

Resources of the Sea

THE SCENIC MARGIN:

A Review of Current Initiatives in
Conservation Planning on the Australian Coastline

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ABSTRACT

Conservation planning on the coastline in terms of the values which need to be protected is of special importance.

Some progress in coastal conservation in Australia has occurred, all amenity values, recreation places, and sites of scientific interest having received attention. Recent major innovations such as the New South Wales Coastal Protection Scheme are noteworthy. Integrated planning of access is important.

As a result of the relatively high degree of Government ownership of coastal land, Australia was well placed to secure adequate planning of the coast for conservation. However, planning authorities have been impeded in their task by the low priority given to both planning and conservation by the community at large.

The present picture is one of planning authorities beginning to make up some of the lost ground of the fifties and sixties.

INTRODUCTION

It is a truism that hectare for hectare the coastline is our most valuable piece of territory. This narrow zone provides an attractive environment for living and holiday-making, favourable locations for industry, a transfer line between land and sea transport, as well as access to marine fisheries and marine recreation.

Competition between these important and varied demands for a limited resource makes planning ultimately an essential requirement. Furthermore, the instability of the zone and the need to ensure a proper distribution of benefits over the long term indicate an unusually strong case for planning to have a conservation bias.

Unlike the countries of Western Europe and North America, widespread competition between the different coastal land-uses is a recent phenomenon. Australia's relatively small population and its lengthy coastline (19,800 kilometres), coupled with a high degree of Government ownership of foreshore lands, has meant that until very recently people in this country have felt no great sense of urgency about planning for conservation on the coast. Australians, particularly Victorians, Tasmanians and South Australians, had the benefit of systems of foreshore reserves which have no counterpart in most parts of the world.

Town and country planning has tended to have a low status in Australia, and this includes planning of the coastline. Generally speaking, Australians have tended until recently to view planning as a negative force curbing individual initiative and cutting across the rights of property owners. It is only now after the constraining effects of lack of planning have begun to take effect that planning has begun to be taken more seriously.

Perhaps we could not have had this dawning realisation of the unplanned nightmare which eventually awaited us without the excesses of coastal development which

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resulted from the unwillingness of governments to apply the powers they had. The thousands of speculative land sales and subdivisions of the 'fifties and 'sixties give substance to a vision of a virtually continuous coastal settlement from Cairns to Adelaide.

Planning of the coast during these two decades was effectively left to hundreds of municipalities, nearly all with a preference for development. Using hindsight, much of the sub-division of this era was unsound in terms of both siting and location. While a good deal of ground has been lost, the Australian circumstances are such that there is still scope for a successful approach to the planning of the coast for the long-term benefit of Australians.

Comprehensive planning requires a considerable number of different techniques and processes. Basic to successful planning is the need for adequate information about the capability of the land (including its value for different purposes, and its stability); and about the needs of the community. Surveys and inventories, and consultation with the public, are the main sources of information. Involvement of the public in land-use decision-making is another vital information-yielding process. Equally important is the involvement of skilled planners whose task is to utilise information and to equate resources and needs in the form of imaginative planning options. It is particularly important to have planners operating at the national regional and strategic as well as local levels - working with a broad brush on a broad canvas to create a framework of major use zones.

Both the information seeking and the planning phases require the skills of many disciplines. Compartmentalisation of government activity has obstructed the multi-disciplinary attitude in the past, but now there is a trend towards bringing together the planning, land managing departments, and environmental protection bodies, into a loosely co-ordinated structure. The common ground of all these bodies is concern for different aspects of environmental quality, and so we are likely to see more and more Environment or Environment and Planning Departments created in the Australian States, paving the way for a more comprehensive approach to all aspects of planning.

When planning is absent, or of a low standard, the qualities which make the coast attractive for the less gregarious forms of recreation and valuable for study and scientific reference are the first to go. The attributes which are important for amenity, such as retention of natural vegetation and uncontaminated water, the avoidance of overcrowding, and the location of buildings on the water's edge, are equally important for the maintenance of ecological stability.

My paper is devoted to a discussion of current Australian initiatives in planning for coastal conservation. I have paid particular attention to measures aimed at protecting non-productive values (other than national parks and reserves). When these are in evidence they tend to indicate the presence of a high overall concern for conservation planning.

