

## ***Management of Public Coastal Land in Queensland – uncovering the problems and exploring the solution***

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### **Abstract**

Much of the 22000 parcels of public use land available for public recreational pursuits in Queensland fringe our beautiful coastline. The diversity of habitats, trusteeship arrangements and organisations involved in policy development and implementation and on-ground management roles coupled with the increasing demand for recreational use makes effective planning and management of these areas extremely difficult. Further complicating management and rehabilitation efforts are the natural phenomena of shoreline erosion. With a collaborative planning, protection and management approach between the different levels of government and community organisations, iconic coastal recreational activities will remain available for future generations to enjoy.

### **Introduction**

A sharp increase in the number of residents and tourists visiting Queensland has resulted in increased demand for public coastal land and associated recreational infrastructure. A dramatic increase in the number of visitors to our beaches and foreshore areas has caused extensive damage to sensitive coastal habitats. Particular recreational activities have, in some instances, completely destroyed the very resource attracting high visitation. Some of these activities include vehicle use, fires, dumping of rubbish and clearing of native vegetation.

The destructive nature of certain unmanaged recreational activities has also increased the impacts of shoreline erosion. Coastal erosion is a natural phenomenon however in many instances, significant recreational infrastructure has been placed in the path of erosive forces and subsequently instigated the need for costly protection activities. In many areas of Queensland, and Far North Queensland in particular, the management effort required to control and manage the use of public coastal land is lagging behind and some of the more popular public coastal lands are suffering the consequences.

Fluctuations in the position of the coastline and periodic inundation of some coastal areas are part of the natural processes of the coast. However, coastal erosion in settled areas presents an ongoing threat to land and property on the coast. The best possible management response is to allow erosion to occur naturally. This is easier to achieve on public land without permanent development and on land without dedicated public and recreational uses. Therefore proactive planning approaches are the best option to ensure future recreational activities are undertaken and sustainably managed in the most appropriate locations.

This paper will explore issues in relation to two of the most significant management problems facing managers of public coastal lands: vehicle use and shoreline erosion management and how these issues along with other recreational use and public land management issues can be managed in a proactive and collaborative manner.

### **Vehicle use**

For many people, driving their car on the sand is one of the great joys of a visit to the beach. Queensland has numerous beaches where driving vehicles is permitted and managed to reduce impacts: Stradbroke, Morton and Fraser Islands all have beaches where driving along the beach is one of the main recreational pursuits.

In some remote areas, particularly in far North Queensland, driving on the beach is not condoned or sanctioned by managing bodies, but is merely tolerated. Until recently, this situation has not caused significant problems on some of the more remote beaches, where only one or two vehicles and just a handful of pedestrians access the beach per day. However, with the growth of the number of people seeking to live on the coast, the remote areas are not so remote. Increases in the number of pedestrians and beach goers using 4wd's and other all terrain vehicles are creating more frequent conflicts between user groups as well as greater impacts on dune habitat.

For some people, driving a car on the beach is an anathema. Like many local government offices along the Queensland coast, the DERM Cairns Office is receiving increasing numbers of complaints from residents and visitors in relation to driving of vehicles on beaches.

Complainants concerns mainly fall into three categories: environmental impacts, user conflict and safety. Complainants are concerned that vehicles driving on the beach create the following impacts

- damage to and loss of coastal vegetation
- erosion of dunes
- destruction of nesting sites for marine turtle and shore birds
- disturbance to migratory waders during feeding and roosting
- damage to intertidal invertebrates
- threats to the safety of pedestrian users
- impacts on the enjoyment of other beach users
- no policing of unregistered or unroadworthy vehicles using the beach
- liability and insurance issues in relation to unregistered vehicles in case of accident

### **Shoreline erosion management**

Experience has shown that coastal erosion is best managed using a planned proactive approach. The *Coastal Protection and Management Act 1995* provides for erosion prone land to be placed into a reserve for coastal management purposes at the time of approval of a new subdivision, thereby creating a buffer zone which can be allowed to erode and accrete naturally without threatening infrastructure or other public assets

Where development already exists, the most common response to erosion threats has been to construct erosion protection works such as rock walls. Reactive responses that involve the construction of armour defences have proven to be unsatisfactory in the long term and often result in other ongoing costly problems and safety issues.

