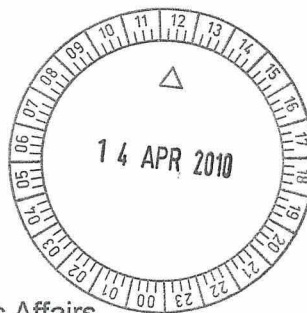


PUBLIC

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 Nick Goiran on 3 March 2010 in the Legislative Council. The petition was actually presented to Hon Simon O'Brien on 19 November 2009.

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 submission outlines:

- background to a political commitment given prior to the last State election
- merit of shack communities being integrated into future site management plans
- heritage assessment as a mechanism for review
- existence of viable Shack Settlement Models

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 generated.

I would appreciate access to any public documents that become available in relation to this matter.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "M Knowles".

Murray Knowles

12th April 2010

Submission to the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs

Petition No 50 – Shack Site Communities

Promoter – Mr Murray Knowles,

(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.

A commitment was made through the Shadow Minister for the Environment, Dr Steve Thomas, after being endorsed through the "Campaign1" Liberal Headquarters and confirmed via email dated 3rd September 2008. It reads:

'Wish to confirm that the Liberal Party's commitment is to continue the role of the Wedge and Grey Task Force created to....examine policies, legislation and associated resolution practices regarding shack communities in other states and jurisdictions, in order to determine the best way forward... in implementing management plans for the two reserves.

Further, the purpose of the Wedge and Grey Task Force is to investigate and make recommendations on how the shack communities could be integrated into such plans for the provision of upgraded recreation and tourist facilities, prior to any future EOI process being commenced.'

I was personally involved in negotiating this commitment and although Dr Thomas lost his seat, he confirmed post election that the commitment was binding and should be implemented by the Liberal government. 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.

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, endorse the course of action proposed.

It is not just the Wedge and Grey sites that are at risk, but include locations from the south coast to the northwest. This is an issue that affects the whole of government, not 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.

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

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.

The current framework under which Shack-based recreational use of Crown land is managed is neither universally supported nor consistently applied by the government agencies vested with managing such Crown land. Since the Squatter Removal Policy was introduced in 1989, community values have changed dramatically and if the best interests of the State are to be realised, i.e. a balance between economic, social and environmental needs, the Policy requires revision.

In summary:

- 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 bottom line here is there will be sealed roads into Wedge and Grey by the end of 2010. The estimated \$7M cost will need to be publicly justified by a Minister when it is opened

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.

As a family man who has holidayed all along the west coast, camped within Cape Range National Park, at Ningaloo and Warroora Stations and now enjoy the shack recreational life with my two grandchildren at Wedge, I can say with some authority that the government has an opportunity to create something of great value to the families of WA and enhance the States reputation of providing a wonderful variety of tourist experiences that cannot be replicated if these communities are removed.