

CRUNCH TIME FOR THE KIMBERLEY

On 5 August 2009, Josh Coates, Kimberley Campaigner with The Wilderness Society (TWS) WA, spoke to the Kimberley Society. His PowerPoint presentation was titled: "Crunch time for the Kimberley: Australia's great northern wilderness on the edge".

Josh began by providing background on TWS, which formed in 1976, born from leading the Franklin River campaign. It is now one of Australia's leading non-government conservation organisations. With campaign centres in all states, the organisation runs campaigns across Australia. It also has an international focus on forests and climate change.

TWS's organisational purpose is 'to protect, promote and restore wilderness and natural processes across Australia for the survival and ongoing evolution of life on Earth'. As its web site states, it values passion for its purpose; the power of people to make change; organisational independence and integrity; compassion in dealing with its staff and others; and a commitment to success in protecting the environment.

As a grass roots organization serving tens of thousands of members, TWS engages those people in environment protection campaigns. In describing its strong history of success, Josh listed protection of Tasmanian old growth forest, Victoria's woodlands, NSW forests, halting broadscale Queensland land clearing and protecting rivers, protecting Kakadu and the Daly River (NT), and successful South Australian outback wilderness campaigns. The organisation does not accept government or industry funding for its advocacy work. When it needs to speak out for the environment it does so without fear or prejudice.

Josh explained that TWS is driven by its WildCountry vision, which asks the question: what does nature need to survive and thrive in Australia? To answer this question it utilises the best science available, including facilitating the WildCountry science council, which is made up of many of the preeminent conservation scientists working in Australia and the world. The WildCountry vision for Australia is continental in scale, recognizing the importance of connectivity ('defragmenting' landscapes in tenure and management), continuity (of evolution and culture), collaboration and compatibility (including economic development).

TWS always seeks to work with Traditional Owners toward common goals of protecting of environmental and cultural values. Acknowledging the role of people in wilderness environments and the need for appropriate land and sea management, it recognises the important role of traditional land managers and it encourages Indigenous ranger groups.

The WA Campaign Centre is in Lotteries House, West Perth, and TWS WA currently employs eight staff on a range of campaigns. Achievements in WA include playing a leading role in securing protection for Ningaloo reef with its "Save Ningaloo" campaign and for over 250,000 hectares of old growth forest in the south west.

Its key campaign areas in WA are the Kimberley, the Great Western Woodlands (the biggest temperate woodland left on Earth), and protecting

WA's amazing marine environment, where it seeks a state-wide marine conservation plan including marine parks and no-take sanctuaries.

The Wilderness Society and the Kimberley

TWS has been intermittently active in the Kimberley since 1989, working with local community, scientists, Traditional Owners and government towards regional conservation planning. The Kimberley is currently a TWS WA and TWS national campaign priority area.

Josh sees an exciting time ahead with TWS well placed to ensure some amazing outcomes for WA's unique, beautiful, and highly valuable natural areas. He says, "The political times are going to be tough but with enough support and resources we can do it!"

The Kimberley – values, threats and solutions

As we know, the Kimberley has the longest wilderness coastline in Australia... and one of the longest in the world. It is also, Josh explained, home to one of the world's vastest, intact tropical savannah ecosystems. Rich also in Indigenous cultural values the Kimberley is a unique global asset.

The presentation utilised maps to highlight the global significance of the Kimberley as one of the least human-impacted coastal environments in the world. It also showed that the region is important in terms of global tropical savannah health and national woodland and river health.

Josh showed images of the incredible landscapes and wildlife of the Kimberley, including the group IV population of humpback whales, the largest population in the world. This population's recovery from whaling is probably due in a large part to the currently un-spoilt nature of their calving, breeding and feeding home base in the Kimberley.

The importance, wonder and natural beauty of the Kimberley is well established, and of course well understood by Kimberley society members. Yet, Josh pointed out, the region currently faces an unprecedented level of threat. TWS sees the pervasive threats of uncontrolled wildfires, feral animals, weeds, invasive species (including the cane toad) and overgrazing now being joined by the emerging threats of large scale industrial development. There are proposals for water extraction / damming of rivers for broad scale irrigated agriculture; uranium and coal mining; and the LNG (gas) processing industrial hub proposed for James Price Point 50km north of Broome.

Decisions will be made in the coming few months and years that will decide the future of the region – it truly is crunch time for the Kimberley.

Josh also spoke of the importance of protected areas in the Kimberley, pointing out that, in terms of terrestrial conservation, less than 7% of the Kimberley terrestrial area is protected in any form of reserve, and that 0% of the coastal marine waters are protected – an unacceptable situation.

