

THE HILLS ARE ALIVE WITH THE SOUND OF JUST ABOUT EVERYTHING: The Gold Coast Hinterland as Natural Resource, Media Source and Liminal Space

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Abstract

The Gold Coast hinterland is a diverse and rapidly changing region in which supporters of both tourism and the environment, along with local media and residents, vie for position, power and influence as Gold Coast urbanism and imagery steadily advance. The hinterland is described as a buffer zone or liminal space separating the commercial excesses of the Coast from the publicly protected environment. In recent years two tourist cableway projects were planned to traverse this liminal space, but for some the projects also threatened the protected environment. Two Gold Coast newspapers dealt with the projects in ways that reflect and draw attention to the many-faceted forces of environmentalism and tourism as they interact along the vector that joins the Gold Coast to 'its' hinterland.

Introduction: images and fantasies

Let me begin with two images—two ‘imaginings’—of Australian hinterlands. The first, a scene from Charles Chauvel’s film *Sons of Matthew* (1949), shows those sons cutting down giant trees in their new-claimed virgin rainforest. The film rejoices in the sound of the axes. It is a paean to the pioneering spirit. The scene was set, and filmed, on the Lamington Plateau, now commonly and locally referred to as the Gold Coast hinterland. Chauvel’s epic is loosely based on the experiences of the O’Reilly family, who carved out their dairy and timber ‘empire’ in the same area and whose descendants now own and operate the well-known O’Reilly’s Resort, also in the same spot. Chauvel’s film has all the ingredients of its genre, which serve to justify—perhaps innocently or at least naïvely—the exploitation of the natural resources offered up by the pristine landscape. But even here there is no hiding the archetypal irony or paradox, repeated down through the generations: Matthew’s sons marvel at the natural splendour of their new lands which they proceed to ‘tame’, thus threatening and diminishing the glories of these natural environments revealed to the sons and the audience, and on which the imaginary of the film so much depends. The audience is doubtless meant to believe that bountiful nature and the sons’ pioneering spirit and activities will co-exist in a sustainable relationship. But where the sons have led, will not others follow?

The second hinterland image is actually three images constituting Frederick McCubbin’s triptych *The Pioneer* (1904). In the first panel a man and woman contemplate their new bush wilderness selection. In the second panel we see some clearing of the selection. The man boils a billy after cutting timber, the woman holds a baby, there is a bark hut in the

background. The third panel brings us to the present (i.e. 1904) and we now see the pioneers' son grown to manhood and uncovering his parents' grave. The dwelling has gone and the bush has returned, but in the distance a coastal city has sprung up and in the march of progress, the old bush selection has become part of the encroaching city's hinterland. I have a little fantasy about possible subjects of a fourth panel that McCubbin might paint were he around today: a fruit and flower roadside stall; luxury chalets for weekend retreaters; a line of tourist buses; a chapel specialising in Japanese weddings; a billboard advertising a rainforest experience; a suburbanised retirement 'village'; or cable-car pylons illustrating the laws of perspective as they link background city to foreground site.

I have another, even less realisable, fantasy: of painting a series of panels based on observations and musings made over a few months during the morning drive from my hinterland home at Tamborine Mountain to the Gold Coast. Panel one: a vacant rural block overlooking the western escarpment. Panel two: on the same block, a dwelling comprising two joined shipping containers, a yard strewn with oil drums, old car hulks, and pieces of machinery, and the beginnings of a garden in which a man and woman are standing. Panel three: a furniture removal truck parked outside the house. Panel four: the house and yard deserted and empty—just the remains of the garden and bits of junk lying about.

On hinterlands

Hinterlands have many uses, many meanings. In Australian economic history, hinterlands have traditionally been defined as the widespread locations of the major wealth-making rural and extractive industries. Australia's coastal cities developed mainly as service and transport centres for these hinterlands, on which they were economically dependent (Manning 1997). But in the late twentieth century, hinterlands appear to have contracted both physically and metaphorically, becoming strips of land on the continental or inland side of coastal cities. These strips are deemed to be closer to nature, thereby encouraging more natural leisure pursuits, and compensate, perhaps, for the rezoning of city green belts for housing developments (Buxton & Goodman 2003). They are often adjacent to or contain national parks and protected 'wilderness' areas. And so we have the Blue Mountains, the Dandenongs, the Adelaide Hills, the Atherton Tableland, and the Gold Coast hinterland. The flights of fancy indulged in above are meant as points of entry into an exploration of some of the uses and meanings of hinterlands—the Gold Coast hinterland in particular.