CURRENT CONSERVATION PLANNING

Queensland

In Queensland, the main current initiatives have resulted from two major problems: firstly, the conflict between beach sand mining and nature conservation, and secondly, erosion in areas interfered with by resort development and beach sand mining.

In 1970, because of the strength of objections to beach sand mining applications at Cooloola, the State Cabinet set up a Committee to assess future areas of mining activity in the coastal regions of the State and indicate which areas should be used for mining, forestry, and national parks. cursory surveys by an inter-departmental

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committee of first Fraser Island (Co-ordinator General 1971), and then the major islands of Moreton Bay (Co-ordinator General 1972) led to the granting of further mining leases, the proposal of lands for national parks, and other land-use decisions. Following on this very crude approach, the Co-ordinator General has commenced a 'Coastal Management Study', which is a more thorough survey of the coast from the New South Wales boundary to the northern boundary of the Noosa Shire. Its purpose is to determine existing land-use patterns and principles for allocating various non-urban lands for particular uses. The zone under investigation covers the islands and estuarine areas, and extends inland to the five metre contour, or two kilometres from high-tide line, whichever is the further. Eventually it is intended to conduct other coastal management studies on the whole coast of Queensland.

Another interesting development in Queensland was the setting up in 1968 of Australia's first special organisation for the protection of the coast against erosion. The Beach Protection Authority is primarily responsible for the investigation of erosion or encroachment by sea, and has the power to declare Beach Erosion Control Districts for which beach protection schemes are prepared and land-use restrictions specified. The Authority has a strong record in protection research and the giving of technical advice to local authorities. It can provide financial assistance to local authorities for beach protection works.

New South Wales

The main innovation in the protection of scenic values in New South Wales during the last two years has been the institution of the 'Coastal Protection Scheme' (State Planning Authority 1973). The programme has been carried out by an inter-departmental committee appointed by the Ministers for Local Government and Lands. After identification work which commenced in 1971, lands of scenic value have been divided into two categories: firstly, areas for acquisition, and secondly, areas which will continue as private land but which will be protected by means of land-use constraints. The Committee was able to draw upon information resulting from several years of coastal survey work by the State Planning Authority.

In many cases the immediate coastline is being acquired and the hinterland has been placed in the protected category. 14,400 ha have been earmarked for acquisition, and 9,800 ha for protection as private land. Another 5,800 ha have been identified as meriting further investigation to decide in which of the two categories the land should be placed. Cabinet has set aside one million dollars per annum for the land acquisition part of the programme.

In the case of the private lands, the land-use controls will apply to such things as the removal of trees, the construction of dams, the erection of buildings, the siting of transmission lines, and the construction of roads. If the owner requests, after refusal of development, the Government will acquire land in this category. Control over these lands is likely to be by means of special interim development orders. The proposals were publicly exhibited for six months and provision was made for objections and other representations to be made. The Ministers will make their determinations after consideration of a report from the Inter-departmental Committee.

The most interesting new developments in the field of information-gathering in coastal areas within the State are the Botany Bay Project, and the South Coast Environmental Capability Study. The former is an intensive interdisciplinary study funded by the Federal Government, whilst the South Coast research, which is being carried out by the CSIRO Division of Land Research aims to establish a framework for future land-use decisions. The area being studied is the Shire of Eurobodalla, in which there is heavy recreational pressure on the coast.

Victoria

Victoria's main achievements in coastal conservation have been made through the

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work of the Town and Country Planning Board, and the Land Conservation Council.

The first success of the Town and Country Planning Board, which is Victoria's overall State planning authority, was the preparation in the mid-1950s of the Ocean Road Planning Scheme. This covered the coast between Barwon Heads and Apollo Bay, most of which is a steep and rocky piece of land fringing the Otway Ranges. This scheme has been largely successful in confining subdivision to the existing townships, so preventing ribbon development in a coast of very high amenity value.

