

Summary and Analysis of State and Commonwealth Socio-Economic Reports

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Summary

The proposed World Heritage Area is located adjacent to the eastern coast of northern Australia completely within the political boundaries of the State of Queensland. The proposed area covers approximately 9003 sq km in a relatively narrow band from Townsville in the south to Cooktown in the north. The area is approximately 420 km in length with no area more than 75 km from the coastline.

Just over 7.5% of Queensland's population lies within 50km of the proposed World Heritage boundary. This area of North Queensland is one of the continent's most rapidly expanding population areas. Immediately adjacent to the proposed boundaries are some of Australia's largest tourism developments. Indeed it is the success of the region in the tourism field that poses some of the greatest challenges and ultimate conflicts with the proposed World Heritage Boundaries.

The findings of the consultants indicate an overall immediate potential economic impact approaching one billion dollars. Further unidentified costs would be expected over the next 20 years. There would also be an estimated annual \$30 million negative effect on Australia's balance of trade with respect to lost rainforest timber export and importation of replacement product. Over a ten-year period this negative effect would likely be over \$300 million (1987 dollars).

Forestry

Direct loss of jobs in the forestry sectors would be between 800 and 900 persons with flow-on job loss bringing the total to 2000. The overwhelming majority of the job loss, some 1520 positions, would occur in the already high unemployment area of North Queensland. Sociological studies indicate significant regional impact, as a result of this magnitude of job loss, on the small towns of the Atherton Tablelands.

The Commonwealth Government has chosen to ban logging in the nominated area outright. This action is despite the fact that logging may occur in a World Heritage Area, under certain circumstances, and does so in other World Heritage Areas in Australia. The Commonwealth, however, views logging to be incompatible with the desire to protect "the outstanding values of the Wet Tropics". This position is taken with the full knowledge that logging in the nominated area has been ongoing for approximately 100 years. The Consultant's on site review of logging and general forestry practices in the area show an industry that is closely monitored.

The selected logging that is practised in North Queensland is viewed by forestry experts as perhaps the most environmentally correct commercial logging anywhere in the world. The Consultant's recommendations were that the industry could be further strengthened with respect to environmental considerations and could be shown as a model to assist in the preservation of the wet tropical rainforests which elsewhere in the world are under threat through clear cutting.

Mining

The North-east Queensland area includes some of the most prospective areas for gold, tin and tungsten resource development in the state, and possibly in Australia. Based upon the Kakadu Stage 2 World Heritage decisions of the Commonwealth Government the mining industry does not view future mineral exploration and development within the proposed Queensland World Heritage site with any degree of confidence. This study does not attempt to put any compensation claim from the mining sector although the consultants are aware of compensation claims that have been lodged with the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth Government has stated that mining could continue in the nominated area provided World Heritage values are not impacted. (It was later confirmed by Senator Richardson that intending miners might not be allowed to remove trees which would effectively prevent mining.)

Agriculture

Agriculture has traditionally been the main threat to the rainforest. Agriculture today is itself under threat by lack of affordable land for new and expanded crop production. The sugar industry in particular is now and will in the future come under increasing economic pressure because of rising land values. The World Heritage listing will likely contribute to the rising real estate value of non-World Heritage land, and thus in turn will add pressure on the sugar industry as more and more land ultimately will be taken out of production and sold for other usages.

Tourism

Tourism has been promoted in some circles as the major economic benefactor of the proposed listing. The Consultants found no direct economic benefit to the tourism sector because of World Heritage Listing as such. Tourism in North Queensland is growing rapidly because of the weather natural beauty, the international airports, and a wide range of modern tourism accommodations. The fact that an area is or is not on the World Heritage List is not a major factor in tourist visitation. Tourism was therefore viewed as economically neutral with respect to the socio-economic study of the proposed World Heritage Area.

Population Growth

It is this growth in tourism and the general migration of Australians to warmer parts of the country that poses the greatest challenge to government planners with respect to the proposed listing. For the proposed World Heritage Area is immediately adjacent to rapidly growing urban areas.

Cairns and Townsville are major regional population centres in Australia. They require the normal infrastructure support for major centres such as water, sewage, electricity and roadways. Because of the proximity of the World Heritage Area these normal infrastructure requirements could undergo major cost escalations because of park boundaries and regulations. An example is the Tully-Millstream hydro electric scheme. The project is scheduled to be built near Ravenshoe within the next three years.

