

Australia's Great Barrier Reef: Biodiversity and Marine Life Threatened

The Day Nemo Died: Coal, Bleaching and the Great Barrier Reef

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Planet Earth's reefs are being damaged at unprecedented rates, with global coral bleaching events becoming a regular facet of environmental catastrophe. The reasons for this are simple enough, a mixture of meddling human agency and environmental affect seeing a rise in water temperatures above the threshold over a sustained period of time; sediment run-off; influences in nutrient levels; and the depredations of the commodities industries.

As the US National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration describes it, corals “turn completely white” when “stressed by changes in conditions such as temperature, light, or nutrients” thereby resulting in the expelling of symbiotic algae resident in their tissues.[1]

The NOAA has been the bringer of ill-tidings, suggesting in March that bleaching conditions would continue to worsen over the coming weeks. It should know – in 2005, the US lost half of its coral reef system in the Caribbean in one year, with warm waters around the Northern Antilles and Puerto Rico expanding southwards.



Such bleaching events are not the sole outcome of temperature rises. In January 2010, another bleaching event was experienced, this time occasioned by cold water temperatures in the Florida Keys.

The largest reef system on earth, Australia's Great Barrier Reef, has become a prime candidate for the ravages of bleaching, occasioned by climate change effects and the ever impressive assaults of El Niño. Till 1998, the sprawling marine structure was spared. A draft UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report went so far as to suggest that the Great Barrier Reef was doomed to functional extinction by 2030.

The worse features of the phenomenon are occurring to the north of the Queensland town of Cairns, considered by Terry Hughes, convenor of the National Coral Taskforce as “the jewel in the crown” of the coral system.[2] “No one ever recorded a mass bleaching event in the

40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, until the middle of the 1980s.” The catalyst here has been an increase in the baseline temperature between half a degree and a full degree for a sustained period of time.

At the end of March, the Australian Marine Conservation Society stressed the event as a national environmental crisis. According to the Great Barrier Reef campaign director, Imogen Zeethoven, “We have never seen bleaching of this magnitude or intensity in such a pristine area of the Reef.”[3]

Few things that happen in a local reef environment prove to be isolated events. Global climate change has meant that Australia, heavily involved in the export and consumption of fossil fuels, partakes as an ably dangerous contributor.

Insatiably addicted, the Australian market continues to rely on approvals for more coal mines, and more coal export terminals which have excited foreign investors keen for an economic steal. These include such companies as China Merchants, one China’s largest stated-owned enterprises, which as bought a share in the largest coal mining export terminal on the planet – located in Sydney.

Such reliance on coal, and the sentimentality associated with the Great Barrier Reef, have produced absurd reactions from such state governments as Queensland’s. Environment Minister Steven Miles, who holds his position with awkward absurdity, spoke of the need to “reduce as many pressures” on the reef system as possible even after his colleagues approved of mining leases for what will be Australia’s largest coalmine.[4] This, despite the minority Palaszczuk government’s promise to protect the Reef system.

The same goes for the Commonwealth environment minister, Greg Hunt. Having warned of the “major and significant” bleaching effect on the Great Barrier Reef after receiving a briefing from the Reef 2050 Independent Expert Panel, Hunt was hardly going to protest to his Queensland colleagues about their pro-mining stance.

The implications of the Adani coal mining project in the Galilee basin and at Abbot Point, provided the company can actually raise the cash in a less friendly financial environment, will be vast. As Queensland Greens candidate Andrew Bartlett has explained, little could justify “letting off the biggest carbon bomb on the planet in an already over-heated atmosphere.”[5]

Far from doing the environmental arithmetic, Miles could only see the value of a commercialised reef, one seen in monetary terms. The totals for Miles were stupefying: a value of \$6 billion to Queensland, and 70,000 jobs. Rather than appraising his own efforts in approving greater stresses to the marine system, the environment minister resorted to indifferent politico-speak, an empty language that condemns more than it serves.

The ever resilient British naturalist Sir David Attenborough has waded into the debate, making the Great Barrier Reef the subject of potentially his last on the road documentary. “Do we really care so little about the Earth on which we live that we don’t wish to protect one of its greatest wonders from the consequences of our behaviour?”[6] His sense of grief for the environmental loss is palpable, having first visited the marine system in 1957.

Reefs are lodestones of biodiversity and environmental equilibrium. Functionally, they act as enormous food systems and protective barriers for coastlines from the elements. Provided

they are sustainable, fishing, recreation and tourism are also industries nourished by their existence. The demise of global coral reefs, however, seems assured, if not through attrition, than through spectacular unrelenting events.

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NOTES

- [1] http://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/coral_bleach.html
- [2] <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/mar/14/severe-coral-bleaching-worsens-in-most-pristine-parts-of-great-barrier-reef>
- [3] <http://www.marineconservation.org.au/news.php/778/great-barrier-reef-coral-bleaching-is-a-national-environmental-crisis>
- [4] <http://www.smh.com.au/environment/climate-change/great-barrier-reef-coral-bleaching-concerning-govt-week-after-mine-approval-20160408-go1xmd.html>
- [5] <http://www.smh.com.au/business/mining-and-resources/adani-coal-mine-approval-sparks-protests-20160404-gnxn3v.html>
- [6] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-04-07/barrier-reef-coral-bleaching-significant-minister-greg-hunt/7308394>

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