

Report to members by LIPS President at the 2011 AGM

On behalf of the outgoing LIPS Management Committee, thanks to everyone who has attended the 2011 AGM tonight. The past year has been a challenging one for LIPS as we have continued in our main role as a volunteer organization dedicated to the protection and preservation of the Low Isles for all time.

Throughout the year LIPS has again provided regular volunteer support for the protection of Low Isles, especially as and when requested by the Low Isles Caretakers, Rick and Alex. I would like to thank all those volunteers who have assisted in caretaking and helping with other tasks to ensure the ongoing care and protection of the Low Isles.

No training programs were run this past year; and while the current number and availability of trained volunteers is quite high, this is sometimes barely sufficient to cover the weekday relief-caretaking needs; and the necessity of training more volunteers may need to be assessed in the near future. It is also time to update the First Aid qualifications of volunteers; and this is a priority now given that more LIPS presence will most likely be needed on the island in the coming year and the new management requirements are more stringent. I would recommend that the new committee try to organize this training as soon as possible. There may be funding available through DERM / GBRMPA.

The LIPS volunteer program, which was first established in 1993 has an exemplary reputation within the marine conservation field of Australia, and all participants should feel proud of their ongoing contribution in protecting the precious Low Isles marine ecosystem.

For the Management Committee, our year began with the knowledge that the government management of Low Isles was about to change. In Sept we met with Doon McColl, Far Northern Community Liason officer from the Cairns GBRMPA office; and Belinda Jago, Director of Regional Engagement and Planning from the Townsville Office. They explained to us the proposal for the joint management program under the Federal GBRMPA and State government DERM organizations. Many other Islands which were previously administered by the Commonwealth Islands authority were also subject to these management changes and for some, such as Lady Elliot Island, the transition had been successfully completed. We were advised that the detail for the new management program would take some time to be finalised, and that in the meantime that LIPS should write to Russell Reichelt Chairperson of GBRMPA lobbying for continuing full time presence on Low Isles and inviting a senior management person to address a LIPS meeting in the near future.

Christmas and the cyclones came and went and while no-one from GBRMPA attended our meetings, the Caretakers contract was renewed on time.

It is always a challenge to adapt to change, and there has been some concern in recent months regarding the Field Management Program that DERM/GBRMPA have planned

for Low Isles. This program which is aligned with the maintenance implemented on other islands, aims to bring Low Isles up to date with current workplace health and safety and other statutory infrastructure requirements.

On the 12th July the Management Committee met with Doon McColl and Stephanie Lemm, GBRMPA Planning Manager to clarify the changes, and we were assured that while many of these new statutory standards are mandatory, there is no intention of changing any of the existing arrangements with the LIPS volunteer program. Our committee accepts the DERM/ GBRMPA Field Management Program and their distinct role and responsibility in implementing the required maintenance.

Our committee strongly reaffirms LIPS primary focus as being on the protection of the Low Isles. We see our LIPS members continuing to be welcome on Low Isles, and proceeding in their role as volunteers, educators, research assistants and ambassadors for the Low Isles Marine Park.

On the 15th Sept Rick tendered his resignation as Caretaker at Low Isles and at this stage we have been advised by GBRMPA that they will now be working to ensure that effective management arrangements are in place for the future. Meanwhile Rick and Alex have volunteers booked to relieve them over the next 4 weeks. We would like to extend our deep appreciation and thanks to Rick and Alex for their dedication and hard work at Low Isles over the past 2 years and wish them well in their future plans.

Throughout the year Julia Hazel has given invaluable support in dealing with the new LIPS memberships, and has indicated that she may be able to continue in this role for the coming year. Thank you Julia, for handling this very important task.

We have had a steady flow of new members and hopefully most old membership will be renewed, keeping our numbers healthy and strong. It would be good to see more LIPS activities where members can get together, and hopefully someone will have more time to organize the monthly bar-b-ques. The monthly Pidgeon-counts activities are available to all members wishing to participate. The pigeon count program started 2 weeks ago and the next one will be in approximately 2 weeks time. Until Oct 16th Alex is still coordinating this, and anyone who wishes to be involved should contact her.

At the start of the year our committee agreed to focus on supporting the Low Isles programs and not to be side-tracked from this important purpose by getting involved with other plans and projects.

In May we were invited to become part of the Port Douglas Maritime Heritage group (first known as the Seachange group). Julie Norman and Sally Sutherland have both attended meetings and while we have agreed to continue to support this group we have decided against recommending LIPS legal incorporation with them. The goals of the group are too far removed from LIPS main focus, there are too many unknown factors and finally we don't have the required funds available.

