



Media Release

Burke approves inappropriate Ella Bay resort development

Cairns: Thursday 20th December 2012

Federal Environment Minister Tony Burke announced his approval of the Ella Bay resort development near Innisfail yesterday, a decision which will threaten federally listed endangered species and ecological communities.

“We have serious concerns for the unique ecology of this area given the nature and scale of the proposed development. The Ella Bay site is simply not an appropriate location for a development of this scale. No amount of environmental management or mitigation will change that” said Anna McGuire, Coordinator of the Cairns and Far North Environment Centre.

“We have concerns about the likely negative consequences of installing cassowary fencing and escape gates across a large area of critical cassowary habitat without any reasonable proof that these fences and escape gates are safe or successful for wild cassowaries. Ella Bay is an area of high ecological importance and is a critical habitat area for a number of endangered species including the southern cassowary.”

“The proponent has included some measures for environmental protection in the proposal, however these measures are inadequate and no amount of research or “wildlife management” would adequately reduce the impacts of this development on the nationally significant ecology of this area to an acceptable level.”

“There is strong community opposition to this development, both from within the local Innisfail community and broader regional community. Over 1000 people sent emails and letters to Tony Burke urging him to refuse this development. A recent Cairns Post poll indicated only 19% of the population support this development going ahead. In addition, previous examples clearly show that this type of development is not the economic panacea for the Cassowary Coast that some claim it to be.”

“The influx of people resulting from the proposed development would inevitably lead to unacceptable environmental impacts. The development would result in as many as 5,000 people visiting and living on this presently unpopulated site, creating a high risk of degrading the unique natural and cultural values of the area. The influx would result in a dramatic increase in traffic to a destination at the end of a very narrow coastal road through a regularly cyclone impacted section of the World Heritage listed Wet Tropics, and is likely to result in increased Cassowary strikes and ongoing access issues.”

Background

Matters of National Environmental Significance - The site is adjacent to the World Heritage listed Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, and is surrounded by the World Heritage listed Wet Tropics rainforests. It is ideally suited to restoration and conversion to national park to improve connectivity of a critical area of lowland rainforest habitat in an already heavily fragmented regional landscape.

According to the proponent's documentation, the site is home to one EPBC listed endangered frog species: the common mistfrog (*Litoria rheocola*). The area is considered to be likely habitat of other EPBC listed endangered frog species including the Australian lacelid (*Nyctimystes dayi*) and the waterfall frog (*Litoria nannotis*). The proponent has previously publicly acknowledged the presence of both the Australian lacelid and the waterfall frog on their web site (<http://ellabay.idealistatestplatform.com/encounter-ellabay/?sspid=1>) but failed to disclose this information to any assessing authority including the Commonwealth government.

The site is prime habitat of the endangered southern cassowary (*Casuarius casuarius johnsonii*) with a cassowary population density possibly exceeding Mission Beach. The proposed development would involve widening of the entry road which traverses World Heritage listed rainforest. The development would result in a high volume of traffic with increased speed limits through this important cassowary habitat, making cassowary fatalities inevitable. Compliance of traffic speed would be almost impossible to enforce.

The proposed extensive cassowary fencing and associated escape gates are untested on wild cassowaries and we have serious concerns that they are likely to jeopardise the ability of cassowaries to escape from predators, and may cause separation of chicks from adult birds (as young will be able to fit under the fence). Given that this proposed fencing/escape gate "solution" is untested on wild animals, the proponent would essentially be using an endangered species as a guinea pig, posing grave and unnecessary risks to the health of the local cassowary population. The proponent has offered no alternative road protection alternatives for the southern cassowary if the above-mentioned experimental measures fail.

The site contains and is adjacent to areas of the EPBC listed critically endangered ecological community known as Littoral Rainforest and Coastal Vine Thickets of Eastern Australia. Fencing of the access road would deny cassowary access and subsequent important seed dispersal between the mosaic of ecosystems including LRCVT, altering and impacting on the health of the high biodiversity coastal locality.

The beach adjacent to the development is a known nesting site for the EPBC listed vulnerable green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) and potentially other EPBC listed endangered and vulnerable marine turtle species. The proposed development would result in an influx of people using the beach, which would inevitably disrupt these important nesting areas and negatively affect the breeding success of these species.

Contact:

Anna McGuire

0434 955 424 or 4032 1746