Despite the proximity of areas of protected environment, hinterlands are by no means unpeopled, pristine wildernesses. They have been exploited and used by people for many years. They have been subject to change, transition and transience. In particular, the hinterlands of non-capital city coastal communities are increasingly experiencing the same kind of rapid social and demographic change now affecting those coastal communities (Burnley & Murphy 2004). They are populated by a diverse range of people: not only the descendants of the pioneers or alternative New Age types or NIMBY commuters (which I admit to being) or well-heeled retirees or environmentalists, but also business people, developers and investors, as well as those struggling to survive on

welfare and part-time or temporary local jobs. And then there are the ‘battler blockies’ with their sheds and caravans and houses made out of shipping containers, on the cheaper blocks of land where they try to maintain an independent life.

The Gold Coast and its hinterland

And so to the Gold Coast hinterland, which begins at the continually receding line just west of the most recent suburban housing estate. From there it incorporates the rural acreage developments in the foothills and lower eastern ridges of the Darlington and McPherson Ranges and the Lamington Plateau, and finally the body of the ranges themselves along with the detached plateau known as Tamborine Mountain. The ranges and plateaus of the Gold Coast hinterland are part of the environmental conglomeration known as CERRA (Central Eastern Rainforest Reserves of Australia) World Heritage Area, which extends from south-east Queensland to mid-north NSW. The area under scrutiny contains small but rapidly growing towns and villages (the biggest population of 6,000 clusters around three settlements on Tamborine Mountain), declining dairy farms and orchards, and burgeoning tourist centres and facilities. It also contains the Lamington and Springbrook National Parks with their World Heritage-listed areas, including a pocket near the mountain village of Springbrook which features Purlingbrook Falls. The hinterland is now promoted as the ‘green behind the gold’—an expression that has become the mantra of Gold Coast developers, tourist promoters and media. Or as the local daily newspaper put it a few years ago in a front-page headline: ‘There’s gold in them thar hills’ (*Gold Coast Bulletin* 1998, p. 1). The ‘gold’, of course, being the profits extracted from tourists greatly encouraged to spend their money while admiring the green.

The city of the Gold Coast, with its population approaching the half-million mark, is one of the most rapidly growing urban conurbations in the country. In short, the Gold Coast is booming, and with its retirement and tourism base strengthened by a continual influx of long-term, working-age migrants from interstate and rural areas, the city seems to be immunising itself against the economic busts that it once regularly suffered. Although its economic and cultural epicentre remains on the coastal strip, the city is on the move towards ‘its’ hinterland: suburban housing estates are encroaching on the acreages of the rural gentry and pony set, while mansions of monstrous proportions (a goodly number of them Art Union prizes) have taken up positions on the eastern ridges where lofty views and high rises are fought over at auction time.

The Gold Coast has ‘naming rights’ over ‘its’ hinterland and with them the power, perhaps more symbolic than real, to dictate how the hinterland is to be envisaged, identified, and finally exploited. But these naming rights are more than an imprimatur to acquire space for an expanding population. The Gold Coast’s economic movers and shakers want ‘their’ hinterland and national parks to remain green and environmentally friendly—but on their terms and conditions, which inevitably focus on appropriating the hinterland as another ‘natural’ attraction for Gold Coast tourists and a source of ‘gold’ to underwrite and expand the Gold Coast economy. Empirical research conducted by the Griffith University Centre for Sustainable Tourism found this attitude reinforced by Gold Coasters surveyed while visiting the hinterland (Weaver & Lawton 2004). In contrast to

Brisbane visitors, who 'do not want the hinterland to be tainted by increased linkages to the Gold Coast' (2004, p. 294), Coasters tended to support integration of the hinterland tourism 'product' with that of the Gold Coast.

