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MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, HERITAGE AND THE ARTS

## SPEECH TO THE QUEENSLAND MEDIA CLUB

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[CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY]

### ***From the sand hills to the suburbs ... steps towards a sustainable Australia.***

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of this land on which we meet, the Toorbal and Jagara people.

I'm always impressed by Queenslanders' conviction that they live in the best part of Australia.

You have a significant share of Australia's great natural assets – and you know how to use and celebrate them for the international wonders that they are.

From the teeming waters of the Great Barrier Reef to the lush rainforests of the Wet Tropics, from the mighty sandhills of Fraser Island to the bush surrounding the suburbs of Brisbane, Queensland has harnessed these wonders to make a strong contribution to the state's identity and to its economy.

The World Heritage list records the places of natural and cultural heritage that are of outstanding value to humanity on a global scale. Queensland is blessed with five of Australia's 17 World Heritage places.

Two of these, the Great Barrier Reef and the Wet Tropics, help to attract \$1.2 billion a year to the city of Cairns. In total, tourism from the Reef injects a massive \$4.9 billion into the Queensland economy, and overall tourism is the second largest export earner for Queensland.

Now more than ever, the health of the environment should be recognized as essential to the health of the Queensland economy.

But Queensland's natural assets are also under threat. Rapid urban expansion, overfishing, land-clearing and declining water quality all pose major challenges.

And, of course, the big one – climate change.

### **Climate change impacts**

Every day it seems another report, another undeniable truth, emerges about how dangerous changing global temperatures will be. Australians are increasingly coming to understand how global warming will impact on our environment.

Ongoing research from our own Australian Antarctic Division and CSIRO scientists on the profound changes underway in Antarctica provides even more food for thought on this issue.

It is extraordinary, when the climate change challenge is so evident, that Brendan Nelson, Greg Hunt and the other dinosaurs in the Liberal and National parties are squabbling over how long to put off taking action.

Earlier this month, on 16 July, Mr Hunt stated unequivocally “2012 is the time by which we would like to see an emissions trading scheme in place.”

Similarly, on 9 July, Mr Turnbull was asked, “The Coalition, if you were in Government today, you would have an emissions trading scheme starting in 2012?” His answer, very plainly, was “Yes, we would.”

Yet just yesterday Mr Hunt could no longer answer the question, saying “I’m not going to pre-empt the discussion of the colleagues.”

And Mr Turnbull went out of his way to avoid the same question, saying, “You know, people debate the start date – the real issue is what is the scheme, what is the design of the scheme.”

The Shadow Treasurer then assured us that he and his colleagues had “All been singing off the same song sheet.”

Well I can assure you, as someone who’s sung off a few song-sheets in my time, there’s no harmony coming from the Opposition on addressing the challenge of climate change.

But there is a very familiar tune, and it’s the theme song of 12 years of climate change inaction, 12 years of climate change denial and delay.

So the Coalition that signed Kyoto and then refused to ratify has become the Opposition that committed to emissions trading in 2012 and then walked away.

What an irresponsible approach to this country’s long-term future, to the future of our environment, more vulnerable than most to climate change, and to the future of our economy, with the business community looking for certainty in the transition to a low-carbon economy.

And we are already seeing the effects of climate change, with more frequent and intense coral bleaching, and scientists are predicting worse to come. A three degree temperature rise by 2030 could see up to 97 per cent of the magnificent Great Barrier Reef bleached every year.

A one degree temperature rise could slash the upland tropical rainforests of the Wet Tropics by half, and within 50 to 100 years we could lose more than half the vertebrates unique to this region.

We're likely to see more frequent and severe droughts, with greater fire risk. More extreme storm events, and more flash flooding.

It is possible that global sea level could rise a metre or more by 2100 – which would have a devastating impact on the infrastructure, wetlands and estuaries in the South East Queensland corridor in particular.

Given the range of threats to this State posed by climate change, there is no doubt that the potential risks - and the costs - are huge.

## **Resilience**

The time for action is now and that's why the Rudd Labor Government is pressing ahead with a bold agenda for tackling the challenge, not arguing about when to start.

Part of that agenda is rebuilding Australia's resilience to the threats that harm the environment.

Not just climate change, but all the traditional pressures of population, pests and development.

Our legacy should be an environment with the resilience that it once had – for the good of our landscapes and ultimately our communities.

So what exactly is resilience and why is it important?

A resilient ecosystem is one that has the capacity to withstand shocks and dramatic changes and to rebuild itself without the need for significant human intervention. It must be diverse enough and sufficiently large to be able to bounce back after a disturbance.