### **Roles and responsibilities**

All three levels of government share coastal management responsibilities in Queensland. According to some, this arrangement is currently suffering from 'duplication, risk and cost shifting' which leads to 'conflict, confusion and inaction'. (Berwick, 2007)

Coastal management in Queensland is underpinned by numerous pieces of legislation including: Coastal Protection and Management Act 1995 (Qld); Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (Cwth); Fisheries Act 1994 (Qld); Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975 (Qth); Integrated Planning Act 1997 (Qld); Land Act 1994 (Qld); Marine Parks Act 2004 (Qld); Marine Parks (Declaration) Regulation 2006 (Qld); Marine Parks Regulation 2006 (Qld); Nature Conservation Act 1992 (Qld).

The *Coastal Protection and Management Act (1995)* (Coastal Act) is the primary legislation for coastal management in Queensland. The Coastal Act provides the legislative basis for State and Regional Coastal Management Plans, which deliver a vision and direction for coastal management in Queensland.

**Vehicles** – The Department of Environment and Resource Management (DERM) administers the *Coastal Protection and Management Act 1995* (Coastal Act), which is the primary legislation for coastal management in Queensland. Fundamental tools to implement the Coastal Act are the State Coastal Management Plan and regional coastal management plans.

The Coastal Management Plan includes policies for Vehicle use on beaches and states that ".....increased use of vehicles on beaches for recreational purposes, should be avoided, unless: (a) there would be no significant adverse impacts on coastal resources and their values; (b) there would be no unacceptable conflict with other major user groups; and (c) adequate public safety can be provided." The policy goes further to state that, "Vehicle use of the foreshore is to be restricted to the area between low and high water mark when being driven along the beach. Measures undertaken by local, state and Commonwealth agencies to ensure vehicle use on beaches does not impact on coastal resources and their values are encouraged."

Coastal land is often multi-tenured and includes: esplanades, unallocated state land, Council reserves, National Park, Conservation Parks, and freehold land. Overlying these tenures, in some areas, there are a range of additional management regimes including State Marine Park and Fish Habitat Areas. To access the beach vehicles often traverse a number of parcels of land, each of which has a different tenure and management regime, and it is this situation which creates problems for coordinating management between state and local government and between state government departments. Place based localised cooperation between various agencies often produces more tangible results than at the strategic policy level (Knight & Landres, 1998).

**Erosion** - DERM has a regulatory role in development assessment in part of the coastal zone declared as coastal management districts. Many of the newly created public coastal lands which are established through the development approval process are managed by local government as trustees. This arrangement relies on cooperation between the DERM and local government at the regional level. This process of placing erosion prone land into public coastal land ensures that coastal erosion can occur naturally without threatening the integrity of private structures.

## **Public coastal land management plans**

Trustees of public coastal land are encouraged to prepare land management plans as a proactive means of planning for and implementing effective protection, rehabilitation and management activities. DERM strongly supports local governments preparing such plans to govern sustainable and equitable use of public coastal land for recreational uses. Where erosion presents as a critical management issue, DERM encourages local government's and other trustees to develop a Shoreline Erosion Management Plan (SEMP) as a component of the overall Coastal Land Management Plan. The Queensland Government provides technical advice and assistance to councils to encourage the development of Land Management Plans with specific funding available for the SEMP component.

Through the SEMP process and the creation of public coastal land, the DERM have worked cooperatively with a number of local government bodies in Queensland to address the issue of shoreline erosion management.

### **Aim of the workshop**

The aim of the workshop presentation is to discuss and highlight some of the issues in relation to the management of public coastal lands in far north Queensland. Many of these issues are common throughout Queensland and the workshop will work with participants to explore options for resolution.

The workshop will highlight the effectiveness of proactive and collaborative approaches to manage the use of public coastal land via land management plans.

### **Workshop structure**

This workshop presentation will use a case study approach to explore the issues in relation to management of public coastal lands where there are multiple tenures and management responsibilities. Following the presentation of the case study the workshop will be opened up for discussion in relation to options for cooperation and resolution.

### **References**

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