The colonial connection

There is a whiff of colonialist discourse about all this, which is gleefully sniffed out by those identifying themselves as the proto-oppressed natives of the hinterland colony whose natural resources (rainforests, waterfalls, wildlife, views) are being increasingly exploited, mainly by the Gold Coast tourist industry at the behest and connivance of the Gold Coast media, with local agents and small operators getting their cut—or crumbs. For their defiance the natives are likely to find support among metropolitan intellectual and cultural elites, who identify in the Gold Coast all that is crass, grasping, materialistic and meretricious (Symes 1994; Holmes 1998).

However, exploitation of natural resources has always been the key to the Queensland economy, and particularly the Gold Coast economy, as Patrick Mullins (2003) has reminded us. Initially the sea, surf and beach were the major attractions, and they could be enjoyed with minimal infrastructure and services. But now, so the argument goes, they have become commodified in the sense that they are being used and exploited primarily as a means of attracting tourists and their dollars to the city. As such, they are not far removed from the blatantly unnatural attractions of theme parks, shopping malls, casinos and the like. And now the pressure is on to seek out new natural resources in the opposite direction to the beach—the hinterland. A generous, and perhaps naïve, response to this trend might detect vestiges of an atavistic desire to return to the simple, natural pleasures that Gold Coast residents and trippers once found in surf and beach. At the other extreme, some will see it as egregious self-serving expansion into and commercial exploitation of a part of the world inhabited, in the majority, by those who have chosen to reject Gold Coast values and lifestyles.

I would suggest the existence of a relationship between these two phenomena. At the Gold Coast, and now increasingly in the hinterland, natural pleasures give way to, or perhaps require, an expanding commercial infrastructure—a development that parallels the rise of colonialism in which 'innocent' and 'gentlemanly' scientific and aesthetic naturalists 'were seen as handmaidens to Europe's expansive commercial aspirations' (Pratt 1992, p. 34). Meanwhile, taking up various positions between nature and commerce are those who talk about the positives of ecotourism and other tourist activities that ensure environmental sustainability.

In the hinterland itself a diverse range of residents makes for a broad range of values and attitudes. However, the Griffith University Centre for Sustainable Tourism finds the Tamborine Mountain population divided somewhat unremarkably into three groups in terms of attitudes to further tourist development: one quarter 'for', one quarter 'against', and half 'neutral' (Weaver & Lawton 2001). Nevertheless, judging by the content of the two local newspapers the pros and antis are by far the most vocal, with the antis having a slight edge. (While the commercially-operated weekly *Tamborine Times* gives space to both sides of environmental debates, it tends to favour commercial interest groups such as

the Tamborine Mountain Tourist Association. The fortnightly *Tamborine Mountain News* is published by the Tamborine Mountain Rainforest Trust and gives more support to environmental groups.) The anti-developers have a powerful weapon in their armoury: any development not to their liking is immediately branded as a Gold Coast-type of development. Weaver and Lawton found that regardless of their stance on development, Tamborine Mountain 'residents are fiercely attached to the uniqueness of their community and do not wish it to become like the Gold Coast' (2001, p. 455). In the local Mountain press, while most 'anti' rhetoric focuses on the negative stereotypes of greed and materialism, the more conservative and xenophobic correspondents point to the incidence of Gold Coast crime, and the undesirables, drifters, unemployed, single parents and the welfare-dependent accompanying Gold Coast-type developments.

Buffer zones, contact zones and liminal space

Where do the peopled areas of the hinterland stand in relation to the 'pristine' and protected natural environments of the national parks and State forests? In some instances, quite close. Smaller national parks, including Australia's second-oldest, lie adjacent to residential areas at Tamborine Mountain, and although Lamington National Park is a vast area, many of its scenic spots are easily accessed through privately-owned enclaves such as O'Reilly's and Binna Burra resort.¹ The main attractions of Springbrook National Park are accessible from the village of Springbrook. The peopled areas can therefore be designated as buffer zones that divide (or perhaps protect) the natural environments of the parks and forests from the ever-encroaching urbanism of the Gold Coast and all that the Gold Coast is imagined as representing. Sometimes the buffer zone is not clearly defined, so that tourist development within the zone itself is seen as a harbinger of incursion into the protected areas. At other times the buffer zone is clearly defined as a place that can absorb developments, or inevitable succumb to them, while acting as a last bastion against invasion of the 'purer' remnants of pristine nature. Additionally, the term 'buffer zone', when viewed in the context of the colonialist discourse of Gold Coast expansionism, bears some resemblance to Pratt's concept of the 'contact zone'—a space of 'colonial encounters'. This concept

treats the relations among colonizers and colonized, or travellers and 'travellees', not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power (1992, p. 7).

