



Australian Coral Reef Society Inc.

A society promoting scientific study of Australian Coral Reefs

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Submission on Reef 2050 Partnership Program Australian Coral Reef Society

The ACRS plays a key role in promoting scientific research on Australian coral reefs. It is a forum for discussion and information transfer among scientists, management agencies and reef-based industries that are committed to ecological sustainability. Founded in 1922, the Australian Coral Reef Society (ACRS) is the world's oldest organization concerned with the study and conservation of coral reefs.

The ACRS welcomes the increase in funding for protection of the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) in the 2018-19 budget measures. In this crucial time of multiple severe threats to the survival of the GBR, we must do all we can to maximise the chances of keeping it healthy. We applaud the extra money allocated to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) from 2019-20 so that the GBRMPA can move towards operating in its previous capacity.

In terms of the decision to award the funding to the Great Barrier Reef Foundation (GBRF), it is difficult to address the terms of reference of this Senate Inquiry in detail, as publicly available information is limited. However, the ACRS offers the following responses:

(a) the delivery of the Reef 2050 Plan, including through the Great Barrier Reef 2050 Partnership Program and through other avenues

The most urgent and severe threat to the GBR is climate change, as exemplified by the 2016 and 2017 mass bleaching events that resulted in such high mortality of corals, particularly in the northern sector. Increased intensity of cyclonic activity has also been responsible for considerable mortality over the last few decades. Whilst the areas covered in the Reef 2050 Partnership Program are important, the healthy future of the whole GBR ecosystem will only be possible if climate change can be slowed through a dramatic decrease in emissions. We urge our governments to work towards this goal with immediate strong and assertive actions towards emissions reductions for Australia, and in their discussions with governments of other nations. Australia should be taking the lead in ensuring other nations understand that saving the GBR, an international treasure and World Heritage Listed site, must be achieved with global cooperation on climate change.

It is important to recognise that Australia cannot contribute meaningful reductions in global carbon emissions while also opening massive new coal mines in Queensland. Facilitating the extraction of vast quantities of new coal for burning elsewhere in the world will severely

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impact the value of domestic measures to reduce emissions and lead to ongoing climatic change. Enabling these coal mines will also exacerbate water quality problems for the GBR, with increases in coal dust entering the marine environment, dredging, construction activities and further rises in shipping traffic through the GBR.

ACRS is pleased to see an increase in water quality funding through the 2018-19 budget measures and hopes that this will improve the health of inshore reefs particularly. However, water quality scientists have estimated that it will take many billions of dollars to fix the water quality problems of the GBR, so selecting the highest priority water quality work for this relatively small amount of funding will be important.

Crown of thorns seastars (COTs) have caused the loss of large reef areas in the past few decades, so addressing and fixing this problem would be a significant achievement, though very unlikely. It is hard to assess the success of eradication programs to date, as appropriate assessment programs have not been in place. It would be beneficial to use some of this funding for a revised assessment procedure. Eradication programs are unlikely to rid the GBR of COTs due to the sheer size of the reef ecosystem and the extremely high fecundity and long larval period of the COTs. The success of eradication programs is also dependent, to an extent, on the number of other disturbances that these areas experience (e.g. nutrients, coral bleaching, fishing pressure). However, eradication programs can be useful for protecting small areas such as tourist pontoon locations or other places of particularly high value. If areas can be identified as being resilient to other stressors, for example areas that have avoided bleaching, then eradication of COTs could be important in the survival of these areas. ACRS recommends that the eradication work funded by the Australian Government be diligently targeted for the greatest effect.

(b) the proficiency of the Great Barrier Reef Foundation and its capacity to deliver components of the Reef 2050 Plan

The Great Barrier Reef Foundation (GBRF) has a good record of fundraising for the reef and of corporate engagement, and it has an expert scientific panel of sound repute, but it does not have the depth of full time staff fully occupied with reef issues that an organisation like the GBRMPA has. A funding allocation of this magnitude will require significant expansion of the GBRF team to responsibly manage the expenditure and ensure the directed outcomes for the GBR have the best chance of success. Appropriate resourcing for administration will be important, as will selection of appropriate staff to fill these and project management roles.

