

Thursday, 8 March 2007

**ROTTNEST ISLAND,  
A POLICY STATEMENT**

from

THE ROTTNEST SOCIETY



**Preamble**

The Rottneest Society recently wrote to the Premier on a number of Rottneest-related issues. Several of the issues are matters of policy rather than specifically related to the current debate on the proposed Mt Herschel development. These matters of policy however need, in our view to be addressed by both parties if the future of Rottneest is to be protected as it is obviously intended to be under the Rottneest Island Authority Act 1987.

We believe that there are two matters of policy that need to be addressed. Firstly there is the need for an acceptance by governments of both persuasions that this "A" Class Reserve must have ongoing annual funding from the public purse for certain aspects of its management if the island is to survive the ravages of 500,000 visitors annually; if the nationally significant built heritage component is to be maintained and conserved in a proper manner; and if the purpose for which the Act says Rottneest is to be managed (essentially as an affordable local holiday island with the natural environment cared for) is not to be diluted by the efforts of tourism agencies to turn the island into a "world class tourism destination". Secondly it requires a clarification and affirmation of the purposes for which Rottneest is to be managed under the Act with all associated ministers and agency personnel.

A number of reviews and reports over the decades have identified the same problems, time after time, but governments of both persuasions have continued to believe that the RIA will ultimately become self-sustaining. These reports have shown that this is not possible given the magnitude of the task the RIA is asked to do at the same time that it keeps the island "affordable". The Rottneest Island Taskforce, when it recommended a "low-impact, eco-tourism" development, intended this to fill the gap by having wealthier patrons somehow subsidise the affordability for the rest of the holiday makers who value this island so highly. Whether in fact such a venture would be viable given the seasonality of the nature of Rottneest is a debatable question. However the very introduction of this class of wealthy visitor immediately changes the social values which are a significant part of the appeal of Rottneest to the hundreds of thousands of Western Australians who visit Rottneest and return many times over the years. Therefore we must ask "What is the real cost of such a venture?" The Rottneest Society believes that significant steps could be taken towards putting the management of Rottneest on a more sustainable footing into the future by putting into practice the recommendations found in the following pages.

**Community Service Obligations**

The government is to be commended for committing expenditure of \$26 million to the necessary refurbishment and upgrading work that is being undertaken currently. Although successive governments in the last decade have committed funds to upgrading work it has been somewhat ad hoc and there has been a huge backlog of problems to rectify as the Island's infrastructure was very run down. The work of the RIA towards a properly scheduled ongoing works programme is very commendable and one that we support. This has brought most of the accommodation up to a good basic standard which large numbers of Western Australians find appropriate for Rottneest.

While in general it is not unreasonable for the government to expect a statutory authority to be financially self-sustaining, we believe this does not apply in the case of Rottnest. It is a publicly owned “A” Class Reserve with no base of resident ratepayers. There is no private ownership of land, and no local council. Yet the statutory authority is responsible for the provision of all the services of a remote small country town and is expected to cope with a visitor population of 500,000 people annually.

The RIA’s major sources of income are the landing fees it charges each person to visit the island, and the rentals it charges for accommodation. It also receives income from business leases. On the one hand the RIA has been required by successive governments to keep accommodation affordable to ordinary people – and this should continue. However this obviously limits what the RIA can do by way of income boosting. On the other hand the RIA is responsible for the provision of visitor and accommodation services, for the provision of all utilities, for the conservation and maintenance of a significant built heritage component and for the conservation and restoration of the fragile and degraded natural environment on Rottnest. All of these things are more expensive to manage than similar items on the mainland simply because of the cost of transport. It has been recognised by a number of reviews and reports over the decades that this is an impossible ask.

The lack of an acceptance of these facts by governments and the lack of an ongoing commitment by governments to funding certain aspects of the management of the “A” Class Reserve leads to inappropriate proposals to attract more visitors to the island in an effort to boost income so that the island can achieve the government’s objective of it becoming financially self-sustaining. There has, for example, been no research by the Rottnest Island Authority to rectify their uncertainty as to the impact of the current 500,000 visitors to this already heavily degraded and inadequately conserved reserve or, indeed, on the social values. The proposed Broadwater hotel on Mt Herschel will attract approximately 90,000 extra overnight visitors annually.

**Recommendation 1: Commit to ongoing annual Community Service Obligations for the Rottnest “A” Class Reserve in the following areas:**

- a. **The restoration and conservation of the natural environment;**
- b. **The restoration, conservation and regular maintenance of the built heritage component of Rottnest buildings**
- c. **A component to be determined towards the provision of utilities on Rottnest island**

**Recommendation 2: Amend the Rottnest Island Authority Act 1987 to enshrine this principal in the Act.**

**Conservation of the natural environment of Rottnest Island**

The natural environment of Rottnest is heavily degraded in many places. The island currently receives 500,000 visitors annually. The Rottnest Island Authority Act 1987 requires the Rottnest Island Authority to “maintain and protect the natural environment and the man-made resources of the Island and, to the extent that the Authority’s resources allow, repair its natural environment” [Part III(11)(2)(c)]. This is a ‘let-out’ clause that means that the natural environment never has sufficient funding budgeted each year to carry out necessary and well-overdue conservation and restoration work.