Another term, liminal space, also has some descriptive and heuristic currency when applied to the Gold Coast hinterland. Liminal space (Howitt 2001; Shields 1991; Turner 1985) is a somewhat overused fashionable academic concept, but I believe the hinterland buffer zone can also be characterised as liminal space—a space of rapid transition, change, paradox and ritualised conflict situated between the 'culture' of urbanism and the 'nature' of places where the natural environment needs to be protected and cherished at all costs. It is the space where long- and short-term residents and tourists congregate within a culture-nature continuum and participate in a culture-nature tug-of-war, where nature itself becomes culturally mediated in the ensuing struggles.² It is the space where new arrivals (initiates) are introduced to the contending forces that ritualistically and

symbolically assert their own cultural identities and what they perceive to be the appropriate cultural and environmental identity for their region.³

Tourist cableways and the local press

It was through this liminal buffer zone and indeed beyond it, into the hallowed spaces of nature, that the 'imperialistic' Gold Coast has attempted twice in recent years to penetrate with tourist cableways. In the remainder of this paper I want to analyse the symbolic representation of the contestations surrounding the Naturelink and Ecotrans cableway proposals in two major regional news outlets—the *Gold Coast Bulletin* and *Gold Coast Sun*. The results will, I hope, illustrate not only the conflicting viewpoints and values within the highly volatile and dynamic urban and hinterland environments of the Gold Coast, but also the role of local media in depicting, arbitrating among, intervening in and ultimately contributing to these environments. But first, some background to the two cableway schemes.

Naturelink

On 10 February 1998 an 'international consortium' led by ex-Gold Coast mayor Ray Stevens and wealthy Gold Coast businessman Terry Morris (the 'mail-order king') announced their intention to construct a major tourist attraction—a \$50 million cable car service connecting the Gold Coast to Purlingbrook Falls and the hinterland rainforests of Springbrook. The cableway, to be called Naturelink, would mirror the successful Cairns to Kuranda Skyrail, and at 11 kilometres it would be the world's longest. Naturelink would carry over 1000 tourists per day and generate 600 new jobs and, subject to meeting environmental requirements and approval by local council and relevant State Government departments, it would be operating by the year 2000.

Like the Cairns Skyrail project, Naturelink generated much conflict and controversy. Apart from public pronouncements from consortium leaders and consultants, supportive comments (at least initially) emanated from the State Minister for Tourism, the Gold Coast Mayor and councillors, local MPs, representatives of local tourist organizations, and some Springbrook residents, particularly those with commercial interests in the area. The anti lobby comprised the Gold Coast Hinterland and Environmental Council (Gecko), State and national environmental organisations, high-profile identities such as John Williamson, Peter Garrett and the O'Reilly family, more than half the residents of Springbrook, and the 12,000 who signed a petition against the scheme. The arguments for and against the project, as recorded by the local press and the Brisbane *Courier-Mail*, are summarised below.

For:

- Virtually no environmental impact;
- A showcase for ecologically sustainable development;
- Similar to approved and successful Cairns-Kuranda Skyrail;
- A huge boost to the Gold Coast tourism industry and economy in general;
- An educational as well as entertaining ecotourism experience;

- Provides an alternative attraction beaches and theme parks by giving tourists easy access to the natural wonders of the hinterland, a previously relatively neglected area;
- Traverses some national park and heritage areas, but these areas shouldn't be 'locked away' from the public; and
- A safe and sustainable alternative to increasing road traffic into the hinterland.

