

Local Sustainability of Urban Biodiversity through Environmental Nodes - An issue of Social and Environmental Responsibility.

A Case Study



Beeliar Regional Park North Lake

**A focus paper providing a community's social and environmental
perspective on road construction for freight planning**

**Paper presented on behalf of The North Lake Residents Association
Inc. Action Committee by:**

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Introduction

This paper provides a ‘Case Study’ of an Urban Environmental Node constituted of bushland and wetland. Integrity of the area has been maintained in a great part because of the Road Reserve bushland dissecting it. Fortuitously this land, which was set aside for future roadways, is now understood to be integral to the sustainability of a unique ecosystem.

Background

Many people are filled with awe and respect when they view the Australianness of such places as the Beeliiar Wetlands. This is partly because its simplicity suggests there is so much more to it than meets the eye. Its complexities, its flora and fauna, its aesthetic qualities, its links with indigenous culture and its value as public amenity for physical and psychological recreation are only just beginning to be understood.

The ‘bounded system’ of North Lake, Roe Swamp, Bibra Lake and Horse Paddock swamp contains Road Reserve bushland, which is considered to be highly significant to the overall integrity of the Beeliiar Regional Park. This area is currently under threat from a proposed extension of the Roe Highway stage 8.

Local communities have now been campaigning against the demise of the overall area for over twenty years. In October 1984, against the wishes of the community, the wetland area was cut through and backfilled to construct Farrington Road. Ever since, it has been embroiled in controversy. The construction of Farrington Road violated a System Six recommendation (M93.3) that the road should not be built due to its potential to negatively impact North Lake and the Wetlands (DCE, 1983). Today Farrington Road would be unacceptable to the EPA, as it encroaches within 25 metres of the high water mark of North Lake. Farrington Road is a memorial to inadequate planning processes, and to the failure of government and its agencies to heed sensible community concern. It is also an example of that unsustainable approach to road planning which results in minor benefit for transport at major cost to the environment and to the social amenity.

In July 2001 the North Lake Residents Association Inc (NLRA) published a position paper opposing the proposed Roe Highway extension through the Beeliiar Regional Park. That report was designed as a community resource canvassing a large number of aspects under the following two headings:

- A transport planning argument on why not to build the proposed highway.
- Community issues and options

Conclusions drawn from the *NLRA Position Paper* (2001) are complementary with the recommendation from a number of independent studies reported in the late nineteen eighties. At that time, on the basis of social responsibility and the environmental significance of the area, a ‘**No Highway Option**’ was recommended.

This area of urban wetland/bushland is to the local community, an important local ecosystem. As a regional environmental node, it is integral to a wider corridor of parkland.

Defining the Issues:

A case study example

'Case Study' typically involves studying an individual or specific unit. The unit or 'bounded system' would either be very representative or extremely atypical. Such a study seeks to list attributes, indicate the numerous and rich contextual variables and illuminate phenomena for more intensive investigation. In exploring various phenomena, insights and generalisations about the wider system emerge.

Although the Beeliiar Wetlands per se could make a valuable case study in its own right, the discussion here is directed towards evidence of community understanding of the significance of the study area, and of community viewpoint regarding the impact of the proposed Roe Highway.

Evidence is gleaned from video archival records, data collected from document analysis, community and public meetings and rallies, personal interviews and a recent survey of the local community. The survey was carried out to obtain triangulation within the process of data analysis.

Qualities which go to make the area under discussion unique, are well documented. A great deal has been written and verified from a range of perspectives to suggest that this area has aesthetic, historic, scientific and social significance for the community, as well as being of special value for future generations (Bush Forever, 2000; National Estate Register; NLRA Report 2001).

Environmental Nodes have always been here.

Unlike transport nodes, the landscape of Australia has always possessed environmental nodes. Environmental nodes were identified by indigenous Australians long before European settlement, as places worthy of respect for what they offered in terms of shelter, food, and as places for spiritual rekindling.

European settlers were also quick to identify Environmental Nodes. These were often places of great natural beauty. In general, our wetlands were not part of that early process of environmental auditing. Urban wetland areas were to a great part, either filled or reconstructed into miniature English Hyde Park gardens, with ponds, lawns and statues. By 1984 approximately 80% of wetland areas had been either destroyed by landfill or polluted through drainage schemes. The land over an extended period of time had become something to be conquered.

