

President's Report - 2018 AGM

Nature and its guardians, from the Australian Conservation Foundation and State Conservation Councils to the smallest local environment group, are under fierce political attack at all levels of Government – Federal State and Local. The pressures of corporate greed, overpopulation and overconsumption have forged a new generation of largely arrogant, ignorant and self-interested politicians in the major parties who put nature, the environment and the planet last.

Whether it is the protection of great Barrier Reef, Land and Marine National Parks, forests, woodlands, native wildlife, biodiversity, World Heritage Areas or steps to effectively stop disastrous climate change they are all swept aside for mining, logging, land clearing, roads, airports, high impact recreation and endless urban developments. Defenders of nature in NSW now face huge fines and gaol for simple peaceful protests and even assembly on public crown land.

New land clearing and planning laws and a renewed logging assault on our forests throughout NSW, including the Eurobodalla region, critically threaten biodiversity and will further accelerate global warming.

Coastwatchers, its Management Committee and its members have a responsibility under our charter to the broad Eurobodalla community and the many people who have supported us for more than forty years. That responsibility is to stand up, firmly and vigorously; to oppose the greedy and self-interested who would destroy nature and hence the future of our children and most other species on lifeboat Earth.

Polite letter writing to politicians, petitions and submissions to government is necessary but no longer enough – we need to oppose the nature destroyers wherever we can - in the forests, on mining sites, in land clearing operations; in the streets, in public meetings, rallies and protests; in the corporate offices; in the parliaments and Council chambers; in social media and in the public media.

We need to quicken our responses, anticipate threats and learn new skills to make us more effective. Most of all we need renewal, a new generation of committed and active members who have been attracted by the community leadership, advocacy and direct action of Coastwatchers.

In early May I was approached by several members alarmed about the Rural Lands Strategy (RLS) just placed on public exhibition by Eurobodalla Shire Council with as little public notice as possible and only four weeks for exhibition and submissions. The RLS is a clear threat to nature conservation in a number of ways. These include some 38,000 ha of high conservation value land, mostly forested, to be zoned as Rural RU1 and left without any real conservation protection while subject to a large range of permissible uses that would lead to relentless and unsustainable clearing and development over the next decade or two, the death of a thousand cuts. Also, the Shire's wetlands, even those formerly protected by NSW State policy, are to be opened to grazing without the need for any permission by Council or the State.

Coastwatchers acted quickly to form a working group that includes representatives from other local conservation groups to analyse the exhibited documents and alert the general

community. Some of the working group chose to assist as The Nature Coast Alliance. There were more than 300 pages of documents and maps on exhibition and more than 1000 pages of underlying technical reports and studies.

We were able to persuade the Council to extend the exhibition period to 22 June (a total of six weeks) although they refused our request that the period be at least 90 days. We were able to provide a summary and a short guide letter opposing the worst points of the RLS and calling for its withdrawal. Council has now received some 600 submissions from community groups and individuals. Whilst Council is still assessing the submissions, I am confident that the great majority are based on the material provided by the working group and strongly oppose the RLS.

The RLS response required intensive effort by the working group. I would like to particularly thank Jenny Edwards, Meg Switzer and Gillianne Tedder who bore much of the workload and were critical to effective action.

I believe that many of our members made short submissions and I am attaching herewith Coastwatchers and The Nature Coast Alliance official submission for your interest. Our working group also generated about six local press stories and a lengthy interview on ABC South East Radio.

There is still a long way to go if we are to stop the RLS, including a further round of submissions to the Minister for Planning and local MP's should, as expected, the Council dismiss the unprecedented community opposition and proceed to recommend the RLS to the Minister of Planning for approval.

It has been my privilege to serve as Coastwatchers President. I wish Coastwatchers members well and hope that you will continue to fully support the work opposing the RLS (I shall continue to assist The Nature Coast Alliance) and the campaign by the NSW National Parks Association, SEFA and other forest conservation groups to end native forest logging.

Best wishes
Noel Plumb
President Coastwatchers