

# **Pooh Corner Campaign Summary**

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## **Abstract**

*In late February 2005, two large parcels of Department of Defence land in Wacol, Brisbane went up for sale by tender. Of the two blocks totalling 245 hectares, the 138 hectare property known as Pooh Corner has ecologically high quality tall open forest containing approximately 2km of Sandy Creek. The block is also home to a large population of Eastern Grey Kangaroos. In response to the For Sale signs, a group called Friends of Pooh Corner was formed and campaigned to stop private developers taking over ownership of Pooh Corner. The result was a withdrawal of the land from sale and a public undertaking by the Federal Government that the Pooh Corner block would be 'sold' to Brisbane City Council for "...less than ten dollars..." to be managed as a bushland reserve for nature conservation. Here we describe the conditions and events which led to one of the shortest successful conservation campaigns in Queensland's south-east.*

## **Pooh Corner**

Pooh Corner, so named for the smell which emanated from a nearby early 20<sup>th</sup> century burial site for the contents of western suburbs night carts, is now a fine example of one hundred and thirty eight hectares (or 1.4 sq km) of *Eucalyptus tereticornis* woodland on an alluvial plain.

This vegetation type is classified as 12.3.3 (Sattler and Williams) and under the Vegetation Management Act 1999 is scheduled as a regionally endangered ecosystem. Under that Act clearing or substantially interfering with the ecosystem without permit, licence or authority would constitute a serious offence.

The Brisbane City Council had recognised the values of Pooh Corner, including the fact that it is the intersection for three wildlife corridors, in its City Plan, marking the area "Parkland for Conservation Purposes".

## **Objection to the sale**

Local objection to the sale of the defence land was immediate, unsurprising considering the interest that local community groups, Save Our Riverfront Bushland and Centenary Riverfront Advisory Committee had previously shown in Pooh Corner.

Local communities had risen up in opposition to other similar cases: when the Federal Government attempted to sell surplus Defence land in Sydney Harbour in the nineties, and more recently at Point Nepean in Victoria earlier this decade.

In each of these three cases the Federal Government undertook absolutely no formal community consultation as to what should happen to the public lands that were no longer required by Defence.

Friends of Pooh Corner argued that Pooh Corner should remain in public ownership considering the outstanding ecological values, and the fact that any development of

the site would be contrary to State legislation and the legislated local government plan. Obviously the Federal Government wasn't the best level of government to manage Pooh Corner as a conservation reserve, so it was argued that it should be gifted to either the State or Local government.

### **Research**

The public only first became aware of the sale after "For Sale" signs were erected in late February 2005. It was soon discovered through the real estate agent's website that a tender period that ended 27 April 2005.

Given there was a two month tender process before the Federal Government could act on an actual sale, the first step in the Pooh Corner campaign was research, research, research which included relevant legislation, and a look into the political landscape.

The Vegetation Management Act (VMA) protects Pooh Corner because it is an endangered ecosystem. This State legislation, which was enacted in 1999, strives to protect whole ecosystems, unlike the Nature Conservation Act (NCA) which focuses on species present.

Under the NCA a number of rare, vulnerable or endangered species would have had to be identified as being present and dependent on any site. That is, a development would only be refused if it would cause damage to the species as a whole, not individuals within a species. This leads to 'death by a thousand cuts'.

How have NCA battles gone in the past? Despite the presence of the platypus in the Maleny supermarket struggle, it was no use in stopping the development! All of the species theoretically possible on site are found elsewhere. In the past the protagonists have always suggested shifting any endangered species to another area so that no individual gets hurt.

For conservationists the legislative approach of the NCA inevitably causes problems and frustration; the limited time for research, the need for permits for flora and fauna studies, the cost and supply of equipment and so on.

The beauty of the VMA is that it is the **ecosystem** which is endangered and moving an ecosystem to a safer place is not just impossible it is ridiculous.

When the For Sale signs were nailed to the trees, Pooh Corner was already mapped as an endangered ecosystem, and the protection in place via the VMA. So Friends of Pooh Corner was able to use this protected status in rallying support from local, State and Federal politicians and the wider community.

