

The economy versus the coast: development and death by a thousand cuts

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- Queensland's rich coastline is a glorious gift to present and future generations.
- Yet it faces death by a thousand cuts.
- What is the nature of destructive coastal development and its drivers?
- Governments have vested interests and can't be trusted to conserve the coast.
- We Queenslanders need to be vigilant and pro-active if we are to preserve our heritage.

Development and its drivers

Mining and construction are the largest components of the Queensland economy; each generates output worth many billions of dollars a year. The massive mining projects are also generating employment; some 300,000 Queenslanders have jobs in the construction industry. Coal mining for export is growing exponentially. So is the construction of ports to handle the increase in coal ships. Likewise, coal seam gas will be piped to large coastal plants for liquefaction and transfer to vessels for export.

There are 42 coastal projects currently being assessed by the commonwealth that are likely to have impacts on the Great Barrier Reef. In many proposals the sensitive tidal zone will be dredged for shipping channels, while beaches and wetlands will host transport, processing and loading facilities.

Industrial construction is booming. Building activity, driven by Australia's rapid population growth, will be almost on par with construction for its economic contribution.

Queensland's population grew by 76,000 last year. This increase is being accommodated mainly in coastal suburbs, where habitat is making way for houses.

Policies, federal and state

Economic growth of 3%+ is the holy grail of the Australian and Queensland governments. Mining and a large migrant intake are supported by both federal and state governments because they contribute heavily to growth.

Gladstone Harbour's LNG facilities are within the GBR World Heritage Area. Yet the federal government approved huge harbour dredging and the dumping of the dredge spoil as well

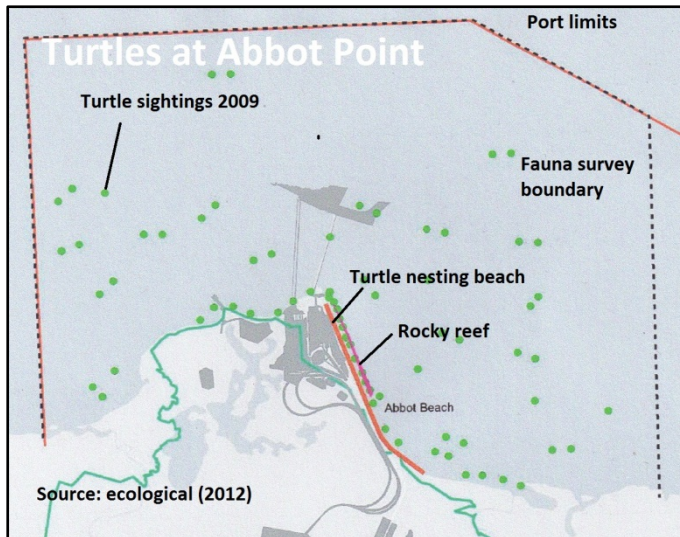
as the construction of three LNG plants on Curtis Island in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.



UNESCO has thrown down the gauntlet: Australia must not permit new port or infrastructure development in the GBR World Heritage Area. Non-compliance with this directive is likely lead to serious consequences for Australia’s standing in the world (not to mention the negative impact on Queensland’s tourism industry). The World Heritage Committee of UNESCO will meet in 2013, “**...with a view to consider, in the absence of substantial progress, the possible inscription of the property on the List of World Heritage in Danger**” (emphasis is UNESCO’s).

Environment Minister Burke recently approved Abbot Point Stage 2 coal loading facility near Bowen, having already ticked GVK’s Alpha Coal Mine. Abbot Point is an existing port extension and Burke claims that, as such, the approval won’t incur the wrath of UNESCO. But UNESCO also stipulated “...it is essential that no port, coastal or other development that could affect the property should be approved if it would pre-empt a positive outcome of the Strategic Assessment and the resulting plan for the sustainable development of the reef”.