Against:

- Naturelink will have major social and environmental impacts, especially around Springbrook, which would be transformed from a peaceful village to a Gold Coast-style mixture of tourist resort and theme park;
- Concerns over commercial incursions into national reserves, especially the small, heritage-listed Springbrook National Park with its fragile rainforest environment, which is far more vulnerable than the Cairns Skyway 'wilderness';
- Possible impact on Gold Coast water catchment area;
- Traverses high-risk bushfire area;
- Danger to flora and fauna, including endangered frog species, from pylon construction;
- In conflict with the *National Conservation Act 1992*, which stipulates that all national park activities must be nature-based and ecologically sustainable. Also contrary to the intent of the State's *Nature Conservation Act 1994* as well as the Federal *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*; and
- Flaws and deficiencies in the consortium's Environmental Impact Statement (EIS); for example, the EIS did not adequately identify the World Heritage values likely to be affected by the development. (These concerns were increasingly expressed by Gold Coast City councillors and then officially by the Council.)

Under growing pressure from local and Federal governments concerning the inadequacies of the EIS and legal ramifications of the proposal, the State Government eventually rejected the proposal on 8 November 2000. It was argued that the proposal failed to meet the government's environmental protection requirements and could not proceed without necessitating a change in State law and the government's election promise to reject proposals for economic activity in national parks (Franklin 2000). Apart from the predictable reaction from cableway supporters, this decision created a short supplementary controversy, with the accusation that the government had made the decision purely to save the Gold Coast-based Tourism Minister Merri Rose from a Green voter backlash on the eve of a State election.

Ecotrans

Eighteen months after the demise of Naturelink, a consortium of local businessmen headed by prominent Gold Coast entrepreneur Billy James announced another cableway venture. Named Ecotrans, it would be a 12-kilometre route linking Coomera on the Coast with Tamborine Mountain. While initial Mountain reaction was reported as being ambivalent or undecided, spokespersons for the pro lobby (centred on the Tamborine Mountain Tourism Association) received prominence in the *Gold Coast Bulletin*. Local opposition to the project focused on the plan to terminate the cableway at Gallery Walk,

the Mountain's congested and signage-infested tourist consumption strip. Consequently, James offered to shorten the route and terminate it at consortium's optioned 870-hectare Darlington Range property, over which most of the cableway would traverse. The only remaining snag was that Ecotrans would still cross over 380 hectares of environmentally-sensitive land at the foot of the Range, purchased by the Council from its Open Space Preservation levy on ratepayers. This further galvanised opposition, with local community groups such as the Tamborine Mountain Progress Association, Tamborine Mountain Natural History Association and the Friends of Tamborine Mountain organising public meetings and forming a 'No Cableway' Campaign Committee.

Progress was temporarily halted. While the pro-environment and anti-development contingent celebrated the reprieve, James and the Council entered protracted negotiations over the environmental conditions with which James would need to comply and the surveys he would need to undertake to gain Council approval.

Although traversing mainly privately-owned land, with seemingly fewer environmental consequences, the Ecotrans consortium did little for its cause when it threatened to construct a housing estate on its own property, adjacent to the Council's space preservation land, if the cableway scheme was rejected by Council. And rejected it was, when James refused to undertake an environmental assessment prior to a making a full developmental application on the grounds that it would incur extra time and costs. James' refusal to comply with Council, along with the sudden withdrawal of some of his backers, suggests that lack of capital along with the inability to fire up the majority of Tamborine Mountain residents induced James to fold. However, he promptly blamed 'minority bogan' groups for his demise (Jones 2003).

Newspaper surveys

Initially I undertook a fairly basic quantitative content analysis of the *Gold Coast Bulletin* (*Bulletin*) and *Gold Coast Sun* (*Sun*) in terms of items devoted to Naturelink between its inception on 10 February 1998 and rejection on 8 November 2000. My survey also included any follow-up items. The Brisbane *Courier-Mail* was also analysed, for comparative purposes. A similar analysis was conducted on the *Bulletin*, the *Sun* and the *Courier-Mail* regarding Ecotrans.

Each newspaper item was classified as belonging to one of the following five categories: Editorial (ie, conventional editorial opinion); Pro Proposal; Anti Proposal; Balanced; and Neutral. Pro and Anti items include opinion-pieces, features or 'straight' reporting that distinctly favour one or other side of the debate—with straight reporting indicating bias mainly through choice of news source and quotations. Balanced describes items that give equal coverage and emphasis to both sides of the debate, while Neutral describes 'objective' reports of events that could not be said to favour either side.

