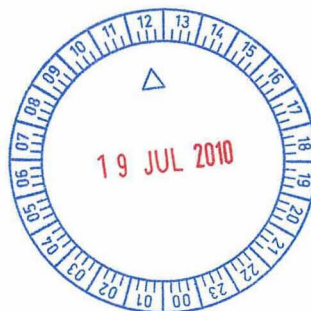


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Ms Linda Omar
Committee Clerk
Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs
Parliament House
PERTH WA 6000

Inquiry into Shack Sites in Western Australia

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs advertised recently in the West Australian newspaper.

I am a supporter of the current Shack Site Communities Petitions that were lodged to convince the Government to review policy on shack communities in W.A. and to highlight public support for these sites.

Background

As a long time visitor to the Wedge Island shack site and a shack owner for the last 5 years, I am convinced of the value of these unique communities.

I am joint owner of the shack at Wedge, my partner being a long time friend of 50 years from early school days. We share both the costs and the use of the shack, with our families regularly travelling to Wedge for weekends and the main holiday breaks. Our shack is shared with our family members and our friends, with visitors and guests taking advantage of this simple but outstanding place.

Joint ownership of shacks at Wedge is common, providing the means for many families to enjoy the activities of this coastal shack community. It is also common to encounter many new and long time visitors to Wedge who are guests of shack owners.

First time visitors to Wedge are overwhelmed by the family oriented and neighbourly social structure, whether it be early morning walks walking along the beach or gathering at the point to watch the sunset. There is a broad mix of people who own or visit shacks; three generations of one family all staying in one shack, young couples, and pensioners enjoying an extended holiday as they have for decades.

There is also a lot of support by visitors for the simple and low impact pastimes and facilities at Wedge. With power at the shacks provided mainly by solar energy, there is little opportunity for wasters of energy and time such as television and computer games. With rain water tanks to collect and store water, all shack users are very aware of the need to curb their water usage and conserve this resource.

There has been ongoing opposition to shacks at Wedge with claims of their detrimental effect on the environment, including pollution of ground water and destruction of the local features and flora. The reality is that shack owners have a good track record when it comes to protection of the environment at Wedge Island.

With over 340 shacks at Wedge, there have been no significant environmental issues associated with these shacks and their usage. This is evidence that the current methods employed for rubbish, waste water and sewerage are not detrimental to the environment, and do not present a significant risk to health of the shack community or to the public.

The Wedge Island Protection Association (WIPA) represents the majority of shack owners at Wedge, and has been instrumental in protection and conservation activities at the site. These activities are diverse, from collection of rubbish left by campers in the dunes, planting vegetation that will limit erosion of ocean facing dunes through to maintaining and operating fire tenders.

Shack owners, and in particular members of WIPA, are willing and diligent protectors of the environment and the site. Shack owners keep an eye out for campers at Wedge or people looking for a fishing or 4WD experience, and are happy to provide advice on how the site can be enjoyed without negatively impacting the environs. While neither the shack owners nor WIPA have any authority to act on illegal activities, they are an on-site presence that is a deterrent to anti-social behaviour.

This is a direct contrast to the role by Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) in the management and protection of the site. Shack owners pay an annual lease in excess of \$800, and with about 350 shacks at Wedge and about 130 at Grey, these fees are a considerable sum of money. However DEC does not provide any services or facilities for shack owners or for members of the public visiting the area. These lease payments have been revenue for CALM and now DEC for about 16 years, and it is difficult to find evidence of their investment in the sites over that time.

Recent events with visitors to Wedge and Grey shack sites have exposed the problems with the inadequate services and facilities for the public. The construction of the Indian Ocean Drive to link Lancelin and Cervantes has provided the means for the public to visit the Wedge and Grey sites, an opportunity which would previously have not been available.

This influx of visitors is creating problems for the two sites, including social, traffic and environmental. With no designated parking areas, limited signage and no ablution facilities, the extra visitors to the areas are ill-informed and present a risk to safety and the environment.