Tully-Millstream Hydro Electric Scheme

The proposed 600 megawatt hydro electric scheme is an extension of the existing Tully Falls hydro project which has been in operation since 1957. The new hydro project would make more efficient use of the water in the Upper Tully River and produce significantly more power than the current facility. Most of the land for the project has been used for grazing or logging for more than half a century. Less than 100 hectares of rainforest is expected to be inundated by the project. Extensive environmental investigations have been carried out by the Queensland Electricity Commission over the total project area. Under previous circumstances the Tully-Millstream hydro project would be built. Today, as a result of the proposed World Heritage Boundaries (approximately half the project is located within the boundaries) the project is in doubt. If the Queensland Electricity Commission is prohibited by the Commonwealth Government in constructing the Tully-Millstream project then the alternative coal fired power station will cost the taxpayers of Queensland an additional \$500 to \$700 million (approximately \$200 per man, woman and child in the state based on the 1986 population of 2.587 million).

Commonwealth World Heritage Guidelines

Guidelines issued by the Commonwealth of Australia on 11 December 1987 relating to the proposed World Heritage Area in North Queensland stated:

“Grazing of stock can continue, as can mining operations, and the provision of infrastructure like roads and electricity and water supply systems, PROVIDED SUCH ACTIVITIES DO NOT INVOLVE CLEARANCE OF AREAS OF RAINFORESTS OR OTHER THREATS TO WORLD HERITAGE VALUES.”

Current electric power line upgrades into Cairns and Port Douglas would appear to be prohibited under these guidelines as would water supply upgrades, roadway improvements, and other necessary infrastructure projects. The Australian World Heritage Guidelines are not intended for urbanised areas yet the boundaries surround some of the country's fastest growing areas. The conflict between these two facts can not be understated or ignored.

Conclusions

The layoff of 2000 people, the uncertainty surrounding the Tully-Millstream Hydro Project, current social unrest in parts of the Listing Area, and increased constitutional conflict between the State of Queensland and the Federal Government are all current problems associated with the proposed listing.

Australia is not a heavily forested continent. Less than six per cent of Australia's land mass is classified as forest. The protection of our forests is extremely important. It was this recognition that led the Government of Queensland to protect most of the area currently proposed as a World Heritage site. Indeed, most of the 9003 sq km area nominated for World Heritage is already national (state) park, another 4928 sq km is State Forest, some 1081 sq km is Timber Reserve and the balance is made up of other Crown land and 113 sq.km of privately owned land. The area in actual dispute represents less than 20% of the rainforest area of the proposed World Heritage Area. The Consultants believe that an agreement between the Commonwealth and the State which would allow selective logging, create infrastructure corridors, allow Tully-Millstream and public water works projects would appear to be viable from an economic and environmental perspective. Such an agreement would significantly reduce any economic loss to the State and Commonwealth because of the proposed listing.

The North Queensland rainforests are probably the best example of proven sustained yield multiple use rainforests in the world. This area could serve as an invaluable training and demonstration region for rainforest logging throughout the world. The Consultants believe that the total cessation of Queensland rainforest logging would, in a global sense, likely increase virgin rainforest destruction in other less conservation conscious parts of the world.

In essence the ability to have an economically and ecologically innovative logging industry in North Queensland would ultimately have a much bigger impact on World Rainforest conservation than the banning of logging on 1800 sq km in Queensland State Forests.

The Consultants believe that failure to come to terms with the reality of significant economic and socio disruptions in the area will be of harm not only to North Queensland but the nation as a whole. The human tragedy of potential loss of livelihood and home can be turned around by examining the true effect of logging in North Queensland. The other issues such as Tully-Millstream, water supply, and roadworks must be addressed sooner rather than later. There is also the issue of the future of Cooktown and the Cape Tribulation to Bloomfield River coastal highway in Australia.

Resolution of these problems and negotiations on all aspects of Commonwealth and State action in the World Heritage issue is required. Failure to reach negotiated agreements will lead to negative economic impacts, long delays in infrastructure improvements, and likely lengthy constitutional and environmental court battles.