



Save the Reef Rally and March – Brisbane 25th August, 2013

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On Sunday 25th August my wife and I joined a large crowd of people for Brisbane's Save the Reef Rally. A good-natured, multi-hued crowd gathered in Queen's Park close to the river for the event. Early on there was plenty of room at the T-shirt and Action Station stalls. But as the crowd began to build the square quickly filled up with people of all ages – from kids in strollers to Knitting Nannas and every age group in between. As billed, it certainly had the atmosphere of a family occasion. Yet while the vibe was relaxed, tolerant and easy-going, the underlying concern could not have been more serious - the survival of Australia's precious Great Barrier Reef. Everyone had turned out to register their determined opposition to plans for new coal ports, export infrastructure and further dredging along Queensland's northern coast that would all take place dangerously close to the already endangered reef. Opening up the area as a vast new industrial zone would inevitably bring even more commercial vessels through the entire reef area. While phosphate runoff, turbidity and acidification are currently acknowledged as serious issues there would also be a significant increase in further pressures upon the reef that would include more frequent marine spills and other accidents.

Earlier this year, a UNESCO report stated that Australia had 'failed to properly protect the reef' and called for 'a panel of experts to review the natural wonder and safeguard its future.' It added that: 'the scale and pace of development proposals appear beyond the capacity for independent, quality and transparent decision-making.' Furthermore, 'few developments are refused, some overlap

and no development limits have been set by government.' These are pretty damning conclusions from a highly credible international organisation.

Two of the speakers were people who live and work on the reef. After witnessing its deterioration first-hand, one had left her 'dream job' there to become a full-time community activist. The event left no doubt in my mind that there will be growing outrage if the politicians continue to promote industrial expansion and growth over the community's desire to protect this priceless world heritage asset. Such growth and expansion can only be short-term anyway because it is linked with an damaging extractive industry that quite literally has no future. This is no way to treat an ancient living community of quite incalculable value that should be held in trust for future generations

Some of those taking part were also there to express their opposition to the further expansion of the coal industry while others sought to promote the 'Lock the Gate' initiative against coal seam gas. I was surprised that none of the speakers mentioned the need to keep all or most of the remaining coal in the ground, instead of allowing it to be exported and burned. This was a wasted opportunity since reference to that pressing issue would have strengthened the case being made on behalf of the reef. The fact is that Australia has long been guilty of egregious dishonesty by continuing to profit from short-term income from selling coal while ignoring the need to rein in CO2 emissions before it is too late. Bill McKibben's recent visit here made that entirely clear for anyone who was listening. The take home message is that some 80% or more of the currently identified fossil fuel reserves in the world - especially coal - must not be exploited.

At the same time there's one issue in particular that this group needs to get into perspective. Most people living in Queensland – and elsewhere in Australia – seem quite happy to live an affluent, energy profligate lifestyle that could not exist without fossil fuels. They drive their SUVs and are enthusiastic users of the electricity that, at present, still comes mainly from the burning of coal. Blocking the use of coal and, perhaps, that of coal seam gas, would have some highly desirable consequences. Yet, at the same time, their loss would impact on the finances of the state and the country. So we can't really have it both ways. If we are to oppose what some now regard as 'rogue industries' then we should also be willing to accept the costs involved. These include reviewing our unconscious choices, reducing our demand for certain things and playing our own individual parts in adapting to very different circumstances. The whole event would have had greater credibility had some of these issues been touched upon, however briefly.

Finally I wondered how well the impressive turnout reflected the views of the wider community. Certainly, if the distinctly welcoming and positive responses shown during the march by other passers by was any indication, support is widespread. If everyone truly understood what was at stake that support might be almost universal. But there's one reason why that may not occur – at least not any time soon. That evening the event was ignored in three out of five TV news bulletins. Only Channel 7 and the ABC bothered to report it (see links below).

Then, the following morning, no mention at all appeared in either the *Australian* or the Brisbane-based *Courier Mail*. This looks like another reflection of the still remarkably common view that the human economy must always trump all other interests, including those of the natural world itself.

Overall the event left me encouraged that pressure is building to at least scale back, and even cancel, some of the proposed developments adjacent to the reef. It is simply too precious to endanger for short-term ends that are themselves highly problematic in some respects. Politicians may find the message uncomfortable but they would be foolish in the extreme to ignore it. We are already too close to the edge to stand by and let this kind of official vandalism of one of our most precious natural assets to occur. Not today. Not ever.

The quotes on pp. 1-2 are from Brian Williams, Australia has failed to protect the Great Barrier Reef, says UN report, *Courier-Mail*, June 21, 2012.

Bill McKibben's piece on: How Australian Coal is Causing Global Damage: False Profits, was published in *The Monthly*, June 2013, No. 90.

Photos of the event: <http://fightforthereef.org.au/photos-rally-for-the-reef/>

The Source News Report: <http://thesourcenews.com/2013/08/29/thousands-gather-for-rally-for-the-reef/>

ABC News Report: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-08-25/great-barrier-reef-on-protesters-voting-agenda/4911138>

Also see Felicity Wishart, Politicians risk future of reef for sake of progress <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/politicians-risk-future-of-reef-for-sake-of-progress-20130811-2rq4h.html> Retrieved 12th August, 2013