

THE GREAT BARRIER REEF 2014-2015

Professor Ove Hoegh-Guldberg
Director, Global Change Institute
The University of Queensland

2014 was an extraordinary year. Not only was it Australia's hottest year on record, but it was also a year in which the future of the Great Barrier Reef was the subject of some of the hottest debate in its history.

Creating the heat was the real possibility that UNESCO would down-grade the World Heritage Area status of the Great Barrier Reef to a World Heritage Area 'IN DANGER'.

Given its importance to Queensland and the World, commentators and politicians everywhere scrambled to take a position on what was big news across the world. And naturally - recriminations began to fly. How could Queensland's number one ecological asset – our precious Great Barrier Reef - lauded for its state of the art management – be in danger?

And - if so: Who was to blame? Who had let this happen?

And what were the implications for the \$5 billion we earn from it each year – from tourism and sustainable fisheries on the Reef?

The excitement was enormous - I note that the fourth biggest word in the word cloud that Ann Scott showed when demonstrating your website was REEF (http://www.tjryanfoundation.org.au/_dbase_up/TJRyan_Foundation_2014-15.pdf).

And we know that the Reef played a very decisive role in the latest (January 2015) election - especially in Queensland's coastal electorates.

As with most issues – there is no simple culprit or cause. It was, as always a combination of multiple factors acting over long periods of time.

But somehow - we all - collectively - got it wrong.

Here are some of the major parts of this story as it boiled over 2014.

First there was the science that told us unambiguously that it was in deep trouble.

In a report from the Australian Institute of Marine Science or AIMS - scientists reported that 50% of the corals that make up the Great Barrier Reef – essential to its existence - had been lost since the early 1980s. And of great concern in all of this - was that there is no evidence that a catastrophic decline of this magnitude has ever happened before. The fact that the corals at the heart of the Great Barrier Reef are disappearing at an unprecedented rate caused reverberations through the scientific and conservation worlds. Whether we like it or not, current efforts to protect and manage the Reef were woefully inadequate to stem the very visible deterioration of the Great Barrier Reef.

The second was the appearance of industrial facilities on Curtis Island, near Gladstone – inside - it would seem - the World Heritage Area designated in 1981. Permitted by the State government in 2008, these facilities sat within the boundaries of the world heritage area – sitting on areas excised out of the World Heritage Area - at the last moment by the government - as State Development Areas. While legal, this appeared to many people to be out of step with Australia's commitment - under UNESCO's World Heritage Convention - to preserve the Outstanding Universal Values of the Great Barrier Reef. Living up to this convention shouldn't involve building industrial facilities inside the ecosystem that had been proclaimed World Heritage!

To add to the brewing trouble – a slew of mining companies began to talk openly about fast tracking port facilities up and down the Queensland coast. And it seemed that government was listening! Each one of these port proposals massively up-scaling dredging, shipping, and destruction of coastal ecosystems. It seems from afar that the governments of the day were all for Coal over Coral!

These developments represented further nails in the coffin for the Great Barrier Reef – which is highly sensitive to changes in water quality.

And then, as if a red rag to a bull, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority gave permission for dredging companies to discard millions of cubic metres of dredging spoils into the waters of the Great Barrier Reef! These seemingly defiant activities finally triggered a process which saw UNESCO travel to the Great Barrier Reef on the invitation of the Australian government and began to examine the situation in detail. And not surprisingly, UNESCO began to ask the questions – with all this going on – shouldn't the Great Barrier Reef be re-listed as a World Heritage Area 'in danger'? After all, the ecosystem was declining very rapidly, and it seemed threats – such as water quality – were not being given priority over the mad rush to extract and export minerals - across the Queensland coastline.

