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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Great Barrier Reef Marine Park

SPEECH

Monday, 24 November 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Page 12961
Questioner
Speaker Christensen, George, MP

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Mr CHRISTENSEN (Dawson—The Nationals Deputy Whip) (13:16): I thank the member for Leichhardt for his private member's motion and I acknowledge the work that he does in his large area across Far North Queensland. This is a motion about sustainability, about recognising the value of creatures such as turtles and dugongs to the environment and also to Australian industries, recreation, culture, education, science and tourism. This motion is about ensuring future generations can enjoy those same benefits.

There is no intention here of inhibiting traditional hunting rights for traditional and ceremonial purposes. In fact, this motion affirms the Native Title Act 1993, which recognises the right of certain traditional owners to hunt and gather. It is important to strike a balance between rights and responsibilities, and we already have communities on the Queensland coast working hard to strike that balance. I have spoken to a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, including Tony Irelandes from Mackay, who related to me how the community there already monitors traditional hunting and the sustainability of marine resources. He actually endorsed the motion that my colleague has brought here today.

I also recognise the great work of the Gudjuda people in the Burdekin, where community leader Eddie Smallwood works with a network of Indigenous rangers who monitor the coastal area and also turtle and dugong hunting practices. I have spoken with Eddie about extending the network to have permanent Indigenous marine rangers to monitor the seas for illegal hunting of these marine animals. I see this fitting into the motion that the member for Leichhardt has brought before us today.

Dugongs are currently listed as vulnerable both in Queensland and internationally. Green turtles also are listed as vulnerable in Queensland and as endangered by the IUCN. Green turtles live in seaweed rich coral reefs and coastal seagrass pastures in tropical and subtropical areas of Australia, but the entire reef is an important feeding area for the green turtle. Commercial harvesting of the green turtle in southern Queensland was closed in 1950 due to concerns about sustainability and, as a result, the numbers of nesting turtles on Heron Island, for example, have tripled.

There are a number of factors that put pressure on dugong and turtle populations, including habitat degradation from things like cyclones, injuries to animals from boats, starvation due to seagrass dying off, illness or death due to plastic being ingested or animals being caught in nets, predators such as feral pigs eating turtle eggs and hatchlings on the beach and also, unfortunately, traditional hunting. Traditional hunting does place an added pressure on these populations, especially when some of the practices are carried out in the name of traditional rights but not in the spirit of those rights. Some of these activities have been reported in the Cairns media, notably the *Cairns Post* front page of 10 November 2011: 'Slaughtered in front of tourists'.

These activities have not only had an impact on local populations but on the sustainability of the tourism industry, which is crucial to a place like Cairns, as it is to my electorate with the Whitsundays. The *Cairns Post* also reported on 8 December of that year that an elder said it was 'time to start prosecuting hunters'. The article reported that 'Tourism operators and traditional owners have called for an end to the slaughter of endangered marine life at Green Island, following a recent spate of turtle killings by hunters. Tourism operators and tourists have reported at least 14 turtle killings in the past month. It is feared the suspected overkill will wipe out the area's turtle population within months.'

There is no need to completely ban all hunting of turtles and dugongs. There can be a compromise that allows traditional hunting and also supports sustainable marine populations. In areas where populations are in danger, green zones should apply, and that would mean no-one takes what is left of the local population in those zones, regardless of whether your heritage is Indigenous or non-Indigenous. In areas where the population can withstand a limited harvest, some rules need to apply to avoid the abuse of traditional hunting rights. Turtle and dugong meat should not be transported from the place where it is caught; it should not be sold; it should not be cryovaced; it should not be brought out and paraded around for non-Indigenous people to sample. It is important to note

that such regulations would only affect a very small portion of the population—that is, the people who abuse the system.

The government has introduced measures to ensure sustainability in the reef, including a \$40 million commitment to the reef trust. We are providing a further \$5 million for dugong and turtle protection, including \$2 million for specialised and Indigenous ranger programs; \$2 million to the Crime Commission to investigate the practice of illegal killing, poaching and transportation of turtle and dugong meat; \$700,000 towards cleaning up marine debris, and I have spent some time with Eco Barge Clean Seas doing that; \$300,000 to support the Cairns, Fitzroy Island Turtle Rehabilitation Centre. This motion supports these measures, and I support this motion. I second the motion.