

Social Impacts of World Heritage Listing

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The situation in 1987

The World Heritage listing of North Queensland tropical rainforests impacted upon four regions spread across the Far Northern and Northern Queensland statistical divisions. The four regions were first, the coastal and hinterland area surrounding the towns of Daintree, Mossman and Port Douglas (population 7371); second, the Tableland region which notably included the towns of Mareeba, Atherton and Ravenshoe (population 17,941); third, the Innisfail district (population 13,369); and finally, the Tully, Cardwell and Ingham region (population 17,830).

Some idea of the general levels of economic wellbeing can be gained by noting the income levels as revealed by the 1986 census. Whilst in the relatively affluent Port Douglas region only 13% of the population had incomes below the \$9,000 per annum level, fully 41% of the Tableland region were recorded as earning less than \$9,000 per year. In both the other two regions more than 35% of the working population were below that level.

The degrees of dependence upon the timber industry varied across these four regions, with the Tablelands always recognised as most dependent, and the Port Douglas area as least dependent. The town of Ravenshoe, in particular, appeared in 1987 to be especially susceptible to negative impacts. Not only was it heavily dependent on the timber industry, but it also had the highest proportion of single parent families, high unemployment and the highest proportion of young people employed in the timber industry. Not surprisingly perhaps, the town of Ravenshoe became the centre of anti-listing sentiment. It was here that the most severe negative impacts were anticipated and from here that the most effective opponents to World Heritage listing operated.

The extent to which the issue of World Heritage listing dominated community life would have been immediately apparent from the moment the general area of Ravenshoe was entered. Anti-listing sentiments were prominently displayed on billboards increasing in frequency until the outer edge of the township was reached, by which time, they had become almost a roadside collage, making it very clear indeed that there was little support for World Heritage listing in this particular neck of the woods.

The residents of Ravenshoe (and the surrounding Tableland area) were keenly aware of the fact that World Heritage listing would almost certainly mean the cessation of virtually all logging in the region. The implications of this were generally regarded as “fatal” to their current lifestyle and their envisaged futures. This attitude could not be dismissed as unrealistic. It was clear that the avowed intentions of the government were already resulting

in genuine hardship, which was only expected to increase with the actual proclamation of the World Heritage legislation.

Social Impact Assessment researchers interviewed 20 business proprietors from the towns of Ravenshoe, Herberton and Atherton. All their businesses were experiencing a significant contraction. For example, the Herberton Newsagent had received pre-Christmas orders to the value of only \$631. This compared with orders for the same period in the previous year of \$1648. Reductions of this magnitude were commonly reported. There was a general expectation that once-thriving businesses would have to be simply abandoned, “just walk away”.

However, it was more a case of demand levelling off as people adopted a more prudent approach to how they managed limited financial resources. Locals were constantly confronted with the fact that a judgement had already been made about the long-term viability of the region by external bodies. Businesses could not be sold because “nobody will want to invest in a potential ghost town” and banks were (reportedly) advising against capital improvements and withdrawing finance from individuals wishing to invest in the region.

Of particular concern to local residents was the impact the prospect of World Heritage listing was already having on families. Prior to World Heritage listing, the Tableland communities had prided themselves on their close-knit nature. However, in almost all of the interviews undertaken, the issue of the strain upon family life emerged as a central concern. As employment prospects diminished or disappeared, the opportunities for children to remain on the Tablelands close to their parents were similarly reduced.

All in all, World Heritage listing precipitated a very general malaise or tension that placed even longstanding friendships under strain. Labor voters were blamed for the downturn that was already occurring and the decimation that was anticipated. This fracturing of aspects of a life which had been assumed to be stable and enduring was in many respects the most disturbing development for many people. For reasons that were far from clear to them, “outsiders” had linked their communities with international treaties and conventions, all in apparent ignorance of the conservation credentials of these involved in the local timber industry. Far-right conspiracy theories abounded which linked World Heritage Listing with the Fabian Society, world government and international communism. The Commonwealth Government did little to effectively counter these developments, focused as it was upon national rather than local interests.

