Omar, Linda

Subject: FW: submission to standing committee on Environment and Public affairs
Attachments: Grey petition.docx; selwood & may.pdf

From:
Sent: Saturday, 10 July 2010 11:40 AM
To: Omar, Linda
Subject: submission to standing committee on Environment and Public affairs

Dear Linda,

Here is my submission to the Committee looking into the settlements at Grey and Wedge. I understand that the deadline is near, but being overseas and not fully conversant with procedures, I hope that my submission is still acceptable (see below and attached) and that it is in an appropriate format:

I have been a frequent visitor to Western Australia for the past 45 years, having taken my Ph.D. in Geography at the University of Western Australia in the late 1960s. Since then I have taken several research sabbaticals there as well as additional extended sojourns for research and pleasure. During that time my research work has included a number of studies of the development of tourism in the state as well as studies in the evolution and characteristics of holiday communities and their clientele in the south-western region stretching from Esperance up to the Exmouth Gulf. Some of this research has been sponsored by the WA Planning Commission, and has been published in several academic books and international journals. I have collaborated with colleagues at UWA, Curtin and Murdoch in much of this work. Recently, I was asked to collaborate with Jim Macbeth, Head of Tourism at Murdoch University, in the 'Tourism' entry in the Encyclopedia of Western Australian History.

Over the years, I have watched with growing concern the gradual erosion of coastal holidaymaking facilities for the informal domestic vacationer and the declining opportunities for those who have a desire to 'get away from it all' to enjoy a more rudimentary lifestyle than offered by conventional suburban-style second homes, motels and resorts. These latter developments, much favoured by the Tourism Commission and by some local authorities for their commercial potential, are progressively usurping the traditional holiday-making localities that have many families have enjoyed over several generations. As I have pointed out in some of my earlier studies, these localities not only have considerable historical social value, but their distinctive physical building and informal layouts create landscapes that are unique. They are magnificent examples of vernacular architecture, with considerable heritage value as symbols of the average working class Australian - the 'Aussie Battler'. They portray the simple, self-sufficient lifestyle reminiscent of the past - a past so ardently spelled out by Western Australia's most gifted writer, Tim Winton. The fact that at Wedge and Grey, examples of such a lifestyle continue to exist despite the encroachment of 'progress' attests to the strength of these values. Some authorities elsewhere in Australia and in the West as well (Manjimup's Windy Harbour; Cockburn's Naval Base), have recognized the intrinsic and heritage values of similar settlements and have successfully managed to retain their essential qualities through carefully conceived planning.

I am convinced that with appropriate heritage designation, development restrictions and sympathetic management planning, the communities of Wedge and Grey can continue to function as traditional, informal style holiday venues and I support their residents in their efforts to retain a lifestyle that many of them so earnestly crave. In a paper published in 2001 (see attached), I made the case for the retention of the essential characteristics of the squatter settlement at Grey, recognizing its heritage value and comparing it what else was being developed along the Central Coast. More recent visits to the region have made me even more strongly convinced that current plans for the region in pursuit of international tourism, commercial development and over-regulation, do a disservice to the State and to its people.

John Selwood, Senior Scholar,
Research Note: Resolving Contested Notions of Tourism Sustainability on Western Australia’s ‘Turquoise Coast’: The Squatter Settlements

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Squatter’s shacks, or informal holiday homes, have been a feature of sections of Western Australia’s coastline for many years. However, population growth and improved accessibility have brought pressure on government to deal with the problems they present. This paper outlines the procedures being used to address the squatter situation, while also suggesting that many of the characteristics of the squatter communities might be used to advantage in the development of new holiday-based settlements.

Introduction  

It has now been a decade or so since ‘sustainability’ became part of the tourism lexicon. However, what constitutes sustainability has been hotly debated and interpretations of the term have varied widely. To some, sustainability has meant that change is acceptable, perhaps even necessary, whereas others argue protection should take the highest priority (e.g. Budowski, 1976; Hall, 1994; Wahab & Pigram, 1997; Mowforth & Munt, 1998). Questions also arise as to what exactly is to be sustained, for what purpose, and for whom. These questions are at the core of policy issues focusing on the squatter settlements on Western Australia’s Central Coast, the coastal zone situated between Perth and Geraldton to the north, and recently designated as the ‘Turquoise Coast’ (Figure 1).