The Indian Ocean Drive also represents a milestone for the Wedge and Grey sites; completion of the road, expected to be June 2011, will trigger the removal of all shacks at Wedge (apart from those used by the Wedge based professional fishers), as set out in the current management plan.

Issues

There are many issues with the shack sites in general and with the Wedge shacks in particular.

The one issue that affects all shack sites in WA is the lack of a workable policy on shack sites. At this time there are viable and operational shack sites in WA that are not in accordance with the State Government Squatter Policy and related legislation. These shack sites have been validated through the granting of long term leases recently by either a Local Government Authority (LGA) or by DEC.

The background and reasons for these shack sites gaining long term leases are varied, but the leases are evidence of the significance of these sites for their community social values and as tourism assets. And it is equally evident that the Wedge Island shack community has these same community social values and is already a significant tourism asset.

These shack sites include:

- Peaceful Bay (Denmark)
- Donnelly River (Manjimup and Nannup)
- Windy Harbour (Manjimup)
- Naval Base (Cockburn)
- Blowholes (Carnarvon)
- Dampier Archipelago. (

The point here is there are shack communities in WA that have recently gained long term leases, while the shack removal policy is still current, yet I am facing having my shack being removed at what appears to be the whim of DEC. This is a major sticking point with most shack owners at Wedge and Grey, and calls into question the authority of DEC to plan the shack removal.

The aim of shack holders at Wedge and Grey is to gain long term tenure, similar to that achieved by other shack sites in WA. It is recognised that there is a cost to this in the form of upgrading of the site and shacks, and that this cost will be mostly borne by shack owners.

Upgrading shacks to comply with a defined building code are expected to be a priority, ensuring safety, building integrity and environmental protection through standards on areas such as sewerage, waste water, electrical wiring and construction materials.

This investment by shack owners will be justified in terms of the certainty gained from a long term lease that the improvements can be enjoyed over a period of time. It is also expected that shack owners will be required to participate in community development and improvement projects and activities.

Regulation of Wedge and Grey Shack Sites

Regulation of shack sites covers many areas, and there are site-specific factors that influence formulation of a management and regulatory structure for Wedge and Grey. These areas of regulation include:

- management of leases
- building code compliance
- environmental protection
- heritage protection and promotion
- essential services, such as rubbish collection
- public use areas
- visitor facilities and services
- commercial operations
- camping and caravan areas.

The one thing that needs to be addressed here is who will be responsible for the regulation of the Wedge and Grey sites. There are several options here for discussion.

While DEC has responsibility for some shack sites on reserves in WA, there is little evidence of a commitment to the Wedge and Grey sites, especially with DEC pushing for the shacks to be removed from these sites.

This is not to say that DEC could not take on this regulation role; with an appropriate government policy and framework in place, DEC could work with other departments, such as Tourism, and with other associations, such as WIPA, to manage these two significant shack communities.

Local Government Authorities have a key role in many of the shack sites in WA, and have demonstrated the effectiveness of a regional authority controlling a local shack site resource. It must be noted that these LGAs have chosen to ignore or not enforce aspects of the State Government Squatter Policy.

The Wedge and Grey sites are within the Shire of Dandaragan, who is an opponent of shack communities. This shire has in the past enforced the removal of squatter shacks, notably at Sandy Cape north of Jurien Bay. With a change in government policy, the Shire would be in a position to take on the regulatory role of Wedge and Grey.

This role for the shire would include the provision of essential services to the two communities. Services such as rubbish collection, rangers and building inspection are those typically provided by the shire to its rate payers, and rates levied on shack owners would represent an additional revenue stream for the shire. WIPA would be able to assist the shire in this management role.

Summary

Shack communities are capable of providing affordable coastal family holiday destinations, as well as a wide range of recreational and tourist facilities and experiences. Their potential as tourism assets is considerable, and can generate investment in facilities and tourism related businesses through increased access to and use of these sites.

I trust this submission provides the Committee with information on shack communities in Western Australia, and that the Committee will be instrumental in changing policy related to shack sites so that the W.A public and visitors to this state can enjoy the benefits of these unique communities.

Yours faithfully,



Mick Kontoolas

11 July 2010