This politicisation of everyday life was one of the most immediate impressions to strike outsiders. Day to day interactions, such as which shops were patronised, had become imbued with political meanings on the basis of the perceived sympathies of proprietors. Contacts with anyone viewed as representing an arm of the Commonwealth Government had become a matter for “vetting” by local community leaders. Timber workers could not (officially) be interviewed by University-based researchers because of a Trade Union strategy of attempting to stymie World Heritage listing through non-cooperation. All discussions tended to revert to a common pattern of pointing to the local impacts in terms of job loss, family breakdown and community fracturing. This would then be followed by

arguing that the conservation plans of the government were being imposed upon the local community without consultation and in the absence of any real appreciation of what World Heritage listing would mean.

In contrast, middle-class residents, who did not personally anticipate particularly severe impacts, were generally more sympathetic to philosophical or ideological arguments about the value of the forests and often appeared somewhat dismissive of the concerns of timber workers. If some locals were naïve and ill-informed in their lining of World Heritage Listing with communism and world government, it is difficult not to take the view that some of those with environmental sympathies were equally naïve and ill informed, with their blithe assertions of the viability of reforestation projects and shifts from rainforest timbers to hoop pine. However, irrespective of the merits of these different perspectives, and whatever their “class” position, residents on the Tablelands were united in the view that they were not being provided with adequate information as to exactly what would happen as a result of World Heritage listing. Understandably, this was of most concern to those whose jobs were already under threat.

People who had made a substantial personal and financial investment in small town life because they believed “with hard work and perseverance you can make something of yourself” now believed they would soon be “back to square one”. As one mill owner put it: “there’s no hope now – 12 to 18 months and it’ll all be gone”. Not surprisingly, the mill owner was bitter, “chopped off at the knees”. The 1987 social impact report addressed these concerns in detail, noting:

“At 56 years of age, and with no education beyond primary school, prospects for future employment in the area for himself or his employees are extremely limited. With seven grandchildren living in the area he is unwilling to contemplate relocating, cannot believe reforestation is a serious concept, cannot imagine what he could be retrained for and expects no sensible compensation scheme to be offered, either to himself or to his staff.”

The compensation package

In early 1988 the re-elected Labor Government announced it would implement its Structural Adjustment Package (SAP) in order to address any negative impacts associated with World Heritage Listing. The SAP had three components. These were job creation, business compensation, and financial assistance for forcibly displaced timber workers. The sum of \$75.3 million was set aside for the SAP, with \$50.9 million designated for employment-related programs and \$24.4 million designated for business compensation. Included in this allocation was \$13 million earmarked for the retooling of the mill in Ravenshoe in order to equip it for the processing of non-rainforest timbers. The job creation component of the SAP comprised of four major elements. These were public works projects, tree planting projects, private sector initiatives and local community initiatives. The component for assistance for displaced workers also comprised four discrete elements. There were a dislocation allowance, an early retirement package, a retraining subsidy and a relocation allowance. The SAP was explicitly designed to represent a broad and comprehensive response to the structural changes in regional economies caused by World Heritage listing. The package

was criticised in some quarters as an exercise in re-badging a collection of existing compensation/welfare mechanisms, but irrespective of the validity or otherwise of this criticism, it did represent a genuinely comprehensive attempt by the government to mitigate negative social impacts. However, one major recommendation of the 1987 social impact assessment was rejected by the Government and this ultimately proved to have very negative consequences.

The missing element

The 1987 study recommended that a “program of community development and community awareness be implemented to ensure that available funds are allocated in ways most beneficial to the communities involved”, it was noted that “reliance on mass media (television, radio, newspapers, brochures) to communicate with local people is by itself ineffective. So too, are highly formalised and publicised visits by prominent spokespersons”. It was further recommended that the existing community action groups provide the basis of this program. The report noted:

“A number of communities, most notably Ravenshoe, have generated very efficient committees and acquired proficient spokespersons. These people could be selectively recruited by the Federal Government to lead the process of community consultation and development, thereby making use of an already existing efficient system of communication in the local area, recruiting people who are obviously talented organisers and mobilisers of public opinion, and tapping into their already developed knowledge of their community and its residents.”