The Town and Country Planning Board was less successful in its handling of a proposal for a new coastal tourist road in East Gippsland. This case is worth mentioning because it illustrates the traditional passive role of planners as far as land use determination is concerned. The Board is responsible for the preparation of a planning scheme for the eastern coastline between Lake Tyers and the New South Wales border, and in the late 'sixties it investigated a local proposal for the construction of a new 32 kilometre road between Mallacoota and Wingan Inlet National Parks, an area which is Victoria's largest coastal wilderness area and which is the subject of a long standing proposal for a national park. The road was supported by local tourist industry interests who were successful in having the proposal surveyed by the Country Roads Board. The Board, when it became involved, arranged a field study by conservationists, but the team's brief was merely to advise on what alignment would cause the least damage to conservation values.

Conservation bodies were understandably aggrieved when the Board, abdicating its responsibility to consider what was the best use of the land, expressed the views that those in authority had an obligation to make the area more accessible, and that it was evident that some sort of improved access would eventually be implemented (Town and Country Planning Board 1972).

The Board in its study report acknowledged that one of the main attractions of the area was its primitive state, but argued that population demand while not pressing at present would undoubtedly do so in the future. Therefore, the Board accepted that there would be development, and concentrated on suggesting an alignment which would conflict least with the conservation of the natural qualities of the coast. Instead of the road parallel and close to the coast which had been proposed locally, the Board recommended the construction of a road located three to eight kilometres further inland with short spurs to the coast, or occasional loops. The idea of long spur roads from the existing Princes Highway located some 24 kilometres inland was rejected on the grounds that the distance involved could discourage the motor tourist.

Throughout its approach, the Board showed a remarkable lack of awareness of the fact that access systems are a most powerful determinant of land-use and management prosperity, believing instead that "in the final analysis an adequate system of management, rather than the actual pattern of access and the location of facilities, is the only means of ensuring the proper development and maintenance of the area".

The Board was looking at this coastal zone from a very narrow point of view, failing to take into consideration the need to plan the area in relation to the land use patterns and land capabilities of the coastline of the whole State. Fortunately, before the recommendations of the Board could be implemented, the Victorian Government passed the Land Conservation Act which set up the Land Conservation Council to study and make recommendations on the future use of all public land in Victoria. Following a request by the Australian Conservation Foundation, the Government decided to defer any final decision on the road until the Land Conservation Council had made its studies and determinations.

To date, the Council has made final recommendations on only one area involving

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coastal land. This is the South-West Study Area, covering the part of the Victorian coast closest to the South Australian border. In its final report on the Area, the Council recommended the drawing up of a scheme of functional classification for scenic, recreation, and scientific areas, using such terms as 'state park', 'regional park', 'conservation park', and so on. One of the new classifications proposed was that of 'coastal reserve', and the Council recommended that a section of the Ministry of Conservation have over-all responsibility for the intergrated management of coastal lands throughout the State. An area at Discovery Bay of 8,000 ha with a coastal frontage of 50 km, was subsequently approved by the Government for setting aside as Victoria's first reserve in this new category. As yet the new section has not been created in the Ministry, and control of the Discovery Bay area continued to be in the hands of the Fisheries and Wildlife Division.

Considerable progress has also been made in coastal planning on the central coast of Victoria adjacent to the Melbourne metropolis. Major environmental studies are being made of Port Phillip and Westernport, and the State Government has recently decided to make a similar study of the Gippsland Lakes. Phase One of the Port Phillip study was published in 1973 (Melbourne and Metropolitan Board etc 1973), after the expenditure of \$1 million. It is expected that the results of the Westernport study will be published in 1975. Whilst they are awaited, there has been a two year moratorium on industrial development of a type likely to have a major impact on the environment. All of these studies are closely considering the effect of land uses in the terrestrial catchments on these water bodies.

Development of the foreshores and inshore waters of Port Phillip is co-ordinated by the Port Phillip Authority. The Authority is also required to preserve the beaches and the natural beauty of the Crown land on the foreshore and improve facilities for public enjoyment. No works may be undertaken or vegetation removed without the Authority's consent. Unfortunately, the Authority has very limited funds, no punitive powers, and no management staff.

