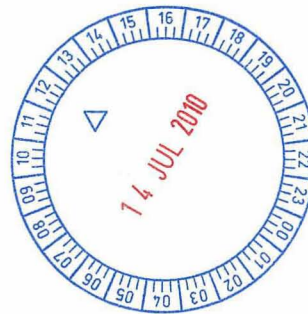


**Submission on Inquiry into Shack Sites in WA
to
The Standing Committee on the Environment
& Public Affairs**

Submission of:

Greg Simpson - Private Citizen

Wedge Island Shack Settlement



This submission has been prepared in response to the Legislative Council of Western Australia's Standing Committee calling for submission to the Inquiry into Shack Sites in W.A.

Terms of reference

To inquire into and report on:

- 1. information and issues to help inform government in the development of policy and the regulation of shack sites on public land in Western Australia; and*
- 2. any other relevant matter.*

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission to the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs.

I am a small business owner and also a shack owner at Wedge Island. I am also a member of the Wedge Island Protection Association.

I represent my family and friends in this submission, which relates to the Wedge Island Shack Settlement.

The Wedge Island Protection Association is represented in a separate submission.

My purpose in making this submission to the Standing Committee is my endeavour to influence the outcome of this inquiry in a positive way and to retain the shacks at Wedge Island in a similar form comparable to what is existing at present.

A negative outcome resulting from this inquiry will have a disastrous effect upon my family, the Wedge Community and the many thousands of visitors to the shack settlement.

Where we have come from

1.1 History

This shack settlement has a history which goes back to 1930/1940's and has developed it's own unusual but very much significant and essential heritage value to the people of the state of Western Australia.

Wedge began as a fishing and camping spot for both amateur and professional fishermen and over time they improved their shelters from tents and small shanties to the variety of shack structures we see today.

Until the 1990's it was generally accepted that anyone could build a shack at this location without fear of being moved on by the government or local council, so many substantial buildings were constructed. Today there are between 300 and 350 shacks.

My father and I built our shack in 1986, but my involvement at Wedge with the squatter village goes back to my childhood, staying at friend's shacks.

Unfortunately, my father died of natural cause during his sleep whilst holidaying at our shack, so as you can appreciate, my family has significant sentimental attachment to our place of escape, where we regularly celebrate and remember him.

Many thousands of people regularly camp at Wedge Island to take advantage of the fishing, surfing and a variety of other recreational activities, but mostly to interact with the shack community.

There have never been any facilities supplied by any authority to accommodate visitors to this area and our community provides all of the existing facilities.

Despite persistent lobbying over the years, progressive governments have never taken an interest in our community nor made an effort find out what we are about.

We have been treated badly and never taken seriously, which has been extremely insulting and degrading, considering the promises that have been made and broken over the years and after the efforts we have made to ensure that sympathetic parties have received our votes and are elected.

1.2 Family / Friends

My extended family and my friends enjoy nearly all of our holiday breaks at Wedge.

I estimate that at different times throughout each year over 55 people stay at our shack, quite often more than 12 at a time.

I would also estimate that this would be a close reflection of most other shacks at Wedge, so that is somewhere around 15,000 to 20,000 people staying in shacks throughout each year.

1.3 Community Values / Pursuits

As with many shack owners at Wedge, whether low income earners or those who recognise the value of involvement in this shack community, we see "our shack" as our only holiday option.

We enjoy fishing, various water and other recreational sports, and community events that we arrange throughout the year, but we get our greatest pleasure from the company and interaction of our friends within the community.

It is the only place where our children have had the opportunity to benefit from a very wholesome, healthy and natural environment, with a very close socially interactive and caring community.

Our children are kept busy day and night with many forms of activities designed to teach them life skills without the influence of electronic gadgets and computers. They are able to play in a safe environment, carefully monitored by all members of our community.

My children's education in life, as my own, has been deeply influenced by their upbringing at Wedge. They have learned to safely drive vehicles and handle boats at young ages, how to become self reliant, self-starting, use their initiative and commonsense and how to interact with people of all sections of the community. They are devoid of the debilitating issues and problems that many young people seem to experience these days.

The children of Wedge have generally grown to become valuable and functional leaders in society, sharing their skills and knowledge with others.

