

PROTECTION

is key to Habitat

Matt Keys is the founder and managing director of environmental services company Habitat and has been at the forefront of eco-sustainability for 20 years. Having witnessed the evolution of environmental management from a dismissed ideology into a multibillion dollar global industry, Keys shares some insight into the day-to-day processes of the growing sector.



Matt Keys

You describe Habitat as ‘the builders of eco-systems’. How does it work?

It’s a combination of science, practical knowledge, experience and dedication. There’s no hard and fast recipe as each ecosystem has different characteristics and requirements to thrive.

Even though it’s an ecosystem, it should still be regarded as a ‘construction’ project. This is because like any construction project, the key fundamentals need to be in place for the project to be a success.

Solid foundations for ecosystem construction include complete and highly detailed analysis of the vegetation on-site, historic analysis regarding pre clearing ecosystems, detailed analysis of the micro climate, soil types, aspect etc, correct plant stock species selections for revegetation, seasonal rainfall analysis and a detailed management plan.

The whole process is quite complicated – rebuilding ecosystems isn’t as easy as planting a veggie garden. However, if the key fundamentals are correctly addressed at the beginning, the project will ultimately be a success.

Are companies becoming far more conscious of sustaining eco-systems, either through corporate social responsibility and/or pressure from the public?

It’s actually happening because every single person is now aware of the challenges and wants to assist in making a positive difference.

When I started out 20 years ago, as a general rule the only way I could achieve results was by publicly humiliating whoever was doing the wrong thing via the media. These days, we all want to do the right thing, so the problem isn’t there anymore.

To be fair, most who were getting whacked by myself and my colleagues 20 years ago, simply didn’t know they were doing damage and to their credit, in many instances they changed their plans after we explained the impacts to them.

You work with a range of property developers. What types of eco-systems do these companies have to work with and preserve when planning a large green-field developments?

The eastern Australian seaboard has a mega diverse

range of flora and fauna. Even though native vegetation is often removed to make way for houses, property developers are in fact among the biggest contributors to ecosystem rehabilitation.

We’ve all got to remember that these houses are being built for new generations and every house site was once part of a pristine ecosystem. These days, the key is to make sure that the development industry is actually helped to ‘put something back’ and often that’s where Habitat comes into the equation.

Developers are already struggling with the red tape around DA approvals, do you help their prospects? Is Gold Coast City Council more likely to rubber stamp a ‘Habitated’ development?

All projects have to stand on their respective merits and be in accord with the laws. In spite of popular belief, both Queensland and the Gold Coast actually have very strict environment planning laws in place. The frustration for developers is that even when they’re doing the right thing, they still struggle to get approval in a timely fashion.

This frustrates me also because people who are doing the right

thing deserve to be supported, not criticised and stymied. The good thing for Habitat is that we attract clients who are fair dinkum in their commitment to positive environmental outcomes.

How does the Gold Coast compare to the rest of Australia and the world in its environmental management initiatives?

There’s a lot that’s unique about this city. It’s got a truly incredible ecological diversity – everything from coastal heathlands right through to cool temperate rainforests. And in spite of all the fantastic built attractions that we’ve created, it’s our natural attractions that keep bringing people back.

If any place has slowed the environmental impact, it’s the Gold Coast. That’s why our natural areas are still being enjoyed and preserved. If this type of work wasn’t happening, my company and all of our industry peers wouldn’t even exist.

It may surprise people to know that the Gold Coast has won highly prestigious international awards across a diverse range of industries for our environment management achievements.