

Property Rights Australia

2nd June, 2014.

Dept. Of Environment and Communications

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Submission by Property Rights Australia to the Great Barrier Reef Inquiry

Property Rights Australia is a group which was formed to protect the property rights of landholders large and small. Most of its membership is in Queensland but we have members in all states.

According to the Australian Institute of Marine Science the greatest threats to the Great Barrier Reef are storms 48%, crown of thorns starfish 42% and coral bleaching 10%.¹

In spite of this, environmental organisations, the media and sometimes Government agencies regularly assert or imply that agriculture is responsible for the most damage to the GBR. For example the WWF submission to the vegetation Management Framework Amendment Bill claimed that “Tree clearing is a major contributor to sediment and nutrient pollution. Reef catchments have already lost 40% of their tree cover with another 24% disturbed. Due to marine pollution caused by tree clearing and outdated farming practices, hard coral cover is now down to just 14%, a loss of 50% since 1986.”² No responsible scientific body blames the entirety of hard coral loss on tree clearing but WWF makes the massively incorrect claim, which is repeated in many forums with impunity. The superiority of grass cover over many forest types in curbing erosion is never acknowledged.

¹ http://www.aims.gov.au/latest-news/-/asset_publisher/MIU7/content/2-october-2012-the-great-barrier-reef-has-lost-half-of-its-coral-in-the-last-27-years

² http://www.aims.gov.au/latest-news/-/asset_publisher/MIU7/content/2-october-2012-the-great-barrier-reef-has-lost-half-of-its-coral-in-the-last-27-years page 6

There is no doubt that floodwater has been depositing sediments on the reef for thousands of years. To claim increases of several orders of magnitude and blame them exclusively on farming and grazing furthers the agendas of various interest groups. The impact of just freshwater, a natural phenomenon caused by flooding never makes the newspaper headlines. It would also appear that effects on fish and crustaceans which often benefit from flooding do not come within the terms of reference.

Dr. Allison Jones contends on crown of thorns “That the [causes of outbreaks](#) are still inferred, rather than known with any confidence.

Nutrients in municipal sewage are discharged all year round, but the relative risk this poses to the reef compared to that in agricultural runoff and flood waters, is still unclear.”³

The April 2010 Marsten Jacob report commissioned by the Queensland Government concluded that urban runoff would quite likely be also damaging the reef. It also concluded that to retrofit a plethora of small and inefficient systems which were spewing raw sewage into the reef lagoon would be too expensive and that it would be cheaper to focus on curbing agricultural runoff.⁴

Despite the uncertainty of claims against agriculture and the unknown effects of untreated sewage and urban development environmental groups, principally WWF make claims against agriculture as if they were certain.

This focus on agricultural runoff, including by Governments has allowed environmental groups who wish to get agriculture under their umbrella and into their long term business plan to focus public

³ <https://theconversation.com/the-battle-over-abbot-point-risks-losing-the-great-barrier-reef-war-24207>

⁴ <http://www.ehp.qld.gov.au/water/policy/pdf/mja-economic-gbr-report.pdf>

attention on agriculture to the exclusion of other causes of reef damage.

WWF believe they can play all sides off against each other and alternately demonise and praise whatever industries it wants to threaten or seduce.

For example the Qld Resources Council (QRC) in a press release of 5th June 2013 “Scientists’ welcome contribution to GBR”, QRC said, *“Responding to a joint statement by scientists collected by environmental group WWF, Queensland Resources Council Chief Executive Michael Roche said that the scientists’ acknowledgement of present threats to the reef and advocacy of a cautious approach to future development was on the same page as the resources sector.”*⁵

By 18th March, 2014 the romance with WWF was over and in another press release “Activist ‘checklist’ two years on” QRC expressed their disappointment in WWF.

“Mr Roche said that although WWF and the Australian Marine Conservation Society (AMCS) were not overtly parties to the original anti-coal movement document, they appear happy playing both sides of the street.

*‘For example, on key environmental issues such as Great Barrier Reef water quality, **WWF had played a constructive role in promoting the importance of land management practices to reduce nutrient and sediment loads entering the lagoon.**’*⁶

⁵ https://www.qrc.org.au/01_cms/details.asp?ID=3263

⁶ https://www.qrc.org.au/01_cms/details.asp?ID=3411

Farmers and graziers are an easily intimidated target who are easily defamed to the global community who donate money and believe environmental groups who claim unsustainability.

Serious reports often qualify claims with phrases such as “scientists feel”, “likely increased” or as in the following quote; “*The model also shows that, given **plausible** historic increases in river nutrient loads over the last 200 years*”⁷ “*plausible*” also enters the lexicon.

Entire agricultural industries have been demonized based on “feelings”, hypotheses being put forward as if there is no doubt and modeling based on unknown assumptions. If Nitrogen is a major part of the problem then untreated urban sewage has to be part of the problem also. Neither Government nor the resources industries want to acknowledge what harmful mining waste may come down the rivers in floodwater.

A recent column in The Land newspaper by Dr. Jennifer Marohasy points to the origins of some of the accusations. Back in the 1990’s “The extent of agriculture in a catchment was used as a measure of condition of catchments and adjacent inshore reefs without reference to a single environmental indicator.”⁸

Not for the first time, the farming community is expected to bear the criticism and the cost of community expectations, whether justified or not, with respect to the environment. Agricultural producers have already suffered severe body blows as a result of the actions of environmental groups. Now they are the subject of savage attack without the means to defend themselves. Practices are evolving constantly but no credit for this ever makes a headline like the blame game. Meanwhile, other possible causes of harm are not investigated.

⁷ Three lines of evidence to link outbreaks of the crown-of-thorns seastar *Acanthaster planci* to the release of larval food limitation [K. E. Fabricius](#), [K. Okaji](#), [G. De’ath](#)

⁸ Dr. Jennifer Marohasy, “Beware the environmental rent-seekers”, The Land, 15/5/2014

We recommend that more research be done into other causes of “plausible” runoff such as inefficient sewage systems, fertiliser from parks and gardens, heavy metals from tyre residue erosion caused by urban development and the fallout from mining.

The public would be more aware of the misinformation that is disseminated by the environmental organisations and it would be more difficult to achieve if the exclusions under the secondary boycott provisions for environmental groups did not exist.

We therefore recommend that the environmental exclusions in the Australian Competition and Consumer Act with respect to secondary boycotts and third line forcing be repealed.

Joanne Rea

Chair

Property Rights Australia