
A safe haven for marine species from muddy floodwaters

FLOODWATERS currently inundating the Queensland coast are expected to cause extensive damage to the critical food source and habitat of endangered marine species.

Scientists are voicing concerns for our marine life as a number of inland and urban rivers from Rockhampton to Moreton Bay flood into the marine environment carrying debris, silt and pollution.

Of particular concern are the immediate impacts of the flood plumes on seagrasses, the critical food source for endangered dugong and green turtles, as well as habitat for fish and many other species.

The Brisbane River has spread a huge plume of turbid water across Moreton Bay. The Burnett, Fitzroy and Mary rivers are discharging enormous amounts of sediment-laden fresh water into the coastal environment. Plumes from the floods have been observed 70 kilometres from the coast and are predicted to affect waters all the way to the north coast of Queensland.

Seagrasses are highly dependent on sunlight for survival. Flood plumes heavy with suspended sediments can block sunlight killing these sensitive seagrasses. Agricultural pesticides and trace metals only add further stress to the seagrass habitat.

In 1992 a cyclone and subsequent flooding of the Mary River had a devastating effect on the local seagrasses of the northern Great Sandy Strait/Hervey Bay regions with immediate impacts on dugong numbers. Also hit hard were the inshore fisheries which sustain the local fishing industry as well as high end fauna such as dolphins.

Immediately following the 1992 floods, scientists documented a significant decline in the dugong population (approximately 45%). During this time the seagrass meadows in the Southern Sandy Strait became critically important as dugong from the Northern Great Sandy Strait and Hervey Bay areas were forced to search for food elsewhere.

Whilst large numbers of dugong perished as a result of this flood, dugong numbers have been able to recover largely thanks to the sanctuary provided by the southern seagrass meadows which at the time supported 85% of the remaining dugong population in the region.

Wildlife Preservation Society secretary Mr Simon Baltais was reported in the Courier Mail warning of the likely damage to seagrass meadows in Moreton Bay following the Brisbane River flooding. Mr Baltais went on to say "...under normal conditions, wildlife had evolved to recover from large-scale natural events. But they are already stressed from pollutants and over-development."

A sanctuary from floods for endangered marine wildlife is urgently required ...

"With the recent floods likely to impact on the seagrass meadows along so much of the coastline, including Moreton Bay, the Great Barrier Reef and the Northern Great Sandy Strait/Hervey Bay area, the critical importance of the southern Great Sandy Strait and Tin Can Inlet waterways has suddenly been made very clear," says Carole Gillies, President of the Southern Sandy Straits Marine Environment Group.

“Research by University of Queensland scientist Dr Janet Lanyon has shown that the Great Sandy Strait/Hervey Bay region sustains the largest population of dugong in southern Queensland. The largest herds are consistently found in the southern section of the Great Sandy Strait (Tin Can Bay to Tuan) - with densities among the highest in the world, demonstrating just how critical this habitat is in both times of flood and ongoing to the survival of the species.”

It is expected that dugong will be extinct in the next 40 years. Now more than ever, a safe haven is urgently required, explains Carole Gillies. “Without long term protection by the federal government, the only remaining safe haven for dugong and sea turtles will be destroyed by proposed marina developments.”

A national campaign to protect this pristine marine wilderness and its inhabitants from development is currently underway. To date, 35,000 signatures have been received online from around Australia.

“As Queenslanders start to search for answers following the floods, the power developers yield over councils and the Queensland Government is being called into question,” says Carole. Why were new developments allowed in known flood plain areas? Why were low lying homes permitted in these areas? It is time for all to recognise that if we continue to bow to developer pressure it will be both Queenslanders and our precious wildlife that will pay the highest price.”

The Tin Can Bay region has not suffered the same degree of over development – it is a near pristine area and the seagrass is somewhat sheltered from flooding. “The seagrass meadows of the Southern Sandy Strait/Tin Can Inlet must be protected if our marine life, including dugong and turtles, are to have any chance of survival in the long term,” says Carole.

“Now is the time to take a stand against inappropriate development proposed for a precious marine wilderness that is a refuge for the endangered dugong, marine turtles and many other species,” she says.

Australians have just a small window of opportunity to help stop this marina development near Fraser Island, before a final decision is made by Environment Minister Tony Bourke as early as the end of February 2011. People can help secure this safe haven for endangered marine species by sending their vote (in 3 seconds) at www.marina.tincanbaydolphins.com.au.

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PHOTO ATTACHED: Bob Irwin in mangroves, Southern Sandy Straits: “Enough is Enough!” says Bob Irwin, champion of the national ‘Click and Save’ campaign. “This is not a local issue. The area provides habitat for species that are threatened all over the world - and we need to make a stand and save some critical habitat for them.”

AVAILABLE FOR INTERVIEW

- Carole Gillies, President of the Southern Sandy Straits Marine Environment Group.
- Bob Irwin, renowned wildlife conservationist

To arrange an interview, contact Carole Gillies: 0439 205 277