Naturelink results

Figure 1 shows that the *Bulletin* (GCB) printed 91 items on Naturelink: four Editorials (two Pro, two Balanced or Neutral); 38 Pro items (44% of the 87 non-editorial items); 26 Anti items (30%); 10 Balanced items (11.5%) and 13 Neutral items (14.5%). Eighteen of

the Pro items could be categorised as ‘major’ in that they comprised a half-page or greater or commanded a large headline or accompanying photograph. Half, or 13, of the Anti stories were ‘major’, while Balanced scored two majors and Neutral, three.

The *Sun* is a weekly suburban (or community) free newspaper. Like the *Bulletin*, it is owned by News Corporation Ltd. Both are affiliated economically, administratively and technologically, although the *Sun* for the most part maintains editorial independence from the *Bulletin* (Griffin 2002). The *Sun* (GCS) published 55 items about Naturelink: no editorials (the *Sun* has no conventional editorials); 7 Pro items (13%); 35 Anti items (64%); 8 Balanced (14.5%); and 5 Neutral (8.5%). Five Pro items were ‘major’, while there were 22 major Anti items, five major Balanced items and two major Neutral items.

The *Courier-Mail* (CM) published 39 items: one Balanced/Neutral editorial; three Pro items (8%); 10 Anti items (26%); 12 Balanced (32%); and 13 Neutral (34%). Neutral scored four ‘majors’, Balanced two, Anti two and Pro one.

	GCB	GCS	CM
Total Items	91	55	39
Editorial	4	0	1
Pro	38 (44%)	7 (13%)	3 (8%)
Anti	26 (30%)	35 (64%)	10 (26%)
Balanced	10 (11.5%)	8 (14.5%)	12 (32%)
Neutral	13 (14.5%)	5 (8.5%)	13 (34%)

Figure 1: Naturelink: Distribution of items in three newspapers.

Ecotrans results

Figure 2 shows that from Ecotrans's inception on 25 May 2002 to its withdrawal on 11 November 2003 and beyond, the *Bulletin* (GCB) published 55 items on Ecotrans: 7 Editorial (all Pro); 18 Pro items (37%); 5 Anti (11%); 10 Balanced (21%); and 15 Neutral (31%).

The *Sun* (GCS) published nine items: two Pro, three Anti, two Balanced and two Neutral.

During the same period the *Courier-Mail* published seven items: three Balanced and four Neutral.

	GCB	GCS	CM
Total Items	55	8	7
Editorial	7	0	0
Pro	18 (37%)	1	0
Anti	5 (11%)	3	0
Balanced	10 (21%)	2	3
Neutral	15 (31%)	2	4

Figure 2: Ecotrans: Distribution of items in three newspapers.

Discussion: the next big thing

It is generally axiomatic that the Western news media has not fared well from academic and popular scrutiny of its representations of environmental issues and concerns. Although it may alert the public to environmental issues and controversies and offer lip service to sustainability, the media are accused of shallow and sensationalistic reporting and a systemic structural bias towards economic 'progress' and corporate profitability at the expense of environmental protection and sustainability (Dispensa & Brulle 2003;

Doyle 1992; Hansen 1993; Jenkins 1998; Karlberg 1997). In short—and to put it rather crudely—the media represent Big Business, and if Big Business and the environment are both at stake then expect the media to ultimately support Big Business over the environment. It could be said that there is nothing particularly unexpected therefore in the *Gold Coast Bulletin's* overall supportive reporting of both Naturelink and Ecotrans. However, given that the *Bulletin* is unashamedly pro-development in all areas of Gold Coast enterprise (especially the tourism and building industries), its editorial proclivities have not entirely dictated its output, which gives reasonable coverage to oppositional views and values. Such coverage suggests that the *Bulletin* recognises that many of its readers would be sympathetic to those oppositional views and values, and is mindful, at the same time, of the enduring commercial news criterion of conflict and controversy. This gives some support to ‘structural-pluralist’ hypothesis: that local news media in more diverse and heterogeneous communities tend to be more conflict-centred (Harry 2001). Nevertheless, while the reporting of conflict may require coverage of alternative views, the data still indicate that the *Bulletin* supported the projects overall.

