Capricorn Conservation Council Inc.

1997 - 1998 Annual Report

The Capricorn Conservation Council Inc. is a non-profit regional environment group responsible for the area from Sarina south to Baffle Creek and west to the Northern Territory border. This is an area of almost half a million square kilometres and covers over one quarter of the state of Queensland. CCC engages in environmental advocacy throughout this region on a variety of issues. CCC also provides comment and input on matters of off-shore and statewide importance.

The region is characterised by a sparse human population, high unemployment, low socio-economic and educational standards and a heavy reliance on primary productivity, mainly agricultural and mining industries. The main population centres are Rockhampton and Gladstone.

Environmental advocacy is taking strong action to address the major needs of the natural environment at cost to, or at least without direct benefit to, the advocate. This can be done through direct 'on-ground' works or through addressing the systemic forces and influences which lead to degradation of the natural environment.

Management Committee

Capricorn Conservation Council has an elected Management Committee who meet once a month to address issues which have arisen and direct the next month's focus.

Management Committee elected last May composed John McCabe (President), Steve Elson (Vice President), Stephen Heyer (Treasurer), Kylie Joyce (Secretary), and Trevor Acfield, Dianne Hoy and Bruce Zimmer as Ordinary Committee Members. In September Steve Elson resigned from the Vice Presidency. Leo Freeman was then brought on to the Committee as Ordinary Committee Member.

Funding

CCC depends entirely on federal and state government funding. Attempts to be self-funding have not been successful due to the depressed local economy and resultant low income levels.

Federal funding through the Grants to Voluntary Conservation Organisations program was reduced from $15 500 in the previous year to $10 000 in 1997. State funding remained constant at $9 500. In addition we received one Regional Forest Agreement grant of $750 and a Gaming Machine Community Benefit Fund grant of $3419.

It is anticipated that when tax deductibility of our established Public Donations Trust Fund is achieved, we will be able to secure donations from prominent central Queensland industries and companies. The Trustees of the Fund are Dr. Robert Newby (Senior Lecturer in Biology), Mr. Matthew Ryan (Chaplain) and Mr. Bruce Zimmer (Manager of Analysis and Planning), all from Central Queensland University.

Environment Centre

The Environment Centre serves as administrative, resource and meeting facility for CCC. It houses the Coordinator, the library and education files, and provides a meeting space for members and allies. This year the Centre was utilised as a display facility with information on rivers, forests and dams being mounted on carpetboards in the window for passers-by and drivers to view.

Education requests dealt with this year included a number of local primary, secondary and tertiary students who visited the Centre and used the resource materials. Written requests from outside Rockhampton or the district were responded to with materials posted back on topics ranging from blue-green algae in Awoonga Dam to mineral sand mining. NSR Environmental Consulting also contacted us from Melbourne seeking a copy of the Waterbirds and Wetlands Study. They were referred to our website for text but maps were supplied from the hard copy in the Library. Other education activities included a stall at Central Queensland University's Orientation Week.

A working bee was held on 31st January to begin updating the Library. Although much work still remains, that day's efforts have made using the Library and Centre easier and more efficient.
Toward the end of the 1997-98 year an Activity Log was set up on the computer for members and volunteers to register their efforts in environmental advocacy. This will allow more comprehensive reporting of CCC activities in the future.

Coordinator

The Coordinator, Susan Cunningham, is responsible for administrative matters within the Environment Centre, collecting and recording correspondence, producing a regular newsletter, issuing media releases and representing CCC on the Fitzroy Basin Association and the Livingstone Remnant Vegetation Study. In 1997 the Coordinator was also a member of the Regional Assessment Panel for Natural Heritage Trust applications. Telephone inquiries are responded to, written education requests attended to, and submissions to governments and developers collated for despatch. Email contact with members, allies and agencies has become more frequent and is proving a quicker, more efficient way to consult and liaise.

