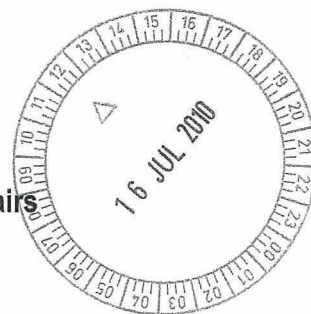


PUBLIC

**SUBMISSION
ON
INQUIRY INTO SHACK SITES IN WA
TO
The Standing Committee on the Environment & Public Affairs**



Submission by:

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This is a 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

Squatter shack communities represent a Western Australian alternative to suburban life. In this age of so called 'planned', regulated and organized developments, such sporadic communities are fast vanishing not only in Western Australia but also in other parts of Australia removing evidence of a unique aspect of our Australian identity. This submission emphasises on the importance of retaining such shack settlements in WA., by attempting to answer the below queries:

- How can the retention of squatter settlements enrich understanding of our Australian identity?

- What cultural meaning and value do Wedge and Grey have for the regional communities and for the wider community of Western Australia?
- What is the heritage tangible and intangible potential of Wedge and Grey, and other makeshift landscapes and how is this reinforced by concepts of sustainability?

1.0 How can the retention of squatter settlements enrich understanding of our Australian identity?

Squatting has a long history in Australia and despite their often illegal status squatters were an admired group symbolising Australian self reliance, resourcefulness, courage and disregard of hardship.¹ These attributes overlaid with a disrespect of authority has informed our national identity and cultural consciousness through such ideal Australian types as 'the bushman' and the phenomenon of Anzac.² The remaining squatter settlements at Wedge and Grey are important as physical expressions of our Australian cultural identity.³

The values and attitudes of Australian cultural identity impels people to establish shack communities. Powerful popular notions of the Australian way of life such as independence, resourcefulness, making do, and a dislike of ostentation, find an expression in shack communities. As well as providing the originating force, cultural identity also provides a usually unremarked but nevertheless potent motivation for retaining them. Notions of anti-authoritarianism and a strong sense of community heritage built up over several generations of occupation and usage; underlie the strong sense of place that strengthens reluctance to leave.⁴

2.0 What cultural meaning and value do Wedge and Grey have for the regional communities and for the wider community of Western Australia?

The WA coastal landscape, dotted with shack communities, offers a domestic lifestyle that is 'other' to the one projected back in suburbia. At Wedge and Grey, the sustenance and trappings of consumption and passivity are absent and there are no systemic infrastructure - no petrol stations, supermarkets, schools, churches, office blocks, newsagents or DVD stores. Wedge and Grey demand active participation from the people who visit or live there since resources such as maintenance skills,

¹ Geoffrey Dutton, 1985, *The Squatters*, Currey O'Neil, South Yarra, p5

² G. Seal, 2004, *Inventing Anzac: The Digger and National Mythology*. Queensland University Press, St Lucia Queensland. p.3.

³ G. Seal, J. Stephens, R. Tiwari, 2007, Australia Research Council Grant Proposal.

⁴ G. Seal, J. Stephens, R. Tiwari, 2007, Australia Research Council Grant Proposal.

knowledge and supplies are not readily available via a telephone call or a local supermarket. Either these resources are brought in, or they need to be developed and shared. Necessity for basic survival, which these shack communities demand, helps in cementing community relations. For example, Wedge's rescue strategy involves numerous vehicles, people and back-up to undertake the difficult evacuation of the seriously injured or ill.

Yet another example of community dynamics evident at Wedge is the customary social exchange that takes place at the Point (where a sandbar connects Wedge island to Wedge mainland), especially during the weekends. The 'shackies' gather close to the tide line to watch the setting sun. Standing around in circles on the damp sand, sharing beer, wine and chips and surrounded by four-wheel drive vehicles, gossip is exchanged and 'outsiders' are identified and discussed. Men promote their latest conquests; for example their genius in resolving some of the 'intricate' problems involved in roof repair or perhaps the maintenance of old and dying hot water systems and the like. Social relations are reconstructed through practices. One might be a truck driver, an electrician, a refrigeration mechanic, a judge, a lawyer, a doctor, a policeman or a trade union leader in Perth, but at Wedge there are new criteria for social status, and there are new opportunities and struggles to establish a position in the social hierarchy. This ritual stimulates a community spirit and constructs the Point temporarily as a 'place'.

These underlying values and attitudes of the shack communities also produce a distinctive folklife of shack architecture, cooking arrangements, decorations, pastimes, etc. that contribute to the sense of belonging to a shared lifestyle. Usually the material used in the shack's construction is recycled, and the construction is highly inventive. Building materials and construction processes tend to be limited to recycled lightweight surface claddings and structural frames. The first shacks were usually built of driftwood. A sand floor was common in older shacks. Most of the material used today is from suburban rubbish tips. Ingenious use of materials unleashes the creative spirit of the shack owner, something that is discussed and displayed with pride. Harsh winds, sand and salt inflict continuous weathering on the buildings, catalysing the natural processes of decay. Experimentation with the shacks is continuous during the necessary replacements, reconstructions, and small additions, and forms a layered skin.⁵ The design of the shacks is organic and evolves as they change hands. Traces of former occupants are seen in the shacks and help provide a unique story and identity to each shack and the occupiers

⁵ R. Tiwari, L. Churchill, 2004, Shack Architecture: A Produced Landscape in *Landscape e- Journal*, Vol. 2. International Centre for Landscape and Language, Edith Cowan University, Perth.

These tangible aspects of shack culture are held together by the intangible sense of belonging to a community, to a place, and persistence over time. These are qualities that people apparently still wish to have in their lives and which are currently being built into new residential developments as 'community'.

