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PRIME MINISTER

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ELECTORATE TALK

Today, perhaps more than ever, Australians are aware of how much we rely on our country's great natural wealth. We are abundant in minerals; have vast reserves of gas and oil; and have millions of acres of land under wheat, sheep and cattle.

Our wealth springs from the land. In the past people sometimes were careless of our natural heritage. Too often people moved into new areas, settled, knocked down bush, planted crops and sowed grasses without any real concern for the consequences.

Now we are at a stage where we need to assess the total land use of this nation. It is our responsibility to make sure it is used to the best advantage - keeping account of both economic and conservation requirements.

While it is a question of governments having to make decisions about parklands, conservation policies and the like, policies would fail without the concern of the general community. In the last ten to 15 years, Australians have started to show a living concern about the environment. It is pleasing that people have the courage to stand up and be counted on these questions.

I sometimes wonder how the physical face of our nation would look without the efforts of concerned people. At the same time, your government is aware of the need for practical laws and policies that allow for protection of the environment.

This week, I announced the government's decision to ban whaling in Australian waters. Many Australians believe the harpooning of whales is offensive to the ideals of mankind. On the other hand, the jobs of a number of Australians depended on whaling.

Early last year we set up an inquiry into whales and whaling. Our decision was to accept all the inquiry's recommendations. Our decision to ban whaling completely, and to ban the import of all whale products from January 1981, demonstrates our commitment to protect this magnificent mammal. We will be arguing strongly through the International Whaling Commission for our policy to be followed by other nations.

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I pay special tribute to the work of Sir Sydney Frost who conducted the whaling inquiry, and to the men, women and children associated with Project Jonah.

Also this week, the Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory was proclaimed. This park will become one of the world's great national parks. Its environment is unique and precious. Aborigines have occupied the area for thousands of years. The several hundred rock painting galleries in the area are recognized amongst the best preserved in Australia. They rival the prehistoric painted caves in France and Spain.

The Act under which the park has been set up makes sure that the traditional Aboriginal land owners are fully consulted in the management of the park. Opportunities for their employment in the park will increase as training programs develop.

Kakadu is not the only unique bushland in Australia. Off the coast of Queensland, Fraser Island has a natural environment of great complexity and fragility. It is the world's largest sand island, and its lakes, beaches and cliffs of coloured sands, sandblows and rain forested sand dunes make it irreplaceable.

In 1976, following a full public environmental inquiry, the government moved to stop the export of minerals from the island.

Since then, the company affected by that decision - the Dillingham Corporation - has conducted an international vendetta against Australia. The company has refused to accept the fair and reasonable compensation offered by the government. We make no apology for our firm stand.

The issue was simple. Were we prepared to watch mining proceed on a unique and fragile stretch of earth? Were we prepared to endanger the environment? The answer was - and is - no.

Australia is also setting high standards of nature conservation. We play a leading role in the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources; we have signed the Washington Convention on Trade in Endangered Species and the Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Seals.

Australia was the first party to the Convention of Wetlands of International Importance especially as waterfowl habitat. Australia and Japan have signed a joint agreement for the protection of migratory birds. On top of that, your government has actively supported the establishment of the World Wildlife Fund in Australia.

Our record of action to protect the environment stands any scrutiny. We are keenly aware that our children - and their children - will judge us by the response we give now to the on-going challenge of conserving our great natural heritage. We will not fail them.