

PERSPECTIVE

QUEENSLAND'S NEW GREEN MONEY MACHINE



Businessmen and environmentalists may be strange bedfellows, but big Sunshine State operators appreciate that saving public land is in everybody's interest, and sometimes their own.

Story Lisa Allen

David Hutchen believes much of the development allowed on Queensland's coast is "morally wrong". But no, Hutchen is not your typical greenie. He's a multi-millionaire entrepreneur. Until last year he was Australia's largest marine tourism operator, having founded and sold the successful Fantasea marine business in the Whitsundays for \$25 million.

He is outraged at the Beattie government's permissive development policies. So is Suzette Pelt, who operates Queensland Yacht Charters from Airlie Beach and who says she's not frightened of knocking on the Premier's door to complain.

They are relative newcomers to Queensland. Pelt was raised in South Africa, Hutchen in New Zealand. Educated, wealthy and managing their own businesses, they are hardly conventional "greenies". Yet these well-heeled individuals are typical of the new activists leading the fight against the Beattie government's coastal-development juggernaut.

In the dying days of the last Queensland state election, Surfers Paradise's elite ventured from their penthouses to fight alongside humble surfers and local families to stop a \$1 billion cruise-ship terminal on the Gold Coast.

Further north, in Airlie Beach, wealthy marine-tour operators have joined Rotary Club members, elderly widows and family groups to oppose a multi-level hotel and gaming house destined for public land on the coast.

It is possible to smell the smoke of self-interest, and for some the fight is not so much about the environment as protecting their own financial patch.

But it's not all self-serving. Queensland's lack of green groups (unlike in other states, there are no representative environmental parties in parliament) is forcing disparate residents – such as lawyers, housewives and retired international CEOs – to unite for the first time to stop what they term the Beattie government's "Joh Bjelke-Petersen" style approach to coastal development.

"The state government is using Bjelke-Petersen legislation to implement what they call major infrastructure projects," says Steve Gratton, a part-time lecturer at Griffith University and president of Save Our Spit, which campaigned successfully to stop the Gold Coast cruise terminal.

"They are winding the clock back. You would expect that from the Bjelke-Petersen government."

And, according to Gratton, green environmentalists are "finding allies in the strangest places. You have people from all walks of life

in these groups. You have the penthouse owners and the green people advocating the retention of public space."

Gratton counts cashed up property developers, local Gold Coast police and even some Labor politicians among those campaigning to stop development on public land. He says there are several extremely wealthy Gold Coasters funding him (but some are so sensitive they do it on the proviso they are not identified).

One of his more high-profile public supporters is Gold Coast based Gordon Douglas, founder of real estate agency Colliers PRDnationwide. The influential Douglas successfully lobbied the Beattie government to help stop the hated cruise terminal. He's a relentless operator whose dedication to this cause may well protect his own financial interests.

Douglas claims his support of a Greens-type environmental group stems from his philosophy that the Gold Coast should preserve its remaining open space. Otherwise it will drive away the cashed-up residents it is trying to attract.

"Clearly there are a lot of people with real money here who you would think would be pro-development," says Gordon. "They came here for all the things they don't want to see buggered up. It's not as if we are short of built form on the coast."

For the first time in their lives Queenslanders are getting angry enough to step in and form groups to do something to stop development on public land.

"It's not an easy alliance but it happens, people get stirred up

enough, it's good, it's very good the way it works," Douglas says.

Up and down the Queensland coast, community groups are gathering to oppose certain types of development, particularly those projects proposed on public land. And on the Gold Coast, Gratton's Save Our Spit has proven it has the muscle to win.

In central Queensland, Mackay Conservation Foundation spokeswoman Patricia Julien stresses that the groups are not anti-development but want to stop the "ticky-tacky boxes" sprouting up and down the coast. She says advocacy groups are disappearing and being replaced by volunteer groups. "The Howard government has disempowered groups for

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advocacy by decreasing eligibility for the grants," she says.

Further north, the Save Our Foreshore group at Airlie Beach is still battling the government and developer FKP to delay a planned hotel and gaming house.