Activities

One of CCC's most important activities is the **provision of community feedback** to governments and proponents of projects.
Several Impact Assessment Studies (IAS) were received and commented upon this year, most notably the Nathan Dam at Taroom, where our response ran to 12 pages, and the Comet Dam at Rolleston (8 page response). Members who put in hours reading and commenting on these did sterling service as there was no possibility of the Coordinator having the requisite time or even the breadth of skills necessary to carry out this work. Comment was provided on the proposed Marlborough nickel mine.
During the year CCC provided comment on a number of government initiatives. Environment Australia's Draft Threat Abatement Plan for Feral Cats was commented on in January, as was the proposed Rockhampton Airport Runway Extension. Interim Marine and Coastal Regionalisation for Australia (IMCRA) comment was also made in January, while comment was provided at Queensland Conservation Council's request in February regarding the Gladstone Port Authority's Permit to Dump Dredge Material At Sea. Another submission was that on the Integrated Planning Act.
Assistance was given to Capelec in finding a Community Liaison person to feedback community concerns to Capelec and this involved a meeting and several phone calls.
CCC also assisted organisers of the "Capricornia Declaration" by way of commenting on drafts, maintaining communication links and assisting in the publicity surrounding its signing. The "Capricornia Declaration" asked the State Government to make a number of commitments to ensure adequate environmental flows were determined and provided for the Fitzroy River system.

Our other major function is **facilitating community discussion and activity**. Numerous meetings were held by, or attended on behalf of, CCC throughout the year. These included regular Fitzroy Basin Association and Livingstone Remnant Vegetation Study meetings, and a Northern Hairy Nosed Wombat Recovery Team meeting, where the Coordinator is our representative. There were also regular North Keppel Island Environmental Education Centre meetings, as well as CCC Management Committee meetings.
Other meetings attended were one-off or community consultation meetings. These included those for the Integrated Planning Act and the Regional Forest Agreement, with Rockhampton City Council once regarding the Comet and Nathan dams and once regarding mosquito control measures, meetings with State Minister for the Environment Brian Littleproud regarding local issues and with Federal Member for Capricornia Paul Marek regarding funding and local issues. The National Koala Conservation Strategy, held in Emerald in June, was attended by the Coordinator. A special CCC meeting was held in July 1997 for members to put concerns to Mr. Marek and this was extensively covered by WIN Television.

The "Rally for the River" was held on Sunday 14th December and attended by about 170 people. The Healthy Rivers Task Force and speakers from throughout the catchment did a fine job in organising this event and public donations received almost covered the increased Telstra bill which resulted.
The Coordinator gave a talk on the Fitzroy River system, superdams and blue-green algae to the University of the Third Age.
A community meeting of several possible Natural Heritage Trust proponents was attended to facilitate strategic planning.
Regular Queensland Regional Conservation Organisation meetings were attended by different CCC members throughout the year.
Revegetation work along Thozet's Creek has been undertaken by CCC members for a number of years. A working bee was held on 11th May to plant another section of this creek, as a supplement to earlier works. On December 7th a walk down Thozet's Creek inspected the work in progress or completed by a number of stakeholders. Along the creek some remnant vegetation has survived and this is complemented by several small replanted sites, those being community groups or individuals.
Other activities which occurred in the 1997-1998 CCC year were the formation of the Healthy Rivers Task Force, follow-up to Operation Tandem Thrust (from March, 1997) and extensive liaison regarding the fishkill downstream of the Theodore weir.

In this year CCC acquired its own webpage on the Internet, courtesy of Stephen Heyer and his associates. This project was initiated as a result of the Queensland State Library project of making space available to non-profit community groups. The site will be regularly upgraded and expanded, and members can access it at **http://www.wamoz.com/CCC/**. This site will be increasingly important in future to facilitate community discussion and dialogue.

Inspection
A site on the southern bank of the Fitzroy River was inspected on 22nd January after reports of illegal dumping of hazardous wastes by members of the public. Undercutting of the riverbank and subsequent loss of private freehold land was evident. The landholder was attempting to remedy this problem by arranging the dumping of large amounts of material from various sources. Landholder advised that he intended to stabilise the bank and then grow trees over the stabilised bank. Technical advice received later indicated that the fill material was dangerous, the planning inadequate and the objective unlikely to succeed without significantly more technical input. Despite attempts to secure landholder cooperation, it was necessary to report this incident to the Department of Environment.