Before the public campaign, The Friends of Pooh Corner put together a website ([www.poohcorner.info](http://www.poohcorner.info)) so that information was easily available to the community, media and politicians.

### **Public media campaign**

Friends of Pooh Corner had its first outing at the State Government's Community Cabinet in Ipswich where the Pooh Corner issue was first raised to Premier Beattie

and his Ministers. Quickly the State government ministers aligned themselves with the view that they did not support the development of Pooh Corner, but made it clear they did not want to take responsibility for Pooh Corner.

Friends of Pooh Corner had meetings with Members of Parliament from all levels of Government; local, State and Federal. The first media on the issue by a local paper had the real estate agent declare the site was “littered” with car bodies and rubbish. In total there are maybe half a dozen car bodies on the 1.4sq km area.

This negative image of Pooh Corner was the beginning and end of the Federal Government’s dirty tricks campaign. When Friends of Pooh Corner began the media campaign and first hit the airwaves with Steve Austin on 612 ABC radio it was to be only 15 days until the Federal Government would announce they wanted to ‘save’ Pooh Corner.

Right from the start of the media campaign, the Federal Member for Oxley, Bernie Ripoll, whose electorate includes Pooh Corner, was very supportive of the call for Pooh Corner to be kept in public ownership as a conservation reserve. Bernie then went on site, attracting considerable local media coverage.

Shortly after this, Friends of Pooh Corner went to buy but were subsequently “given” a copy of the “Due Diligence” material available only to potential purchasers. After being forced to sign a confidential agreement with the Federal Government to get this information, Friends of Pooh Corner discovered that consultants had written to the Department of Natural Resources on behalf of the Federal Government seeking to have the ecosystem of Pooh Corner reclassified so it could be bulldozed for development to take place. This reclassification issue mysteriously came to light the next day in the Courier Mail.

The day following that, the Courier Mail ran the story of how a community group was forced to sign a confidentiality agreement to obtain information on publicly owned land. The Federal Government was now on the back foot, but continued to claim Pooh Corner would be sold to the highest bidder.

Within days the Labor councillors of the Brisbane City Council (BCC) publicly called on the Federal Government to hand Pooh Corner over to the BCC to be a reserve for free. The Liberal Councillors and Mayor responded by agreeing. Pooh Corner reached the channel 9 TV news with a good positive report showing the famous kangaroos of Pooh Corner (the last population in Brisbane).

A few days later the State Government released a statement saying that they would not reclassify Pooh Corner’s ecosystem, and called for the Federal Government to give Pooh Corner to the BCC for conservation.

The next day an announcement was made by the Federal Government and Brisbane City Council Mayor that Pooh Corner would be sold to the Council for a nominal sum, “less than ten dollars”, to be managed as a conservation reserve.

Pooh Corner would be saved, thanks to a strong community campaign using protection under the Vegetation Management Act for leverage.

But what will be put up for sale next in the Defence land lottery? Or will the Federal Government put in place a formal consultation process for the disposal of land surplus to the needs of the Defence?

### **After the battle for the land**

Since the initial campaign to stop the sale of Pooh Corner by the Federal Government, FoPC has also been successful on various 'mini-campaigns':

- Ensured BCC budget included fencing of Pooh Corner. (2005)
- Secured Federal Government funding for the clean up of Pooh Corner. (2005-06)
- Stopped the killing of kangaroos at Wacol and exposed lies being spread by the EPA regarding the number and condition of the kangaroos. (April 2007)
- Stopped the Recycled Water Pipeline from being built in Pooh Corner. (August 2007)

### **References**

Nature Conservation Act 1992, available at [www.legislation.qld.gov.au](http://www.legislation.qld.gov.au)

Sattler, P. S., and R. D. Williams (Eds) 1999, *The Conservation Status of Queensland's Bioregional Ecosystems*. Environmental Protection Agency, Brisbane,.

Vegetation Management Act 1999, available at [www.legislation.qld.gov.au](http://www.legislation.qld.gov.au)

Vegetation Management Regulation 2000, available at [www.legislation.qld.gov.au](http://www.legislation.qld.gov.au)