Erosion on the lower Clarence River

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It’s come to our attention that one of our great rivers is currently under threat by preventable erosion of its banks.

Thought to be largely the work of wake boats, it’s not only eroding the rivers banks, but also preventing access to the river, as well as destroying important bankside habitat for native species, including Australian bass. Brian Gane, a concerned resident, wrote to the Maritime Management Centre, in hope of bringing this issue to the fore.

Here are some abridged versions of the letters.

I believe it’s reasonable to assume the key focus of this MMC draft management plan is to address riverbank erosion on the Clarence River, so understandably I’m disappointed that this issue has not been addressed in any way and in fact enshrines the practice of deliberate wake making activities into reaches of the river described in the MMC co sponsored WRL Riverbank Vulnerability Assessment using a Decision Support System: Clarence River (Rogan Bridge to Ullmarra) as being highly erosive and in immediate need of a management plan (0 to 6 months). This would involve enforcing ‘no wash’ zones and buoy deployment across the study region.

Nowhere in the supporting documentation tabled at the 10/07/15 Grafton presentation does MMC provide scientific advice that negates the WRL ‘no wash’ recommendation, nor was their any rationale presented to overrule the WRL advice that these reaches be immediately declared ‘no wash’ zones because of their erosion sensitivity.

MMC, as the strategic management representative of the NSW Government on maritime strategic planning, has an obligation to uphold the principles of environmental sustainability, both in general terms and specifically related to maritime matters. The RMS regulations in this regard are specific and ‘creating a deliberate wake’ that damages property or causes annoyance is an offence (page 43 NSW Boating Handbook).

The MMC have not provided an explanation as to why the Clarence River Awareness Group CRAG (a pro wake boat lobby, made up of a resort developer, resort tenants, a B&B owner and commercial wake boating interests) should be gifted 35km of uninterrupted (minimally regulated) access to the Clarence River, exposing 70km of unprotected river banks to an unacceptable erosion threat.

CRAG does not represent the Seelands community or the 14,000 NSW Northern Rivers recreational boaters. Furthermore, it is completely inappropriate for a business lobby group (CRAG) to develop a code of conduct for MMC/RMS that may adversely impact on residents, other boating user-groups or compromise environmental outcomes. The credibility of CRAG to self-regulate is naively unwarranted, given the abundant photographic evidence presented to RMS, CVC, LLS, NSW Water Police and MMC over the past two and a half years, showcasing a litany of erosion generating activities and non-compliance related to NSW RMS boating rules and regulations.

When I arrived in Seelands in 2005 the pragmites cover on both sides of the Seeland reaches of the river were up to 4m thick and provided natural resilience to the regular (and massive) flood events that the Clarence is notorious for. This was despite hosting large water skiing pressure, dating back to the 1960s. What changed that usage pattern was the introduction of wakeboarding in the mid 1990s. Wakeboarding was first conducted behind traditional flat keel ski boats measuring 4.0-5.5m, weighing less than 1000kg, powered by modest 40-100hp outboards or mid mounted V8 inboards and carrying small passenger loads. Riverbank resilience was compromised to an extent by this new wakeboarding activity, but did not reach a point of ‘no return’ until dedicated wave-making wake boats were introduced from America in the 2000 period.

These oversize 7.0-8.0m long boats with massive 2.59m wide beams (illegal to tow in all states of Australia without a permit) 2500kg and beyond dry weight, plus 1.293kg water ballast tanks, under keel hydrofoil wedges to produce extra displacement, wave and surf gates to concentrate and direct the wake energy left, right and centre of the boat, 400-550hp motors to drive the boats at semi displacement speeds and an engineered ‘convex keel’ to drive the hull deeper into the water as speed is increased.

Add up to 18 passengers and you have a deliberate wave-making machine capable of producing ocean size surf waves. I believe it would be irresponsible for any waterway management body, tasked with ensure environmental sustainability and public safety, to facilitate this environmentally damaging activity.

Of the 120+ wake and ski boats photographically identified in the Seelands reaches of the river over the past 12 months, around 80% (96 boats) are Queensland registered.

The assumption that wakeboarding is a financial benefit to Grafton is a myth. Interstate wake boaters pay no NSW boat or trailer registration, or boat licence fees. No NSW taxes and duties for the purchase of their boats, trailers and tow vehicles. Retail revenue from equipment, food, beverages and fuel, all stay in Queensland.

What is manifestly unfair about this proposed MMC management plan is it gives NOTHING back to the 25,000 boat licence holders and 14,000 boat owners who live in the Northern Rivers Region and the 229,000 boat owners who live in NSW.

Boat ramps on the Clarence are sub standard in design and function, unusable for elderly boaters or poorly sited (e.g. South Grafton).
ramps at Old Punt Road Seelands and opposite at Old Punt Lane The Whiteman, are a disgrace and have been left to detonated at an accelerated rate since 2000 due to Council indifference (CVC claim they’re punt crossings and wake gouging has not undercut the concrete pads).

These two ramps are the only public launching sites between South Grafton and Copmanhurst. They service the most used reaches of the river for the 1000’s of NSW bass fishers who visit the Clarence each bass season… and MMC propose to hand it over to a resort developer so he can advertise unfettered wake boat access to 35km of river in order to sell holiday cabins to interstate wake boaters.

Bass fishers in tinnies and kayaks look for undisturbed water, as this activity requires delicate lure casting techniques, tranquil water that harbour ‘bank hugging’ bass and a silt free water column to allow bass to respond to the lure. There is absolutely no way bass fishing or kayaking can co exist in the same reach of river as wake and ski boats.

I’m in the largest (MMC surveyed) boating user group on the Northern Rivers (76%) who are aged 50 and over. MMC have a duty of care to ensure all boat ramps in NSW have a ‘wake free’ zone declared around all public boat ramps. The Old Punt Road and Lane ramps are a case in point, having poor entry points, a dangerous drop off, no boat tie-up areas, limited car parking and exposure to continual wake boat traffic in the warmer months. These ramps must receive priority MMC funding before any NSW derived boating revenue is used to reward interstate wake boat operators and resort developers.

Throughout this 29 month process, since I first convened a community response, following the 2013 floods, I’ve been disappointed by the less than transparent response from Roads & Maritime Services-North, Clarence Valley Council (specifically the mayor and environment manager) and the intense lobbing from a resort developer and wake boat importer. Their lobby group (CRAG) have been allowed to highjack the agenda, scope the erosion study parameters and choose the body to do the study (it’s no coincident that the WRL study author had earlier produced a study inferring there was no difference in the wake intensity of ski vs. wake boats).

Working toward a sustainable future

As you can see, Brian is very concerned about the sustainability of this activity and he is not alone. His letters have not gone unanswered. Getting your voice heard as Brian has done is a great way to show your support for healthier waterways. Preserving native fish habitat is at the front of every angler’s mind and by working in numbers, anglers can put pressure on the government and make our waterways better places. – Fmg

Images

Wake boats of this size do untold damage to the banks of our confined waterways.
The eroded boat ramp at Seelands is a result of continual wave activity.

Some of the erosion between Rogan Bridge and Crowther Island on the Clarence River.
Ocean-sized wave activity has all but destroyed some native fish habitat on the Clarence.

Wake boats are designed to make large waves, and this can be seen here.