1.4 Heritage / Culture

The Wedge Island community is a broad mixture from all walks of life, including the local fishermen and Aboriginal families. We have formed a very unique, very close and friendly community group, with a very deep interest in our environment and an intense desire to preserve and protect our unique, living and breathing heritage.

Our heritage value at Wedge is not just the shacks. Whilst they are a significant part of our heritage and history, our past and present community traditions, customs and culture is imperative and must be preserved.

Until this is experienced personally, it is difficult for outsiders to comprehend, however, many are joining our ranks each year after becoming familiar with our culture and way of life.

There is nothing new here, our way of life, our commitment to the community and our moral and ethical standards were the norm many years ago and have since been forgotten by the wider community.

1.5 Environment

The majority of the Wedge community and visitors are very respectful of the environment, however, it seems we are continually grouped in with the anti-social and environmental vandals that invade us, particularly since the construction of the new road.

The majority of shacks use renewable forms of energy to provide power. Water is captured from rain in our tanks. Bottled LPG gas is used for cooking and heating.

Almost all of the shacks have been constructed using recycled materials that would have otherwise been discarded.

To preserve our flora, our community has planted or seeded native trees, shrubs and grasses throughout the settlement, created barrier walls to prevent flooding, re-established coastal dunes that have been damaged by errant visitors and upgraded tracks. We have also encouraged natural vegetation propagation via birds, water run-off and wind breaks.

My recollection and photographs will show that this area was a tidal flood plain with very little vegetation prior to our occupation.

1.6 D.E.C. / Leases

We have been forced into lease agreements with D.E.C. by the Government of Western Australia as a means to and end of the removal of the shack settlement. Millions of dollars of lease money has been collected over time from shack owners and Wedge has received little or no benefit, services or assistance from them.

It would be interesting to see how this money has been spent. I also understand that over a million dollars has not been collected from the non-W.I.P.A. shack owners, which begs the question of why have the W.I.P.A. members been penalised whilst the others get a free ride?

At present we are charged the best part of a thousand dollars a year for which we receive nothing.

1.7 Impact of the Coastal Highway and Spur Road

During the construction of the new coastal highway and the spur road to Wedge, we have been inundated with visitors in two and four wheel drive vehicles, the majority of whom are very anti-social, destructive, violent, vandalising, littering and dangerous in their activities and vehicle use.

And, as yet, the road is not open for public use and these people are sneaking in during hours of darkness and construction down time.

Despite many requests, D.E.C. and police have provided very little if not negligible assistance with the control and management of the influx of visitors.

We have had to stop what we are doing and the enjoyment of our pursuits to clean up after these people, provide medical assistance to them, including emergency evacuation and attempt to modify their behaviour, sometimes with disastrous results to our community members.

If nothing is done to provide us with assistance with the influx of these new visitors, there will be many people hurt and even killed as a result. Our sensitive environment will also suffer.

At present, we are arranging medical evacuations either by the Rescue Helicopter, Ambulance or in our own vehicles nearly every day of each holiday period and the overwhelming majority of the people requiring assistance are not Wedge people. They are visitors who are very difficult to control.

I can't understand why D.E.C. have not made plans to accommodate the impact upon Wedge by the overwhelming increase in vehicle traffic and visitors.

Why was the spur road to our shacks, which would have cost millions of dollars to construct, made in the first place, and why wasn't preparation for this onslaught not considered and planned for?

1.8 Law Enforcement

Because Wedge settlement is effectively a legal "no mans land", we police ourselves and visitors as best we can, and we have established our own codes of conduct.

The Dandaragan Shire plays no part in the management of Wedge and has passed its responsibilities to D.E.C., who have no legal authority to enforce their laws within the confines of the settlement. Their powers can only be exercised in the surrounding parks and reserves. The police have historically been impeded by distance, rough terrain and a lack of resources.

Where we are now

2.1 Impact of Shack Removal

The removal of our shacks will cause devastation to many thousands of Western Australians, and will destroy our way of life and that of our children and generations to come. It will create a massive hole that would need to be filled by the government to accommodate the holiday and escape needs of the people displaced, which includes the many thousands of international tourists that camp in tents, vans and four wheel drive campers each year.