3.0 What is the heritage tangible and intangible potential of Wedge and Grey, and other makeshift landscapes and how is this reinforced by concepts of sustainability?

As discussed by Roberts in *The History of Australian Land Settlement*, "the lure of 'new country' took men further and further, until all vestige of State control had ceased ... there emerged in the Australia of the thirties a unique and unauthorized occupation of large provinces – 'Squatting'."⁶ Squatting has been recognised as an important aspect of Australian colonial history. In recognition of the squatter lifestyle and landscape, the National Trust has emphasised the critical issue of heritage at Wedge which has either been somewhat overlooked or superficially addressed by other stakeholders. Wedge has been classified by the National Trust as "of considerable cultural heritage significance to the community of Wedge Island and the state of Western Australia".⁷

The National Trust assessment of Wedge lists the cultural heritage values as typical of the Australian ethos of making-do and innovative resourcefulness. The cooperative nature of the settlement society with its relaxed inclusive lifestyle holds significance to generations of Western Australians as a unique way of life. This lifestyle was played out in the post war WWII years during many beach holidays at squatters settlements along the coast in pursuit of a 'special way of life' and 'the great outdoors'. The special qualities of the places enhanced and encouraged by the ad hoc development and makeshift nature of the landscape.⁸ A clear heritage value is embedded in the strong sense of place that they project.

The connection between heritage and sustainability also needs more exploration in this context. The concept of 'sustainability' has been an issue of debate between the Wedge stakeholders. The State wants a standard treatment of suburbanisation at Wedge and Grey. Its concept of 'sustainability', has

⁶ Roberts, 1968, p.166

⁷ Gray et al, 2001, p.1

⁸ L. Gray and the W.I.P. Association, 2001, "National Trust Historic Places Assessment - Wedge Island Settlement.", National Trust of Australia (WA): Perth.

been to confine and channel the population (local resident or tourist) into specified zones where appropriate facilities, services and infrastructure have been provided according to conventionally held levels of quality and sustainability⁹. This forms the basis of their view of removing the shacks. The Department of Conservation and Land Management in their attempt to resolve issues of equity and sustainability have identified a range of nature based recreation and tourism potentials in their 'Master Plan 2000' for Wedge.

However, if either Wedge or Gray are destined to be another undifferentiated tourist resort, how do we value it as a material expression of identity? The Wedge community have forwarded two points of view. One is of acceptance of the State's standpoint of inevitable standardisation and change. Whilst the other is an adjustment to preserve and continue the current squatter community's 'environmentally friendly' holiday lifestyle.¹⁰ They point to the 'sustainable' low maintenance costs, self-sufficiency, and necessarily conservation-oriented attitudes prevalent in the settlements, along with the increasingly important environmental educative role played by the squatters.¹¹ The built environment at Wedge and Grey is evidence of a particular resilient community dynamic and has the potential to become a tool to understanding an important part of our culture and identity.¹²

4.0 Danger of what lies ahead

Tourism development seems to be an answer to the need for the capital inflow required to develop such shack settlements. The question we are faced with here is, why is wiping out the shacks necessary for any kind of tourism development? Is it just the natural environment – the pristine beaches – that will make these places attractive for tourists? Or is the alternative lifestyle to suburbia that they offer, the key to their development? Is Wedge destined to be another undifferentiated 'resort' with a sprinkling of caravan parks and brick and tile modular cottages as proposed in CALM's Master Plan? Agreed that there are critical environmental and safety issues associated with some of these shacks that definitely need to be resolved, but surely, wiping them out is not the answer, considering that the shacks and the spatial practices that they give rise to are crucial in retaining the specific 'sense of place'.

⁹ Selwood & May, 2001, p. 384

¹⁰ J. Selwood, "The Squatter Settlements". p. 386

¹¹ J. Selwood, "The Squatter Settlements". p. 387

¹² G. Seal, J. Stephens, R. Tiwari, 2007, Australia Research Council Grant Proposal.

Many settlements like Wedge developed from the late 19th century onwards on the Western Australian coastline. Firstly farming and fishing communities, they then began serving as holiday places, sprouting tin shacks and caravans where people found an alternative lifestyle to suburbia and a vacation refuge. Accompanying the growth of these settlements were also local and state authority concerns on damage to the environment and issues of health and ownership. Many shack communities were eventually replaced by ordered and planned development. Unfortunately this attitude disregarded the social, aesthetic, heritage and environmental possibilities of these landscapes that had slowly evolved to reflect the special needs and lifestyle of these communities.¹³ Examples of these places at Lancelin, Ledge Point, Cervantes and Greenhead have now been upgraded to legal town site status.¹⁴ The past traces of a unique makeshift lifestyle and iconic 'shack' architecture have been erased and replaced by permanent homes, holiday accommodation and good service infrastructure. These places have been subject to a rigorous process of development – but at what cost? In many ways they now mirror suburbia and its passivity. While these places have now become 'civilized', they are completely incapable of offering the alternative lifestyle for which they were originally created. These 'upgraded' environments are the by-products of a commodity culture, which force us into passive consumption of leisure. These places do not afford any opportunity for self-discovery. Is this the future that awaits Wedge?

Yours faithfully,

Reena Tiwari

July 16, 2010

Please also see the below journal article and website for more details:

Tiwari R (April, 2009) 'Embedded Poetics and Surrounding Politics in an Australian Coastal Shack Settlement' in *Journal of Landscape Architecture*, ECLAS

http://draco.hfwu.de/~wikienfk5/index.php/Embedded_poetics_and_surrounding_politics_of_a_coastal_squatter_settlement

¹³ Selwood & May, 2001

¹⁴ Selwood & May, 1992, p. 30