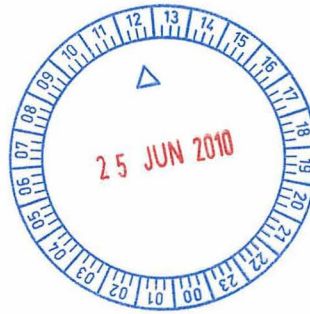


**PUBLIC**

Mr G. Boston

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 Max Trenorden MLC in the Legislative Council on 6 May 2010.

The reason for generating the current Shack Site Communities Petition was 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.

I am aware the Committee has now commenced an inquiry into the Shack Sites in WA through the public notice that appeared in the West Australian on Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> June 2010.

Consequently, the attached submission addresses the issues in your letter dated 13<sup>th</sup> May 2010 as well as the Terms of Reference as stated in the public notice.

The key to this problem is the nature of the current State Government Squatter Policy.

- It was introduced without consultation with the user group negatively affected by it
- The policy only addressed the unauthorised physical structures, with no consideration of the significant social structures involved
- Successive WA governments have not adequately dealt with the issues
- Other States have successfully resolved the perceived problems of similar shack sites
- Unless reviewed, the policy puts at risk significant social values and tourism assets

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.

I strongly recommend the Committee seek direct input from shack associations such as WIPA, GCCA, Donnelly River, DARDA, Blow Holes Conservation Assn, Naval Base tenants group and professional experts to balance the input to this process.

Yours faithfully,

Graham Boston

10<sup>th</sup> June 2010

## **Submission to the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs**

### **Petition No 50 – Shack Site Communities**

**Promoter** – Mr Graham Boston,

(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.

Being a keen fisherman, I started visiting Wedge 40 years ago. In those days I appreciated the effort to transport materials to Wedge and build the shacks that provided a warm bed and substantial shelter from the winds. Having mates at both Wedge and Grey who were prepared to share their resources was a trait of the Aussie character that is still alive and well at these shack communities today. A large number of country people use the shacks, but unlike the cooperative attitude of the south coast shires, the central coast shires appear to have little regard for this traditional recreational lifestyle and seem determined to throw the baby out with the bath water.

Over the past 35 years, WIPA has on three occasions made overtures to the Shire of Dandaragan to formalise a management plan for the site, but to no avail. WIPA also prepared a first class submission in response to the CALM Expression of Interest in 2001. Again no decision was made by the management authority, other than to abandon the exercise. The standard response from the bureaucracy is that the existing State Government Squatter Policy requires the removal of shacks as they are unauthorised structures and only a change of policy would see any intention to change the intended management outcome for the shack communities.

The 14,000 people who use the shacks at Wedge & Grey were under no misunderstanding as to what was intended when the political 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 it's 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 bona 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 facilities. However, this demand is not recognised and the capacity of the current sites to respond to the demands is also not acknowledged.

However, no matter how attractive a site-specific plan may be, it 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 1980s policy has served its purpose and as community values have changed over the last 20 years, so the policy relating to shack communities needs to be brought up to current day norms.

I support the proposal to create an over-arching policy framework, by amending the State Government Squatter Policy, to allow a pathway for shack communities to justify their claims for long-term tenure. This would involve extending the provisions given to professional fishers by creating other 'justification' categories such as formal heritage assessment, remote recreational need, local tourism servicing and require submission by the relevant communities for consideration by a designated authority. Communities would be required to conform to defined building standards, environmental conditions and demonstrate benefit to the public.

A positive assessment by the designated authority would then trigger a site-specific management plan to be prepared and tested for validity. It is necessary for each shack site to prepare a specific plan, as all sites are physically different, respond to different markets and link to different commercial environments.

This two-tiered approach provides the over-arching State policy to open the pathway based on set criteria but allows local issues to be taken into account before the management plan can be implemented. Additional studies such as an Economic & Social Impact study could be undertaken to prove the values that would accrue to all stakeholders.

By way of example, if the existing policy is not changed, the current DEC plan for Wedge is to try to entice a commercial partner to establish some form of camping and caravanning facility and demolish the community. 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. This is at a time when the new Indian Ocean Road is due for completion by as early as September 2010.

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.

It is my very strong opinion that Wedge and Grey should be retained for their cultural value and in doing so the State will also benefit economically and socially and the shack communities can continue to deliver a sense of place that will otherwise be wiped out if common sense and logic do not prevail.