Our heritage, traditions, culture and social customs will be destroyed and probably replaced with coppers logs and sign telling people what they can't do. What point would there be in that?

I am sure that throughout the year and particularly during peak periods, we would have more people staying overnight at Wedge than at Rottnest Island, and historically, with far less impact upon emergency services and police.

If we are gone, who will look after the environment, care for the sick, injured and dead, and control the masses of visitors entering from the new road?

2.2 Economic Impact

Collectively, Wedge people have spent many millions of dollars on their shacks, furniture, power generation, water, sewerage, four wheel drives, boats, hardware, food, fuel, etc, over many years to enjoy our holidays and our sense of place.

Retailers all over Western Australia, whether they be the local hardware, fishing, boating, car dealers, food, sporting goods or the many other stores we purchase our goods from, will feel a dramatic decrease in turnover, in particular those at Lancelin and Cervantes.

Individually, over a period of time, I estimate the investment in shack holidays by our family to be in the vicinity of \$100,000. Apart from the specific shack related costs for improvement, maintenance and upgrading of equipment such as solar panels and rain water tanks, many thousands of dollars are spent in purchase of fuel, bait, food and other household goods required for extended holidays at a remote coastal area. Much of this money has been spent with local businesses.

If the shacks are removed, where will we all go? I have the answer to this question, it will be Bali or Phuket and all of the money we would normally spend in association with Wedge will go with us. I don't believe any Western Australian would want to see this happen.

There may be some argument that the shack settlement could take business away from holiday rental market in adjacent coastal towns. I would argue that there are more people looking for holiday camp sites or beds than they can supply and the people that holiday at Wedge are there for a totally different holiday experience to that which is on offer at other locations.

2.3 Environmental Impact

Without the shack owners to care for Wedge and with the unchecked and unpoliced influx of anti-social destructive idiots who are invading Wedge at present, the environment will be subject to degradation in much the same way as has many other locations.

The coastal dunes north of Two Rocks is one of many examples of the damage done by these vandals and hoons.

We have employed great effort, energy and expense toward preserving the sensitive coastline and protecting our flora and fauna, and we don't want to see it destroyed and returned to the barren flood plain the existed prior to us.

2.4 Who we are

We are "Western Australians", who have come together from every corner of the state and from every measurement of society.

Our community is very unique and close group of people who share common interests and pursuits, with extraordinary community spirit and commitment to our sense of place, Wedge Island.

We recognise and celebrate the significance of all commemorative events, including ANZAC day with our dawn service, Australia Day with our cricket match and throughout the year we have a variety of sporting and social events, including balls, dinners and dances to celebrate many other significant occasions.

We welcome newcomers into our community regardless of race, colour, religion or who they are, as long as they respect and accept our principals of being together in harmony.

Where we want to be

3.1 Shack Retention / Legal Precedence

We want our shacks, community, traditions, culture and our heritage to be preserved for our children and their children.

There are many legal precedents set throughout this state and Australia where the shack communities have been either left alone in their present state, or modified to comply with basic health, safety, building and environmental laws, in either long term lease or freehold arrangements.

There are literally and handful of state government and local government bureaucratic representatives who want to see us gone, as opposed to the hundreds of thousands of Western Australians who want Wedge left alone to enjoy it for what it is and represents.

So why is it that a handful of people, who are largely employees of the state, are able to dictate what happens over the wishes of the majority of people.

Surely people of Western Australia should be given what they want by the people that are employed to serve them. Isn't that the way it is supposed to be?

If the rest of Australia and some of our own state local shires have managed to understand the value of the squatter shack sites, then why not our own state, and the Shire of Dandaragan.

Evidence of these shacks can be provided if required, but there are shack communities all over our state that have either been given long term or permanent tenure or allowed to just exist as they are.

For example, Wilbinga north of Two Rocks (Gin Gin Shire), Donnelly River (Shires of Manjimup and Nannup), Naval Base (City of Cockburn), Blowholes (Shire of Carnarvon), Peaceful Bay (Shire of Denmark), Dampier Archipelago (Shire of Roebourne) and Windy Harbour (Shire of Manjimup) to name a few.

The W.I.P.A. submission will discuss the various shack settlements throughout Australia that have been retained.