(c) the proficiency of other organisations and their capacity to deliver components of the Reef 2050 Plan

ACRS would have preferred that such a large amount of taxpayer funding for such an important block of work was delivered through a government agency with reef expertise, to coordinate decisions on allocation of money. This organisation (for example, GBRMPA) could have consulted with other government, academic and research organisations to determine the most effective ways to use the funds.

(d) the process of granting funding to the Great Barrier Reef Foundation for the Great Barrier Reef 2050 Partnership Program, the terms of agreement for funding, and the ongoing administration of funding

As noted above, the GBRMPA would seem to be a more obvious choice to receive funding to deliver improved reef management outcomes. It is unclear from information publicly available the extent to which the GBRMPA was consulted in the development of the funding package for the GBRF. ACRS recommends that the Senate Inquiry seek clarification on whether the GBRMPA provided input to the Australian Government's decision to allocate funding through this mechanism.

Whilst ACRS supports increasing funding for reef restoration work and research into adaptation possibilities, we also recognise that, should solutions be found in these areas, the challenges of scaling these solutions to the size of the GBR is enormous. There is a great deal of very good work being conducted towards these goals in Australia and careful consideration must be taken when choosing which teams will receive this funding. ACRS considers it important that the funding decision-making processes be transparent and fair, involving consultation across a broad range of academic as well as government and management institutions with reef and other experts as to which plans or projects are likely to be successful. It will be important to carefully consider whether there are likely to be unforeseen secondary impacts of any projects, particularly high technology projects, being conducted by those who may not be familiar with the biological workings of the reef.

(e) the prior activities and operations of the Great Barrier Reef Foundation, including research, public-policy advocacy and fund-raising

As noted above, the GBRF has a good record of fundraising for the GBR and has been an important source of research investment in recent years. It appears well connected within the business community and has demonstrated strong corporate engagement. It has an expert scientific panel and some staff members are known to have reef science research and management backgrounds, including former GBRMPA staff members. The GBRF has actively engaged with the ACRS community through attending and sponsoring annual ACRS conferences and is a valued corporate member of the ACRS community.

(f) the establishment, governance and membership of the Great Barrier Reef Foundation, including the management of conflicts of interest and commercial interests

The ACRS does not wish to comment in detail on the establishment or membership of the GBRF. It has a good record of fundraising for the reef and of corporate engagement, and is guided by an expert scientific panel, but it does not have the depth of full time staff fully occupied with reef issues that an organisation like GBRMPA has. We also note that the membership of the Scientific Advisory Committee has representatives of two universities, which does not reflect the academic diversity of the coral reef research community. As a key advocate for Australian coral reef scientists, we emphasise that open and competitive allocation of funding is a hallmark of productive, targeted and useful research in other disciplinary fields, both nationally and internationally. We strongly encourage that a requirement be incorporated into this award for the GBRF to establish a clearly articulated strategy for open, democratic, competitive and strategic allocation of these government funds. While we understand that the

funds will be used for addressing strategic research priorities that have already been set, we maintain that they should be allocated in a manner that potentially galvanizes meaningful critical inquiry across the whole research community.

We note concern that the GBRF may have to consider the perceptions of its donors when making decisions on the uses of this funding and the choices of recipients, and how this could affect future donations for the GBRF. Decisions made and processes used by government organisations are seen as more accessible due to the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* and the expectation of consultation with other government organisations, academic and research institutions, industry bodies and the general public.

(g) any other related matters

While noting the concerns above with the current capacity of the GBRF and the lack of transparency regarding funding decisions, the ACRS would like to clarify that none of these comments be taken as a slur on the GBRF.

Thank you for considering the input of the ACRS to this Senate Inquiry.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Anna Scott
President
Australian Coral Reef Society