**Update Save Collingwood Beach (SCB) May 2017**

**Collingwood Beach: the next steps**

As the next stage in the ongoing saga of Collingwood Beach approaches, it’s timely to remind ourselves of the outcomes from the community consultation late last year and what we might expect from the upcoming management plan from Shoalhaven City Council (SCC).

Save Collingwood Beach (SCB) was formed as a result of widespread community anger at ongoing vandalism along the beachfront. Since late last year, the SCB partnership has grown to seven and we have welcomed the National Parks Association Milton Branch, Shoalhaven Bushwalkers, Lake Wollumboola Protection Association and the Nature Conservation Council of NSW as new partners.

**Save Collingwood Beach’s position**

In late 2016, prior to the local government elections, SCC exhibited two draft plans for vegetation management at Collingwood Beach. SCB rejected both plans, because we believed that neither was adequate to protect the natural values, and therefore not in the best interests of the community as the dune is Crown (public) land.

In a time of climate uncertainty, we need to see native vegetation as a friend that can help us avoid the worst impacts of intensifying and unpredictable storms. This is especially important on a beach identified as one of the most vulnerable in the Shoalhaven. So taking a precautionary view and retaining the taller vegetation to intercept wind-blown sand and minimise erosion best serves the interests of Shoalhaven residents, because it’s ratepayers that will have to foot the bill in the event of storm damage.

SCB’s position has been consistent in saying that the vandalism should be stopped by SCC, a vandalism policy developed to avoid future issues, the dune vegetation restored and Collingwood managed consistently with other popular beaches on Jervis Bay outside of national parks where filtered views are the norm. As we stated in our submission to SCC, we will consider supporting designated viewpoints along the beachfront, provided they’re done in an ecologically and visually sensitively manner. Councillor Wells expressed strong support for this compromise approach at the SCC meeting where Collingwood was debated.

**The outcome of the consultation process**

Of the 520 submissions considered, 71% opposed both plans while 19% supported one or other vegetation management plan. The community response was therefore strong and emphatic in rejecting the plans.

Of those submissions from within the Shoalhaven (comprising 77% of all submissions) 79% opposed both plans. Submissions from outside the Shoalhaven (comprising 19% of all submissions) 40% opposed vegetation management, while 47% supported either the CBPG plan or the Shoalhaven City Council plan. This is in contrast to a study of 168 visitors conducted by Macquarie University students in Easter 2016 which found 47% supported managing the dune for stability (i.e. to prevent erosion), 41% for animals and just 2% for views.

Other key outcomes from the consultation were:

* The receipt of two petitions opposing the dune vegetation plans, one of 1500 signatures, the other of 946;
* The receipt of seven submissions from community groups, all but one of which (that of the Collingwood Beach Preservation Group who authored one of the plans) strongly opposed the proposals;
* The receipt of three opposing submissions from government agencies, including Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH), Department of Primary Industries (DPI) and Lands;
* The receipt of 511 individual submissions;
* One of these individual submissions was from the Tasmanian author of a dune management manual who said his work had been used selectively to advocate for the removal of taller vegetation.

To have Lands point out that SCC has a duty to manage public land in accordance with law, DPI raise concerns over impacts to the Jervis Bay Marine Park and OEH highlight inconsistencies with the new *Coastal Management Act* was extremely embarrassing for SCC. Due diligence would have saved lots of community angst, lots of time and lots of money.

**Anger**

When the staff report was debated in SCC, Councillor Proudfoot spoke of the palpable anger the community directed towards Council over the issue. He’s right, people were angry and they still are as the vandalism continues. The issue likely had a bearing on the last council election as the new Mayor and Greens Councillors were all vocal opponents of the vandalism during their campaigns.

**Where to next?**

SCC is currently developing a new plan based on the feedback from the community to the consultation. SCB hopes that the new plan can herald a fresh start for the beachfront, where the vandalism ends, the vegetation can be sensitively restored and viewpoints can be formalised. We know that Mayor Findley wants a good outcome for the vegetation and wildlife and to end the vandalism. She showed overdue leadership on the issue by ensuring that any plan would explicitly consider a policy to stop the vandalism.

The Shoalhaven community will be asked to comment on the new plan when it’s released, probably in July. SCB is ready and willing to engage when the time comes. It would be great to see the silent majority along Collingwood and across the Shoalhaven who reject the vandalism, accept the threat of climate change and value the natural beauty of our area speak out and help end this saga.