Until relatively recently, this section of Western Australia’s coast was a largely overlooked, almost uninhabited stretch of shoreline, inaccessible for most of its length to all but 4WD vehicles and small vessels. A limited number of locations provided anchorage for commercial fishing boats, recreational fishing, and rudimentary camping spots for local holidaymakers. For the most part, vacationers from Perth, the only metropolitan area within a thousand miles, headed south to the cooler, more scenic beaches and resorts of the southwest corner of the state. However, the continued rapid growth of Perth’s population, growing interstate tourism, and escalation of international tourist traffic to Western Australia, have resulted in increasing pressures to upgrade facilities offered along the Central Coast. To many of the traditional visitors this is interpreted as a tragic end to an era of relaxed, low-key holidaymaking and the destruction of a valuable heritage. To others, change is necessary to prevent further damage to the natural
landscape and to provide the necessary infrastructure and services to permit increases in visitation in a controlled manner that will accommodate growth within a sustainable environment. The debate between the contesting parties continues; meanwhile, the pressures for both permanent residential development and tourism attractions reach a higher pitch. The renaming of the coastal strip as the ‘Turquoise Coast’ is symbolic of this transition.

Coastal Management in Australia

Over the past several years, all regions of Australia have become increasingly involved in the development of comprehensive schemes of coastal management. Part of this initiative has come from the Commonwealth level (Australia, Parliament, 1980, 1991: Resource Assessment Commission, 1993; Department of Environment, Sport and Territories, 1995), while state governments have also been developing their own programmes. This paper deals with the policies and practices specifically dealing with holidaymakers’ squatter settlements that have, until recently, been a relatively overlooked feature of Australia’s coasts. Squatting is an established practice along many sections of the coast. Although many of their cabins or shacks have been removed, or their status changed, many coastal squatters are still in place, particularly along the shores of Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia. This paper focuses on the central portion of the Western Australia coastline, much of which is now accessible to day-trippers from Perth, the state capital and home to more than a million people.
Western Australia is fairly well advanced in the development of strategic plans for its coasts (Donaldson, et al., 1995). The Central Coast has been under close study for a decade or so, and general management criteria and guidelines have been established for the area (Selwood, 1991; State Planning Commission, 1994; Western Australian Planning Commission, 1996). These call for detailed coastal management plans to be prepared by local (shire) governments which, after their approval by state planning authorities, would be administered at the local level. State and Commonwealth authorities also manage Crown lands that remain under their jurisdiction. Thus, for example, the Commonwealth is responsible for Defence Department lands, while the state’s Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) looks after parks and other state reserves. No accommodation is to be made for squatters. In fact, in Western Australia there is now an active policy of removing squatters and eradicating their settlements.

Holiday coastal squatting has had a relatively long history, becoming increasingly popular after World War II, as shoreline near to major centres was alienated and people sought more remote locations that were made more accessible by 4WD vehicles. Thus, many of Western Australia’s squatter communities originated in the interwar period when farmers pushed tracks across country to the coast, where they established holiday and fishing camps at sheltered spots on the shoreline. These temporary camps became more permanent in the 1950s as commercial fishermen (especially rock lobstermen) set up operations closer to their fishing grounds. The most recent expansion has seen the invasion of these settlements by urbanites seeking an alternate lifestyle to the conventional tourist or holiday resort experience. Despite the lack of infrastructure, a great many of the ‘shacks’ are well appointed, boasting internal plumbing using collected rainwater, and electrical appliances powered by portable generators (Figure 2).
However, as with many other tourist developments, the growth of the squatter settlements has sown the seeds of their destruction. In earlier years, the state government upgraded some of the settlements to townsite status, releasing land as freehold or on leasehold (Selwood et al., 1995). That policy has been discontinued, and after several isolated and desultory efforts to get rid of the squatters on the Central Coast, the state government in the late 1980s finally adopted an effective strategy for their removal (Department of Land Administration (DOLA), 1965–91).

Briefly, this strategy, endorsed by the more southerly local shires, called for the squatters to be given a six-year lease on their property at an annual cost of $600.00, after which they were required to remove their shacks and give up the land to the authorities. The monies received from the lessees were to be spent in rehabilitating areas where the shacks had been located and in developing holiday tourism and other facilities along the coast. To date, several of the former settlements have been cleared away, some rehabilitation has occurred, and there has been a limited amount of new development such as the installation of parking lots and toilet blocks. However, leases in the two largest settlements, the communities of Wedge Point and Grey (Figure 1), were to expire in the near future. Many of the squatters in these two communities have been battling to hold on to their shacks and to retain the lifestyle that they allow. The remainder of the paper will deal with these recent developments and the differing interpretations of ‘heritage’ and ‘sustainability’ that they represent.

