

Green space audit of South East Queensland June 2003



South East Queensland is justly prized for its superb beaches, its rivers and its lush hinterland. Its deserved popularity is creating unprecedented population pressure and a seemingly endless demand for new housing, from apartment blocks and canal homes for the wealthy to new suburban subdivisions still popular with aspiring home owners.

It is a region where the population could well double in the next fifty years, while the rest of the state, with the exception of major urban and coastal settlements, will see little population growth. As the environmental attributes of South East Queensland are critical not only to its attractiveness but also its sustainability, we need to understand the patterns of urban development that have happened in the past and how they might be better directed in the future. And we need to retain and hopefully extend its guaranteed green space.

One of the best ways to consider future options is to compare Brisbane with another coastal city of a somewhat similar urban shape. Both Sydney and Brisbane are built on semi-circles, with the Pacific Ocean to the immediate east. Both have seen linear development to the north, the south and the west.

The maps we have created for the audit traverse the regional landscape and hinterland of both cities, 140 kilometres east west, and 250 kilometres north-south. The green space data we created for this territory utilizes the most reliable data for National Parks, state forests and forest reserves (see table one). There are other measures of open space, reported for Brisbane in table 2, but apart from National Parks, state forests and forest reserves these are not nearly as reliable an indication of green space provision.

Sydney has been blessed by the natural buffers of harbours, rivers, bays and huge sandstone plateaux to its north and south, with the Blue Mountains to its west. The Sydney region was and is much less arable for primary production than South-East Queensland, where the climate and soil types enable a much wider array of crops to be grown, from vegetables to tropical fruit and sugar cane.

Within the Brisbane City Council territory Moreton Island, a marvellous resource, but hardly a buffer to urban development, stands out as the BCC's major national park. The Brisbane State Forest Park, Mt Cootha and water catchment areas give the BCC, with over 18,000 hectares in conservation zones, a higher proportion of green space than any other local government area in South East Queensland.

While much of Moreton Bay and the mangroves surrounding it have been preserved, swathes of coastal landscape of the region have been compromised by sand mining, still occurring on Stradbroke Island, and canal development, especially on the Gold and Sunshine Coasts. Artificial islands were created, extraordinarily with council permission, in the mouth of the Coomera River.

The regional picture is even more alarming, especially when compared to Sydney. Over two thirds of SEQ has been subdivided in waves of land selection and subdivision from the 1880s to the present. The great bulk of this landscape is already held in private hands, as the SEQ2021 map of freehold parcels zoned 'rural' and 'rural residential' demonstrates.

The BCC, the State Government and many local councils in this region have a long history of protecting green space via National

Parks, forest reserves, recreational reserves, water catchment areas and more recently identifying new areas with high bio-diversity values which would be destroyed by urban development. But too often this has been too little, too late in a landscape where the development rights of private owners are seen as sacrosanct.

By the time the Mt Coolool National Park was gazetted in 1990 suburban development had already been allowed half way up its western side. The Glasshouse Mountains as individual outcrops are protected by tiny national parks but it seems unbelievable that suburban subdivision is now being allowed nearby. This comprises one of the region's most significant indigenous sites. Suburban development has the potential to make a mockery of landscape preservation and scenic values.

What we have tried to do in this audit is to highlight the gravity of the situation that confronts south-east Queensland. The two maps of Brisbane and Sydney emphasize two kinds of green space with well defined boundaries, national parks and state forests (and in the case of Brisbane Forest Reserves as well). There are of course many other forms of open space, some of it green, some not. We include audit table 2 which shows national parks, state forest, open space zoning in councils (a complex category, which can vary from council to council) and land acquired by the Regional Landscape Strategy.

Green space is a vexed issue. There are plenty of legitimate questions to be asked about the pros and cons of national parks, the need for recreational and sporting space, along with the level of access and popularity of green space. But we don't have the luxury of thinking that more guaranteed green space can be readily created, not least because the great majority of landowners always want compensation for the highest economic use of their land, even if suburban subdivisions are still well away at present.

We already have a 200 kilometre city in this region, with regular cross-commuting. The Gold Coast is effectively merged by urban development with Logan City and Brisbane. The only thing that separates the Sunshine Coast from greater Brisbane is a series of pine plantations, overseen by the Glasshouse Mountains.

We can't suddenly ring greater Brisbane with National Parks and green space corridors that might have been created twenty years ago. But we can start a public discussion and develop public consciousness around the issue. If every owner of a 10 to 100 hectare block in SE Qld is hoping for small acreage subdivision rights, then they should put their retirement funds elsewhere and give more thought to their immediate and distant neighbours. A society that continues to kow tow not just to the legal rights of private owners but to their aspirations for subdivision and unlimited capital gain cannot remain healthy for long.

Dramatic intervention and infrastructure provision in regional planning and sustainable environmental management is needed to preserve what's left of SE Queensland's green spaces and to create the transport spines and employment centres so desperately needed if we want to go on enjoying living here.

Peter Spearritt