


The inconvenient cassowary

Liz Gallie - Community for Coastal and Cassowary Conservation (C4)



At approximately 7am on a Sunday morning in December another cassowary was killed on the road at Mission Beach (south of Cairns in Queensland). This is barely a month after the last road fatality took the life of a female estimated to be twenty years old. The death occurred at the approach to Mission Beach as the road straightens out from the sharp bends of Fenby's Gap. It is a known crossing area where Queensland Parks and Wildlife staff often post 'Recent Crossing' signs.

Photo by Liz Gallie



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There have been other cassowary fatalities in this area. It is on a main roads section of road which displays a recommended speed limit of 60km/h within an 80 km/h zone.

It appears that this is another case of a cassowary being hit by a vehicle and the driver not stopping.

A couple travelling out of Mission Beach saw a cassowary standing next to something on the other side of the road bending down and touching it with its beak. They stopped and realised then it was another cassowary. They described the scene as the cassowary standing over the other (dead) bird and it looked like it was trying to pull it up. Another witness who stopped called the police to report the 'traffic hazard' because the other bird wouldn't go away. "It kept pecking it and nudging it. It would walk into the bush and come back out again", they said.

When a wildlife life carer arrived, the bird was sitting a few metres away in the cover of the rainforest. The dead bird was removed by a Queensland Parks and Wildlife ranger.

More signs went up and life went back to normal ... for the motorists, that is.

Why there were two birds on the scene raises some questions. Both of the birds were described as similar in appearance.

They were reasonably young adults, ie had full colour, black plumage with a well-formed, relatively small casque.

As the cassowary is a territorial species, it is not common to see two adults being tolerant of each other unless it is the breeding season. December is getting very late in the season. Most of the birds being observed now are solitary or moving about the landscape with their chicks which range from a few weeks to a few months old.

So much is still unknown about this prehistoric keystone species of the rainforest we have the privilege to share our lives with. Yet there is complacency about their plight and even dislike of their presence from some local residents and developers.



Photo by Liz Gallie

It has been said, "I wish I had never heard of cassowaries, they are holding up progress" and even at the scene of the death a month ago someone said, "Get it off the road, they are just a bloody nuisance".

No one driving past the site since Sunday would know that another (likely breeding) adult cassowary had been killed at this location and removed from the important population at Mission Beach. No one knows what its relationship was with the other bird. It was simply another wildlife roadkill.

Despite overwhelming evidence and knowledge that vehicle strike is a major cause of cassowary deaths, traffic-producing development continues to be approved without traffic-calming measures to protect these endangered species at Mission Beach.

The Community for Coastal and Cassowary Conservation (C4) has been voicing their concerns to all levels of government for twenty years and yet, urbanisation continues and with it traffic increases. At Mission Beach all traffic travels through cassowary habitat.

A recent report commissioned by the Federal Environment Agency found that there are 1,000 vacant blocks of land and over 900 new units currently approved or being assessed for development. However, the actual number is greater.

A local real estate agent admits there is an oversupply of real estate at Mission Beach, with many blocks going unsold at the regular land auctions now being held to try and move sales.

The local business group promotes Mission Beach as an adventure playground and appears to play down the importance of the cassowary to the Mission Beach tourism economy



Photo taken by Nancy Lowe on 11 Dec 2009

ignoring the consequences of increased traffic to the area.

Cassowary Coast Council must start taking responsibility and show political will by acknowledging the importance of the cassowary population to the health of our rainforest, our community and our economy. Immediate steps need to be taken to manage and control the ongoing and increasing threats associated with development the Council is approving.

Local, state and federal legislation is allowing for serious environmental harm to occur at Mission Beach. C4 urgently calls for a temporary freeze on more development approvals, especially those that disregard the FNQ 2031 plan.

We ask the federal government to pay particular attention to the impact traffic will have on the continued presence of the cassowary when assessing all current and future developments in important cassowary population areas.

Forty percent of cassowary habitat at Mission Beach is not protected. C4 has already raised \$80,000 to buy back cassowary habitat and protect it forever. We recently entered into a fundraising partnership with renowned Rainforest Rescue. Bob Irwin is our champion and encourages people to please donate to help secure essential cassowary habitat in the lowland tropical rainforests of Mission Beach. We hope that state and federal governments will match donations from the public, which seems fair given cassowaries are listed as endangered under their legislation, although that could be an inconvenient truth.

Community for Coastal and Cassowary Conservation (C4)

The constant pressure of development on Crown land at Mission Beach, all of which is now critical cassowary habitat,



Photo taken by Robert Tidey on 12 Dec 2009

was the impetus for a group of twelve locals to get together to form Mission Beach's first incorporated conservation group, the Movement for Responsible Coastal Development.

In 1990 the newly elected State Labor Government, with the assistance of several local councils and the Tully branch of Wildlife Preservation Society Queensland (WPSQ), organised a conference at Mission Beach to discuss the plight of the cassowary. The outcome of this conference was the establishment of the Consultative Committee for Cassowary Conservation (C4). C4 was a consortium of local community groups, local councils, government departments and other agencies such as CSIRO.

In 1994 the MRCD and C4 combined to form the Community for Coastal and Cassowary Conservation.

C4 aims to:

- implement the Cassowary Recovery plan.
- identify and ensure the retention of environmentally significant areas.
- liaise with all levels of government and have input into the social, economic and environmental well-being of Mission Beach.
- maintain a heightened community awareness of environmental

issues through education and information.

- maintain a Land Gift Fund to protect and secure essential cassowary habitat

C4 established five working groups to achieve these aims:

- Habitat
- Education
- Rural
- Nursery
- Rescue and Rehabilitation
- Representation and advice from the local indigenous people (Djiru)

Through the working groups and the vision statement of 'Knowing Keeping Sharing', C4 undertakes to protect Mission Beach's natural values to ensure a healthy environment, community and economy. We believe Mission Beach can develop and maintain its unique identity including being a place where you can still see a cassowary in the wild.

In 2006 the Wildlife Preservation Society of Australia donated funds to C4 for feeding of a protein substitute and fruit to the cassowary population after Tropical Cyclone Larry devastated the region and the cassowary's habitat.

Website:

www.cassowaryconservation.asn.au



Photo by Liz Gallie