



Australian Coral Reef Society Inc.

A society promoting scientific study of Australian Coral Reefs

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Christine McDonald

Secretary

Senate Inquiry into the Management of the Great Barrier Reef

2nd June 2014

Dear Christine

The Australian Coral Reef Society (ACRS) would like to offer brief comments to the Inquiry. Our responses are inserted in blue in response to each of the questions you raise.

- a. management of the impacts of industrialisation of the reef coastline, including dredging, offshore dumping, and industrial shipping, in particular, but not limited to, current and proposed development in the following regions or locations:
 - i. Gladstone Harbour and Curtis Island,
 - ii. Abbot Point,
 - iii. Fitzroy Delta, and
 - iv. Cape Melville and Bathurst Bay;

While there has been considerable public consultation we feel that the Qld Government has not adequately considered alternative options and passed these to the Commonwealth government for consideration. In particular, there was a failure to pass on an option to vastly reduce the need for dredging during the Abbot Point proposal. This option required a trestle system to transfer minerals from the shore to ships based further offshore. Greater transparency in articulating the range of management options would be useful, both for public consultation and communication to Commonwealth government.

- b. management of the impacts of agricultural runoff;

Plans to reduce agricultural runoff are progressing relatively well even though their impact on the marine environment has yet to achieve targets. It would be disastrous to reduce investment in these programmes. Is it the opinion of the ACRS that government needs to invest more heavily in the management of the Great Barrier Reef and watershed improvement in particular.

- c. management of non-agricultural activities within reef catchments impacting on the reef, including legacy mines, current mining activities and practices, residential and tourism developments, and industrial operations including Yabulu;

We feel that approval processes should be revisited in the context of climate change. Issues such as the flow of toxins from mine spoil into the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park should be re-



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evaluated to consider feasible risks of flooding and impact; for example, the “1 in 100 year storm” scenario may be entirely inadequate given sea level rise and changes to storm intensity.

- d. ensuring the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority has the independence, resourcing and capacity to act in the best interest of the long-term health of the reef;

The ACRS is particularly concerned about proposals brought forward by the Commonwealth and state governments of Queensland and New South Wales to extend bilateral agreements that devolve approvals to States for approving projects that impact the EPBC act. As clearly articulated by McGrath (2014) there is a compelling precedent for retaining Commonwealth oversight of projects that are likely to affect the Great Barrier Reef. Prior to the last national elections, the rhetoric from the Commonwealth was that approvals would not be devolved to State if State was the main promoter of a development plan as this would constitute a clear conflict-of-interest. Yet, in the proposals published recently (and under public comment at present), this check has been removed (<http://www.environment.gov.au/topics/environment-protection/environment-assessments/bilateral-agreements/qld>). Under the new approvals, the GBRMPA is relegated to simply an advisory role over plans advanced by the State to develop infrastructure that might affect the GBR. This is unacceptable and clearly undermines the ability of the GBRMPA to undertake its mandate.

We are also significantly dismayed to see that the Commonwealth government has significantly cut the funding of the GBRMPA at a time when the reef is in its worst state ever. Moreover, funding levels for other aspects of reef management have declined. For example, the state of Queensland has vastly reduced investments into the management of reef fisheries and the Reef Rescue project has effectively reduced in size by placing a wider diversity of activities under the same budget. Coral reef management does indeed help the reef (McCook et al 2012) and is more important now than at any time in the past. We need more action more swiftly.

- e. the adequacy, timeliness and transparency of independent scientific work undertaken to support government decisions impacting the reef;

We feel that programmes like the National Environmental Research Programme (NERP) are proving to be effective in providing the science to help manage the reef and undertake cost-effective interventions. Management agencies have excellent links with the research community and the NERP provides a great example for having researchers work closely with managers and industry. However, it remains to be seen how the cuts to GBRMPA will undermine the continued success of such programmes. It is also important to bear in mind that science is now playing a stronger role than ever in supporting day-to-day decision making (e.g., how to intervene to mitigate crown-of-thorns starfish outbreaks).

- f. whether government decision processes impacting the reef are consistent with the precautionary principle;



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It is hard to agree with this statement when considering the process undergone in granting permission at a State level for the Abbot Point port development.

- g. whether the strategic assessments currently underway are likely to protect the reef from further decline;

The Strategic Assessments were comprehensive and generally accurate portrayals of the immediate problems facing the reefs and extent to which management has improved the outcome. However, one important short-coming of the SAs was that they were not mandated to consider future development scenarios. In particular, the Queensland government has an aspiration to increase agriculture in the far north of the state. This is a matter of concern because the undeveloped nature of the Cape York watershed is likely one of the key reasons that the adjacent reefs are in such a healthy state. Development of this area could have very serious negative consequences for the GBR because the reefs are so close to shore in this sector of the reef. There has been no explicit consideration over how Queensland will realise its aspirations without there being a significant cost to the World Heritage Site.

- h. the identification and protection of off-limits areas on the reef coastline to help protect the health of the reef;

Most of the off-limits areas are offshore. The current zoning plan seems to be effective.

- i. consistency of efforts with the World Heritage Committee's recommendations on what is required to protect the reef;

Our major concern here reflects proposed changes to the approval process for major infrastructure and development projects that would devolve power entirely to the States (see response to d).

- j. the extent to which government decisions impacting the reef, including development of the strategic assessments and Reef 2050 Plan, involve genuine, open and transparent consultation with the Australian community, affected industries and relevant scientific experts, and genuine consideration of the broader community's views in final decisions; and

There is certainly an open consultation but the transparency between consultation and decisions is obscure, particularly at a State level. Moreover, the communication of development options from State to Commonwealth levels appears to be inadequate in some cases (e.g., the Abbott Point decision).



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Yours sincerely,

Professor Peter Mumby
President, Australian Coral Reef Society

The Australian Coral Reef Society

The Australian Coral Reef Society represents Australia's coral reef science community, and plays a key role by 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. Because it is not aligned to any vested interests, the Society's views are sought by government policy makers, conservationists and all those interested in coral reefs who need impartial and expert advice.