

Pearson discusses wild rivers laws

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Broadcast: 15/07/2009

Reporter: Leigh Sales

Noel Pearson joins Lateline to discuss his campaign against Queensland's proposed wild rivers legislation.

Transcript

LEIGH SALES, LATELINE: Noel Pearson is about to launch a new stage in his campaign against the wild rivers legislation. A short time ago he joined me from our Brisbane studio.

Noel Pearson, I'll come to the specifics of the wild rivers legislation later but let's start with the fact that you and your former allies at the Wilderness Society are now at loggerheads. How do you intend to counter their influence?

NOEL PEARSON, LAWYER AND ACTIVIST: Well, you know, I pulled together the Wilderness Society, together with the pastoralists, under the kind of guidance of the late Rick Farley back in 1996 with the Cape York heads of agreement. At that time, we brought together Indigenous people, pastoralists and conservation groups in an agreement called the Cape York heads of agreement that sought to achieve a balance between all of the interests in that region and we were committed to comprehensive conservation protection of the region, but also to allow the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who lived in the region to have an economic base.

Now we want to return to that original understanding that the late Rick Farley brought with us back in 1996. That agreement was about a balance of all of the stakeholders and their interests and what's happened recently is there's been a complete overrun of that agreement at the urging of the Wilderness Society.

LEIGH SALES: Are you saying you're going to formerly reconvene that group that was around that agreement?

NOEL PEARSON: Absolutely. We've been about - my conservation credentials long precede the Wilderness Society. We've been responsible for negotiating many millions of hectares of additional national parks in Cape York Peninsula. My own father's father's country was the first national park to be agreed in Cape York Peninsula back in 1993. I was the one, together with my family, who surrendered our land in the Starkey pastoral holding to the Goss Government in a deal that saw part of the land being set aside for Aboriginal people and part of the land being set aside as Aboriginal-owned national park. And my own family's land was actually in the national park area. So my own inheritance is actually tied up in national park that is now 15 years old.

So, you know, in terms of my conservation credentials we've negotiated national parks in the Starkey area ... and right throughout Cape York Peninsula.

LEIGH SALES: I want to look forward to what you hope this organisation will achieve in the future.

NOEL PEARSON: One of the principles that we established with the Goss Government in the early 90s was the principle of a 50/50 deal that wherever there was a national park created, the rest of the land, the other 50 per cent, would be set aside as Aboriginal land. And now what Lyndon Schneiders and the Wilderness Society are doing is they are saying, "thank you very much for the 50 per cent national park, we now want to create a kind of quasi-national park over the 50 per cent that was set aside as Aboriginal land." And you know, they've broken away from the balance that we sought to achieve the old Cape York heads of agreement and they've basically got a run at the rails with the Bligh Government that is seeing them not be satisfied with a 50/50 deal. They want a 99 per cent deal and unfortunately we can't agree with that.

LEIGH SALES: OK, but I am trying to establish: are you setting up your own lobby group here, your own conservation lobby group? Who is it going to be funded by?

NOEL PEARSON: Absolutely.

LEIGH SALES: Who is going to be funding it?

NOEL PEARSON: We're determined - and I've taken my time about getting this campaign organised because I see this as an extended campaign. I've spent 18 years putting together the land rights of our people in Cape York Peninsula, including the establishment of conservation areas. I've spent 18 years on that struggle.

LEIGH SALES: But who is behind you now in this initiative?

NOEL PEARSON: Sorry?

LEIGH SALES: Who is behind you now in this initiative?

NOEL PEARSON: The traditional owners in Cape York Peninsula and our organisations that put together the land rights.

LEIGH SALES: But who is going to be funding it?

NOEL PEARSON: We're seeking support from the public, those who support the agenda that we prosecuted, namely, an agenda of Aboriginal rights and an agenda of Aboriginal responsibility including our well-known agenda to get our people off welfare.

