

Tully – Mission Beach Road

Anyone who has driven along the Tully – Mission Beach Road recently will have noticed that the roadside verges have been poisoned.

This road is the main entrance for motorists visiting Mission Beach, as most of them will be coming from the south. They will be expecting to see World Heritage listed rainforest, and hoping to catch a glimpse of the elusive Cassowary.

If they are lucky, they will see a cassowary and four chicks standing at the roadside. And if they are very lucky they will have their cameras handy and loaded with film, and they will take what they hope will be the perfect picture.

Unfortunately, all the visitors over Easter will have had no choice but to take the cassowaries' picture with them standing on a stretch of poisoned, dead grass. So the images preserved in their photo albums will always be that little bit less than perfect, and their special memories of Mission Beach will have been that little bit less idyllic.

Of course the grass will grow again - it has started already, but it's too late for the Easter visitors. Their once-in-a-lifetime visit was spoiled.

So who was responsible for this vandalism? Well the road is a State-controlled main road, so the principle agency is Department of Main Roads (DMR). For regular maintenance purposes the responsibility is assigned to Cardwell Shire Council, and they usually contract out the slashing to private operators. Wet Tropics Management Authority (WTMA) also has a role to play, but that really only goes as far as to agree a Code of Practice with DMR.

This poisoning, however, was a bit out of the ordinary. WTMA says that it was *"in response to concerns about weeds raised by the Community Reference Group for Cassowary Management and the South Mission and Wongaling Beaches Progress Association."*

This is incorrect as I was on the Community Reference Group representing the Progress Association, and there was no mention of poisoning

the roadside verges there. I would have complained very loudly if there had been.

I have also checked the records of the Progress Association and I have found a letter written by the President, dated 14th September 1999, that does say the weeds should be poisoned, but I cannot find anything in the minutes of the previous meeting that mentions this problem being discussed at all.

Anyway, as a result of these 'concerns', DMR decided 19 months later to allocate some money for "Weedbug trials". The idea is that if you apply the poison with a wick (rather than a spray) at 400mm above ground level, you will only kill the tall weeds, and you will leave the short grasses alone. That then encourages the short grasses to flourish, and you can cut back on roadside slashing.

Note that the object of the exercise is to poison the environment to cut down on road maintenance costs. It is this kind of economic rationalist thinking that is the real problem.

WTMA says the advantages of the Weedbug system include reduction of exposed earth from broad-scale herbicide treatment, and low levels of herbicide use! Unfortunately the Weedbug trial appears not to have been successful. It would seem that everything has been killed off and the plants that will come back the strongest are likely to be the toughest weeds and most invasive pioneers. As for saving money, the trial cost approximately \$8,000.

I have taken a series of photographs, including the cassowary and four chicks standing in the poisoned grass, and I have shown them to DMR and WTMA. They were a bit surprised to see the results.

What I think should happen now is that DMR and WTMA should accept that the trial has failed, and recognise that this special road needs **more** slashing, not less. Also, now would be a very good time to spread some suitable grass seed and perhaps even some lime and fertiliser. And how about picking up all the litter, rather than leaving it to be slashed?

Ironically, I then picked up my April/May issue of RACQ's magazine, "The Road Ahead", and on page 14 is an article headed **Eco-motoring : road to greener pastures**, with Ron Gordon of DMR. In the article it says:

"In the north Queensland township of Mission Beach, there are signs and measures in place to help preserve the native Cassowaries, along with initiatives to help preserve the overhead canopy (as a bridge for tree habitat fauna)."

Really? Good on yer, DMR!

Well, not exactly. In fact since the excellent public display and questionnaire last October, nothing has happened at all. The results of the questionnaire showed that 76% of respondents favoured a reduced speed limit, and the most popular limit was the lowest one offered – 75 Kph.

Now the DMR reasoning about speed limits is that some people will always speed, so they try to set the speed limit so that 80% of the traffic will obey the signs.

Speed recorders set on the Tully – Mission Beach Road at three places last year showed that 20% of traffic was exceeding 109 Kph, so by the above reasoning, the limit ought to be **raised** to 109!

In reality, what happens is that people go a bit faster than what is allowed, but not that much, so lowering the limit to say 80 Kph will bring most peoples' speed down below 89 Kph, which is a lot better than 109 Kph for the cassowaries.

DMR says the final strategy containing conclusions and recommendations will be available for perusal and comment in early 2001. Meanwhile another cassowary was killed in March in the proposed speed limit zone.

Illegal Logging Hotline

Have you noticed someone clearing land and you're not sure if it's legal? Contact the new QPWS compliance unit on 0418 187163 or Natural Resources on 0418 884351 and let them know what's going on.

□ **Dave Kimble**