

WHEN DID ANYONE START WORRYING ABOUT THE GREAT BARRIER REEF?

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In the *New York Times* last year, Rob Nixon reviewed a book by Ian McCalman, *The Reef – A Passionate History*, which informs us that less than 200 years ago absolutely nobody knew about the size of the Great Barrier Reef, let alone studied it.¹ And it is only very recently that anyone cared.

The developments in ecology, oceanography and climate science have all profoundly altered perceptions both of the reef and of the human and non-human communities it sustains. The advent of scuba diving, underwater cameras and mass tourism have also altered assessments of the Reef's character and worth.

¹ Ian McCalman, *The Reef : A Passionate History* (Scientific American / Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2014).

The Great Barrier Reef wasn't always wondrous, exquisite or fragile; it wasn't even always that great. To borrow from Shakespeare's Malvolio, 'Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them'. It took a while for the reef to achieve its greatness, which, for thousands of years, had been invisible to the coastal tribes that subsisted off local fragments of the larger whole.

Here McCalman's story echoes the cultural history of natural splendour told by Stephen J Pyne in *How the Canyon Became Grand*.² Pyne notes that when 16th-century Europeans first encountered the Canyon, they barely remarked upon it, except to express annoyance at the vast barrier hindering their quest for gold.

Nowadays, the Reef forms a cultural barrier similarly hindering the quest for coal. As numerous reports on the TJRyan Foundation website have emphasized³ the Reef is endangered because of a willingness of successive governments to subordinate the intrinsic character of the Reef (and the tourism industry which feeds off it) to the more immediate financial benefits of using the waters around the Reef to facilitate the transport of coal and gas.

It is also threatened in the long-term by government inaction. Charlie Veron, a reef scientist, has concluded that, without an abrupt decline in greenhouse gas emissions, there is no hope of reefs surviving to even mid-century in any form that we now recognize.

So, Charlie Veron, a man who has lived and worked on the Great Barrier Reef for most of his life, finds himself in the agonizing position of having to be a prophet of its extinction. We cannot wonder that he feels "very very sad. It's real, day in, day out, and I work on this, day in, day out. It's like seeing a house on fire in slow motion. ... There's a fire to end all fires, and you're watching it in slow motion, and you have been for years.

I know of few more poignant sights than the closing moments of Charlie's speech in July 2009 in that hushed room of scientists and citizens. Tossing aside his notes, he apologizes to the audience in a strained, faltering voice for having delivered such a miserable talk. He urges his listeners to think about what they have heard.

'Use your influence', he pleads. 'For the future of the planet, help get this story recognized. It is not a fairy tale. It is reality.'

'Bearing witness to this gradual annihilation is like seeing a house on fire in slow motion.'⁴

² Stephen J Pyne, *How the Canyon Became Grand: A Short History*, (Penguin Books, 1999).

³ See policy papers and other reports under Environment: Great Barrier Reef on the TJRyan Foundation website at: <http://www.tjryanfoundation.org.au/cms/page.asp?ID=632>

⁴ Ian McCalman, 'Explorer Pleads to Save the Great Barrier Reef', *The Scientific American*, May 2014. This article describes the lecture given by J E N Veron to the Royal Society, London, in 2009. Veron was introduced by Sir David Attenborough as 'Charlie', 'because he shares Mr Darwin's obsession with the natural world'.