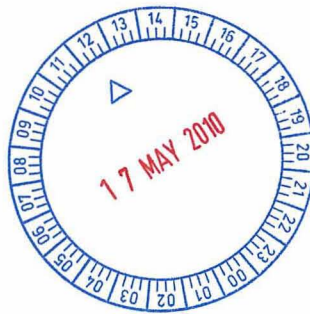


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Ms L. Kuyer

The Hon. Brian Ellis MLC
Chairman
Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs
Parliament House
PERTH WA 6000

Dear Chairman

Re: Petition No 50 – Shack Site Communities

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs in response to the petition on Shack Site Communities tabled by Hon Sue Ellery MLC in the Legislative Council on 30 March 2010.

The reason for generating the current Shack Site Communities Petition is to convince the Government to undertake a policy review and to highlight the increasing public support to protect sites capable of providing affordable coastal family holiday destinations.

The State Government Squatter Policy served a limited purpose during the early 1990s, but it does not reflect current public values. The policy and management plans derived from it, such as the DEC Wedge & Grey Master Plan 2000, are now obsolete and through a lack of timely reviews, most stakeholders are at risk of being shortchanged.

Shack communities are an untapped resource that can generate great investment in tourism assets and provide a far wider range of recreational and tourist facilities and experiences. These resources can also facilitate an increase in the access to and use of these sites rather than the narrow view expressed in the 'exclusivity' claims made at the time the Squatter Removal Policy was promulgated.

Yours faithfully,

Lauren Kuyer

12th May 2010

Submission to the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs

Petition No 50 – Shack Site Communities

Promoter – Ms Lauren Kuyer,

(This issue has not been presented to the Parliamentary Ombudsman)

This petition has been generated because a written political promise made by the Liberal Party during the last election campaign to reconvene the Wedge & Grey Taskforce, established by the previous Labor government, would appear is not going to be honoured.

The Taskforce was a mechanism to review how other States (esp. Tasmania) have incorporated retention of conforming shack site communities into long-term site management plans to better utilise these areas to enable traditional family 'way of life' affordable coastal holidays to coexist with emerging tourism and broader public access needs.

I have been visiting the Wedge Island shack community regularly for the past five years, staying with my uncle and aunty who have had their shack for about thirteen years. It has been a place where our extended family has visited for many years for holidays and breaks from the city. From the moment we got there, I felt a sense of community and friendship among the shack owners, something you seldom find in your own neighbourhood. Wedge is such a fantastic diverse community, as soon as you get there you feel like one of the "family". To me it's a sanctuary; as soon as I see the shacks I feel a sense of calm come over me.

When the opportunity arose for us to have our own shack we jumped at the chance to consolidate this 'way of life'. Our shack is owned by four couples, all of who fell in love with Wedge after spending a weekend at my uncle's shack. The best move we collectively have ever made. We now have our own slice of paradise and enjoy it with our friends and family who can't wait to come up with us and relax, fish, swim and just enjoy the social aspect of Wedge.

Authorities outside the Wedge Island community don't seem to be able to grasp the cultural and historical value that the shacks and the community itself have created. This can't be replaced with some coppers logs and signs telling us what we can't do. If Wedge Island is left to the bureaucrats to ruin, our sense of place and community and cultural identity will be lost forever.

The Minister for the Environment, Hon Donna Faragher, has stated she "was not willing to reconvene the taskforce" as "we weren't going to get a unified position". Instead, her approach is to "make a decision working in consultation with the stakeholders". The Minister has said publicly (ABC TV Stateline program 26/3) that she expects DEC to develop a compromise plan. Unfortunately, the majority of stakeholders are government agencies that are loath to support change of existing policy. The approach taken in NSW, SA and Tasmania has been far more enlightened; taking into account cultural heritage values as living examples that should be retained. At the same time the 'technical' issues relating to building standards, environmentally sustainable services and general public access have been satisfactorily addressed.