LEIGH SALES: The Wild Rivers legislation has already passed the Queensland Parliament. Isn't setting up this sort of a body or a movement now a bit of a case of the horse has already bolted?

NOEL PEARSON: This thing was dropped on us, we - Premier Bligh made her announcement following the recent election. Nobody understood that hidden in the drawer was this agenda to drop more than 70 per cent of Cape York Peninsula into this deal that had been done with the Wilderness Society. And our campaign will be long run. I don't see us reaching the goal we've set ourselves in short time. This is ... it's taken us 18 years to put the land rights thing together in the Cape. It will take us - it's taken just a moment to lose the gains we've made and I don't see us remaking ground without a long campaign on this.

LEIGH SALES: But the legislation as I say has already passed. How are you hoping to turn that around?

NOEL PEARSON: Well, what we need to do firstly is get the public to understand that in terms of conservation protection of Cape York

Peninsula, our credentials are well-established. And when it comes to the protection of rivers, there's absolutely no disagreement on our part that those rivers should remain in the way that they've been managed by Aboriginal people for thousands of years and for the past 200 years.

Cape York Peninsula hosts the most pristine rivers in this country and all of those rivers, bar a few, are on Aboriginal land. Now that says everything about the stewardship of the traditional owners, of the rivers on their land. Those rivers are pristine; they're been within Aboriginal reserve lands for more than a century now. They've been owned by the traditional owners for many hundreds and thousands of years and they will remain pristine for centuries into the future so far as Indigenous people are concerned.

LEIGH SALES: Alright, let's talk about some of the details of the wild rivers issue. Can you give me a specific example of a major development project that's been sidelined because of this legislation?

NOEL PEARSON: Well, you know, this is a very complex story because I don't know if you notice in today's paper the Premier's environmental credentials unravelling a bit, in that she's seeking Federal Government support to increase coal-powered power station emissions.

LEIGH SALES: I am sorry to interrupt but I don't see how that's relevant to the question of asking you to give me a specific example of a major development that's been sidelined.

NOEL PEARSON: What this legislation does - it doesn't stop mining. The wild rivers legislation doesn't stop mining. The place where you stop mining is the Mineral Resources Act. And it's within the power of the Queensland Premier to stop mining. Wild rivers in itself won't stop mining. What Wild Rivers will stop -

LEIGH SALES: You are saying it's stopping development and it's stopping projects and it will cost jobs. I am asking for a specific example.

NOEL PEARSON: Alright. The kind of development that it will stop is small-scale sustainable development. Let me tell you about my cousin at Hope Vale who has recently successfully established an organic passionfruit operation where he's supplying crates of passionfruit to the Sydney market. He makes about \$100,000 a year. And he's quite excited

about the progress that he's made. It's small-scale, it's sustainable, it provides an economic base for his family. And there are many potential followers of this kind of small-scale sustainable development. Now, it's operations like that that will be killed by wild rivers.

LEIGH SALES: And why will it be killed?

NOEL PEARSON: Because you won't be able to get the permits to undertake that kind of horticultural operation within X kilometres of a river - the water source. So we're going to have this ridiculous situation where wild rivers actually doesn't stop mining but it will stop small-scale Aboriginal development activities and at making money and at feeding themselves.

Let me tell you about the Queensland Government's hypocrisy here. They've exempted the new Chinalco bauxite mine from the whole wild rivers scheme. They've exempted the whole mining on western Cape York Peninsula from the operation of the wild rivers scheme. So wild rivers does not stop large-scale industrial development, the very kind of development that threatens rivers. What it will do and what it does, it will stop small-scale sustainable development by land owners and at feeding themselves and aimed at making money such as my cousin has been able to do with his passionfruit operation.

LEIGH SALES: So does that mean that you agree with the Wilderness Society that it will not stop the cattle industry or mining or it won't stop tourism or emerging industries around fishing? Do you agree with them that it's not going stop any of those opportunities?