The *Gold Coast Sun's* coverage of both Naturelink and Ecotrans contrasts sharply with that of its ‘big brother’, the *Bulletin*. The free ‘throwaway’ suburban press is usually dismissed as being totally in thrall to the business interests on whose advertising it depends for its survival and therefore lacking any editorial courage and independence, failing to give voice to viewpoints that might question or undermine local economic progress. However, as previous research suggests (Griffin 2002), the *Sun* takes itself seriously as an independent community-oriented newspaper. It is not afraid to offer a different perspective on local issues, and is prepared to support alternative and oppositional views that emanate from the grass roots. While not openly editorialising as the *Bulletin* so often does, the *Sun* is content either to present issues in conventional objective or balanced news format or to allow generous amounts of quotations from diverse community representatives. Of some interest, too, is the relative paucity of articles on Ecotrans in the *Sun*—a point raised in further discussion below.

The *Courier-Mail* was used as a kind of control in this exercise with it providing (as if on cue) a more balanced and neutral coverage, although slightly favouring the Anti spokespersons. Location may be a contributing factor in the difference between the *Bulletin* and the *Courier-Mail*, with the latter adopting a more detached and at times a somewhat bemused tone befitting a more senior metropolitan and State newspaper removed from the hurly-burly of Gold Coast politics and pressure groups.

To gain a more realistic sense of the *Bulletin's* broader ideological role as a definer and ‘imager’ of Gold Coast and hinterland cultural, economic, environmental and lifestyle priorities, it is necessary to go beyond quantitative analysis to a qualitative and interpretive textual investigation of the *Bulletin's* coverage of the two cableway projects. An abbreviated version of this task can be achieved by recourse, first, to articles that appeared during the first flush of the proposals’ inceptions, and second, to the ‘wash-up’ articles and editorials that were published towards the end of and after each project’s run. Both periods give rise to a recurring phenomenon that I have labelled ‘the next big thing’. It is a syndrome that looms large in Gold Coast promotional discourse and is readily

adopted and enhanced by the *Bulletin*.⁴ Its rationale is simple and quite plausible: the Gold Coast is a tourist city, and it must entice tourists by constantly adding to its repertoire of tourist attractions. Theme parks and shopping malls have supplemented the iconic natural resources of surf and sand, but tourists constantly demand new attractions and experiences, hence the need to incorporate the hitherto neglected natural attractions of the hinterland. And the means to that end will be the next big thing—Naturelink—and when that fails, the *next* next big thing—Ecotrans.

During the *Bulletin*'s early, heady days of reporting and commenting on the two projects—before the complications, constraints and organised opposition set in—both were presented as logical and typical manifestations of Gold Coast iconography and lifestyle, links in a chain of 'big things' that underwrite the Coast's tourist-based economy by attracting tourists and inducing them to return. The strong visual representations of the projects (especially Naturelink) as full front-page items, including 'artist's impressions' of the cableway superimposed on a panorama of mountains and waterfalls, promoted the 'generic' elements of the tourist gaze (Urry 1990). But they also both literally and figuratively produced a 'heightened' version of this gaze, reflecting the much-publicised and reproduced seaward (and now increasingly hinterland-facing) views afforded to tourists as well as residents from the Coast's burgeoning high rises. Similarly, an emphasis on the 'experience' of the cable-car ride offered a more sedate echo of the visceral thrills of the Coast's theme park rides while still appealing to the emotional, the sensual and the hedonistic which, as Terkenli argues in his study of tourist landscapes, create in the tourist 'a state of physical transcendence' (2002, p. 218). The cableways therefore combined two prime Gold Coast experiences—the popular natural and aesthetic spectacle provided by the panoramic view, and the heightened sensual pleasure of movement through space, with the cableway ride substituting awe for speed. Surely, then, the successful Cairns Skyrail could be even more successfully replicated at the Gold Coast, with its natural and commercial proclivity for such spectacles and enterprises?

