

Labor connives with green alliance to control indigenous growth

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Next time you bump into a koala conservationist begging for money in the street, ask what it thinks of Noel Pearson and his opposition to the Queensland government's wild rivers laws. The koala will tell you that I am a rapacious developer who wants to mine, clear-fell, pollute and pillage the unique environment of Cape York Peninsula. The koala will tell you that I do not speak for Aboriginal people from the region, and that the laws are strongly supported by them.

The Wilderness Society has an army of teenagers out on the streets saying that about those of us resisting its attack on the land rights of Aboriginal people in the cape. As in all propaganda campaigns, its main currency is to push its side of the story.

It spent years laying down the groundwork before Premier Anna Bligh announced three wild river declarations after the state election last March. The first step was to cause great alarm about the threats facing Cape York. From Indooroopilly to Surry Hills it distributed pamphlets and held public meetings in the suburbs talking up the threats to Cape York. Threats can be the lifeblood of campaigns such as those routinely run by the Wilderness Society.

It helps when citizens on the southeastern seaboard of the country – not the least those in the marginal seats of Brisbane – are saturated with images of the Gunns Paper Mill in Tasmania and the disaster of the Murray-Darling. Not to mention global warming.

For an environmentally anxious public, the Wilderness Society conflated Cape York Peninsula with clear-felling of old-growth forests in southern Australia and the Murray-Darling, and it had a winner.

Add a good brand name – Wild River – and there you have it: the perfect product to sell to an environmentally troubled public. The name corners the market on motherhood and apple pie, and whatever protests affected landowners in remote regions may make, they have no chance in the propaganda war because they are by the very definition of speaking against Wild Rivers, environmental vandals.

The Wilderness Society spent years campaigning about the threats facing Cape York. But when you examine what possible source of threat it is talking about, you find very little.

Take clear-felling of forests for paper mills and the like. None. Never has been. Never will be.

Take timber. There is only one small sawmill in the entire region the size of Victoria that cuts a single species, Darwin Stringybark, a dry forest timber abundant across northern Australia.

Take mining. There are only two operating mines in the entire region, both of which have been in existence for 50 years, the Mitsubishi silica mine at Cape Flattery and the Comalco bauxite mine at Weipa.

There are two new bauxite mines proposed. One is to be developed by Chinese company Chalco, which was awarded the opportunity by the Queensland government. The Chalco mining area, on the northern side of the Archer River, was excluded from the Wild River declarations announced by Bligh, but on the southern side the Aurukun community lands were included.

The Chalco mining area is an example of hypocrisy for two reasons. First, the Queensland government says mining can be consistent with the use of Wild River areas. Therefore why exclude the Chalco mining area from the Wild River declaration?

Second, the Wilderness Society has never expressed its position on the Chalco mine. Why has it not insisted the Chalco mining area be included in the Wild River areas?

The second bauxite mine is proposed by a start-up company called Cape Alumina on a pastoral property purchased by the federal government for the owners of Australia Zoo. Terry Irwin has been

campaigning against this mine. This area has not been excluded from a proposed Wild River declaration of the Wenlock River, and, therefore, Irwin and the Wilderness Society have been arguing that this mine is a grave threat to the environment of what Australia Zoo promotes as Steve's Place.

The Wilderness Society is campaigning vigorously against "strip mining" by the Cape Alumina mob, but seem silent on the Chinese proposal. Why?

It is because this was the terms of the deal the Wilderness Society cut with former Queensland premier Peter Beattie. Beattie insisted the Wilderness Society could get blanket Wild Rivers over the blackfellas' land – without providing anything to the blackfellas other than a few make-work ranger jobs – provided the Chalco mining area was excluded.

This is why the Wilderness Society is silent on Chalco and screaming loud on the other mine.

Like moving pieces in a massive game of chess, the leaders of the Wilderness Society sit down with Labor Party principals in front of a map of Queensland and they make deals about what they want and what they're prepared to give away. You give us the Traveston dam, we give you Cape York. You can fight Cape Alumina, but don't fight the Chinese.

This is how you get the Greens party in Queensland not opposing the Traveston dam at state election time. The charade of participatory democracy can be seen in every region of the state where there are networks of "catchment management groups" and "natural resource management groups". Farmers, local communities, indigenous representatives and shire councils sit down with state government bureaucrats and representatives of green groups and supposedly work out consensus solutions to land use and environmental management. But what the mug stakeholders from these communities do not realise is these processes are tokenism.

The real decisions are made in Brisbane. The people who actually live in these regions and who strive to make a livelihood out of the land, are reduced to being bit-part "stakeholders", while the real players are those cutting the deals in Brisbane.

Griffith University academics James Whelan and Kristen Lyons, in a 2004 paper examining the methods successfully employed by environment groups in getting tree-clearing bans in Queensland, report that one of the principals of the Wilderness Society, Lyndon Schneiders, called community consultation processes under legislation for land-clearing management "an exercise in futility" and "a long suicide note".

The organisations funded by the state and commonwealth to facilitate these stakeholder processes are controlled by the purse-strings of government. Their employees end up compromised because jobs and funding programs are dependent on everybody toeing the line that the governments and environment groups insist on.

From the far north to western Queensland you can see what is happening. The poor buggers who live in these places are no match for the corporatist power of organisations such as the Wilderness Society and the wealthy US outfit, the Pew Foundation, who bankroll these campaigns.

If you accept that Cape York Peninsula is not threatened by wholesale commercial or industrial development, and that the best prospect will be small-scale sustainable developments that preserve the region's environment, you are then left with the tragic conclusion that the entire argument about Wild Rivers is misconstrued.

Bligh has consistently rejected that Wild Rivers was all about election deals. But that wasn't always the community perception. Whelan and Lyons reported on the land-management campaign: "Interviewees considered TWS [the Wilderness Society] had demonstrably influenced the outcome of recent Queensland elections. The Labor Party's environmental commitments had been rewarded by TWS campaigns in marginal electorates, which boosted Labor candidates, notably [in 2004] by reducing the vote of a popular Green candidate who might otherwise have won the party's first parliamentary position."

This should be the last thing consuming the attention of Aboriginal people in Cape York. We should be devoting our political and organisational energies into the abject problems of health, education, housing, child protection and criminal justice afflicting our communities. Instead we have to fight a rearguard action to preserve our rights to sustainable development against a bunch of people from the Wilderness Society who desperately want their names listed on the pantheon of environmental heroes who saved Cape York Peninsula. But saved it from what?

In the week before Christmas, The Weekend Australian featured a story on Eddie Woibo, from Hopevale in Cape York. Eddie is a hard-working indigenous man who set up a small-scale passionfruit farm on his native land. Woibo and his family developed the land for 25 years, building a home and putting in miles of fencing, planted pasture and irrigation infrastructure, waiting for formal land title from successive Queensland governments. His land and home is a dead asset. Because he does not have title to his lands, he has never been able to leverage any further capital investment into his property through loans from banks. More than 80 other indigenous families are in the same position.

Eddie was struck by a heart condition and was hospitalised in December. While he was in recovery a bushfire gutted his property, wiping out his enterprise and ruining most of his infrastructure. Normally, Woibo would have had insurance for his passionfruit business. But he could not insure his property because he did not have title. Woibo has been waiting 25 years for title to his land, and he's still waiting.

The article published last year was to draw attention to the need for land tenure resolution and to appeal for financial help on Eddie's behalf. Any donation would be much appreciated.

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