

PUBLIC

3rd June 2010



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

Dear Sir

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 Giz Watson MLC in the Legislative Council on 20 April 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.

The people of Wedge are made up from all walks of life – from public servants, self employed tradesmen, professionals and business owners, transport and plant operators to farmers, ex service people and retirees. They have formed a community which is 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 sincerely,

(Mr) Dean Carrick

Submission to the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs

Petition No 50 – Shack Site Communities

Promoter – Mr Dean Carrick,

(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 in the early 70's with my mates for boy's weekends. In 1992 I bought a shack from a mate and started our Wedge family experience. Our daughter was 3 years old at the time and my wife and I wanted her to have the freedom to experience nature and a community where she could roam free in the knowledge that a senior community member was always watching out for her safety. She listened to tales told by senior members of Wedge and asked for her favourites to be repeated over and over again. She was able to use her imagination and develop her creativity, rather than be entertained by TV and computer games. People always commend us on having a well adjusted mature child which we attribute to her Wedge community experience, observing a diverse range of people and being able to discern honesty, strength of character and the value of true friendship.

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. Thousands of people visit Wedge from around Australia and the world because of what it is, it has its own sense of place. They are very impressed with the spirit of our community, the ingenuity to create self-sufficiency and the willingness to share scarce resources.

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 22,000 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 a beautiful place and was sought out originally by keen fishermen. Those characteristics are still relevant but the settlement, which evolved over the last 70 years, is far more valuable. The social significance needs to be recognised and protected to allow that Australian coastal family holiday experience to be able to continue to be an option for generations to come. Overseas visitors recognise it, thousands of WA families have been able to enjoy it so lets not allow the bureaucrats to wipe out the last remaining vestiges of WA shack history and be replaced with replicated sterile car parks and interpretation signs.