It's a bit like the human immune system. The research shows that people recover from infections more quickly if the rest of their life is in order – if they're eating well, sleeping enough, and are generally in good health. Take away any of these factors and recovery slows down, and the risk of sustaining permanent harm goes up.

As custodians of the environment, our challenge is to ensure that all the work we do – all the money we direct, all the volunteer hours we put in and the

plans we implement – will protect or rebuild that resilience so that natural ecosystems have a better chance of recovering from the stresses that they face – and can continue to provide essential ecosystem services such as fresh water.

## **Cassowary**

Now Queensland as you would know is home to the southern cassowary, that large flightless bird of the wet tropics, and it is an excellent example of how a native species contributes to the overall resilience of an ecosystem.

After the devastation of Cyclone Larry in 2006, the Queensland Environment Protection Authority and wildlife groups joined forces to provide food for the southern cassowaries around Mission Beach.

They weren't just motivated by animal welfare – though of course that was part of it.

The real driver was the crucial role these birds play in sustaining the rainforest. In the Cape York Peninsula and the Wet Tropics, the southern cassowary eats rainforest fruits like native laurels, lilipillies and palms, and disperses the seeds in their droppings.

So the cassowary's survival was central to the regeneration of the area, and the long-term viability of rainforest communities.

One of my recent responsibilities as Federal Environment Minister under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act was to consider an application for a residential development near this same cassowary habitat at Mission Beach.

The development would have subdivided about 24 hectares into 40 residential lots and involved vegetation clearing, earthworks, construction of a new access road and associated infrastructure.

I was considering a number of factors as I reviewed this proposal.

One was that this site contains what is known as 'essential habitat'. It contains remnant rainforest habitat and provides an important cassowary movement corridor between the habitat of the Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area and the coast. Even strict conditions wouldn't be enough to protect this vital corridor. Another was that land clearing and development have already had a dramatic impact on the cassowary - less than 25 per cent of this lowland habitat is intact.

This development would have had an unacceptable impact on the chances of this species' survival – but the clincher was the impact that it would have on the survival of the rainforest itself. The flow-on effects for tourism and the economy of far-north Queensland are obvious.

Having carefully considered the likely impact of this proposed development, and the fact that even strict conditions would not be sufficient to protect the essential cassowary habitat on which the developer was proposing to build, I came to the view that I had no choice but to use my powers under the Act to rule out this proposal completely.

This is only the second time a proposal has been deemed 'clearly unacceptable' under the EPBC Act and rejected outright, so it is a significant decision. The other was an application to shoot an unspecified number of threatened grey-headed flying foxes at Singleton in NSW. This action was found to be unacceptable as it would contribute to the decline of a species at local and potentially regional scales.

In the vast majority of cases considered under the Act, the potential impacts on matters of national environmental significance can be offset or minimised in some way.

### **EPBC Act**

I now want to briefly address the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act or EPBC Act. It is the central piece of environmental legislation that I administer.

I know that there is great interest in how it relates to other controversial proposals including the Traveston Dam on the Mary River.

Naturally I am not going to preempt any future decisions today, but what I can say is that when the Act is applied properly and in conformity with its guiding principles, it is a powerful tool that can make a major contribution to Queensland's sustainable future.

It is comprehensive and broad ranging legislation. Its objects cover the protection of matters of national environmental significance and heritage; the promotion of ecologically sustainable development and biodiversity and a cooperative approach to protecting the environment; and, last but not least, the central role and expertise of indigenous custodians of our land.

As Minister I intend to look at the whole picture to assess developments in terms of how they might impact on matters of national environmental significance as well as the social and economic impacts of proposals.

The EPBC Act should not be seen as a barrier to development. Although it is sometimes necessary to reject proposals – such as the Mission Beach residential development – in the large majority of cases my Department works *with* proponents to ensure that the potential impacts of proposals on matters of national environmental significance are minimised. Following such negotiations, the large majority of proposals are able to proceed.

In my role as Minister I am determined to ensure that developments with potentially significant impacts on matters of national environmental significance

are carried out in an ecologically sustainable manner. In this way the Queensland economy will grow together with – rather than at the expense of – its environmental resilience.

I can give you my commitment that I will apply due process in all my considerations under the Act. I will ensure that all developments coming across my desk are considered carefully in light of the principles set down in the Act.

### **National Reserve System**

I'd like to turn now to Australia's National Reserve System, that network of national parks and reserves that provides a refuge for plants and animals against climate change. Increasingly, they're recognised as drivers of national and international tourism, attracting millions of visitors every year and generating billions of dollars for the Australian economy.

