

Caloundra South in potential deep water

By Rowan Schindler

Looking north from Wild Horse Mountain reveals a landscape of contradiction. The Glasshouse Mountains to the north-west – Tibrogargon, Beerwah and Coonowrin – tower above green forests and keep a lookout over the coastline. To the north-east, Pumicestone Passage shimmers silver as the morning sun creeps slowly above the horizon. The panorama interrupted by a bare patch of Earth, stuck between the passage coastline and the mountains, standing out like a sore thumb.

The area, 2,310 hectares in size, is the construction zone for the Caloundra South Development, owned by developer Stockland. The [developer](#), as well as the [Queensland State Government](#), plans 20,000 residential buildings for construction and approximately 50,000 people settled - twice the population of Alice Springs. According to the [Australian Bureau of Statistics](#) (ABS), in the ten years leading up to June 2011, Caloundra West experienced the most growth on the Sunshine Coast (up 9,900 people), followed by Sippy Downs (6,100) and Peregian (4,500).

The [Sunshine Coast Council](#) estimates Caloundra city's population at close to 89,000 and it is expected to grow to 120,000 by 2016. A city the size of Toowoomba, Bendigo or Ipswich, wedged between the vulnerable Pumicestone Passage, Bribie Island National Park and the Glasshouse Mountains. By 2026, the city is projected to surpass 155,500.

The Sunshine Coast as a whole has an approximate population of 350,000 people and is [predicted to go to](#) a population of 439,100 (when), or even as high as 516,250 by 2031. The quiet, sandy beaches, relaxed coastal cafes and the “corporate barefoot” may soon go the way of Coolum National Park's now extinct coastal emu.

[Stockland argue](#) they will inject more than \$10 billion into the Sunshine Coast community and create more than 60,000 jobs. The developer claims they will not impact negatively on the health of Pumicestone Passage. Certainly, the environmental impact of such a project is already ruffling feathers within the coastal community.

Sunshine Coast Environmental Council Executive Officer Wiebe ter Bals, who originally hails from the Netherlands, has worked for the UN campaigning for human rights as well as for Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander issues. He said there is no doubt Caloundra South will impact negatively on Pumicestone Passage.

“What makes this one slightly different is this development sits in the Pumicestone catchment,” ter Bals said.

“The Pumicestone is an internationally protected wetland and we have a local, state and national obligation to look after that wetland.

“It is highly unlikely, after Caloundra South, you can add this level of development and not seriously degrade water quality within the Passage.”

When asked as to what the effects on the environment of Pumicestone Passage would be, Mr ter Bals was scathing in his attack on Stockland.

“That depends on who ask, if you asked the proponent, Stockland, then nothing,” he said.

“If you ask anybody who works in environmental science, can you ask 50,000 people to a catchment and not have an impact on water quality? Then the answer is no, that is absolutely rubbish.

“What Stockland has done to get their environmental approval, they’ve said ‘we will maintain existing water quality so we won’t have an impact’.

“But existing water quality doesn’t actually meet the standards.”

Stockland claim the project will not affect the health of Pumicestone Passage, which has suffered [declining health results](#) since 2000. The government’s [Environmental Water Protection Policy](#) outlines the standards for the health of marine areas in Queensland. The passage is currently rated C +, as occasionally meeting some of the conditions, some of the time.

Stockland declined to comment when contacted. Environmental information about the bare patch of Earth between the mountains and the passage are as closed off to journalists as the summit route of Mt Beerwah is to climbers. It seems, dirt is hard to get if you are not a developer.

With the passage already suffering from environmental degradation, the potential of an additional 50,000 people living directly within the coastal catchment area may spell disaster for the internationally protected site.

A potential risk of the Caloundra South development is the location of the site in relation to natural flooding and potential sea level rise. In the aftermath of the 2011 flood crisis, the term Q100 was tossed around. The year before, in 2010, the Office of Climate Change [released a document](#) which defines Q100 as a climate change factor of 1 per cent of the Annual Exceedence Probability (AEP), or quite simply as a way of estimating a 1-in-100 year chance of a devastating flood.