From the point of view of conservation of scenic values, attention has focussed chiefly on the southern Mornington Peninsula, which the Government's statement of planning policy (Town and Country Planning Board 1960) lays down is to be conserved for its "recreational and scenic value and biological significance". The policy also states that "development within the area shall be required to conform to visual and other standards appropriate to its special character".

The statement of planning policy lays down a broad strategy for the area, but statutory planning is under the control of the Westernport Regional Planning Authority. The Authority is composed of representatives of the local councils which are development-oriented, and there are no special funds available to meet those costs in planning which are designed to benefit urban recreationists. The Authority feels it has a moral obligation to either purchase land or pay compensation where it wishes to impose land-use controls which will prevent development. To date, because of these difficulties, the Authority has been only partly successful in stemming suburbanisation. Following a number of studies of landscapes and natural systems (Environmental Resources 1974; Centre for Env. Studs. 1974), a 'Conservation Plan' has been approved by the Regional Planning Authority and is scheduled to go on three months' public exhibition in November of this year. One of the main features of this plan is expected to be strict control over further urban development outside the existing resorts on the Westernport coast of the Peninsula.

The Victorian Town and Country Planning Board has not neglected the identification of features of scientific interest and has enlisted the services of Dr. E.C.F. Bird to compile a preliminary list of sites of special scientific interest (Town and Country Planning Board 1973). As far as I can discover, this is the most comprehensive attempt to list such features on the Australian coastline.

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Tasmania

The most interesting proposals affecting the Tasmanian coastline are contained in the report of the Joint Committee on Town and Country Planning. I should not need to mention these recommendations to an audience of Tasmanians, but for the fact that the report was tabled in 1970 (Parliament of Tasm. 1970). Amongst the chief recommendations were the setting up of a State Planning Authority, and the undertaking of a thorough survey of the foreshores of the sea and of estuaries, as soon as possible. The Committee felt that there was a strong case for firm State-wide co-ordinated planning of the foreshores. It was proposed that the survey, to cover physical geography, ecology, and land-use potentials, be co-ordinated by the State Planning Authority, and that consideration be given to it being carried out by the Department of Geography in the University of Tasmania. The Committee expressed its view that foreshore reserves up to 90 m from high water mark may be required as a foreshore reserve in a proposed subdivision; and that all foreshore lands should be vested in the Crown.

The latest advice from the Minister for Local Government on progress with these recommendations is that they have been incorporated in the draft Planning and Development Bill which is expected to be introduced into Parliament later this year, and debated early in 1975.

South Australia

The Australian planning and administrative scene exhibits two noteworthy approaches to coastal planning for conservation: the provision in legislation for statements of planning policy applied by the State Planning Authority to 'planning areas' defined on a regional basis, and the operation since 1972 of a South Australian Coast Protection Board.

The main coastal area so far affected by a plan giving high priority to amenity conservation is Kangaroo Island. The plan (S. Aust. State Planning Auth. 1970), which is regarded as a statement of policy for the Planning Area, states that the whole island, which extends over 4352 sq. km, should be regarded as a conservation area. Environmental regulations have been drawn up to implement the objectives of the overall plan.

The setting up of the Coast Protection Board under the Coast Protection Act 1972, and the establishment of a Coast Protection Division in the Environment and Conservation Department, also indicate the high priority being given to conservation of the South Australian coast. The duties of the Board include not only protection of the coast against erosion, but also research and development of the coast for aesthetic improvement and other uses. The Act defines the coast as land between low and high water marks and 100 m inland, and within 5.556 km seaward from low water mark. Building work within these boundaries must be approved by the Board.

The Board has the duty to recommend the establishment of Coast Protection Districts, and has already recommended that the first district should be the Metropolitan Coast Protection District, extending from Port Gawler to Sellicks Beach. Where a coast protection district is created, a consultative committee must be appointed on which local Councils are represented. Once a District has been established a Management Plan must be prepared which will cover protection works and proposals for facilities and land use.

The Board is currently preparing a Plan of Management for the Metropolitan District and has commissioned a firm of consultants to do the basic work. After public exhibition of the draft plan, the Board will submit the plan to the Governor for approval (Coast Protection Board 1973). Once the plan has been declared the Board will be able to carry out any works which are necessary within a coastal district for the purpose of implementing the plan. The Board can also make regulations to

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prevent works of a prescribed nature being carried out without its consent. The activities of the Board are financed by a Coast Protection Fund, and it is perhaps significant that in 1972-73, \$600,000 were spent on works associated with the restoration of the metropolitan coast alone.