Even further north, the Cairns and Far North Environment Centre is fighting a development at False Cape headland at East Trinity. There's also the Shute Haven

Suzette Pelt and Steve Gratton: not your garden-variety Greenies.
Photo Glenn Hunt

Residents Association, which is warring with local authorities over a proposed \$240 million marina, residential and hotel project slated for public land. The Mackay Conservation Group and Save Our Airport (Whitsundays) are also active in their fights.

The common denominator for all these groups is the simple desire to stop development on public land.

According to Pelt (also the president of Save Our Foreshore) the success of these groups, which have recruited thousands and thousands of members, is due to their ability to network.

Save Our Foreshore in Airlie Beach – fighting the \$1 billion Queensland development company FKP's proposal for a hotel and gaming house on public land – is regularly in contact with Save Our Spit, which tasted success after Queensland Labor's surprise decision to axe the cruise-ship terminal in the dying days of the election. Save Our Spit is now fighting a commercial marina proposed for public land.

"These groups are networking up and down the coast," Pelt says. "We are used to networking in our daily jobs, we are not afraid to stand up. One of our biggest supporters is the biggest single business operator on the Whitsunday Coast. It's people like him. [But we] also have conservative groups, such as the Rotarians, supporting us.

"We have members who are

elderly ladies or widows whose husbands, 50 or 60 years ago, planted the trees that were bulldozed.

"We are not afraid of going and knocking on the Premier's door. We are mainstream, we are not fringe any more, and everybody knows that except the dinosaurs. We are single issue, we can focus, and we find the Greens are coming behind us."

Describing himself as a hard-nosed businessman, David Hutchen says his corporate life has tended to make him want to fight. "I am not letting go of this FKP [Airlie Beach proposal]; it's morally wrong," he says.

"I am opposed to giving away public land. It's a little piece of public land in the middle of town and it will be needed in future. If they want to build a bloody hotel,

'If they want to build a bloody hotel, there are other places they could build it.'

there are other places in Airlie they could build it."

Hutchen supports Save Our Foreshore with cash and attends some meetings.

It doesn't bother Hutchen that he is fighting the fight that hard-core Green environmentalists would once have fought. He believes he has no choice but to stand up and fight for Airlie Beach.

Of course FKP, the listed Queensland developer, has another side of the story to tell, but it too believes the rise of anti-development environmental groups will shape Queensland over the next 20 years.

FKP says it won a legitimate council and state tender (to develop public land at Airlie Beach into a tavern with poker machines and a multi-storey hotel) fairly and squarely four years ago.

The project is now gridlocked between the state and local council, with no decision made on whether it will proceed.

FKP's executive general manager Queensland, Matthew Miller, believes more community groups opposing development will spring up over the next two decades.

"I think there's probably a perception that new development will spoil the lifestyle," says Miller.

"There's a number of commercial interests, as per the situation we faced at Airlie Beach, who don't want to see any more competition; it's put the fence up around the local community and the full sign is up, like Noosa tried to do.

"[The rise of these groups] is a big issue, not only in coastal areas; it's [going to be] a big issue in South-East Queensland over the next 20 years."

According to Miller, the vagaries of planning schemes up and down the coast provide fuel for the fire of these community groups.

"Lie after lie is being spun, the classic one was that we would put a fence up around the Airlie Beach lagoon and people would have to pay to get in there."

But as Brisbane struggles to house the expected migrant intake over the next 10 years – a council report shows there will not be enough housing – Miller reckons more and more of these anti-development groups will spring up.

Perhaps Jacinta Lipson, spokeswoman for Shute Harbour Residents – by day a successful business consultant and by night an activist – puts it best. (She and hundreds of other residents oppose the \$240 million Shute Harbour marina development, complaining that it will encroach on public land.)

"We are not talking about green issues; we are talking about long-term viability of our [marine tourism] industry," says Lipson.

"We see the devastation of Queensland's coastal waterways as having a detrimental affect on the long-term viability of tourism."



Gordon Douglas lobbied to help stop the cruise terminal. Photo Adam McLean