But it was not to be, and now there is talk that the next big thing will be the construction of a 'rainforest experience' (aka 'rainforest theme park') somewhere on the Coast's tourist strip—a move also in keeping with the Gold Coast experience in which simulacra provide greater and more reliable 'edutainment' value than the real thing (Sternberg 1997).

In its wash-up or post-mortem stage of reflection and commentary the *Bulletin* taps into the social and historical imaginary of the Gold Coast, with its honour roll of rugged entrepreneurial individualists and movers and shakers who overcame local and State bureaucrats and their petty restrictions, as well as the wowsers and the do-gooders, to create a colourful and vibrant city forever expanding and growing and confounding its critics by appealing to international sophisticates and ordinary Australians alike. The setbacks of Naturelink and Ecotrans reveal that the Gold Coast is in danger of becoming a 'generic city' (*Gold Coast Bulletin* 2002, p. 26), and confirm the need to call on more enterprising and imaginative developers to preserve the independent Gold Coast spirit and identity by seeking new ways to lead the tourist industry towards eco-friendly experiences in the hinterland. In fact, it could be inferred that the introduction of a new

proposal soon after the demise of Naturelink gave extra impetus to the *Bulletin* to more openly support Ecotrans, especially in its editorials, all seven of which were strongly 'Pro' compared with only two Pro editorials for Naturelink. While emphatically arguing for Ecotans and valorising its very entrepreneurial instigator, the *Bulletin* was also conducting an extended post-mortem on the more ambitious and spectacular Naturelink, using Ecotrans as a way of proving more abstract points about the identity and future directions of the Gold Coast.

Having much less of a point to prove and being much less oriented to the big picture of the Gold Coast, the *Sun* by contrast showed relatively little interest in Ecotrans, even as an item of straight reportage. This was due perhaps to its perception that this second project, like so many of the Coast's next big things, simply lacked the economic, environmental and planning legs to support it through even its earliest stages as a proposed development. These pragmatic considerations were of minimal editorial concern to the *Bulletin*, which saw the failure of the two projects in more symbolic terms, as representing an out-of-character failure to recognise and take advantage of the next big thing—a failure that goes against the grain of Gold Coast history and enterprise.

While the *Gold Coast Sun* reflects and reinforces community issues and concerns at the grass roots level with painstaking, and sometimes rather pedestrian, conscientiousness, the *Gold Coast Bulletin*, with its somewhat vainglorious but strangely compelling tilting at the occasional windmill, sets out to confront the big picture—or rather paints the big picture in which 'its' hinterland remains ripe for the development of its natural resources, which are displayed as items of sustainable wealth. Meanwhile, up in the liminal buffer zone of the hinterland itself, minor voices conduct their own debates and contest their own spaces, sometimes echoing and sometimes turning a deaf ear to the trumpet voluntaries of the Gold Coast. And yet the hinterland is experiencing the same kind of population change, albeit on a lesser scale, that is enveloping the coast. The hinterland will never revert to quaint villages and farmlets surrounded by pristine wilderness. It will be subject to increasing development—housing in particular—as more tourists and residents move in. Nevertheless, its somewhat chaotic and disparate state of continuing liminality has helped deflect and destroy, at least for the time being and despite the strident tones of the *Gold Coast Bulletin*, two attempts to invade its symbolic heartland.

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¹ For a description of O'Reilly's and Binna Burra as ecotourism centres, see Buckley (2003). Elsewhere, Buckley (2002) discusses the relationship between private companies such as O'Reilly's and Binna Burra and public protected areas such as Lamington National Park.

² There is a substantial literature on the cultural mediation of nature; that is, the notion that perception and representation of nature is never transparent, but is determined by cultural values and meanings. See for example Richards (2000), Tuan (1974) and Urry (1990).

³ In their study of Tamborine Mountain residents' perceptions of tourism, Weaver and Lawton (2001) found that more recent residents were less likely to oppose tourist development, especially if they had extensive contact with tourists. This suggests that these supporters were actually new recruits to the expanding tourist industry on the Mountain—a point not raised by Weaver and Lawton.

⁴ The *Bulletin* (Gleeson 2004) applied the term literally in a July 2004 headline: 'Next big thing for Gold Coast' (this time a cruise ship terminal for the Broadwater).