NOEL PEARSON: Well, you have to look at each of those industries. The wild rivers scheme doesn't, for example stop, doesn't answer, the problems with overfishing, for example, because it says nothing about protecting the fish stock in these rivers. All of those commercial operations that many traditional owner groups complain about, the effect of commercial fishing in these rivers - wild rivers does nothing to deal with the issues of commercial fishing. But for example, things like aquaculture. In Australia, the CSIRO have developed technologies that have completely solved all of the pollution problems associated with aquaculture. Now I know of no Aboriginal community at the moment that actually wants to undertake aquaculture activities but this is now an industry that has solved its pollution problems. There need be no effluent

extruded into these rivers.

LEIGH SALES: Given that, do you want to see large-scale irrigation projects in Cape York? Would you like to turn the area into a national food bowl, if you like?

NOEL PEARSON: Absolutely not. I don't know of any Indigenous communities that have that vision in front of them. And as I said in relation to the aquaculture business, I don't know of any existing proposals. But what this debate is about, Leigh, this debate is about future generations. We don't know what our grandchildren will want to do in 15 years time, in 25 years time. This is about preserving opportunities for the future.

LEIGH SALES: So you want all options for development on the table, with no restrictions, is that what you're saying?

NOEL PEARSON: There has to be reasonable restrictions. We want the rivers protected. Our fathers and grandfathers looked after those rivers. The reason why they're pristine is because they've been under continuous Aboriginal ownership. The only reason these rivers are pristine is that they are the only parts of Australia which have been under continuous Aboriginal ownership, notwithstanding European colonisation.

And now, having preserved these rivers in a pristine condition, we face this ridiculous prospect that the Wilderness Society and ... can make political deals with politicians that say, alright, the Aboriginal people have looked after these rivers for the past 200 years and for many millennia before that, but now we're going to take over responsibility for it and take over their responsibility. And what I'm saying is that we've got to be given a go here. We've got to be given a chance.

LEIGH SALES: Let me ask you a final question. You claim this legislation was developed without consultation with the local Aboriginal people. But the Queensland Premier Anna Bligh told us in terms of the consultation that it not only occurred, but it occurred over a much longer period than the legislated period and the Cape York Development Corporation, of which your brother Gerhardt is executive director, was paid to do the consultation and a number of the submissions that were gathered have been accommodated. Now, are you saying that's a lie?

NOEL PEARSON: Well, the submission process started in the middle of last year and the proposals were first put together by the Queensland Government several years ago and we knew nothing about it. But at a meeting in Aurukun yesterday, it was the first time when the traditional owners actually came to see what these rivers mean on a map. It was the first time they came to see that the maps that have finally been decided upon by the Queensland Government.

LEIGH SALES: But I'm asking you, you've said there was no consultation. Anna Bligh says there was extensive consultation which involved your brother.

NOEL PEARSON: Well, we've never said - our complaint has never been consultation, Leigh. If you get the facts right. Our complaint has been is there's been no consent. There's been no consent to this. Now, if miners undertake activity on Aboriginal land, they have to get consent.

Now, we've already agreed to set aside 50 per cent of the land as national park and the Wilderness Society are now saying, "Thank you very much for the 50 per cent national park. Now give us the remainder of the land as some kind of quasi-national park that we called wild rivers." And the important point to understand here, Leigh, is these are not just rivers they've taken over here. Rivers have just been the entry point to establish what is actually a quasi-national park in the middle of Aboriginal land. And when you look at the volume of land that these areas cover, it's not the tributaries and the rivers, it's an entire takeover of Aboriginal land. And our point is that, well mate, the deal was 50/50 here. Now you want a 99 per cent takeover of Aboriginal land. And the problem with what you want is that, basically, you're condemning us to a perpetual life of welfare. And though the welfare cheque comes in recycled paper green, it's still a welfare cheque. And it's no good for our people.

LEIGH SALES: Noel Pearson many thanks for coming in tonight. We appreciate it.

NOEL PEARSON: Thank you very much.