

Agenda



ORDINARY MEETING OF COUNCIL

SUPPLEMENTARY AGENDA

28 AUGUST 2019

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11. ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND PLANNING SERVICES REPORTS

11.7 Lake Apex Wildlife Relocation

Date: 23 August 2019
Author: Renee Sternberg, Senior Environmental Planner
Responsible Officer: Ian Church, Chief Executive Officer

Summary:

The purpose of this report is to seek Council's support for relocating wildlife including turtles, eels and fish before the pools of water in Lake Apex dry out completely.

Officer's Recommendation:

THAT Council approve Option 1: the engagement of suitably qualified and licenced fauna spotter-catchers to relocate the remaining wildlife from the drying pools of water in Lake Apex, Gatton to more permanent pools of water in the Lockyer Creek, Crowley Vale.

Report

1. Introduction

Lake Apex precinct is a multi-use park area that includes barbeque areas, playgrounds, exercise equipment, a skatepark, a dog-off-leash area and the Lights on the Hill memorial. A key component of the Lake Apex precinct is Lake Apex and Lake Freeman which are considered referable wetlands and High Ecological Significant Wetlands by the State Government. These important wetlands are home to many waterbirds (including migratory species) and native aquatic species such as the longfin eel, Krefft's river turtle, Murray turtle, Common Saw shell turtle, Eastern Long necked turtle and the broad shelled turtle as well as fish species Boney bream, Glass fish, Spangled perch, Australia smelt, Western carp gudgeon, Fire tail gudgeon and potentially the federally protected Australian lungfish (*Neoceratodus forsteri*).

Since 12 February 2019, Lake Apex and Lake Freeman has been closely monitored as the water level reduced due to the lack of rainfall or drought conditions. The remaining water is now constrained to two small ponds. One in the south-west of Lake Apex which is approximately 55m long and 18m wide (at the widest point) and likely only 60cm deep and the other smaller pond in the south-east corner of Lake Apex which is only 10cm deep.

The purpose of this report is to seek Council's approval to engage suitably qualified and licenced fauna-spotter catchers to relocate the wildlife from these ponds to a location on the Lockyer Creek which is a more permanent source of water.

2. Background

In February 2019, Councillors received a briefing note and workshopped a Fauna Rescue Plan for wildlife in Lake Apex if required. This fauna rescue plan detailed how turtles could be assisted to relocate themselves

from Lake Apex using sediment fences to guide them to the culvert under Western Drive and into the Lockyer Creek. It also stated that Council could engage suitably qualified and licenced fauna spotter-catchers to rescue the remaining fish and turtles should the lakes dry up. The aim of the Fauna Rescue Plan was to prevent a repeat of the 2003 mass turtle movement which resulted in hundreds of turtles killed on the road over a 48-hour period.

Over the past six months, turtles have been relocating themselves, however the water has now dried to two small ponds. Trenches around the perimeter of the Lake contain thick, sticky mud, which the turtles are struggling to escape. The ponds are now at the point that they are likely to completely dry up in the next few weeks which will result in fish dying and possible mass numbers of turtles leaving the Lake and crossing roads.

Suitably qualified and licenced fauna spotter-catchers have already rescued 17 turtles stuck in the mud and relocated them to a water hole near Davey's Bridge on the Lockyer Creek. The fauna spotter-catchers were also engaged to estimate the number of animals remaining in the two isolated ponds. A report submitted by the fauna spotter-catchers suggests more than 100 turtles as well as numerous fish species (including exotic carp) and possibly some eels remain in the larger pond.

3. Report

A number of options have been investigated to remediate the problem of the ponds drying as follows:

Option 1: Engage suitably qualified and licenced fauna spotter-catchers (with rehabilitation permits) to perform the relocation.

As Council Officers are not licenced to perform the relocation themselves, a quote has been obtained from a suitably qualified and licenced fauna spotter-catcher company to relocate all wildlife from the remaining ponds of water at their earliest availability. This quote came in at \$4,958.80 (incl. GST). Council officers from Environment and Pest Unit and Infrastructure Works and Services Group will be required to assist the contractors in transporting the animals in plastic tubs on a Council truck.

The earliest that the fauna spotter-catchers and Council staff are available to assist with relocating the remaining wildlife is Thursday evening 29 August and Friday 30 August 2019. It is the fauna spotters-catchers professional opinion that the wildlife will survive until then. Specially designed turtle traps can be set on Thursday afternoon and evening to catch the majority of the turtles. A drag net can then be used on Friday morning to collect any remaining fish, eels and turtles. In both cases all wildlife will be immediately relocated. If any federally protected Lung Fish are present, their capture and release will require careful planning.

Under the fauna spotter-catchers rehabilitation permit, the aquatic wildlife must be relocated to within the same catchment. A suitable release location has been located at a more permanent chain of ponds on the Lockyer Creek (Figure 5) and permission from the adjacent landholder sought for the use of their land to access the creek. A turtle count has been undertaken at the release location and it appears that it should be able to accommodate additional turtles. Anecdotal evidence from the adjacent landholder indicates that this chain of ponds has never gone dry.

Option 2: Engage suitably qualified and licenced fauna spotter-catchers (with rehabilitation permits) to only trap turtles over one evening.

