and GBR stakeholders have never been closer. The incorporation of GBRMPA within DEH in Canberra would certainly damage, if not destroy, this close relationship and sense of ownership.

Compatibility of the GBRMP Act of 1975 and the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBCA) is essential, but this must not be at the expense of GBRMPA's hard-won ability to deliver sensible policy and management following public consultation. GBRMPA should retain the ability to develop and implement policy within the new EPBCA. The GBRMP Act should be updated to incorporate principles of ecologically sustainable development, as such concepts were not developed in 1975.

The close relationship of GBRMPA and Queensland Government is critical as many of the problems facing the reef are land based. GBRMPA has achieved the Queensland Government's commitment to and cooperation with sustainable management of the Great Barrier Reef. How many other Commonwealth agencies can claim as much?

With GBRMPA, the concept of if "it works don't break it" is very relevant. Few conservation agencies anywhere in the world today have achieved what GBRMPA has, especially in the context of a federal system of overlapping and often competing jurisdictions. Management of large, complex systems like the GBR require an ecosystem approach, and for this to work, cross-jurisdictional cooperation is essential. GBRMPA has achieved this, and alteration of its governance arrangements places this achievement at risk.

Major issues such as global warming and increased incidence of coral bleaching and frequency of cyclones require that the Reef is managed by the best possible team and methods. This is best achieved with the current GBRMPA arrangements where the Chairman reports directly to the Minister. Additional layers of bureaucracy will only hinder effective management.

In conclusion, the GBRMPA's management of the Great Barrier Reef is exemplary, as is its consultation with stakeholders. GBRMPA needs more resources to accomplish its Herculean task of sustainably managing the GBR. What it does not need is a change to its present governance structure: this would only place its accomplishments at risk. This structure works, and responds to change and challenges. It is critical that GBRMPA maintains the tasks of policy development and implementation. Finally, the location of GBRMPA in Townsville is clearly essential: the Great Barrier Reef – its *raison d'être* – is there, as are its

stakeholders, and the scientific expertise upon which it relies to scientifically manage the Reef.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey M Leis, PhD