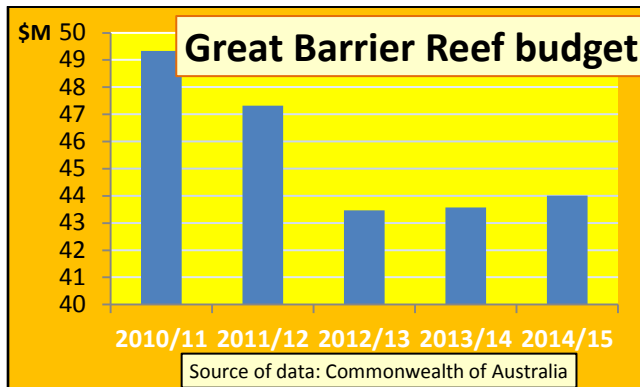
It is apparent from the environmental impact assessment of Abbot Point that sea grass areas presently recovering from flooding in 2010 –and their dependent dugong and endangered turtle populations – will be affected, as will turtle beaches. Moreover, port development bisects a dugong movement corridor linking two protection zones. Burke appears to be skating on thin ice here as his decision has pre-empted the strategic assessment.



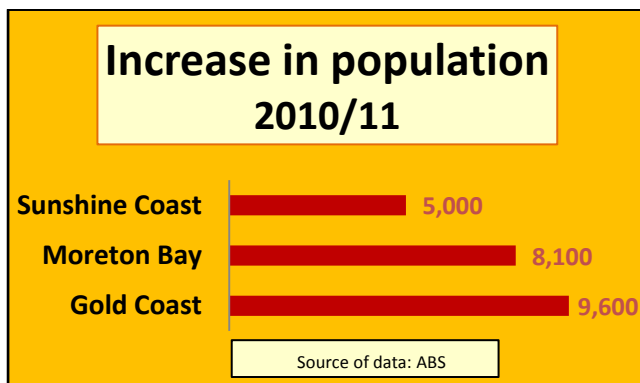
On the drawing board are several **new** ports in the GBR's coast. Environmental impact assessments – part of the approval process – are being prepared for coal ports at Balaclava Island and Fitzroy River (40 km north of Gladstone). These sites are in their natural state and there will be environmental impacts of construction. The *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* will surely be invoked given the likely threats to the GBR and migratory and threatened species. The new coal port proposed for Wongai (150 km north-west of Cooktown) is also in the pristine coast. The commonwealth would risk a downgrade of the Reef in approving these ports.



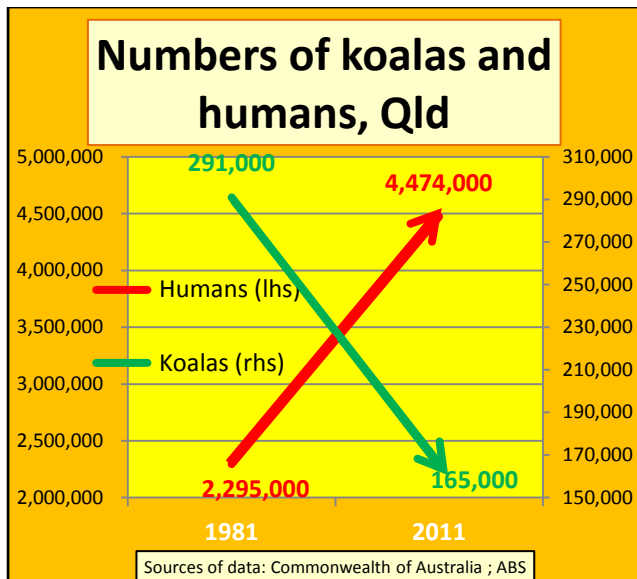
The Australian government has acknowledged the challenges it faces in managing the Reef, whose coral cover is down to 12.5%, which is a loss of 50% since 1985. Coastal development is just one of the causes of the steep decline in its values. Despite the extra work required to address these threats the federal government has cut the allocation of funds to the managing agency GBRMPA (see chart).



Given that it boosts economic growth, successive state governments have promoted immigration, both interstate and overseas. Accelerated migrant intake is fuelling settlement and commercial activity in Queensland's coast. Of the population increase of 76,000 in the state in 2011/2012, 37,074 were overseas migrants and 11,183 interstate. Just three coastal divisions in Queensland accommodated 24,000 more people in 2010-1011 (see chart).



Now Queensland's LNP government has gone further by relaxing coastal planning regulations which are seen as constraints on growth. Residential, commercial and industrial development is singled out for acceleration.