James Price Point, LNG processing and the 'thin edge of the wedge'

The presentation then focused briefly on the values of the James Price Point area and the threat posed by the proposed LNG development, both to the area

and the broader Kimberley. Some of the marine values include extensive sponge gardens (filter feeding communities), sea grasses, corals, an acknowledged fish aggregation area (likely to be a fish breeding area), and a high density humpback whale migration area. The terrestrial values directly at risk include dwarf pindan woodland and monsoonal vine thicket communities.

TWS sees this proposed LNG development as the 'thin edge of the wedge' for the Kimberley. The large port facility proposed and the access to a cheap fossil fuel power source has the potential to facilitate environmentally damaging activities that include strip mining for bauxite in the Mitchell plateau / north Kimberley region, uranium and coal mining, and 'downstream' industries such as explosives and fertilizer factories.

TWS views the proposed port facility as a major environmental concern. It would require extensive blasting and ongoing dredging (impacting on seagrass, sponge gardens and corals); the construction of a large jetty; the building of a huge (5-7km) breakwater, altering the oceanography of the region; and increased boat traffic with the associated risk of oil spills, boat strike and marine pests. Other impacts would include land clearing, fresh water use (altering water tables or injecting highly saline outfalls to local waters), pollution in the form of toxic gasses and particulates and massive greenhouse gas emissions. Culture (including cutting an Indigenous song line) would be affected, and the character of Broome and the Dampier peninsula would change – impacting on local tourism and recreation and the broader Kimberley tourism 'brand'.

Josh explained that the LNG hub in the Kimberley is not a 'done deal' as portrayed by the WA premier and certain media outlets. Traditional Owners have not made a final decision on allowing the development and, while an 'in principle' agreement has been made, it does not have unanimous support. Environmental approvals are still required. The Joint Venture partners have not signed off on the Kimberley option and seem to be leaning toward more environmentally and economically attractive alternatives to a 'greenfields' development on the Kimberley coast. Alternative processing options include processing in the Pilbara at 'brownfields' sites with established industrial infrastructure and floating LNG production.

An Alternative vision for the Kimberley

TWS has an alternative vision for the Kimberley. This vision has been articulated in its extensive submission to the State Government's Kimberley science and conservation strategy, developed cooperatively with a number of other conservation groups, and available for download on the TWS website.

This alternative vision includes:

- A comprehensive conservation and compatible development plan for the Kimberley, ruling out incompatible industry and encouraging conservation compatible development with investment in sustainable industry and jobs
- Legal protection for the Kimberley's rivers

- More protected areas, and improved off reserve management as part of the overall planning approach – replacing the current ad hoc approach to planning and management in the Kimberley
- No new large scale polluting industry

Crunch time

Timelines are pressing, with various government processes underway and due for completion in 2010. The Federal Government's marine planning/parks process (for Commonwealth waters more than three nautical miles from shore) is well underway and will be completed next year. In January 2010 the assessment report for the LNG hub is scheduled to go out for public comment. Mid 2010 is the proposed timing for LNG development approvals, coinciding with the outcomes of the Commonwealth strategic assessment of the Kimberley's natural and cultural values, a process which will provide recommendations regarding national heritage listing for the Kimberley's natural and cultural landscape. TWS argues that this is a back to front process. It is also mindful that the timelines and outcomes of the State Government's Kimberley science and conservation strategy process are uncertain. Will the process deliver a comprehensive conservation and compatible development strategy, as recommended by environment groups, or will it merely deliver a couple of public relations exercise 'gas hub offset' parks?

Concluding remarks

Josh completed his presentation by summarizing and recapping on the Wilderness Society's track record of action and commitment, reflecting on:

- A 20 year history working in northern Australia
- Collaborations with groups such as the Conservation Council, Save The Kimberley, and Environs Kimberley
- Working with Traditional Owners
- The WildCountry Science Council work
- Lobbying, State and Commonwealth
- Involving the public in decisions around the Kimberley

He then thanked the Society for the invitation and opportunity to speak to such a knowledgeable and engaged audience and encouraged members to learn more by visiting www.wilderness.org.au/kimberley.

Editor's Note: On 13 November, conservationists welcomed the news that the Norwegian-owned alumina company Norsk-Hydro had relinquished its Mitchell Plateau mining leases, citing a shortage of information about environmental values as the reason. Some 5,500sqkm may now be safe from strip-mining for bauxite. A news report on the relinquishment mentioned Josh Coates congratulating the company and urging other companies to follow suit. November also brought fresh news of Traditional Owners protesting against the government's stated intention of using land at James Price Point for a port. A second new port is also being mooted, at Point Torment near Derby, where, at intervals since 1883, successive governments have shown interest in establishing a deep water port. That location is seen as having potential to woo Inpex back to Western Australia but, at present, all the government appears to be doing is offering to support Inpex in the building of a port, e.g. by providing land and an access road.