



CLARENCE ENVIRONMENT CENTRE INC

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The General Manager
Clarence Valley Council
Prince Street
Grafton

Dear Sir

Submission to the Review of Council Policy for Beach Access and Vehicles on Beaches

Introduction

The Clarence Environment Centre (CEC) has maintained a shop-front in Grafton for nearly 30 years, and has a proud history of environmental advocacy. The conservation of Australia's natural environment, both terrestrial and and marine, and has always been a priority for our members. To that end we are making this submission to Council's review of beach access and vehicles on beaches in the hope of reducing the adverse impacts on the natural coastal environment.

Impacts of vehicles on beaches

“The ecological and physical impact of 4WD vehicles on beaches is an area of steadily growing knowledge. The effects on dune vegetation and vertebrates have been the focus of many studies with fewer studies directed towards the effects on invertebrates and the physical disturbance to the beach”. (Tim Austin, School of Geoscience, University of Sydney).

There are numerous, well documented threats resulting from motor vehicles on beaches, such as dune erosion and loss of vegetation; threats to nesting shore birds and their habitat, and the direct danger to beach goers. However, there are other lesser known impacts which are only just being recognised, such as the impacts to subsurface biota, otherwise known as *“benthic micro- and meiofauna”*, which are destroyed when impacted by vehicles. Also there are emerging theories that 4WD vehicles directly physically alter beaches by affecting the beach surface with tyre tracks that interrupt natural sand flows.

The fact that, unlike roads, there are no lanes, or signage, and virtually no rules, adds to the dangers (and probably the satisfaction of thrill-seekers). This in turn leads to an element of bad behaviour which can put lives at risk. Unfortunately, the unregulated nature of beach driving is not something that is easily addressed, and inevitably beach usage will lead to dispersal into local bushland areas in search of adventure and/or remote, unserviced camping sites, causing significant long-term damage to the environment. Having to deal with this can in turn result in the diversion of conservation resources into rehabilitation work. The fact that most beaches in the Clarence Valley LGA adjoin national parks is particularly relevant in this instance.

Summary of impacts

There are scores of research papers highlighting the threats caused by off-road vehicles on beaches.

1. Destruction of flora and vegetation cover leading to erosion. This also includes direct impacts on saltmarsh – wheel ruts from off-road vehicles persist for many years, even after vehicles have been excluded (DECC, 2008).
2. Direct impacts on fauna such as migratory and resident shorebirds and nesting marine turtles, many of which are listed as threatened under state and federal legislation -impacts include disturbances (causing birds to leave nests, eggs and chicks or feeding and roosting areas), collisions, nest destruction and the crushing of chicks and hatchlings.
3. Direct impacts on *benthic micro- and meiofauna* through compaction of sand reducing habitat potential and reducing the numbers of invertebrates available for feeding and leading to changes in community composition and structure.
4. Direct social impacts on beach users, especially where some activities are not compatible with others. For example vehicles driving through areas where families with young children are sunbathing, swimming and playing; into dunes where rehabilitation work is being undertaken; or affecting the aesthetics or private enjoyment of remote beaches.
5. Direct impacts on cultural heritage sites including aboriginal shell middens along foreshores, tidal wetlands, and intertidal areas.
6. Indirect impacts to coastal communities through erosion and decreased resilience to the future and ongoing impacts of sea level rise, storm surges and extreme weather events.
7. Indirect impacts on native flora and fauna through the introduction of weeds and pests competing for habitat and/or out-competing native species. Vehicle hygiene is of particular concern, with a real possibility of spread of diseases such as the root rot pathogen *Phytophthora cinnamomi*.

As a result we strongly believe that beach access should be limited to boat launch sites, where adequate parking can be provided. Beach driving should be restricted to management vehicles only, and that the use of beaches as an alternative to roads simply to move from point A to point B should be disallowed altogether.

Having said that, we believe it is incumbent on Council to provide adequate road access to areas that are attractive to the public. An example of this is Sandon River, where many prefer to drive along the beach from Brooms Head to avoid using what is often a shockingly maintained road.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Yours sincerely
John Edwards (Honorary Secretary)