

6
PUBLIC

R. Robinson



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 Ed Dermer MLC in the Legislative Council on 23 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.

I have been involved in trying to formalise long-term tenure for the shack community for over 40 years.

It seems to me the nub of this problem is the nature of the 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 initiate further investigation to allow representative associations and professional experts to have input to this process.

Yours faithfully,

Ross Robinson

27th April 2010

Submission to the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs

Petition No 50 – Shack Site Communities

Promoter – Mr Ross Robinson,

(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 first visited Wedge 50 years ago. You were required to be fully self-reliant as there was no water supply or amenities. Building a shack where one could store cooking utensils, bedding, tinned food and collect water run off from the roof alleviated carriage of those necessities for each trip. The effort to transport materials to Wedge and build the shack was a logistic challenge.

The thriving rock lobster industry fishermen and the many new recreational shack owners decided to establish local standards for sewerage and rubbish disposal to address health and environment matters. The Wedge Island Progress Association was formed in August 1968 and five Shire of Dandaragan councillors also attended this first meeting. The association was incorporated in 1972 and I have been the WIPA Secretary/Treasurer since inception.

Our community has stood the test of time. It has fostered a sense of camaraderie amongst members and neighbours quickly assisted anyone who had a problem. As there were no medical facilities and the nearest assistance was 40kms of very rough tracks away, WIPA built a First Aid post that was equipped through community donations and staffed by a volunteer nurse (She has since been awarded an Order of Australia for her work). A fire tender was constructed and in excess of 10,000 man-hours have been spent rehabilitating degraded sand dunes. Local seed was collected, germinated and distributed for members to plant. Low lying areas were also planted with salt water Ti trees on advice of a Forestry professor and WIPA was presented a John Tonkin Greening award.

My three sons and three daughters enjoyed Wedge as kids and now their families make good use of the shack and the Wedge life style. In addition to our three generations of users, the shack has enabled all my relatives and friends to do likewise.

The Minister for the Environment, Hon Donna Faragher, has stated "there was no formal promise to reconvene the taskforce" and "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". 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.

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 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 20,000 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.

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.
- 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.

It is my very strong opinion that Wedge should be retained for its 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.