

Walter Starck

## Dredging up another bogus threat

Plans to dredge Queensland ports are under attack by the usual suspects, who have brought to bear their customary arsenal of faux science, outrageous misrepresentation and emotional manipulation



**Despite half a century of reef “experts” chanting a continuous litany of imminent threats to the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) none has proved to be other than trivial or temporary. The *threat de jour* is dredging in connection with port developments for the gas and mining industries. Is this one any more real than the previous non-events, or is it just another grab for public attention and funding by the reef salvation industry?**

As its name implies, the Great Barrier Reef is not a coastal or fringing reef, but is well off the coast and separated from it by a wide and deep lagoon. The nearest reefs of the GBR are many kilometres upwind and cross current from the areas to be dredged. The lagoon floors of most reefs are normally and naturally blanketed in sediments generated by the reefs themselves. In the GBR lagoon this is added to by sediments washed down from the ancient eroded land over countless millennia of wet season rains and floods. These sediments are many meters deep over most of the inshore sea floor.

Around rocky headlands and occasional rocky outcrops further offshore a limited range of silt-resistant corals may be found, where wave action prevents silt from settling and keeps hard substrate exposed. However, these inshore reefs tend to be few and small with only limited biodiversity. They are typically dominated by algae and are subject to frequent devastation from storms, floods and temperature extremes, both hot and cold.

Normal wave action generated by the prevailing trade winds stirs up the bottom sediments and maintains high turbidity in most inshore locations along the GBR coast. Frequent strong wind events commonly result in ocean turbidity comparable to, or greater than, that of floodwater plumes. In most years several tropical cyclones also strike the GBR. These entirely natural events regularly result in massive resuspension of bottom sediments and siltation of corals. This is orders of magnitude greater than that associated with any dredging.

The threat to the reef from coastal dredging has been greatly exaggerated. This is not just an opinion but is an observed fact. Extensive dredging for the ports of Cairns and Townsville has been conducted in the recent past with no significant detrimental impact. The most notable ongoing effect has been at Townsville, where the dredged shipping channel has become one of the best fishing grounds in the area.

Certainly any approval-and-permitting process must take into consideration potentially detrimental impacts, assess them against benefits and seek to minimise them where practical. Ecology is above all holistic. What we do not get in one way must be obtained elsewhere or we must do without. Nothing can be done without impacts, and no organism is without them.

In Australia we now have the most expensive housing in the world, the fastest growing food prices in the OECD, the smallest manufacturing sector of any developed nation and despite having our power plants located directly on the coal fields our electricity costs are double those of other nations which buy our coal and transport it thousands of miles to generate their power. Poorly conceived environmental measures have played a large role in this situation.

The health of the Australian economy now depends heavily on the resource sector; however, we also have the highest mining costs in the world, at near double those in the U.S. and Canada. A number of important resource-development projects here have recently been put on indefinite hold or cancelled, and a number of existing mines have been closed because they are too expensive to operate at current commodity prices. To impose an expensive shipping bottleneck on future mineral exports through inadequate port facilities would be beyond stupid.

The ethical objections raised by the eco-saviours over purported conflicts of interest regarding two Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority board members having links to the mining industry are as contrived as the endless threats to the reef themselves. Somehow, by this reasoning it is deemed improper for the most important remaining industry in our economy to have a voice in the environmental decision making that is strangling it; but, entirely proper that environmentalists enjoy status as a “stakeholder”, even though they have nothing at stake and nothing invested, nothing to lose and not even any special knowledge to offer.

The fact that the environmental lobby’s own financial support depends heavily on promoting the idea of threats would seem to be the most obvious and real conflict of interest in this issue.

Another major point of concern for environmentalists in this matter seems to be a change made between the draft and final versions in the GBRMPA board’s recommendations regarding environmental permitting for the port development. The final version is that impact on biodiversity should be a “key consideration” in environmental approval, while an earlier draft recommendation stated that port development should be opposed if there was a “potential to degrade inshore diversity”. The operational word here is “potential”. In effect, this version would have been an open invitation for hypothetical possibilities of concern from environmentalists, with developers being demanded the logically impossible task of proving a negative proposition. In other words: they must prove there could be no potential reduction in biodiversity anywhere, any place, any time with no consideration of any benefits either environmental or economic. The version the environmentalists prefer amounts to a blanket ban. What they don’t want is a balanced assessment of costs and benefits.

Fundamental environmentalism is an indulgence that has cost us dearly, and it is one we can no longer afford. Living costs in Australia are among the highest in the world and working families feel their impact first of all. Even though the ruinous cost of misguided environmentalism is already all too real, eco-activists are demanding still more and stronger restrictions. Their demographic is characteristically comprised of the economically comfortable with a preference for righteousness over reality and gratitude. Ironically, most are urbanites whose own preferred habitat is the tiny portion of the nation where nature has been virtually annihilated. They then profess to be deeply concerned about the impact on nature of the productive activity which makes possible their own indulgent way of life.

In addition to its parasitic and hypocritical aspects, fundamental environmentalism is also a highly intolerant belief that treats all others with contempt. It cares nothing for the misery it has inflicted on the lives of many thousands of honest hard working and productive families. Globally it has consigned millions more to unrelenting poverty, even to death from easily preventable causes.

All this is not just in Third World countries. Over the past three decades some three-quarters of our farming, grazing, fishing and small mining families have been forced to give up their cherished and productive ways of life. A major contributor to this tragedy has been a proliferation of malignant environmental demands and restrictions. In Europe ill-founded and unworkable attempts to control changes in climate, which can't even be shown to exist, have been a key element in an economic malaise that is now chronic and threatens to become much worse. Even in Germany, the richest most technologically advanced EU nation, over 600,000 households are reported to have had their power shut off because they are unable to pay the costs imposed by the ill-conceived adoption of alternative energy systems, none of which has reduced CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by any measurable degree.

We are only beginning to wake up to the damage caused by unfounded, self-righteous environmentalism abetted by a phony pretence of expertise, and certainty from a sadly corrupted area of science, regarding matters which, in truth, are only poorly understood. It is time to recognise that we have been hoodwinked by phony experts and sucked in by the righteousness of fools happily assisted by economically illiterate politicians willing to go with the flow of whatever seems popular. It is going to take years to revive industries and repair the damage and to keep our economy going during this time we are going to need a healthy resource industry more than ever.

With the recent change in government and growing trends in media reporting and opinion polls toward questioning the established eco-orthodoxy, the true believers are ratcheting up the alarm level of their proclamations. It is to be hoped that the new government will stand its ground and start shedding the phony experts and stakeless stakeholders who have infested the body politic.

A place at the conference table is badly needed for dissenting opinion. A key difference between science and religion is, or should be, that in the former dissenting opinion is heard and addressed. The recent attempts in environmental sciences to claim consensus, misrepresent findings, ignore or hide conflicting evidence and suppress dissent is contrary to the very essence of science. This constitutes serious scientific malpractice and should be seen as such.

If those shown to be guilty of such practices were barred from any further public funding it would do much to start to restore the tattered integrity of environmental science.

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