

Great Barrier Reef Fantasies: The Morrison Government's Electoral Ploy

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Asia-Pacific Research, February 08, 2022

Region: [Oceania](#)

Theme: [Environment](#)

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There are some things that strain credulity. There are the dubious accounts of virgin births. There are the resolute flat earth theorists and denialists of the moon landing. To this can be added the environmental stance of Australia's Scott Morrison and his ministers, one resolutely opposed to the empirical world. We are now at the phoney stage of an electoral war, and, with the government in more than a spot of bother, you can start expecting some rather extravagant promises of public spending.

The Great Barrier Reef, one of the single most remarkable natural structures on Planet Earth, [home to](#) 400 types of coral, 1,500 species of fish and 4,000 types of mollusc, is not one that has been spared. Politically, the **Environment Minister Sussan Ley** has denied that its health is failing, citing Australia's superior reef management skills. The Prime Minister, late last month, [promised](#) that his government would “invest an additional \$1 billion in protecting the Great Barrier Reef, while supporting 64,000 Queenslanders and their jobs which drive the Reef economy.”

The coupling of both the expenditure and the “Reef economy” illustrates the narrow, ballot-driven focus here. Environmental considerations are subsidiary matters; what does matter is the electoral thrust and spin: the jobs, the Queenslanders in industry, votes.

Morrison [does little](#) to disabuse us of this. “We are backing the health of the reef and the economic future of tourism operators, hospitality providers and Queensland communities that are at the heart of the reef economy.” So the Reef better get its act together quickly to enable such communities to flourish. After all, we are told that it is the “best managed reef in the world”.

In substance, the new funding package stretching over nine years will cover water quality issues (remediate erosion, reduce nutrient and pesticide runoff); aid reef management and

conservation; fund further research into the use of reef resilience; and modest funding for community and Traditional Owner projects.

Image on the right: A [striped surgeonfish](#) amongst the coral on Flynn Reef (Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0)



The government is also mindful, at least in a fashion, of wanting to remain in UNESCO's good books. Last year, moves were afoot to place the Reef on the list of world heritage sites "in danger". UNESCO had recommended doing so in June 2021, claiming that targets for the improvement of water had not been met. "The recommendation from UNESCO," Richard Leck, Head of Oceans from the World Wide Fund for Nature-Australia [stated at the time](#), "is clear and unequivocal that the Australian government is not doing enough to protect our greatest natural asset, especially on climate change."

The response from Ley [was indignant](#). "Clearly there were politics behind it; clearly those politics have subverted a proper process." Why, she insisted, was Australia being singled out, given that there "are 83 natural World Heritage properties facing climate change threats"? China, as the chair of the World Heritage Committee, was looked upon as being a deciding, prejudicial factor. Ley [warned](#) that this process risked "damaging [the] integrity of the World Heritage System."

Due and proper process are not strong points for the Morrison government. But politicising procedure certainly is. Ley proceeded to screech and lobby against the move, leaving behind a hefty carbon footprint in convincing countries that Australia had been wronged. At the general assembly of the UN's World Heritage Convention, Australia's representatives claimed that any such decision might not be reversible.

The central concern here was a lack of clarity on how any change could be possible given the need for a more global approach. "What, in particular," [asked](#) Australian government representative James Larsen of the general assembly, "is the route *off* the 'in danger' list for a single property if the dangers concerned are global developments that require global solutions?" The Australian effort was successful enough to convince 12 of the 21 voting members to refrain from changing the status of the Reef. Environmental vandalism had again won through.

Such funding promises as that of the Morrison government are decidedly narrow, the stuff of spreadsheet wonks and committees. These are almost always doomed to failure. Throw money at the problem in isolation, tinker with that deficiency, and ignore the more calamitous, expansive picture. John C. Day and Scott F. Heron, both of James Cook University, [summarise the point](#): "While the new funding is meant to address other threats

to the natural wonder and may improve its resilience, failing to address the climate threat is both disappointing and nonsensical.”



Heron Island, a coral cay in the southern Great Barrier Reef (Licensed under CC BY 2.0)

The picture painted by Day and Heron is bleak. In December 2021, the ocean temperatures on the Reef proved to be [the warmest on record](#). The risk of a fourth mass bleaching event in this decade was very much a serious proposition.

Both the Commonwealth and Queensland governments have also shown an appetite for approving new coal and gas projects, which bring with them a greater expansion of ports and increased shipping. This is despite warnings stretching back years, including a [2013 declaration](#) by concerned scientists about industrial development of the Great Barrier Reef coast. “As scientists, we therefore are concerned about the additional pressures that will be exerted by expansion of coastal ports and industrial development accompanied by a projected near-doubling in shipping, major coastal reclamation works, large-scale seabed dredging and dredge soil disposal.”

To date, compliance with such restrictions as fertiliser runoff that find their way into the Reef system and attempts to limit agricultural and clearing activities in reef catchment areas, has been uneven. Improving water quality, Day and Heron [write](#), is not merely a matter of disbursing more funds, but more effective spending. But a de facto election campaign is underway, and climate change and coral bleaching can wait – so the voters are being told.

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Featured image: A variety of colourful corals on Flynn Reef near Cairns (Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0)

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