



**Nature Refuge caretakers need help to
communicate with each other and
with members of the public**



30 April 2015

Hon Dr Steven Miles

Minister for Environment and Heritage Protection and the Great Barrier Reef

cc: Allan Williams (Director of Landscape Conservation, Queensland Department of Environment and Heritage Protection), Peter Spencer (Policy Adviser to Dr Steven Miles)

Dear Minister Steven Miles,

Congratulations on your very special portfolio. Healthy environments are the building blocks for a sound society and economy.

A recently-formed group of concerned citizens and Nature Refuge (NR) owners, of which I am the President, has a basic but important request to put to your Department (DEHP). In previous years individual NR owners raised this issue but nothing was done.

We are frustrated by not being able to freely interact with each other and members of the public due to privacy rules. We believe these rules are stifling dialogue and we need a way to overcome them in the interests of positive communication and progress.

To introduce ourselves: We are The Bimblebox Alliance Inc. (TBA)

<http://bimblebox.org/nature-refuges/> and in this request we are joined by Protect the Bush Alliance (PTBA) <http://ptba.org.au/>. Both are not-for-profit groups run by volunteers. Our objectives (see attached¹) are closely aligned with the principles that NR owners agree to uphold when they sign a NR agreement.

Most NR landholders have a significant and inter-generational duty of care for the environment and, by dedicating themselves to the hard practical work required, provide a highly cost-effective way to secure nature conservation in Queensland. The labour and the associated on-going costs are contributed free of charge to manage and maintain NRs as a de facto public resource.

With around 453 Nature Refuges in Queensland covering 3.4 million hectares, there is a critical need for good communication about the issues that their owners face in maintaining and enhancing the biodiversity they protect. Effective information flows are vital to allow for efficient management of common concerns. We need to be able to easily swap notes about the best practical solutions for our everyday problems. Far too often, Nature Refuge owners whose continuous day to day work involves time consuming jobs like weeding, feral animal control, boundary/internal fencing maintenance, trail grading, seasonal fire breaks,

etc. all of which serve to defend the refuge's natural integrity and purpose, are left isolated and struggling.

Since most NRs have benefited in some way from public financing, as a general principle members of the public should have a right to know about them, especially where access and on-site activities are appropriate. At least the public should have an easy way to contact those owners who welcome such enquires.

DEHP has established a website where NR landholders can register as members (viz. <http://landmanagementonline.org.au/home/>) however this site states exactly what is needed without delivering it: *'Land Management Online was created to bring nature refuge landholders together; to share and connect, as well as being a place to discover other groups and organisations with common interests.'*

Although members do have the option to request contact details from individual NR owners via the internal messaging system, there is no way to generate a list of NRs who wish to communicate their contact details either to the public or to all members of the site.

In order to allow success with the above, here are our suggestions for DEHP to make the Land Management Online website functional:

- The website should have a new tab called 'NRs open to the public' with a profile for each NR and contact details for owners who welcome enquires from interested parties; another option would be to put check boxes on the 'Edit Profile' page where contact details are entered (Display to public, Display to members only, Do not display) then add a 'View' option to the 'Contacts' page to accommodate all three options.
- Send a letter to NR owners alerting them to the new functions on the website and explaining how they can help resolve problems that have persisted due to poor communication, and thus encouraging more active sharing of ideas and resources;
- The NR profiles should be pre-filled with publicly available information which Mr Williams' office would have on hand, allowing each owner to complete their entry with details specific to their case;
- Each profile will also include viable options for compatible industries such as eco-tourism, since other income is forgone and a venue is needed to develop ventures in this field (An example for the website listing of Bimblebox NR is attached²);
- The website will also be an invaluable resource to recruit and coordinate the volunteers who play such a vital role in privately operated conservation efforts;
- An on-line forum is also needed where NR owners can discuss their work and share concerns, problems and solutions.

Without wishing to anticipate that your government might fall at the next election, we must aim for a long-term future in which we survive many governments to come. In order to safeguard our work from another possible destructive administration, such as the last one, we need to set up a support group that operates independently and is viable without ongoing support from your department. This group must be run by the people on the

ground – us. All we are asking for is reasonable assistance now to put this in place. The website could easily be taken down at some time, and our aim must be to quickly establish resilient and robust alternative communication networks, via email, phone, etc.

Two of my TBA colleagues (Jude Garlick Committee Member and Joan Vickers, Treasurer) spoke with Allan Williams and your Policy Advisor Peter Spencer at the NPAQ event you attended on Wednesday, April 22. We all look forward to being able to continue this constructive conversation.

With kind regards,

Paola Cassoni

Part-owner, Bimblebox Nature Refuge and President, The Bimblebox Alliance Inc.

Alpha, Qld 4724

Ph 07 4985 3474

Email bimblebox@gmail.com

Footnotes

1. **Protect the Bush Alliance (PTBA)** is an alliance of organizations, businesses and individuals that endorses the following aims:

- to advocate the protection of High Conservation Value areas
- to identify and encourage activities that improve the understanding of their biodiversity and other environmental values.

The **TBA** objectives are:

- To protect the natural environment;
- To conserve the natural values of Bimblebox Nature Refuge;
- To conserve the natural values of other Protected Areas;
- To undertake activities and stimulate activities to assist in conservation of existing Protected Areas;
- To undertake activities and stimulate activities to assist in expansion of Protected Areas.

2. **Bimblebox Nature Refuge** Lot 4 on plan BF22 situated in the County of Beaufort, containing an area of about 7912ha, shown on plan PA81

Bimblebox Nature Refuge is 60 km north-west of Alpha and 45 km north east of Jericho in CWQ. We are a small group of friends managing an environmentally-oriented cattle property in an arid zone of the very peaceful Desert Uplands bioregion.

We have large areas of uncleared bush land and you can enjoy long bush walks amongst the native flora and fauna, and plenty of birdwatching.

Bimblebox has good basic facilities for volunteers willing to help with our weeding programme, fencing, species retention, erosion control and/or the maintenance of the buildings and machineries.

We lead simple, non-consumerist lives, simple food and comfortable accommodation is offered.

Please notify well in advance. Min stay one week due to remoteness and infrequent trips to Alpha for pickups. Isolation could be a problem - there are no entertainment services and the ecology seems raw and harsh to some people. If you have your own vehicle, it will need high clearance underneath, and preferably four-wheel drive, to travel on our access roads, or you can leave your car in the care of our friends in Alpha.

Grey Nomads welcome.

Website: www.bimblebox.org