Western Australia

Western Australia has a vast coastline, 7,000 km in length, but to date concern for conservation has been directed towards the problems of the more heavily populated south-western section.

In 1970, one of the main proposals of the conservation movement of that time was for a coastal zone at least 4.83 km inshore and 16.1 km offshore from Geraldton to Esperance, free from further encroachment by mining and industry. A committee of Enquiry into the Mining Act, which reported in 1971, accepted this point with regard to mining when it recommended that mining should not be allowed without Parliamentary approval in the South Western coastal strip extending from Kalbarri to Israelite Bay.

In spite of the high public values placed on the coast, the Western Australian planning bodies have paid relatively little attention to the special problems of the coast. The Town Planning Board's policy of limiting sub-division to a number of specific townships and protecting other areas is an internal one and does not prevent speculative land purchase for eventual development. The only published report of the Town Planning Department on this subject concerns erosion (Town Planning Dept. 1972). An unpublished interim report of the Department on coastal development envisaged that Local Government authorities were capable of controlling coastal planning and development by means of Outline Planning Schemes. The absence of a public statement of policy intention is a considerable handicap to planning for conservation on the Western Australian coast.

The main thrust of responsibility for the coast now rests with the Environmental Protection Authority which, under the Environmental Protection Act is responsible for formulating environmental protection policies. The Authority has recently decided to formulate a coastal policy which will be binding on the Government after it has been approved by Parliament. The Authority also stated in its Annual Report for 1972/73, that it endorsed the concept of a nominal 0.8 km strip of coastal reserve wherever practical and economic.

For a number of years there have been advisory committees for the Cockburn Sound, the Leschenault Estuary and the Peel Inlet, as well as the Swan River Conservation Board. The Environmental Protection Authority is now greatly extending the work of these bodies by means of an Estuarine and Marine Advisory Committee. The new Committee is being used to advise on the optimum use and management of the marine and estuarine environments, and to provide a means of assessing the likely effects of development proposals. One such development proposal which the Committee has commenced to investigate is Hardy's Inlet, for which an application for heavy mineral mining had been made. The Authority believes the research work which will flow from the activities of this Committee will pave the way for management plans for the major estuaries. In 1973 it also proposed the establishment of an Estuarine Conservation Management Authority to provide day-to-day management for the major waterways of south western Western Australia, with policy direction by the EPA and advice from the local committees (Env. Prot. Auth. 1973). However, the legislation for this lapsed with a change of Government.

Federal Government

The main initiatives taken by the Federal Government which have a bearing on the conservation of the coastline are its concern for the National Estate and the giving of financial assistance to local government authorities.

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Having set up a Task Force on the National Estate, the Federal Government has accepted its main recommendations (Nat. Estate Comm. 1974) and is now moving towards the creation of a National Heritage Commission to implement them. The recommendations of the Task Force include: a review of Australian Government lands to see which areas may be included in Coastal Heritage Parks; a State grants programme of help for studies and land acquisition, including rights less than freehold; that there be discussions with the States on the possibilities of establishing systems of English National Parks; that the Australian Government ensure that adequate funds are available to the States for the acquisition of scenic easements and covenants to conserve the scenic quality of important areas; and the greater use of town and country planning powers to achieve the preservation of open space and scenic areas. The Committee expressed its view that it considered the Great Barrier Reef to be of World Heritage standard. The Federal Government has said it will ratify the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage.

The direct funding of local authorities by the Federal Government and the work of the Department of Urban and Regional Development also offer machinery for giving higher priority to coastal conservation and the implementation of national and regional planning goals. It provides a possible way of overcoming the traditional bias of the local authorities for development.

CONCLUSION

The overall picture of progress in the conservation of the coast is one of greatly increased activity over the last few years, and the use of very different methods. Some States are progressing with one or more aspect, but as yet not one has adopted a comprehensive approach to the problem.