The State’s Position

The state’s position is that the squatter settlements are a blot on the landscape with the squatters being an arrogant group of ‘freeloaders’ who have been monopolising sections of prime coastal land, contributing to the rapid degradation of the delicate dunal foreshores, and living in unsafe, insanitary conditions. Reports produced by the state Planning Commission and the Department of Land Administration (DOLA, 1965–91) focus on these aspects of the squatter communities, condemning the practice out of hand, highlighting the environmental damage done to the landscape, and insisting that the squatters are the culprits. Expressing concern for the safety of the squatters and for the delicate and dynamic state of the coastline, the state’s management policy has been to remove the offending communities and in their stead to identify specific locations along the coast which are appropriate for various uses, designating them for townsite development, caravan parks, picnic areas and the like. These plans for the accommodation of tourists follow recommendations of the Western Australian Tourist Commission (WATC, 1990). The state’s concept of ‘sustainability’, then, has been to confine and channel the population (local resident or tourist) into specified zones where appropriate facilities, services and infrastructure have been provided according to conventionally held levels of quality and sustainability. Generally, this has meant that close to suburban standards of development have been applied. Existing coastal townsites reflect these standards. Caravan parks, picnic areas and interpretive sites are also developed largely according to standardised materials and designs featuring brick, asphalt, grass lawns, and formal street plans (Figures 3 and 4) in contrast to the informal
layouts of the squatter settlements (Figure 5). Until very recently, virtually no recognition has been given to the positive attributes of the squatter settlements, and almost none to their potential heritage value (Hardy & Ward, 1984; Selwood, 1991). In token recognition of their place in the history of the coast, a photographic survey of the shacks has been compiled, with the story of the settlements to be displayed on interpretive boards at selected sites along the coast (Figure 6).
The Squatters' Perspectives

The squatters who remain are divided in their opinions as to their future on the Turquoise Coast (Revitt, 1997). Many are fatalistic, conceding that their shacks have served their term. Numbers of squatters have already abandoned their shacks and others are ignoring the requirement that they pay the annual lease for their site. Some of the abandoned shacks have been cannibalised for materials and CALM has removed many of them, although, as yet, they have not done as threatened in summarily removing occupied but unleased shacks and charging the costs to owners. The prevailing attitude among the fatalists appears to be that they will 'consume' what time and squatting lifestyle is left to them without any commitment to the future or to the community. Members of this group have often chosen to withdraw from membership and participation in the community progress (protection) association's activities in maintaining the settlements and their efforts to preserve them.

At the other end of the spectrum are the committed enthusiasts of the alternative lifestyle provided by the squatter communities. Community leaders at Wedge Point and Grey have continued their campaign to allow the settlements to remain in existence with relatively little change in their present state (Grey Community Association, 1997). This is particularly evident at Grey, a smaller, more close knit community containing a higher proportion of professional people, many of them with families, and a considerable degree of sensitivity for the environment. Their campaign highlights the numbers of people (up to 6000 at Wedge Point and 4000 at Grey, it is claimed) who, through the course of the year, enjoy the informal, basic lifestyle, the absence of commercialism, the affinity with the natural environment, and the communal atmosphere in the settlements. They insist that theirs is a legitimate form of holidaymaking that has gone on for decades, that is 'environmentally friendly', and that should be given legal recog-
nition. They point to the 'sustainable' low maintenance costs, self-sufficiency, and necessarily conservation-oriented attitudes prevalent in the settlements, along with the increasingly important environmental educative role played by the squatters. They are also keenly aware of their potential interest to outside tourists and the heritage value of the settlements.

The authors of this paper accept some responsibility for these developments. Some years ago we produced a report for the state Department of Land Administration, much of which was subsequently published and circulated in the squatter communities (Selwood, 1991; May & Selwood, 1992). Questioning the state policy calling for the complete eradication of the squatter settlements, we suggested that they contained a number of elements that were very attractive and which could be incorporated into future management plans to considerable advantage. The narrow, winding pathways and informal layout of the shacks are aesthetically pleasing and they consume land less extravagantly than the streets.
and lots in conventional townsites. The settlements also retain much of the natural vegetation. They use resources like water, building materials and power very conservatively, making construction and maintenance costs very inexpensive. Furthermore, they represent a truly vernacular style of development that does indeed have considerable heritage value. As such, they offer a legitimate and genuinely alternative form of vacation experience for the local holidaymaker, while providing an attractive, authentic, and unique experience to the ‘outside’ tourist.

These arguments form the backbone of the squatters’ lobbying for the preservation of their lifestyle and communities through an extension of their leases. As a measure of their commitment, the squatters have been actively cleaning up communal areas, and fencing off erosional sites, replanting them with native trees and shrubs. Another strategy has been to identify themselves as an ‘alternative lifestyle village’, playing down their status as squatters and stressing the conservationist elements of the community.