In general there is little in the way of naturally vegetated Environmental Nodes surviving in Australian cities today. What there is on the Perth Coastal Plain has been documented, but remains dependent upon a range of tenuous variables for its conservation.

Today the contribution made by wetland ecosystems to the community, is much better appreciated. The *Annual Report of the EPA* provides considerable evidence that much is known of their value, and that environmental criteria for assessing wetland sites are now much more rigorous. There is even greater evidence of the

current value placed on our wetlands, in documents such as *Bush Forever* (2000) and *The Wetlands Conservation Policy for Western Australia* (1997). We return later to discuss the significance that these documents hold for government agencies in relation to planning.

A Problem of Planning or a Problem for Planners?

As a society, we build museums to house artefacts for the community to view and admire, we pay for pieces of sculpture that we value as being beautiful, but rarely in our culture do we ask, 'How much is natural beauty worth?' 'Is biodiversity worthy of our admiration and stewardship?' 'When are we prepared to protect what made us, and makes us, uniquely human?'

At the time of the formation of the Stevenson Plan, the Wetland areas were neither understood nor valued. The above questions were never addressed.

Location of Environmental Nodes within the MRS have, in many cases, been fortuitous. Ironically, although environmental nodes have not been deliberately placed into the MRS, the fact that the MRS has been placed over the environment has fortunately allowed remnant bushland areas to survive.

In 2001 therefore, the issue becomes one of placing the environment *central* to the planning process. MRS planning must be subjected to stringent and rigorous environmental assessment processes, so as to redress the imbalance. Surviving environmental nodes, including those documented and stated in *Bush Forever* (2000), must be considered not merely as a 'restraint to planning' but in fact as 'green spots' for planners to work around. Since community environmental standards have moved forward, it is no longer sufficient to merely draw an arching line on a map, and then legitimate gross vandalism of the environment through so called Town Planning legislation.

A Community View of the way Forward

- **Language hegemony or a shared language?**

In modern corporate language when discussing planning issues, the expression is always the triple bottom line '*economic, social and environmental*'. The term was coined around the notion of 'sustainability', to conceptualise performance against economic, social and environmental parameters. Accordingly this '*focuses corporations not just on the economic value they add, but also on the environmental and social value they add – and destroy*' (Dunn, 1998).

In more recent times the environment has gained increased notoriety due to the effects of salinity, global warming, and pollution. Today, an increasing number in the community are conscious of the environmental imperative. Moreover, the centrality of environmental sustainability is appreciated more now, than at any other time in the history of Australia.

Whether that is the case in the area of urban planning is questionable. Within the discourse of transport planning, the language used signifies cultural differences and the hegemony of the economic imperative. Environmental and social issues do not appear to be given core consideration, within a culture focused primarily on the economic dimension, at the expense of the natural environment.

The need to change the culture of indifference to community and environmental values, is obvious in the language used. To talk of '*Minimising*' the social and environmental impacts from transport, portrays a completely indifferent cultural perspective. The assumption it makes is that it is possible to *minimise* environmental impact!

Cultural differences are seen here in the very nature of the argument. For one group, the destruction of significant places is considered acceptable because they believe it is possible to reconstruct a sanitised 'new' environment. Given that MRWA implements road planning, it seems that impediments created by environmental issues, might well be overcome by unhitching environmental responsibility from the triple bottom line. This can be effected by redefining the term 'environment' to mean '*a place to be reconstituted*'. Roadwork 'artistry' is offered to placate the removal of natural habitat, regardless of the severity of the dislocation it causes. '*Remedial work*' is the term used in this context for reconstituting the environment. The language shows no understanding that the impact of highway development is in fact, irreversible!

Within a context where social and environmental responsibility is the bottom line, it is no longer acceptable to use euphemisms such as '*minimising*' when talking of the destruction of urban remnant bushland. Moreover, describing significant environmental nodes as 'hot spots' is typical of the language of this cultural approach. Within a Review of Freight Networking, it would be more sensitive to the triple bottom line, if proposed road development is acknowledged for what it is - A threat to significant environmental nodes - to 'Green Spots'.

The Industry of planning, design and construction must become environmentally and socially responsible in order to earn its place in the broader community. By exhibiting cultural sensitivity and by negotiating with the community, the Planning Industry could be on the path to dialogue with those in our communities who are most affected.