Most States have recognised that the coast is a very valuable national resource and that it has special problems resulting from its limited quantity and the pressures which bear on it of both human demand and natural forces. In spite of this, to my knowledge no Australian State or the Commonwealth has devised a policy for the coastal lands. Such policies are essential as an indication of priorities in the allocation of finance, priorities in allocation between different land uses, and how the different levels of Government are to be involved in the planning of the coast. Backed by effective regional and local planning processes, these policies are the answer to the problems which have arisen from piecemeal planning. Britain has had overall policies of this kind for several years (Ministry of Housing 1963, 1966); New Zealand prepared its National Coastal Policy last year (Ministry of Works 1973).

The statements of planning policy which Victoria is preparing provide an ideal vehicle for a planning policy for the coast, but have so far not been used for this purpose. As has been noted, it has used this method to give priority to amenity conservation objectives in planning to a particular coastal area near Melbourne. South Australia has done the same with its plan for Kangaroo Island.

Nearly every Australian Government has recognised the need for more information about the coast as a basis for planning. The work of Victoria's Land Conservation Council with respect to studying and making recommendations on the use of public lands on the coast represents the most systematic approach to the problem, although it must be noted that its determinations lack the guidance of national policy. New South Wales has made a considerable study of its coastal resources, and Queensland has just made a start; legislation is being prepared in Tasmania; but there is little sign of action, apart from that in the estuarine and marine field in Western Australia.

The most detailed assessment of the scenic landscape resources of any one area are the reports of the National Trust and the Melbourne University Centre for Environmental Studies on the Mornington Peninsula. Western Australia's research-oriented

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Estuarine and Marine Advisory Committee suggests another desirable approach to specialised coastal conservation problems.

The New South Wales State-wide coastal protection scheme represents the most concentrated effort in Australia to protect key areas of coastal landscape. Its use of the method of placing conservation-oriented constraints on the use of private land would be well worth study by other State Governments.

The creation of special authorities for the coast is also an indication of the increased priority being given to the protection of the coast and to the recognition of its special problems. They are one of the methods of overcoming the division of planning and management responsibilities between different authorities. Of the two specialised bodies concerned with the coast of a whole State, that of South Australia - the Coast Protection Board - shows an evolution from Queensland's Beach Protection Authority, which is concerned more with preventing erosion than making the best use of the coast. The South Australian body sees the management plan as the key to success, and undoubtedly there is a need for more attention to be paid to the implementation of policies by means of firm plans at both the strategic and statutory levels, drawn up after full consultation with local communities.

Clearly, if the coast has a high priority for protection as a national asset, it also requires the application of more money and expertise than is available locally. One method of making funds and skills available from central Government is to set up these special bodies and to ensure that there is adequate local involvement. At present it is a little unclear about how the Federal Government's direct funding of local Government authorities can be made to work in the interests of coastal conservation. Possibly one way the Federal Government could operate would be to pass legislation like that of the American Coastal Zone Management Act (1972) which provides for both grants to the States and coastal zone management programmes. No matter what role the Federal Government has in the future a large burden of responsibility for co-ordination of planning and the injection of national objectives will of course continue to fall on the State planning authorities where they exist.

At present, the Australian Government stands without a national coast policy, which is a major obstacle to informed action, and careful co-ordination will be necessary if the Federal Government is to link its initiatives in this area with those of the States. At this stage, I believe it would be entirely justified for the Federal Government to financially support the coastal survey programmes of the States such as that in progress in Queensland, and that planned for Tasmania.

The overall picture is one of innovation and experiment. Many interesting new techniques are being tried, but not one State has yet developed a comprehensive programme for the conservation of the coast having all the necessary components - national policy definition, resource surveys, preparation of strategic and detailed plans, flow of funds from central Government (State and Federal) and the establishment of organisations for the specialised day-to-day management of the coast. Final omissions are the failure to generally consider the effect of terrestrial planning of land-use on the adjoining marine environment. Planning and management of the land and sea are seen as separate exercises.

My aim has been to try to introduce you to better ways of caring for the coast, and I hope your appetites have been whetted for a more detailed personal investigation of the initiatives which have been mentioned.

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