This recommendation was not accepted by the government, and instead, the delivery of the compensation package was largely made the responsibility of a six-person office operating out of Cairns (the Rainforest Unit).

The situation in 1991

By 1991, the fear that World Heritage listing would decimate the north Queensland timber industry had been proved justified. Only two licensed timber mills continued to operate in the Crown rainforests in the Atherton and Ingham forestry districts, whereas in 1987, 12 mills had been in operation employing some 486 timber workers. By 1991, fully 413 of these timber workers had been made redundant. In the same period, the number of Independent Timber Logging Contractors declined from 48 to 13, and the number of Special Purpose Sawmillers declined from 16 to 10. In terms of the actual amounts of timber processed, between September 1987 to June 1990, there was a 98% reduction in the amount of timber processed in Atherton, a 94% reduction in Mareeba and a 74% reduction in Eacham. Timber from private land continued to be processed but this did not compensate for the lack of access to Crown Land.

Over the mid-1987 to early 1991 period, the number of sawmillers processing timber drawn exclusively from private land remained constant at eight with a reduction in employee numbers from 63 to 62.

In considering the impact of these job losses (particularly in terms of “flow on” or “multiplier” effects) it is useful to examine the level of fluctuation associated with another major industry, the building industry. If we only consider non-residential building and if we accept an output labour ratio of \$100,000 to one employed person, we find a level of volatility and change which dwarfs the changes associated with World Heritage listing. For example, in the north coast region, over the 1987-88 period, 900 extra jobs were available over the preceding year, followed by a further 934 jobs in 1988-89 and then a reduction of 2310 jobs during 1989-90. The figures for the Tableland are similar in their level of fluctuation, but interestingly moving in the opposite direction to that which might be expected. In the period 1987-88 an additional 260 jobs were available in the building industry over the preceding year. Given that regions do not survive on timber, or non-residential building alone and that major employers such as the tourist industry, agricultural sector and the sugar industry were all also subject to fluctuation, it is perhaps not surprising that the 1991 study concluded that “at the community level is not possible to quantify specific World Heritage related impacts”. This is not to say, however, that at an individual level there were not negative impacts, or that there were not “hot spots” with concentrations of affected individuals (Ravenshoe for example). Returning to Ravenshoe did indeed reveal a region which had experienced particularly severe negative impacts, which had not been well managed, and which faced an uncertain future. But Ravenshoe also provides a telling reminder that the social world is complex and that social planners should beware the unanticipated consequence.

Ravenshoe revisited

Because Ravenshoe was the area in which the most severe negative social impacts were expected, it offers the clearest picture of the degree to which the SAP successfully mitigated World Heritage-related impacts at the both the individual and community level. Before turning to the ways in which the various aspects of the SAP compensation actually worked for displaced timber workers, it is necessary to recognise the extent to which unanticipated events framed the implementation of the SAP.

In 1987, the general expectation in Ravenshoe was that World Heritage listing would signal the death of the community. The mill would cease operations, businesses would close and families would be forced either to split up or leave the area. The reality in late 1990 was that Ravenshoe was experiencing something of a boom, the population had increased, new businesses had opened and World Heritage listing was no longer the sole focus of community life. The 1991 study notes:

“The atmosphere is no longer highly charged with the prospect of uncontrolled “flare ups” ever present. Instead, a variety of community groups are attempting to deal in a pragmatic fashion with a range of problems facing the town whilst simultaneously planning ahead for the next five to ten years.”