- ***Valuing Ecosystems***

The EPA has reported that a key issue faced through its assessment process is 'the magnitude of the project, relative to the significance of the potential impacts on a local and regional scale' (EPA Annual Report 2000:7).

What is also revealed in that report is the fact that:

" ... few or no criteria for minimum habitat requirements are generally supplied for assessment on impacts on fauna. This is so even though considerable information may be available ... Impacts of proposals on system dynamics such as plant/animal interaction are almost never considered" (EPA Annual Report 2000:7).

The way forward with regard to the issues and concerns held by our community, is that a process be put in place, or if necessary the Act be amended, whereby the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) :

- Improves the quality and quantity of information required for environmental assessments.
- Includes assessments which are not merely impact oriented. That is, a definitional change could be made. The language and function of the

approach to assessment would alter. Terminology would become more inclusive and equitable.

Currently a 'proponent' is often in fact, an *opponent* of an ecosystem, whilst also being a proponent of environmental impact. For the term 'proponent' to become more inclusive, there has to be clarification of the nature of action available to the community. Either government or community agencies could then pro-actively request the EPA to conduct terrestrial biological and aesthetic surveys.

- Acknowledges a major policy shift is needed to redress the current imbalance between - advocating for environmental conservation *and* proposing environmental impact.
- Acknowledges that through the right of proponentship, significant Bushplan areas (such as MRS Road Reserves) could be vested in the community. For example, Road Reserve land through the Beeliiar Regional Park could, within a process of community proponentship, be advocated as integral to the lakes' ecosystem and significant for future generations.
- Reviews progress in the implementation of *The Wetlands Conservation Policy for Western Australia* with specific reference to the progress made by government agencies responsible for the actioning of objectives 1.1 through 1.21. This set of policy objectives is laudable, in that they speak directly "*to preventing the further loss or degradation of valuable wetlands and wetland types, and to promoting wetland conservation, creation and restoration*" (*The Wetlands Conservation Policy For Western Australia*, 1997:10).

• ***Environmental and Social Responsibility.***

Professor David Birch in an article titled '*Still waiting for corporate citizenship as a business basic*' (2001) highlights the need for modern corporations to acknowledge the place of environmental and social responsibility, within their efforts to renew their corporation.

In most cases, community stakeholders are not seen as being significant to the core business of most corporations. There is little evidence of social responsibility being mainstreamed with environmental issues in corporate culture. Modern government agencies are perceived as modelling themselves on such corporations, and are often viewed within the community as lacking environmental and social responsibility. This is evidenced by the comments made in a recent *Community Survey* (2001), where respondents were asked whether they agreed with the following statement:

The MRWA know what's best for the community?

(Rating Scale: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, Don't Know)

[Ninety-four percent of the of 399 community members who responded to the Survey, disagreed with the above statement. Only five (1%) respondents agreed.]

Respondents were also given opportunity to make written comments if they wished.

A Sample of Written Comments:

Question 13: <i>The MRWA know what's best for the community?</i>	
Resp. No.	Written Comments
7	(SD) How does a Government department who does not understand the environment, know about community!!
8	(SD) I don't believe they adequately consult the community - how can they know what's best.
29	(SD) They probably know of the monetary gains for themselves. Seems like they have lost focus of environmental focus.

Such comments are unsurprising for a range of reasons. They reflect the community's past experience with government planning and construction agencies. The community perceives MRWA's consultation process as lacking social responsibility necessary for negotiated outcomes. For example, an MRWA 'Newsletter' informing the community of planned highway construction, exhibited little evidence of a socially responsible approach.