The 14,000 people who use the shacks at Wedge & Grey were under no misunderstanding as to what was intended when the commitment was sought and endorsed. In addition, the 21,000 people who have signed the petitions being presented to both the Upper and Lower Houses, support the course of action proposed.

It is not just the Wedge and Grey sites that are affected, but includes locations from the south coast to the northwest. This is an issue that involves more than just the Environment portfolio. It also impacts on Lands, Planning, Tourism, Heritage & Local Government and Indigenous Affairs. In fact both the Wedge and Grey reserves are not DEC lands as defined under the CALM Act and therefore the Minister for the Environment does not have the authority to implement a DEC management plan, especially one that is obsolete by its own definition. The authority for implementing a management plan rests with the Minister for Lands.

The National Trust of WA has classified both settlements at Wedge and Grey as being places of cultural significance and has recommended full assessment of the social values and development of a conservation management plan. This would appear to be an appropriate mechanism to use to establish the bone fides of both

settlements and ensure that what started formally over 20 years ago to control and remove unauthorised structures, does not also eliminate an important social icon that can enhance future tourism developments.

Both community associations, Wedge Island Protection Association (WIPA) and Grey Conservation and Community Association (GCCA) have developed viable Shack Settlement Models that propose integrated tourism and recreational facilities. These build on the critical mass of the shack user market to support what would otherwise be non-viable commercial operations trying to service seasonal markets at a time when commercial developments are hampered by limited or no access to development funds.

It appears the focus of some government agencies, especially Tourism WA, is on the high yield facilities aimed at the top end tourism market. Of course, to attract developers to invest, prime sites are needed and a theme needs to be created. The 'sense of place' that exists in shack settlements, apart from the underdeveloped physical environment, is the 'community feel' and cultural heritage. This makes a point of difference for the tourist and adds to the tourism assets.

The recent report released by the Economic and Industry Standing Committee (E&ISC) of its review of the Caravan Park and Camping Ground industry, highlighted the need to protect "a central part of the WA way of life" and of the need to collect data to better plan for and manage suitable sites. The recreational issues addressed by the E&ISC, are reflected in the demand for access by the general public to shack community sites. However, this demand is not recognised and the capacity of the current sites to respond to the demands is also not acknowledged.

A site-specific plan cannot exist in isolation and needs to fit within an overall policy framework. At present, that framework is still the Squatter Removal Policy and its focus was to halt the uncontrolled expansion of unauthorised structures being erected on Crown land. That policy has served its purpose.

I understand that some changes must be made to ensure the long-term viability of the area in regard to environment, health and safety, and we have been making those changes, even without any promise of long-term tenure. We are prepared to do what ever is needed to ensure a future for our community. WIPA prepared a professional submission to the Dept of CALM's Expression of Interest in 2001 but CALM decided to abandon the process after 3 years and wait for other commercial partners to surface.

There are alternative mechanisms available if the Minister for the Environment is not going to reconvene the taskforce. For example:

- A formal heritage assessment of the sites could form the initial element of a revised framework if allowable under the State Government Squatter Policy.
- The site-specific settlement models developed by WIPA and GCCA could be the guides to formulate integrated management plans for both sites
- Additional studies such as an Economic & Social Impact study could be undertaken to prove the values that would accrue to all stakeholders.

The current DEC plan is to entice a commercial partner to establish some form of camping and caravanning facility into Wedge and possibly Grey and demolish both communities. The facilities are likely to be small scale, basic and with an unknown delivery date. The reality is such a venture is highly unlikely due to availability of willing partners and the doubtful economic return of a stand-alone facility due to the seasonal market.

The alternative is to use the critical mass of the existing shack market to facilitate additional public facilities and enhance the visitor experience by providing something different on the central west coast.

Wedge is such a fantastic place for young families to come and enjoy a safe, friendly environment where kids can run around in the fresh air and I look forward to one day being able to bring my kids up to Wedge. It's such a privilege to be part of this community; we all rally around each other and help out when needed. Shack communities like Wedge serve an important social purpose and must be preserved. I'm sure everyone who has experienced the Wedge 'sense of place' feels the same.