I accept that the formalising the retention of our shack community will create headaches for some within our bureaucracy who are reluctant to move out of their comfort zones and think

outside the box, but if it is too hard for them, then perhaps they need to step aside and make room for those who are prepared to do some work.

The cost of renovations or in some cases, reconstruction, will be borne by individual shack owners. The cost of providing services, facilities, camping and so on, will be recuperated as with any business case.

Whilst many arguments have been thrown into the mix, there is no valid reason as to why the shacks can't remain, albeit with requisite modification, and upgraded facilities, which is generally accepted needs to take place.

3.2 Public Access

We would like to see regulated and managed camping areas with provision of toilets, rubbish collection and potable water. We can also see a need for construction of more shacks to accommodate the overflow of people wishing to holiday at Wedge. The location and management of these shacks could be integrated with the camping facilities.

The majority of the Wedge community do not want to rent their shacks and feel that their shacks are already fully booked during the holiday periods with their own family and friends needs. We do not want to turn our shacks into a commercial enterprise, but we can see the need to accommodate more people wanting to share our holiday experience.

I know that D.E.C. have been unable to lure private enterprise to establish, maintain and manage camping areas and I am not surprised.

Depending upon the outcome of this inquiry, there are many standards and grades of caravan and camping parks, from fully serviced to very low impact camping with little or no services that could be considered.

D.E.C. has never approached us for assistance or support and but I am sure that some sort of solution could be negotiated if the need us to assist them.

We have amongst us many professions and skills, including engineers, architects, surveyors, lawyers, barristers, bankers, accountants, builders, policemen, plant operators, plumbers, electricians and other tradesmen. We have the ability to develop Wedge Island ourselves, but this is not our preferred option.

In our own plan, W.I.P.A. have accommodated various options for camping, caravanning or shack stay. The standard of these will depend upon what is asked for by this inquiry, but we prefer a very low impact with minimum services, so as not to upset our environment.

Whilst W.I.P.A. is reluctant to become a commercial operator, were are prepared to do this if that's what it takes for our shacks to be retained.

We would prefer a minimal approach to accommodate visitors to Wedge in the form of very low impact camping and basic shack accommodation.

3.3 Tourism

The Wedge Island shack settlement is renowned both nationally and internationally as a popular place to visit when holidaying in Western Australia.

This is borne out by the many tourists we speak to and welcome into our community and the signatures to our petitions and web sites from all over the world.

There are also many international tourism Internet references to our community.

The overwhelming tourism interest is the shacks and our community, not just the location.

3.4 Public Interest

W.I.P.A. and its members have actively petitioned the government to retain the shacks and our life style and we have collected many thousands of signatures in support.

We have written to or spoken with many members of parliament, from every political faction, and every case they given full support to the retention of our shacks and our community.

I believe and history has shown that we can influence many thousand of voters to a sympathetic government.

There are several Internet web sites such as "Face Book" which has also amassed thousands of supporters. There are also many international web sites that make reference to and also give support to the retention of our shacks, heritage and culture.

3.5 Services / Administration

We manage our rubbish collection, disposal and clean up after the campers and tourists. We provide our own water, power and sewerage treatment.

We manage our own affairs and control every aspect of the administration of a small community by our own council, which is selected by and represents the various areas within our community, much like any other shire council.

However, it would be to our advantage to have government or preferably, the local government for the district, manage our settlement and provide the same services as any other community, for which we would be happy to pay a fair remuneration.

In my opinion, which is shared with many others, D.E.C. are not capable of successfully managing Wedge Island and it's community. It is too far removed from their charter and skills base.

I believe that either the Shire of Dandaragan, or a management committee with permanent employees (as with the Tasmanian model), or, and probably the best option, would be the National Trust to be being given this task.

Our community will enthusiastically work through all issues and problems, and provide support to the government, it's agencies, and the shire Of Dandaragan towards bringing about a positive outcome to the satisfaction of all involved.

3.6 Legislative Compliance

We would be happy to comply with a basic form of health, safety, building and environmental regulation provided it does not impact greatly upon our culture and heritage.

We do not need the same structure of regulations, which are applied in the metropolitan area or any town for that matter, as our shacks are for short-term accommodation, not permanent residency.