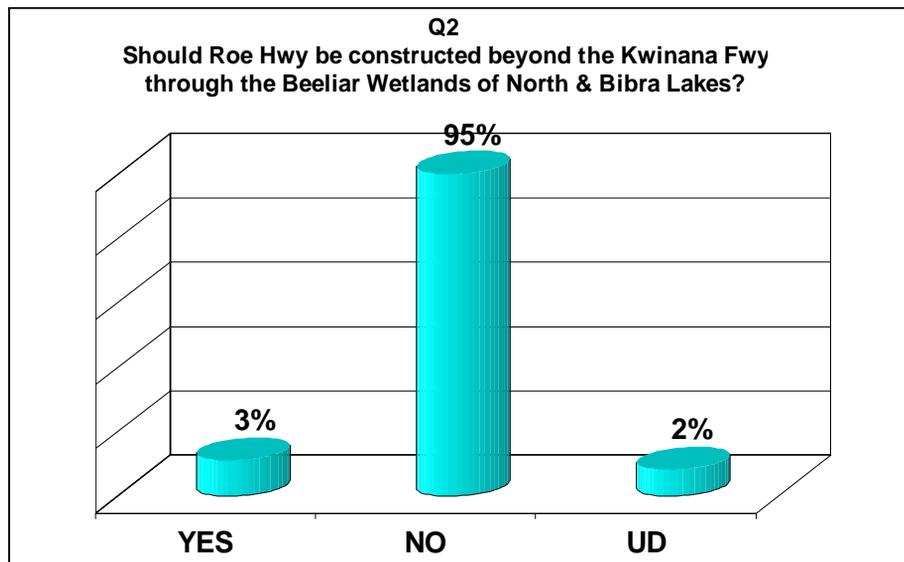
The case study community noted that the proponents of highway construction, appeared to lack sensitivity to the qualities of the local environment, and were ignoring significant recommendations emanating from earlier MRWA and commissioned independent studies.

- ***Consideration of Local needs and wishes***

The case study community expressed a range of understandings about local needs and wishes through survey responses and comments. Detailed within the *Community Survey Report 2001* are a wide range of viewpoints relating to concern for the local environment. Of major concern is the proposed destruction of corridor bushland by the proposed Roe Highway extension (stage 8) through the Beelihar Regional Park and Wetlands.

Opposition to the Roe Highway proposal is depicted here graphically:

Graph of the results of Survey Question 2



(n=399)

Other aspects relevant to the concerns of the case study community include:

- **Community Reference Groups**

Community Reference Groups need to be part of the planning process. Currently the Act requires a 'trigger' (such as an application by MRWA to use an area for road construction) before the EPA responds. In the case of Farrington Road, this 'trigger' approach did not protect significant wetlands. Although bushland has been preserved due to its Road Reserve status, being under Road Reserve status can also prove detrimental to remnant bushland because:

- the bushland is deemed lost, it is not protected and therefore open to vandalism;
- it is not revegetated and not given positive value;
- it is removed from the community and denied positive community support;
- it is given the status of being nonexistent whilst it is tied to the MRS.

- **Coordination**

Coordination is needed of those government agencies responsible for the implementation of the WA Government's Wetlands Policy. This involves authenticating MOU's across agencies, monitoring progress, and providing transparent links between departments, so as to accomplish current policy and outcomes. Cost benefits and accountability within and between agencies (ie EPA, DEP, CALM, WRC, Local Government, Planning, Transport and MRWA) is essential, to achieve policy objectives.

- ***Cultural change***

The links between environmental, social, and economic bottom lines need to be put in place so that they connect and inform. As an example, the Wetlands Conservation Policy of W.A. provides the language, the objectives, indicators and measures as well as signifying the agencies responsible for cooperative and coordinated implementation and monitoring. As good as much of this policy is, without a change of culture, policy can remain merely aspirational.

- ***Proponentship***

Community power of Proponentship in relation to the environment is also needed. The case study community believes it is ready to have the EPA advise the Minister to remove the Roe Highway Road Reserve from the MRS. The case study community is capable and positioned, to provide full and adequate data to meet the EPA assessment criteria. These data establish the significance of these Road Reserve areas for the integrity of the Beeliar Wetlands.

- ***Legislation***

Given that the responsibility of environmental advocacy is often cast upon the community, legislation is needed to allow the community to be proponents to the EPA, and thus initiate conservation of wetlands and bushplan areas locked into road reserve status.

References:

Birch, D. *Still waiting for the corporate citizenship as a business basic*. In: Leadership: Committing to the triple bottom line. July 2001:8-10

Dunn, J. *Are our corporations serious about the triple bottom line?* In: Leadership: Committing to the triple bottom line. July 2001:4-7

North Lake Residents Association Inc Action Committee (2001) *Opposition to Proposed Roe highway: Stage 8 Through the Beeliar Regional Park*. Position Paper . July

North Lake Residents Association Inc Action Committee (2001). *Community Survey Report*. October.

Acronyms

CALM	Conservation and Land management.
DEP	Department of Environmental Protection.
EPA	Environmental Protection Authority.
MRWA	Main Roads Western Australia.
MOUs	Memorandum of understandings.
WRC	Water and Rivers Commission.