Recent Alternative Proposals

It is heartening to note that many of the foregoing points have been incorporated into recently introduced sets of draft proposals for treatment of the squatter communities along the Turquoise Coast of Western Australia. The first of these, a proposal for Coolimba, another more northerly settlement, was ‘based upon a design philosophy encompassing environmental sensitivity, self sufficiency and innovation, low-key and low impact development’ (Whelans, 1997). The settlement would provide a mix of accommodation for both professional fishermen and holidaymakers, with a recommendation that as much as possible of the local vegetation be retained. Buildings would be designed to minimise disruption to
The sites, be small scale, low profile, and simple frame construction made from materials similar to those used in the traditional squatter shacks. That is, the settlement would be 'developed as a sustainable coastal village catering for low key accommodation [and] its character should be recognisably different to that of a typically urbanised coastal townsite'.

The second, more complex proposal, envisages a range of different facilities situated along the coast that would cater to a greater variety of needs. The *Wedge and Grey Draft Master Plan* (CALM, 1999), which, as its title indicates, addresses the larger squatter communities located in what will become an expanded Nambung National Park. Impetus for the master plan stemmed partly from the fast approaching deadline for the removal of the squatters and partly from a decision to construct a road much closer to the coast than hitherto. Unlike previous policy initiatives, the Draft Plan has involved a greater degree of public consultation and input than was before the case. Its contents also more closely reflect the holiday environment currently enjoyed by the squatter community.

To quote from the Draft Plan:

The vision for future recreation and tourism is that Wedge and Grey will achieve best practice standards in environmentally sustainable development, providing for socially acceptable and equitable uses which are economically sustainable and rely on the use, conservation and enhancement of natural resources.

It is envisaged that Wedge and Grey will provide nature-based recreation and tourism opportunities for day visitors and short-stay holiday makers, catering for a wide range of interests and budgets. Basic amenities and interpretive facilities will be provided for potentially large numbers of visitors seeking access to the beaches and other natural attractions of the region.

Visitor services available may include information, marine and land-based tours and refreshment sales. Overnight facilities should cater for limited numbers of visitors and include a spectrum of accommodation types such as unserviced bush camp sites, basic self-contained beach huts for families, group accommodation for budget travellers and special interest groups, and some accommodation with a higher standard of amenity and service.

Development and management of Wedge and Grey should achieve high standards of environmental awareness and protection, and the natural environment should be an integral part of visitor experiences and facilities. Sensitive landscapes will be restored and protected, and infrastructure should incorporate appropriate technologies to minimise environmental impacts and maximise the use of renewable resources.

Government will undertake rehabilitation and landscape protection works, and provide basic amenities for day visitors and possibly campers. Commercial partnerships should be established with suitable proponents to develop accommodation and other services, whereby the revenue from commercial operations covers the costs of maintaining the sites' public facilities and services and provides adequate return for the developers and operators. (CALM, 1999: v–vi)
The foregoing points stress environmental concerns, but clearly expect increases in tourist numbers and a transition to a more commercially based form of development. However, it does appear that there is a growing sensitivity to the more nature-based tourist’s needs and to elements of the squatter settlement environment. Other sections of the plan reinforce these aspects of the draft proposals. It is recommended that ‘facilities should be designed and located to create a strong ‘sense of place’ and that buildings should ‘incorporate elements of the traditional coastal shack, in scale and materials’. However, shack-related architecture should be ‘reinterpreted to provide a more efficient structure and a more obvious sense of environmental empathy’. The new street system should be sympathetic to the contours, with bike paths and walkways linking elements of the community. Furthermore, the new settlements should continue to be self-sufficient in power and utility services, encouraging the use of solar power and composting of wastes (CALM, 1999: 20–3).

These proposals are currently being debated, and it is not clear as to the extent to which they will be acceptable to the various authorities whose approval is necessary. Nor is it clear how commercially viable the proposed developments might be. However, the proposals have generated sufficient interest among members of the squatter community for some of them to have expressed a desire to develop and manage cottage and camping facilities at Wedge Point (CALM, 1999: 16). This will not preserve the squatter community. However, many of the more aesthetically pleasing, organic and vernacular elements could be retained, thereby satisfying both the alternative lifestyle holidaymakers’ needs and the ‘outside’ tourists’ demands for an authentic experience in a sustainable, low key level of development. The more conventional, and mass tourists’ needs can be met elsewhere along the coast (WATC, 1990).

Correspondence

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References