An alternative option is to trap only turtles using specialised floating turtle traps over one evening and relocate them to the same location as option 1. However, this option will likely only capture 30 individuals and mean the remaining turtles will likely self-relocate across roads and remaining aquatic fauna would perish. The cost of this option is \$1,919.50 (incl. GST).

Option 3: RSPCA perform the relocation

RSPCA were contacted however they do not have rehabilitation permits and are only able to rescue sick or injured wildlife. RSPCA also noted that many wildlife carers do not possess the necessary permits and are also only permitted to rescue sick and injured wildlife.

Option 4: The University of Queensland perform the relocation

The University of Queensland Gatton Campus were contacted, however do not have rehabilitation permits or the necessary equipment available.

Option 5: The State Department of Environment and Science perform the relocation

The Wildlife and Threatened Species Operations Department within the State Department of Environment and Science (DES) in Toowoomba were contacted. They don't perform fauna relocations themselves, however recommended that Council engage a fauna spotter-catcher.

Option 5: Put water into the Lake

Water can be carted using Council water trucks and gently trickled into the remaining pools of water to "top them up". This procedure requires carefully management to ensure sediment in the water is not stirred up which may result in fish kills. The water from the bore standpipe at Smithfield Road may be utilised however the "topping up" will need to continue until it rains. As the water trucks are from the Infrastructure Delivery Unit they will need to be taken off current road works projects to cart the water.

As a medium-term solution, it is worth exploring the viability of reinstating the functionality of an historic bore near Lake Apex to top up the water levels in the future.

Option 6: Install sediment fencing to allow the turtles to self-relocate safely under the road

The Fauna Rescue Plan provided to Councillors in February 2019 outlined a method of installing sediment fencing to guide the turtles through the culverts under Western Drive to the Lockyer Creek. The aim was to prevent a repeat of the 2003 mass turtle movement which resulted in large quantities of turtles killed on the road, which Council were responsible for cleaning-up. This option (shown in Figure 6) would likely cost \$1830 - \$2000 to supply and install the sediment fencing, however it would still likely result in large quantities of other aquatic fauna such as fish dying as the pools dry up. In addition, the pools in the Lockyer Creek closest to the culvert are now dry and the nearest downhill pools are now 5.4km downstream.

Option 7: Do nothing

Another option is that Council do nothing, and let mother nature take its course, as has occurred around the region as dams and creeks have dried out. There is the possibility that once the pools dry out completely causing the fish to die, the odour produced by the decaying aquatic fauna (possibly including large carp) may be undesirable and the decaying matter requested to be removed by Council.



Fig 1: Latest Nearmap imagery showing extent of remaining water in Lake Apex and Lake Freeman (Sunday 4 August 2019). The pond of water on the south-eastern corner of Lake Apex is now approx. 10cm deep, and the pond of the south-western side of Lake Apex is now approximately 60cm deep.



Fig 2: Photo showing remaining muddy trenches around the perimeter of Lake Apex. Standing on the northern side of Lake Apex, looking south-west (14/8/2019).



Fig 3: Photo showing remaining muddy trenches around the perimeter of Lake Apex. Standing on the northern side of Lake Apex, looking east towards Lights on the Hill memorial (14/8/2019).



Fig 4: Photo showing remaining muddy trenches around the perimeter of Lake Apex. Red circles show turtles buried in the mud (14/8/2019).



Fig 5: Proposed relation release site. Lockyer Creek, Crowley Vale.



Fig 6: Proposed location of sediment fencing shown in blue

4. Policy and Legal Implications

The *Animal Care and Protection Act 2001* promotes the responsible care and use of animals. It places a legal duty of care on people in charge of animals to meet those animals' needs in an appropriate way. Council do not have a legal duty of care to the wildlife in the Lake Apex precinct as the fauna are wild.

Rehabilitation permits (spotter-catcher) under Section 12(e) - Nature Conservation (Administration) Regulation 2017 are required to relocate the wildlife under these circumstances.

5. Financial and Resource Implications

The costs for this action will be covered by the budget allocated to Environment and Pest for the care of wildlife.

6. Delegations/Authorisations

No additional delegations are required in relation to the matters raised in this report.

7. Communication and Engagement

Signs have been erected around the Lake to ensure public safety. Following is an example of signage:



8. Conclusion

Due to the ongoing drought, the wetlands at Lake Apex and Lake Freeman are close to dry. Aquatic wildlife remaining in the two shallow ponds are likely to perish in the next few weeks if no rain is received (as predicted). As Lake Apex and Lake Freeman are Council owned land, Council have investigated options for rescuing the aquatic wildlife. The recommended option (Option 1) is to engage a suitably qualified and licenced fauna spotter catcher, in conjunction with assistance from Council staff to relocate the aquatic wildlife from Lake Apex to a more permanent source of water in the Lockyer Creek at Crowley Vale.

9. Action/s

Staff from Environment and Pest and Parks, Gardens and Cemeteries will assist suitably qualified and licenced fauna-spotter catchers in the relocation of aquatic wildlife from the drying ponds of water in Lake Apex to a more permanent water source in the Lockyer Creek at Crowley Vale. The relocation can occur on Thursday 29 August and Friday 30 August 2019.

During the next budget review, the opportunity to reinstate the bore within the Lake Apex precinct will be investigated.

Attachments

There are no attachments for this report.