The talk of downgrading the UNESCO status of the Great Barrier Reef soon had the attention of the public, politicians, particularly the two environment ministers Powell and Hunt. Quite sincerely, I believe, they set about to drive through a series of changes. These included an agreement, through the *Ports Bill*, not to expand port development beyond the five priority port regions (four of five ports which are in Great Barrier Reef waters). In addition, an agreement – also through the

Ports Bill – to restrict dredging for new and existing port facilities for the next 10 years, except in priority ports. They also banned the dumping of dredge spoils.

At first 3 million, and then 47 million cubic metres, were banned within Great Barrier Reef Marine Park waters. An agreement to produce a long-term sustainability plan for the Reef, while expanding activities aimed at tackling the water quality issue. And funds – around \$40 million – were provided in the form of a ‘Reef Trust’ in order to help solve the problem.

Sounds good, doesn’t it? However – as with everything – the devil is in the details. For example, the *Ports Bill*, as drafted, leaves open a number of loopholes. As you know - UNESCO has expressly recommended that there be no new port development in the World Heritage Area, yet the Bill only prohibits any significant port development. What would be classified as ‘significant’ is not defined in the Bill but clearly needs to be. Additionally, UNESCO recommended that port development be restricted to the four major ports. These are termed ‘priority ports’ in the Bill. All well and good – except that there do not appear to be any barriers in the legislation to declaring further areas as priority ports.

Therefore the restrictions on new development (and dredging) could potentially be overcome by declaring a proposed port to be either:

- (a) not a significant port development; or
- (b) a priority port.

Pretty clever eh? Could have been part of an episode of ‘Yes Minister’!

This needs to be resolved so as to reassure UNESCO and the Australian people that port development cannot proliferate across coastal Queensland through a loophole.

One can go on and on. There are great problems with the strategic document which lacks hard milestones and measurable goals.

And the \$40 million – the Reef Trust – in my opinion - this is far too small an amount to solve a problems faced by the Great Barrier Reef. It is literally a drop in the Ocean. In this regard – it would hardly make good business sense to allocate \$40 million to support a business that makes Australia \$5 billion each year!

When Australia and the world faced the global financial crisis we spent trillions - shouldn’t we be thinking in a similar way about our lucrative Great Barrier Reef - Reef Inc.?

This brings me to my final comments – which focus on what we should be doing as a State and a Nation when it comes to our beloved Great Barrier Reef. And it comes down to 4 major steps we need to take:

1. The first is that we need to close the loops holes in the *Ports Bill* and ensure that port development is truly restricted to four specified areas of the Great Barrier Reef coastline. We

must never let ourselves get into the position where large corporate interests run amok over the interests of the people and the health of assets such as the Great Barrier Reef.

2. The second is that we must develop a plan for the sustainable future of the Great Barrier Reef that has measurable milestones and goals that go beyond aspiring words. Any plan must have measurable targets and strategies.
3. We must also invest sufficient resources into the Great Barrier Reef. Federal and state leaders must put the right amounts of money on the table to solve the problem. Estimates suggest that \$1 billion not \$40 million that is need to fix the catches and erosion that is having such a huge impact on the health of the Great Barrier Reef.
4. And lastly, - and I started with the observation that 2014 was the hottest year on record - we must deal with the monstrous elephant in the room. The international scientific consensus tells us that a failure to stabilise carbon dioxide at or below today will spell the end of the Reef, regardless of what else we do.

The latest scientific consensus of the IPCC concluded that this is 99% likely if we don't rapidly decarbonise our economies and power systems. We must listen to the science and take its messages on board. In this regard, we must commit to deeper cuts in greenhouse emissions and to reconsider our position with respect to our contribution to the problem.

The solution here does not involve opening the world's largest thermal coal mine. It does not involve growing the export of coal and gas - in a world that will soon be retracting from these energy options. Rather - it is making Australia a country that engages with renewables and becomes a leader in the technologies of the future.

It is by having leaders place Queensland and Australia in a tactical rather than short-term position. This not only makes good business sense but it also means we will have our Great Barrier Reef for future generations to prosper from.