The reason for this turn of events is extremely interesting from an impact assessment perspective and constitutes a salutary reminder that not everything can be planned for. Precisely because Ravenshoe was seen to be in dire straits in 1987, land prices fell and this resulted in large tracts of land just outside Ravenshoe being subdivided and sold as “house and land packages” for as little as \$1,000. These packages attracted an influx of “rent

refugees” from Cairns, many of whom believed a new hydro-electricity scheme (the Tully Millstream Electricity Project) would provide the opportunity for employment in the future. The Tully Millstream Electricity Project has yet to be approved, and so, at least for the foreseeable future, the challenge for Ravenshoe as a community is not so much how to cope with a contraction of the timber industry, but rather, how to cope with the influx of “new blood” given that, as a group, the newcomers are (perhaps unfairly) characterised by “the number of single parent families, families with no income beyond welfare payments and generally less conservative attitudes towards issues such as the use of marijuana and the control of children”. While this unanticipated development may have “saved the town” this is quite separate from the issue of how well the government’s remedial strategy operated.

The 1991 study concluded that the SAP was conceptually flawed, poorly delivered and short-term in its effects. The SAP as applied in Ravenshoe had two aspects. On the one hand there was the delivery of the various SAP components for displaced timber workers. Neither of these two aspects of the SAP were delivered in a satisfactory manner. The retooling of the mill in Ravenshoe was described by residents as “a complete shemozzle” which had financially disadvantaged locals who had extended significant amounts of credit to the mill in the belief that it was in some way supported by the government. The failure of the mill to meet these credit obligations meant that locals felt themselves to be victims of a “double whammy”. By 1991, the mill was effectively no longer operational and in receivership. As the 1991 study noted:

“The full story of the retooling and management of the Ravenshoe APS mill is yet to be finally documented. For the purposes of this report it is sufficient to note that considerable speculation exists both within Ravenshoe and more generally in the region, as to whether the \$7.5 million provided in grants and cheap loans to the mill has been used as effectively and efficiently as would be desirable... The mill is currently not processing timber and is for sale. Receivers are actively pursuing prospective buyers. In the current economic climate it is increasingly unlikely that a buyer will be found who is not attracted by the asset stripping possibilities.”

The level of service delivery was also significantly less than ideal in terms of the other aspects of the SAP. The Business Compensation component of the SAP was widely criticised by claimants as unfair and unwieldy. The criticism that the compensation was unfair was not substantiated but it was very clearly unwieldy in its operations. The Dislocation Allowance was successfully delivered and operated as intended, but this was no more than short-term financial support. The Early Retirement assistance was not well accepted with many recipients believing the maximum payout of \$30,000 did not represent fair compensation for the premature termination of a “working life”. The Private Initiatives scheme which was intended as a means by which displaced timber workers could begin an altogether new career or business was crippled by its inability to reconcile the government’s accountability requirements with the realities of the private sector. The Public Sector projects, which essentially entailed local councils employing displaced timber workers on public infrastructure projects, were highly successful, but, given the finite funding for these projects, most timber workers felt they were simply “delaying the inevitable”.

Common to all these components of the SAP was widespread frustration at the way the SAP was administered. Delivery of the SAP was managed by the Rainforest Unit in Cairns and was primarily the responsibility of two environmental scientists. This level of resourcing, and distance from the affected workers, virtually guaranteed that negative impacts would not be mitigated as efficiently as intended. Coupled to this issue of inadequate service delivery was the fact that the mitigation of negative impacts was being understood in almost exclusively economic terms. The financial impacts were obviously important, but World Heritage listing was not simply taking away jobs, it was taking away a sense of personal identity inextricably linked with the timber industry. These were people who saw themselves as genuinely Green conservators of a natural resource which they earnestly believed could be harvested without being destroyed. They were affronted by the way in which (as they saw it) they were demonised by “middle class armchair greenies” whose only knowledge of the forests came from knowing that “somewhere in some city there’s a Wilderness Shop”. The SAP did nothing to address these psycho-social concerns.

The 1991 study concluded that many of the problems associated with a conceptually flawed and poorly delivered SAP could have been addressed via a community based coordinating body, as had been recommended in 1987:

“Such a body would have drawn together representatives of shire councils, chambers of commerce, community action groups, industry and Trade Union representatives and officers of the Commonwealth Government”.

The forests in North Queensland have now been secured and the appropriateness of this decision is no longer widely questioned. However, we should be mindful of the fact that the relatively low level of serious long term social impacts associated with World Heritage listing is the result of good luck as much as good management.