Earlier this year I announced an investment of \$180 million over five years in our network of national parks – more than five times the financial commitment of the previous Government.

National parks are not remote, locked-up pockets of biodiversity. They can be part of our urban sustainability experience as well.

At Noosa, for example - one of the most densely populated and fastest growing regions in the nation - 35 per cent of the region is in parks and reserves, including one of the only rivers in south-east Queensland with an A grade environmental rating – the Noosa River.

That's a great achievement for a waterway surrounded by homes, businesses and rural industries. It's testament to the joint efforts of three levels of government, the local community and the tourism industry that has built nature and conservation into the core of the Noosa brand.

### **Community Coastcare**

But for every Noosa success story, there's a coastal community struggling to look after their fragile estuaries and beaches. Many of these favourite places are in danger of being loved to death through over-use. In places we see declining water quality, sand dunes blowing out and coastlines eroding. And with the population in South East Queensland growing by 50,000 to 60,000 each year, that risk is destined to grow.

The Government has responded to this need with a round of competitive grants worth up to \$20 million this financial year under Caring for our Country Community Coastcare.

This year, we have identified 12 priority coastal hotspots for Community Coastcare – including Moreton Bay, which is a marine reserve providing habitats for dugong and seagrass populations.

Moreton Bay is listed as a Ramsar wetland of international importance and is under pressure as a result of population growth and development, disturbance of acid sulfate soils and water quality decline.

Targeting investment to areas of high conservation value, such as the priority coastal hotspots, will mean that Community Coastcare funding can make a substantial and measurable change at these key sites.

### **Caring for our Country**

Community Coastcare is one component of the Rudd Government's new rescue package for our environment – *Caring for our Country*.

Caring for our Country started four weeks ago today on July 1, and we have committed \$2.25 billion to it over five years.

I am incredibly proud of this package and the fact that it:

- cuts red tape,
- slashes bureaucracy,
- plugs the leaks that have been a feature of previous national resource management systems, and
- focuses investment where it can make a real difference.

I am pleased to announce today that \$25.7 million of this funding will be spent on regional investments in Queensland this financial year. The money will be for a range of environmental and sustainable land management projects in each of the state's 14 natural resource management regions.

Now I earlier mentioned the action I took to protect the cassowary habitat at Mission Beach, using powers available to me under the EPBC Act. Several of these regional investments funded under Caring for our Country will complement these regulatory measures.

They will help to create habitat islands on private land in the Julatten area adjacent to the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area, and restore key habitats at Kuranda leading to improved long term conservation outcomes for this iconic species.

Of course it's not just about a single species. Several of these projects will improve the condition and resilience of ecosystems and threatened species habitat.

For example the \$1.4 million to the Condamine regional body will be for projects to help private landholders manage endangered ecosystems such as blue grass, vine scrub and Brigalow whilst other projects will improve the aquatic habitat of six parts of the Condamine River to increase native fish populations.

So it's all about delivering real results for biodiversity and national icons. And this

program will offer clear and measurable targets, value for money, reduced red tape and increased accountability of public expenditure, as well as working closely with private landholders and other levels of government.

Understanding that providing our natural landscapes and the ecosystems that make them up with sufficient resilience to withstand the range of pressures and threats, and to enable to continue productive occupation of our continent, *Caring for Our Country* will focus on six national priorities, most of which I've touched on today:

- The National Reserve System
- Biodiversity and natural icons
- Coastal environments and critical aquatic habitats
- Sustainable farm practices
- Natural resource management in remote and northern Australia
- Community skills knowledge and engagement

These national priorities, articulated for the first time in this way, delivered through a focused and strategic program, brings rigour and accountability to natural resource management in ways which simply didn't happen under the previous government.

## **Conclusion**

I started today by listing some of the natural assets of Queensland and pointing out that now, more than ever, the long term economic and social health of the state is tied to the health of its natural assets.

But I could have named so many more – the wetlands of the Channel Country, the wild rivers of the Gulf, the dunes of Shelburne Bay, or the vast expanse of the Simpson Desert.

But it's not all 'out there', remote from where most of us live. These natural assets run from the sandhills to the suburbs. Much of this natural heritage is close to home. It's the rainforest gully in the backyard, the creek where your kids play and the birds in your garden.

It's front and centre in all our minds, and it's at the centre of this Government's decision-making, was we aim to make sure we are caring for our country.

Here in Queensland you have the opportunity to do it differently, to avoid some of the mistakes that have been made down south. Many of your ecosystems are intact, and you're already learning that you can keep them that way, as you build a sustainable economy and safeguard your natural assets - our precious environment - that is so essential to our future.

Thank you.