A funding request from Julia Hazel for her turtle research project was considered and also rejected in order to maintain focus on existing LIPS programs. However we offered volunteer support if that was needed.

With a funding grant from Coast Care Doon McColl organized the upgrade and replacement of both the Coast Care signs in Port Douglas and the Low Isles signs in conjunction with Sally Sutherland from LIPS and a student group at Mossman High School. Alex coordinated an overnight stay for 2 groups of students involved in this project who also participated in a Tangaroa Blue clean-up. This visit prompted the LIPS committee to re-visit our policy on overnight stays, and it was decided that LIPS needs to remain firm on keeping a limit on visiting-group numbers. We are cautious about setting a precedent and fostering expectations that big overnight groups are acceptable.

Rob Sutherland examined the fine details on the real levels of resource-costs in running the STP and compiled a detailed report for LIPS which has provided some very useful data for any future evaluation. At this stage the STP will continue to operate, and is apparently on its best behaviour lately.

In May LIPS organized a Carnivale Marine Presentation event in conjunction with Eye to Eye Marine Encounters (John and Linda Rumney). “ Meeting our Marine Neighbours” drew over 100 people to watch local scientists and film-makers showcasing 4 iconic marine creatures- tiger sharks, humpback whales, sea turtles and dwarf minke whales, with world class footage, slideshows and current research. While the whale footage was a joy to watch, the highly precarious and endangered status of the both tiger sharks and sea turtles was revealed in sobering clarity. Gold coin donations at the door raised \$90 for LIPS and the event provided us a good opportunity to display LIPS, do some PR and to garner a few new memberships. It would be good to consider making this event an annual fixture in the Carnivale Film Festival at the Sugar Wharf, as the venue, technical equipment and support and publicity were provided by the Carnivale committee, making LIPS overall organization of the event so much easier.

At our General Meeting in June it was decided to refurbish the bedding in the volunteers cottage and replace the 18 year old mattresses. In August we finally got enough calm weather to complete the barge run to the island which Rick had organized, delivering new supplies and bringing rubbish, STP sludge, empty gas bottles and old household goods off the island. A huge thanks to all who helped with this operation.

Rick has recently repaired the LIPS zodiac outboard and although there is now a new UQ research boat at the island, this committee recommends that LIPS retains our own zodiac as this gives us guaranteed independent transport around and about the isles when needed.

We would also recommend that the new LIPS committee ask future caretakers to continue with the monthly Caretakers report. This very important information is then available to members, and when posted on the LIPS website the general community. If DERM do appoint an interim Caretaker on the Island perhaps we could specifically ask for a regular report on endangered species such as the sea turtles, dugongs and sea-grass.

Sally represented LIPS on the LMAC for the year and kept us in touch with relevant issues. Valda and Doon McColl are currently organizing a joint LIPS-LMAC forum on sea turtles and whales to be held on October the 25th at the Port Douglas Community Centre. Jenny Gilbert who runs the turtle rescue program in Cairns will be the main presenter, with perhaps John Rumney sharing his adventures with Minkes. It promises to be an event not to be missed.

We had several committee changes during our year. Valda Reynolds was unable to take-up her position as Vice- chair until recently owing to family health issues, then in May Patrick Lighthart resigned to relocate to Weipa and in August our invaluable Tanya followed him, leaving us without a secretary. Sally took up the Secretaries position, and Valda was able to join us as Vice President in August. I would like to thank all my fellow committee members for their excellent contribution this year. Being on the LIPS committee demands a lot of time and dedication and should not be underestimated; as long as LIPS doesn't have anyone in a paid position. Several attempts to find suitable storage space for our archives were unsuccessful, it would be worth continuing this search.

The biggest challenge for the year was maintaining our prime focus on our main goal protecting Low Isles. In making decisions and plans it must be noted that LIPS is essentially a volunteer organization and that too much strain should not be put on our limited finances and volunteer time, and especially at this time when we have lost our paid caretaker and are faced with some uncertainty, we need to guard our resources for Low Isles. Ensuring currency of all necessary training for our volunteers is probably our main priority at this time.

I wish the new incoming committee all the best in meeting these challenges, and hope that the wonderful LIPS Volunteer program can continue to contribute to the protection and preservation of the Low Isles in the excellent tradition that has been long-established.

Thank you
Jill Bickford
LIPS President 2011