

Submission to the Senate Inquiry on the Adequacy of Management of the Great
Barrier Reef,
from Graeme Kelleher. AO. FTSE. FIE Aust. FEIANZ.

In general, I believe that management over the past few decades of the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) has been adequate. However, there is one element that raises serious questions about the independence of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (the Authority)..

I refer to the recent decision of the Authority to issue a permit for the dredging of a shipping channel through the GBR within the GBR World Heritage Area and the dumping of 3 million cubic metres of dredged spoil into the GBR Marine Park and World Heritage Area, as part of the proposed Abbot Point coal port development.

The following comments are in recognition that the Authority was established as an independent management body so as to ensure that its decisions were not determined by short term political considerations. Throughout the history of Australia and other democratic countries, such independence has been shown to be essential for the delivery of unbiased, evidence-based decisions.

There is considerable reason to believe that the decision to issue the permit mentioned above was not made on the basis of evidence. This evidence indicates that the GBR has lost about 50% of its coral cover in the past 30 years due mainly to human-induced changes including increases in run-off of nutrients and sediments from the mainland and climate change.

While the permit previously issued by the Honourable Greg Hunt, the Commonwealth Minister for the Environment, for the dredging and dumping referred to above, attached a series of conditions for the project and indicated an intended increase in the funds aimed at reducing mainland run-off, the permit was inadequate in the same ways as that issued by the Authority.

It should be recognised that the existing stresses on the GBR ecosystem are so high that that ecosystem is extremely vulnerable to additional stresses. The ecosystem will not be able to resist the stresses from the proposed Abbot Point development, which will exacerbate the continuing degradation of the GBR. The need for additional investment to reduce run-off of nutrients and sediments is urgent, even if the Abbot Point development does not proceed, and that investment should not be conditional on the development.

The evidence that the Authority's decision to issue the permit was not independent and was not based on careful scientific assessment includes;

1. Documents obtained by Greenpeace show that the Authority's experts recommended that the permit not be issued;
2. The comments by the Authority's Chairman and CEO, Dr Russell Reichelt, in 'the Conversation' show that he believes that the Authority did not compare the cost/benefits and feasibilities of alternative ways of dumping the sediments produced by dredging, such as land reclamation along the coastline and storage near the coal mine site for later disposal in that site. The comments seem to imply that the Authority does not have the jurisdiction to carry out such studies, This is wrong.

3. There is inadequate scientific information to allow the effects of sediment dumping on the coral reef and seagrass ecosystems and associated species such as reef fish and dugongs to be predicted with the necessary certainty. This has been recognised in various ways, including the setting-up by the Authority and the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS) of an expert group to assess this issue in mid April. The permit should not have been issued without the necessary scientific studies having been completed first.

All of these considerations suggest that the decision by the Authority's delegate to issue the permit was not independent, but was affected by the prior decisions of the Minister and the policies of the Commonwealth Government. The primary function of the Authority is to protect the GBR. The decision to issue the permit in the face of enormous opposition from the public to the proposal in the public consultation process provides additional evidence that the Authority has not competently carried out its legal mandate.

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