The Rottnest Island Taskforce Report of 2004 blithely says “There is little doubt that Rottnest has the capacity to handle greater visitor numbers”. Yet the Report goes on to contradict itself with “Capacity is an elusive concept, and the Authority has not yet carried out the research necessary to identify evidence capable of either supporting or dispelling the arguments relating to capacity”. It later emphasises its uncertainty by referring to the Rottnest Island Management Plan 2003-2008 (RIMP) assertion that “The Authority does not have a good

understanding of the relationship between visitor numbers, impact on the Island's environment and demand on resources. Although there is awareness of general seasonal and annual trends, there are limited recorded data on visitor usage patterns and behaviours."

**Recommendation 3: Amend the Rottnest Island Authority Act 1987 to remove the phrase "to the extent that the Authority's resources allow" from Part III(11)(2)(c), for while this remains embedded in the Act it will always serve as an escape clause for hard pressed managers.**

**Recommendation 4: Ensure that the Rottnest Island Authority as carries out research required by Recommendation 115 of the Rottnest Island Management Plan 2003-2008 into the impact of both day and overnight visitors on the natural environment and widely accepted social values of Rottnest before there are any further moves to boost visitor numbers to the island above 500,000 annually.**

#### **Conflict about the purpose for which Rottnest Island is managed**

There is a serious conflict of interest between the desires and expectations of tourism authorities and Ministers for Rottnest and the specific purpose for which it is managed as expressed in the Rottnest Island Authority Act 1987 (and supported by decades of public opinion). The Act requires that Rottnest be managed by the RIA "to provide and operate recreational and holiday facilities on the Island" [Part 111(11)(2)(a)]. The Act also requires that the provision of those facilities have "particular regard to the needs of people normally resident in Western Australia who visit or holiday on the Island as a family group".

Western Australians know it as their holiday island and do not want it promoted widely as a 'world class tourist destination'. Tourism people see it as a potential world class tourist destination – if only it had suitable accommodation. A large percentage of the 500,000 annual visitors are local and return many times. We have to ask why. The answer always lies in the very simplicity of the experience on Rottnest. Rottnest has an extraordinary place in the hearts and minds of hundreds of thousands of Western Australian people of differing ages and social backgrounds. To them tourists are welcome to join them but they do not want Rottnest turned into a world class tourism destination. The island cannot be all things to all people. It is primarily an "A" Class Reserve which is also WA's favourite holiday island and the Act reflects that.

**Recommendation 5: Clarify and confirm with the Minister for Tourism, WA Tourism, Landbank and the Rottnest Island Authority (RIA) that the purposes for which Rottnest is to be managed are as defined in the Rottnest Island Authority Act 1987.**

## **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION OF INTEREST IN THE CURRENT DEBATE:**

### **Key Performance Indicators (published in the RIA's Annual Report 2005-06)**

“The Government of Western Australia has outlined its intentions to improve the quality of life for all Western Australians in Better Planning: Better Services, A Strategic Planning Framework for the Western Australian Public Sector.

The framework is built around five strategic goals that contribute to the Government's vision. Through its legislated functions, the Rottnest Island Authority contributes to two of these goals in particular:

**People and communities: to enhance the quality of life and wellbeing of all people throughout Western Australia;**

**and: The environment: to ensure that Western Australia has an environment in which resources are managed, developed and used sustainably, biological diversity is preserved and habitats protected.**

The Authority has one agency level Government desired outcome, reflecting the intent of these Government goals:

Provision of accessible recreational and holiday facilities, appropriate to the Island environment, for the benefit of Western Australian families and other visitors, and conservation of the natural and cultural values.

To achieve this outcome, the Authority has two services:

Service 1: Provision of services to visitors: the Rottnest Island Authority provides and operates accessible recreational and holiday facilities with particular regard to the needs of people normally resident in Western Australia who visit or holiday on the Island as a family group.

Service 2: Conservation of the natural and cultural environment: the Rottnest Island Authority maintains, protects and restores the Island's natural and cultural environment.

The single outcome and two services are derived from the functions of the Authority as established under the Rottnest Island Authority Act 1987.”

### **From the RIA's website in which they invite public comment on the proposed amendments to the RIMP in order to rezone the land at Mt Herschel:**

“You are invited to provide a written submission detailing your approval of or opposition to changes outlined as an Addendum to the Rottnest Island Management Plan 2003-2008 (RIMP). The Addendum outlines changes, mainly in zoning, that are necessary for the Authority to progress towards financial sustainability for Rottnest Island.

Should you disagree with the amendments, your submission should include alternatives leading to financial sustainability for Rottnest.”

The Rottnest Society believes that this is totally unacceptable.