



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Main Committee**

**APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 1) 2002-03**

**Consideration in Detail**

**SPEECH**

**Wednesday, 19 June 2002**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

**Date** Wednesday, 19 June 2002  
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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Katter, Bob, MP

**Source** House  
**Proof** No  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Mr KATTER** (Kennedy) (5.34 pm)—The parliamentary secretary has not addressed the problem which I raised. We are talking about the appropriations for this year. Part of those appropriations goes to GBRMPA and GBRMPA have earned for themselves a most unenviable reputation. There is a standard joke in North Queensland about the classic oxymoron—an environmental scientist.

Parliamentary Secretary, I am putting it to you that, after a study was done by someone or other, GBRMPA said that they would get a 50 per cent diminution of sedimentation, and the minister committed himself to cutting the sedimentation by half. Even supporters of GBRMPA are leaving them, saying, 'This must inevitably mean a closure of a quarter or a third of the industry.' I do not know if the minister's remarks are meant to be interpreted by me as her saying, 'Well, you're done for anyway because you're selling into a corrupt market and you're a goner.' But I have to say that that seems to me to be what you are implying to me, Parliamentary Secretary. Please understand that GBRMPA have said—and the minister has backed them up—that they will halve the sedimentation levels.

Parliamentary Secretary, for your information—and I ask you please to verify what I am saying—the reports that I have read say that, in the period prior to land clearing, in the period prior to the coming of the Europeans, if you like, five tonnes of soil was removed from a hectare of land in its natural rainforest state. You must understand that, because of the tree canopy, the land is unprotected in a natural rainforest state. So, in actual fact, for most of the year, the heavy sugarcane regime would allow far less sedimentation to go into the river system than would occur under a natural canopy of rainforest. But GBRMPA are not interested in these simple truths. They seem to have a burning desire to destroy agriculture and close the sugar industry down.

I do not think that any objective person in North Queensland, who follows the media reasonably closely, would say that there is any intention by GBRMPA except an intention to see that the sugar industry is ultimately closed down. That is their position. Even if that is not the position of the government, it is extremely unhealthy for people to be left in a situation where they do not know what the future holds for them. If a survey were taken of the sugar industry in North Queensland, I would say that three-quarters of them would say they believe that GBRMPA are determined and probably will get their way, which will ultimately see the closure of the entire industry.

To put that in perspective, this industry is still worth about \$2,000 million to the Australian economy, it employs 60,000 people and it exists in an area of extremely high rainfall, where we simply have one other option. Bananas are the only other option, and that option could well be cut off by the government's free trade policies. But even given that option, we are already exceeding demand in the Australian market for bananas at the present moment. Thirty or 40 other crops have been tried and, quite frankly, no-one will try any crops now. I must mention that the biodiversity act has resulted in the infamous case of Bosworth. In that case it was, quite frankly, held that flying foxes were more important than the lychee industry and all the other industries in North Queensland which are attacked in massive numbers by fruit bats—in numbers that could not be dreamed of in days past; they are very well fed on farm produce.

Returning to the subject of the sugar industry, I want to go into the figures. There was five tonnes of soil run-off per hectare prior to white settlement or European settlement or land clearing—whatever words you want to use. Remember, the land had no cover then because it had a tree canopy. Now it is very heavy. There is nothing on earth that produces as much tonnage of carbon per hectare as sugarcane does. The sort of production figures you get from sugarcane are 110 tonnes per hectare per year. It covers the ground completely; it is very hard for anything to run off whilst the sugarcane is growing. (*Extension of time granted*) So there was five tonnes of soil run-off per hectare. The scientists claim that it increased to 20 tonnes. I find that hard to believe because I cannot see how you can get much run-off from a field of cane. But, of course, when the fields are fallow, there would be an increase in run-off.

I am just basing this upon the scientific research and I am sticking exclusively to the studies that have been done. So we had five tonnes of run-off prior to clearing and 20 tonnes of run-off on average after clearing—

I could argue about that figure, but I will accept it. In one study I read it was four tonnes, but the latest figure is 2.6 tonnes. So, in actual fact, the sedimentation levels are below what they were previously. GBRMPA are magnificent in their colossal stupidity. They are a classic example of people who are so far removed from reality that they simply have no understanding of what takes place out there. We had an example of GBRMPA's deceit, when they claimed that the dugong numbers in Queensland had dropped by half. The numbers had dropped by half in the southern half of the Barrier Reef and they had increased dramatically in the northern half—they almost doubled. All that had happened was that the dugong had moved north. It was one of the most stupid mistakes that GBRMPA ever made, because it allows their enemies—people such as me—to use this example again and again. They used the example that the numbers had dropped by half, always quoting sites in the southern half of the Barrier Reef and not the northern half. Of course, when it became known that in the northern half the numbers had increased dramatically, their credibility and standing in the community vanished. I have had a number of fights with AIMS over the years but, in sharp contrast, AIMS enjoys a reputation of scientific and intellectual integrity which is not even remotely deserved by the people at GBRMPA.

I must emphasise that the latest figures for run-off are 2.6 tonnes per hectare. Another scientific study says four tonnes, and the original figure was five tonnes. When the sedimentation going out onto the seagrass was cut off, what happened to those dugong in the southern half of the reef? There was a big drought: there was no sedimentation run-off, there was no top dressing of the seagrass, so the dugong had no seagrass to eat and moved north. If you cut off that sedimentation, you must understand that that is going to be very detrimental to the dugong. In fact, because of green harvesting now, there is possibly a problem the other way. But GBRMPA do not even remotely understand this. For those people that are not familiar with the sugar industry, when we harvest, we leave a trash cover on the ground some six to eight inches deep.

There are some very green oriented people in the sugar industry and Ross Digman is one of them. He took me on a four-wheeler ATV, which was a bit exciting. We had a look at a couple of crocodiles on the banks of the Johnston or the Tully River—I cannot remember which. Ross had this idea 12 years ago of digging silt traps and, being a very active 'greenie', as he would be called locally, he built one. The idea is that all of the run-off from all of his farms runs into a six-foot deep pond that he dug out. It holds most of the water run-off—not all of it, because if there were a big flood it would not hold all of that. For 12 years, the pond has taken the entire run-off of a square mile of sugarcane plantations. All of the so-called pesticides and fertilisers have run into a tiny little pond which would not be much bigger than this room. I had a look at the pond and there were four huge barramundi looking at me, there were insects all over the place and the place was absolutely alive with every form of life. So that pond had taken every single bit of run-off of pesticide, fertiliser, soil et cetera—and here it was, crystal clear, pure and magnificent. I have to admit there is an argument here about wetlands and swamps because I strongly endorse the necessity of keeping some wetlands and swamps. I have to be honest and fair and own up to that aspect of it as well. (*Time expired*)