The shacks are basically "hard walled comfortable camping structures", and in the main, most would already comply with health, safety and building regulations similar to that applied to many established camping parks including Rottneest.

The shacks have survived the worst weather Mother Nature could throw at them and in comparison to modern homes, have stood up to the ravages of time extremely well.

I'm sure a middle road can be negotiated to please all of the parties involved.

3.7 Environment

Whilst we do our best to protect our environment, we need help, particularly now that the new road has allowed easier access for many more people, who appear to have little or no regard to the damage they are causing.

We need to see controlled public access to sensitive coastal dunes and native scrub, but what we don't want is for the bureaucrats to get carried away and spoil our sense of place with unnecessary over regulation, as they seem to do everywhere else.

3.8 Equity and Exclusivity

The term "Numpty" has many meanings but in academic circles, it used to describe people that are very ignorant, but yet, are experts on every subject.

Unfortunately, many of our accusers fall into this category. They profess expertise and knowledge of our community, yet they have not made proper inquiry or research and have merely made assumptions that they think are correct. We all know what happens when we assume things.

The issues of equity and exclusivity have been raised from time to time and my answer to this is very simple.

Most of our towns began as shack sites and the people who pioneered them received benefit from doing so.

We did not restrict other people from building shacks, D.E.C. did.

Each shack owner at Wedge has, over a long period of time, invested many thousands of dollars, time and energy into their individual shacks and into the community shared facilities, improvements and environmental protection. We did not get a free kick. It has cost us dearly.

We have paid money/rent to D.E.C. every year, including several years when we were not bound by a lease but coerced to pay or lose our entitlement.

These shacks are bought and sold, in the same way any other piece of real estate, which provides the opportunity for any individual to purchase a shack as they become available to the market and for a pittance in comparison to what they have cost the owner.

There are many people who would like to build a shack but are not permitted. There are many who are waiting for a shack to come onto the market so that they may purchase one and there are many others who would rather just rent a shack. There are also many more people who also simply enjoy the camping experience.

Our community has never discouraged any of these options and support the concept that Wedge belongs to all Western Australians. There is more than enough room to accommodate the needs of everyone at this point of time.

We do not want to see Wedge become a resort playground for the rich and famous, that ordinary Western Australians will not be able to afford.

There will also be the issue of people who have been displaced by other coastal shack removal programs, who may be disgruntled at having been kicked out of their shacks and could argue as to why we will be allowed to stay when they weren't.

My argument to this is two fold.

Firstly, there have been many cases in history where the powers that be have made decisions, based upon policy that was current at that time, and which has had a detrimental effect upon individuals. I believe that the guiding principles have now changed and there is scope to do things differently and protect the rights of Western Australians.

Secondly, the people who were displaced by previous shack removal policies, can be given the opportunity to re-establish themselves at Wedge in the form of additional shack construction approvals or to be given first right of refusal to purchase shacks as they become available to the market.

It is anticipated that there will be shack owners who will not be able to afford to upgrade to comply with regulations that may be imposed, so their shacks will become available to the market.

Summary / Conclusion

Wedge Island is a very popular and unique family oriented beach / ocean recreational and shack based holiday experience that offers an economical and alternative adventure to that of other locations around the state, which are spoiled by high cost, too much regulation and ancient bureaucratic thinking, such as Rottneest.

The reason Wedge Island is so popular with the people of this state and our international visitors, is "the shacks and the shack community". It is not just the beach, sand dunes and the ocean, and any thought of removing the shacks and the people who own them, or even upsetting the existing balance, will devastate one of our state's greatest resources.

Please consider the economic impact upon us and the people we purchase our goods from.

Please also consider what you will do with us and all of the visitors to this area, and our future holidays if the shacks are removed.

For the first time in my over forty years of involvement with Wedge Island, the government has finally taken the future of our community and its desires seriously and for that, I commend them.

I am delighted that this issue has been taken out of the hands of the bureaucratic system, which by its mandate and design cannot solve this problem.

I have great faith that this committee will ensure that we all get a fair go and bring about a successful resolution for the future retention of the Wedge Island Shack Community.

Yours faithfully,

Greg Simpson

July 9, 2010.