Mr ter Bals said the Coast fought long and hard to get climate change recognised within planning frameworks.

“Sunshine Coast Council was the first, and to my knowledge, the only local council to actually adopt a climate change strategy,” Mr ter Bals said.

“So when you launched a development application you need to justify not just that you were safe from the Q100 or the Q100 plus 40 or 80 centimetres.

“In Queensland we had that within a thing called the Coastal Management Plan which basically said that every development in Queensland needed to account for .8 metres of sea level rise by 2100.”

Mr ter Bals said under the current government, approval for building around flood zones was back on the agenda because accommodations for climate change had been thrown out the window.

“Then the powers that be changed and climate change all of a sudden became a belief and the Coastal Plan was rescinded,” Mr ter Bals said.

“Now in spite of the fact the insurance industry has enough faith in the science to not insure you if you’re below Q100 plus .8 [.8 metres of sea level rise] you’re not actually required to meet Q100 plus .8 in order to get development approval in Queensland.

“So you could build there but your clients couldn't insure their house.

“So unfortunately, yes we used to take it [climate change] into consideration but certain people in certain position of power thought ‘well that was green tape and had to be reduced’.”

In 2012, Paul Summers, a former planning consultant for Noosa Shire, [criticised the Caloundra South](#) development for building on floodplains and rain catchment area.

In 2013, the Climate Commission released a report, [the Angry Summer](#), detailing research into the most erratic summer on Australian record in terms of weather. Hot on the heels was the 2013/14 summer, which broke [156 records over 90 days](#). The potential for further environmental degradation to Pumicestone Passage is worrying. The erratic and record breaking weather endured over past summers also adds fuel to the fire.

University of the Sunshine Coast Principal Research Fellow Dr Richard Wilson is an expert in disaster management and issues relating to climate change.

Dr Wilson says future erratic weather is forecasted and low-lying developments such as Caloundra South may be at risk.

Dr Wilson spent 39 years in the Australian Regular Army and most recently worked with the Queensland Reconstruction Authority (QRA) after the 2011 floods. He knows what mopping up after a disaster looks like. The Authority took charge of an estimated \$14 billion to clean up in the wake of the floods in 2011 and 2012, as well as the damage wreaked by tropical cyclone Ita. Dr Wilson says 75 per cent of the clean up and reconstruction funds goes to infrastructure, mainly the rebuilding of roads. He said legislation had been scrapped in regards to dealing with climate change, opening the doors for development of potentially risky areas. Dr Wilson said the Annual Exceedence Probability (AEP) factor and Q100 term needed to be revised.

“In regards to the Q100, the bottom line is that approach needs more work to do with what exactly that means,” he said.

Asked about his personal opinion towards the Caloundra South development, Dr Wilson was diplomatic.

“I can’t comment directly on the Caloundra South development but part of the Reconstruction Authority’s work was working with local councils to ensure there isn’t development in areas at risk of floods and deliver other reconstruction deliveries,” he said.

Dr Wilson raised concern over the development of the site, which sits between two creeks, a site which acts as a flood allayment zone.

“Caloundra South is in a flood allayment area and that could potentially be a troubling situation,” he said.

“With disaster management, we always try to look for ways to improve infrastructure to deal with the effects of floods and so on.

“But the fact developers build on floodplains is the primary problem.

“We [the QRA] are hoping to help change the processes and legislation to do with planning and developing in areas such as floodplains.”

Dr Wilson declined to comment on why he thought development approval was given.

Regional Development Australia CEO Russell Mason would not comment, but instead gave some advice.

“I don’t think anyone in the development sector will answer your questions,” Mr Mason said.

Looking north from Wild Horse Mountain in the future may be looking over a landscape of abandoned houses or a sprawling grey city, stretching to the foot of Beerwah itself.

Note on story:

Interviews were sought with employees and spokespeople from Stockland as well as members of the development and insurance industry, but no responses were received.

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