

Address to Senate Committee hearing on management of the GBR Region, Townsville, 23 July 2014

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By definition, the management of the GBR is not at the level it needs to be because the reef is sick and – as is likely to be demonstrated in the soon to be released 2014 Outlook Report - getting sicker.

One significant reason for this deterioration is that governments (driven by business), to a greater or lesser degree, want simplicity in a system that is extremely complex. The more we study, the more we learn that the GBR is amazing BECAUSE it is complex. If it weren't, it wouldn't be extraordinarily beautiful and fascinating.

Governments (and business) also want speed – why oh why they must wonder can't the Reef just adapt to cope quickly – preferably within 3-4 years.

And governments also want to be able to convince the voters that they (and only they) can deliver a cake that can be eaten and kept. The surreal idea that the Reef can be used and used and used and still remain the same.

Unfortunately, because the Reef is not simple or speedy or surreal, science must be sacrificed for ideological spin – and that is what happens.

The current government's failure to appoint a Minister for Science and the cutbacks in funds for scientific bodies, GBRMPA, AIMS and CSIRO, do not augur well for the future of the Reef, and increase the opportunity for smart to outweigh clever.

With respect to **GBRMPA** we would like to see a more independent body with a larger Board, with a greater skill base and less mining industry interest.

The EIS process, under which proponents are often part of the decision-making body (as in the case of Abbot Point), and select and pay for consultants, also puts science and the Reef at risk. The approval process, which increasingly assumes that every negative impact can be spirited away through the smoke and mirrors of offsets, does the same. The EIS process is becoming cursory.

And ideology threatens not only science but also **legislation**.

Far too often the main object of the GBRMP Act is overlooked. The main object is 'to provide for the long term protection and conservation of the environment, biodiversity and heritage values of the GBR Region'. All other objects, public enjoyment and appreciation, education, recreational, economic and cultural activities and research are allowed *only to the extent that they are consistent with the main object*. This is so often overlooked on the grounds that the GBRMP is a 'multiple use area'. Even the Reef 2050 Long-term Sustainability Plan Discussion Paper, describes the GBRWHA as 'a multiple use area that supports a range of activities including agriculture, defence, fishing, mining, ports, recreation, research, shipping tourism and traditional use'. With this fundamental misunderstanding of the legislation, the Reef 2050 plan is off to a contentious and dubious start.

The same can be said for the legislation when it comes to the overlooking of the precautionary principle.

And with this overall dubious approach to Reef planning and management, how are the 165 million cubic metres of dredge spoil forecast, by the ports, for **the next 25 years** to be handled? Or the advent of Triple E ships – ships that are almost a quarter-mile long, wider than a motorway, taller than a 20-storey office block and carrying so many containers that if they were stacked on top of each other they would touch the

stratosphere – 47 kilometres above the earth?

Consultation is too often perfunctory. Two examples: Reef 2050 will be put out for public consultation 'by the end of 2014' – while it is scheduled to be handed to UNESCO in February; and, the delegate in charge of the Abbot Point decision referred in his Statement of Reasons to the campaigns, petitions, correspondence and phone calls received from members of the public (and the Avaaz petition alone contained over 1.25 million signatures) saying, 'I noted that in the majority of cases it was not clear how or whether these members of the public were impacted by the proposal' and 'most communications from members of the public expressed broad concerns or objections to disposal of dredged material in the Marine park and did not specifically address the proposed activity'.

The level of spin in government is now leading to the politicisation of the public service. Frank and fearless advisors are at best ignored and, at worst, turned into promoters of ideologically driven policies, laws and regulations. Below is an email received from a public servant following NQCC's submission and subsequent phone conference on a draft offset policy that was not even compliant with IUCN or ICMM (International Council on Mining & Metals).

*Dear valued stakeholders,
As anticipated, Queensland's new environmental offsets framework commenced today. I would like to take this opportunity to thank each of you for your role in forming the new framework particularly to those of you who took the time to provide submissions on the framework either to the Parliamentary Committee in relation to the Environmental Offsets Bill or directly to the Department in relation to the draft Regulation, Policy and guidance material.*

Without your valued insight and experience the framework would not have achieved its strategic focus in achieving environmental outcomes while at the same time streamlining the offsets assessment and delivery process.

Environmental offsets is a complex policy issue, but as a result of your input, we have a framework that is simpler to use but effective. The offsets reform journey started over 2 years ago and as the framework goes live today we will continue to effectively implement the new framework going forward.

Agency staff around the State have received training in the new framework over the last month and supporting guidance material and tools will be made available in the near future.

So again, thank you for partnering with EHP on our Environmental Offsets reform journey.