President's Report
Having served for 10 continuous years on the Committee of Capricorn Conservation Council and about to stand down to draw breath for a few years, I want to look back over the decade, reflect on the past, and outline a personal view of the future for environmental activism in Central Queensland.

This year is the 25th anniversary of CCC and that longer time span has seen even greater changes. As a small active group able to concentrate with intensity on two or three issues at a time the organisation was able to catch the attention of governments and often the state and national media on the key issues under consideration. Today we sometimes seem like an under-resourced, overworked section of a government bureaucracy wading through voluminous reports, involving in endless committees and dealing with 20 differing issues a week.
Capricorn Conservation Council has been a key player in many conservation issues: keeping the sandminers at bay along 500 kilometres of coastal sand dunes, fighting for the islands, reefs and waters of the southern Great Barrier Reef, publicising the destructive logging of native forests, researching and promoting the value of coastal wetlands, assisting the promotion of Shoalwater Bay and Mount Etna to national prominence, pioneering the linking of the conservation movement into land care and tree clearing issues, campaigns for endangered species. Increasingly we have moved from the spot issues to a broad scale concern for the total environment.

Despite the significant role the conservation movement plays in government initiated reviews, impact assessment studies, educational services, and the provision of support and information to the community it is clear that governments are not inclined to increase the limited funding provided for regional conservation organisations and that further reductions of grants is a more likely scenario.
What should be the role and future directions of CCC and other conservation organisations in Central Queensland? It would be pleasant to go back to the focused activism of the 1970's where environmental action was based on easily researched facts promoted with innovative tactics which enabled the movement to outplay the "other side". The reality today is that sometimes we are working with the other side, whether they be government, miners, or industry. The soon to be signed Regional Forest Agreement for South- East Queensland is an example where two sides have come together and argued out compromises which will give industry a clear future while allowing for some very significant conservation gains. A CCC representative sits on the company sponsored committee overseeing the rehabilitation of the Mount Etna limestone quarry, the site of the most bitterly fought environmental battle.

Despite the above, few people active in the conservation movement would subscribe to the view that the environment would rate as a high priority for governments, or that industries would effectively self regulate if there were not community watchdogs monitoring their actions. It is still a fact that when we lose a place or issue the loss is forever but when we win we have to remain vigilant forever.
The predominant issue we have involved with over the past year has been the massive water schemes proposed for the Fitzroy River (and for other areas such as the Boyne and Calliope Rivers). The drive by government and the bureaucracy towards structures and industries which will result in a totally regulated (but severely degraded) Fitzroy River system poses a threat which far out weighs in importance every other environment issue faced in Central Queensland. This issue has confirmed that the extensive reports, the commitment to WAMP, the interminable "consultations" make only a limited contribution to a better environmental outcome.
The most effective outcomes to date on the water issue have been achieved through volunteers engaging in community action; networking among concerned, thinking people across the catchment, educating the public on issues of great complexity. The formation of interactive groups like the Healthy Rivers Task Force and Central Highlands Information and Environment Network (CHIEN) have been significant confirmation that change will come from people working within their communities making strategic alliances. The government material will still be important but must never be allowed to dominate over community action.
Despite the focus remaining on volunteer-ism the conservation movement still relies on the paid (mostly part time underpaid) workers who co-ordinate and farm out the ever increasing volumes of work demands being placed on environment centres. Working for conservation groups led me to other jobs : in the tropical rainforests, diving on 400 year old Dutch shipwrecks, leading tours on the Great Barrier Reef and Fraser Island, writing for Readers Digest Nature Books, surveying mine sites for plants. I am hopeful the conservation movement will continue to be a training ground for people who want to make a career of working for a better Earth.
The incoming executive committee will have the task of deciding future directions for CCC and I am hopeful that new blood and new energy will lead to further growth of activist working groups. I remind all those who want to involve with conservation of the words of Fraser Island advocate John Sinclair, a person who lost his job and who was subject to repeated legal action because of his conservation efforts "Conservation should always be FUN".

President and Management Committee, May, 1998