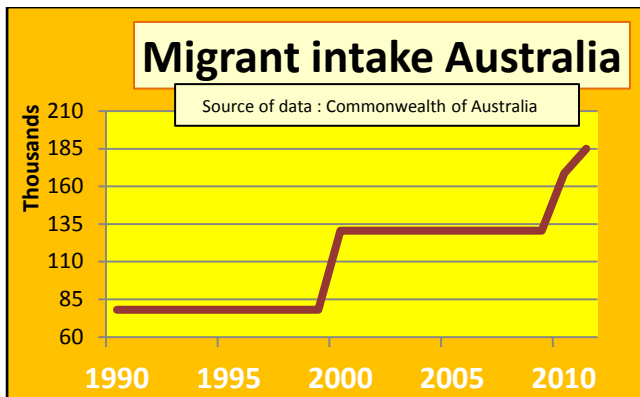
It is noteworthy that planning policies of successive Queensland governments have failed to stop the precipitous decline in koala bear numbers (see chart). Acceleration in settlement will inevitably hasten the demise in the coast of the iconic koala.

Reliance on regulation

Our economic accounting methods are deficient. While construction in the coast contributes to national and state incomes, ignored is the accompanying irreversible destruction of coastal amenity, wetlands and fauna. Development generates a positive entry in the income column. This should be matched by a negative entry in state and federal balance sheets.

Because environmental assets are not valued their protection is reliant on regulation. But regulations change with governments. Witness the recent weakening of Queensland planning regulations. Regulations can also be subject to wide differences in interpretation. What is an “acceptable” level of loss of wetland or of a protected species?

But there is no regulation governing one of the most powerful underlying causes of coastal development – population increase. There is as yet no coherent immigration policy. Cast your mind back: did you actually vote at the last election for a large increase in migrant intake? (See chart.)



Checks and balances

It is not safe to rely on state and local government regulation to keep unacceptable development in check because both have a vested interest in development. Non-government organisations are bastions against the economic odds heavily stacked against the coast. They scrutinise government policies, legislation and actions and expose failures and weaknesses. This information empowers individuals to lobby their political representatives and make informed choices at the ballot box.

The Queensland government has recently withdrawn funding from key environmental NGOs. This can be seen as a body blow to civil society. But it can be viewed as an opportunity to get weaned off funds flowing through the government teat. Not-for-profit groups that are in all ways independent of governments will gather greater strength in the long run. This article will hopefully provide a stimulus to uncommitted people to sign up to an environmental group without delay.

The importance of federal government powers is that they can override state government approvals that affect world heritage, wetlands, migratory species and threatened species and communities. All of these are found in the Queensland coast. A move under the Council of Australian Governments to devolve commonwealth environmental assessment to the states has, for the time being, been shelved. But there is already an agreement in place, of June 2012, between the commonwealth and Queensland to streamline environmental assessments. Under this, Queensland must provide sufficient information on development proposals and their impacts to enable the Commonwealth to decide on approval or not under EPBC Act.

The koala bear was recently added to the threatened species list. Invoking the EPBC Act to protect koalas may prove to be an important instrument in tempering rampant residential and commercial development. However, environmental impact assessments are piecemeal and excuse coastal habitat destruction in development proposals "...a small proportion only of total coastal habitat will be affected".

It is imperative that the Queensland government insists on the reporting of **cumulative environmental impacts** of multiple developments rather than just the impacts of individual projects. Otherwise death by a thousand cuts of the coast, and koalas, will likely continue.



Action stations

The necessity for examination of the Queensland government's interpretation of its relaxed coastal development policies goes without saying. As does the necessity to fight further attempts to devolve commonwealth environmental powers to the states; powers that serve the national interest and that are the result of the shedding of blood, sweat and tears over 40 years.

Moreover, immigration policies must also come under scrutiny. Lowering overall immigration – while at the same time increasing the humanitarian intake – makes sense, both environmentally and ethically.

The next federal election is not far off; but there is time enough to pin down the parties on their policies, especially on coastal development and immigration. Then an informed choice can be made at the ballot box.



Dr Hunt is an ecological economist with a long term interest in coastal development. His PhD was awarded for a study of economic, institutional and spatial issues in the adoption of ecologically sustainable development in the Cairns region. His research encompasses issues

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