



PRIME MINISTER

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ELECTORATE TALK

Australians today, perhaps more than ever before, care about the physical shape and face of our land. Australia is fortunate in still possessing a range of wilderness - areas which contain fragile and complex environments.

Australia, too, is the last sanctuary on earth for many natural species. In a real sense we are the custodians of their survival. We want to preserve and protect our natural heritage.

We know that no person, no organisation, no Government Department can ever rebuild an island, renew a forest or a swamp or resurrect an extinct species. No decree of Government can turn back the clock and save a lost species or a lost wilderness.

That is why a Federal Government has a national obligation to make decisions on any issue that affects our heritage. This is a responsibility that your Government has accepted.

Australia's record of action in the protection of the environment has given our nation a growing international reputation. A few days ago, Sir Peter Scott, Chairman of the World Wildlife Fund said -- "Australia has made a tremendous contribution to world conservation ... Australia has shown the way".

During the week I asked the Minister for Science and the Environment to look at the question of banning the imports of products from endangered animals listed under an international convention.

Australia should not import products from species that are threatened with extinction. Why should we give this kind of tacit approval to the killing of endangered species.

Accordingly, I have asked the Minister to look particularly closely at imports of hides, skins and furs included in this international convention.

Also, this week I announced that there would be no further exploration for oil in the region of the Great Barrier Reef until the results of both short and long term research are known. We accepted the recommendation of the Chairman of the Royal Commission on this question. I gave a categorical and absolute guarantee that the Government would not permit any drilling on the Reef, or any drilling or mining which could damage the Reef.

The Government has asked the Australian Marine Science and Technologies Advisory Committee to recommend a program of research. We will be considering that recommendation in the Budget context.

The Great Barrier Reef is a unique part of our natural heritage. We have acted to protect it.

These decisions follow earlier action by this Government to ban whaling and to ban the import of whale products from January 1981. We are using the International Whaling Commission to argue strongly that our policy be followed by other countries.

The Government has appointed Professor Ovington, Director of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, as the Australian Commissioner to the International Whaling Commission. Professor Ovington will lead the Australian delegation to the 31st Annual Meeting of the International Whaling Commission in London next month. As a distinguished scientist and conservationist, he will advise the Australian Government on the conservation of whales.

In April we proclaimed the Kakadu National Park, one of the world's truly great national parks. The Act under which the Park has been established makes sure that traditional land owners are fully consulted in its management.

In 1976 we moved to stop effectively mining on Fraser Island, the world's largest sand island. The issue here was simple. Were we prepared to watch mining proceed on a unique and fragile stretch of earth. The answer was a categorical no.

The Government has acted to support the establishment of the World Wildlife Fund in Australia. Australia also plays a leading role in worldwide moves to protect endangered species and migratory birds.

My own concern for the environment and for conservation goes back many years. I can recall as a backbencher in the late 1950s expressing concern in the Government Party Room that the Princess Alexandra Parrot was in danger of extinction. Because of its beauty, this Parrot was highly prized by overseas aviarists. I was determined that this repulsive trade in birds should stop. Subsequently I was pleased to learn in about November 1959 that the then Minister for Customs, Senator Henty, had convinced Cabinet that the export of not only the Princess Alexandra Parrot, but of all native birds, should be banned.

Conservation at that time was something of a dirty word. It was not a popular issue, but that ban was a start. From it, the conservation movement went from strength to strength. It now commands, as it should, great popular support.

Today the Government is playing its part to the fullest extent in protecting Australia's environment. We have a record of action to conserve our unique heritage. We are meeting the on-going challenge of protecting what can never be replaced. We will not falter in that task.