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The Effects of Coal Mining on the Great Barrier Reef

Dear Dr. Lynham,

I am currently a third-year student studying real estate at the University of Georgia’s Terry College of Business. After attending a study abroad in Australia and spending a week on Lady Elliot Island in Queensland, I became aware of the pressing issue of the rapid deterioration of the Great Barrier Reef. I was informed of a variety of factors that are leading to the destruction of this reef system including coral bleaching, crown of thorns starfish, and ocean acidification. Most of these factors are irreversible and extremely difficult to regulate through legislation. However, I also learned that one of the leading causes of coral destruction is the effect of coal mining in Queensland and throughout Australia. I know that this is something that the Australian government can control and interfere in so as the minister for natural resources, mines and energy in Queensland, I hope that this letter will convince you to take further action on this matter.

Queensland has relied on coal as one of its most valuable exports for many years and the coal mining industry has long been one of the most influential on the economy. However, the increase in large-scale mining operations in Queensland has proved to be detrimental to the ecosystem of the Great Barrier Reef. The 2014 GBR Outlook Report states that, “The continued use of fossil fuels globally is the major driver of climate and ocean change, and servicing the export of coal is the major driver of port expansion along the regions coast”. The result of large-scale coal mining in Queensland is that large sections of healthy coral are being destroyed by the construction of new ports, accidental oil spills, and runoff from industrial mines. Despite having government legislation that protects these sections of the reef, large mining companies are taking advantage of the situation by promising an influx of jobs and boosting local economies. A recent study conducted by multiple international conservation organizations concerning the state of the Great Barrier Reef ‘found that the number and extent of new port developments presented “a significant risk to the conservation” of the world heritage area. Since then, the Australian and Queensland governments have approved six new thermal coal mining developments’ (Grech, Pressey, Day, 2016). Government agencies are aware of the effects that the increase in coal mining is having on the already declining state of the reef but have chosen to ignore them and approver further expansion. I implore you to act on this issue and help preserve the beauty of the Great Barrier Reef for my generation and the generations to come.

Through my research and experience, I have identified three major stakeholder groups that play a significant role in the conservation of the Great Barrier Reef. These groups are the Queensland government and its agencies such as the GBRMPA, the citizens of Queensland, and large mining companies such as Adani. Each one of these groups has a unique perspective on the sustainability of the Great Barrier Reef and will be greatly influenced by its longevity. Throughout the remainder of this letter, I will detail how these different bodies address the issue of coal mining’s effects on the Great Barrier Reef and will explore the motivations behind their alternate viewpoints.

The Adani Group is a multi-billion dollar privately owned Indian corporation that conducts business in a variety of different industries. However, one of their largest and most profitable sectors is their operation of coal mines in many countries but primarily in Australia. In recent years, Adani has worked to gain approval from the Australian government for the construction of new coal mines in Queensland. Their proposal for the $16 billion dollar Carmichael mine project in central Queensland promised the influx of ten thousand new jobs as well as increased revenues in the local economy. However, this project would come at a detrimental cost to the Great Barrier Reef. The new mine would be one of the biggest in the world estimated to generate 4.7 billion tons of carbon pollution over its lifetime and requiring the dredging of the sea floor for port expansions throughout the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. Furthermore, the Carmichael Mine would demand more shipping in the area which greatly increases the chances of massive oil spills and the dumping of coal into the reef. The suspension of coal particles in ocean waters was examined in a recent study and it was discovered that, “moderate to high levels of coal contamination can substantially decrease growth and increase mortality of important reef-building coral species, reef fish and seagrass” (Berry, Hoogenboom, Flores, Negri, 2016). Despite the environmental damages, the Carmichael mine project gained approvals from the Queensland government but the project was drastically delayed by legal challenges and difficulty in securing financing. As a result, the mine was scaled down and is now projected to contribute far less jobs to local economies but will still lead to port expansions and the risk of oil and coal pollution in the oceans.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority is the Australian governmental organization that protects and regulates all parts of the Great Barrier Reef. At first glance they seem to be doing everything they can to preserve the reef and ensure its sustainability. However, this agency has made a variety of questionable decisions in recent years including appointing paid government officials to executive and board positions within the authority. A prime example of this is the recent announcement of the organizations new chairman, Dr. Ian Poiner. Former chair of the board for the Reef and Rainforest Research Centre (RRRC), it was revealed that Poiner and the RRRC, “altered a scientific assessment of its starfish-killing program against the direct demands of the report’s author, before passing it on to the government” (Slezak, 2018). The crown of thorns starfish is extremely destructive to the reef and the fact that Poiner was directly responsible for altering scientific suggestions to deal with them proves that he has outside motivations. Poiner’s history at RRRC illustrates how the people in charge of regulating and legislating the Great Barrier Reef may not actually be doing what’s best for preserving its longevity. Government officials like Poiner are likely to directly profit from allowing mining groups such as Adani dredge for new ports through the marine park and expand their operations.

Additionally, a large stakeholder group that is influenced through coal mining’s effects on the Great Barrier Reef is the citizens of Queensland. These Australian citizens are the ones who will benefit from a bolstered economy and the jobs that new coal mines bring to their region. However, they are also the ones that live and work along the reef and witness its deterioration every day. The Adani group promised to provide ten thousand new jobs in Queensland as a result of the Carmichael project. Yet, this promise was far from the truth and the actual number of jobs created from the mine was much less. In fact, jobs in the coal mining industry are actually decreasing and it “currently employs around 20,000 people in Queensland. This has fallen from a highpoint of 30,000 in 2013. There are 2.36 million people in work in Queensland” (The Australian Institute, 2016). This extremely destructive industry now only employs less than one percent of the population of Queensland which demonstrates how false the Adani Groups promises of bolstering local economies really is. The citizens of Queensland recognize the company’s false promises and most advocate for the protection of the reef. Citizens are beginning to organize so that they can have more of a voice in how their country is treated. This is shown through a group of elderly Queensland citizens forcing government headquarters to shut down because they “were demanding the government prosecute Adani for an alleged breach of its pollution license by releasing sludge into wetlands near the Great Barrier Reef” (SBS News, 2018). Demonstrations such as this are occurring frequently in the region as citizens begin to advocate more and more for the protection of the reef.

Despite the gloomy outlook for the longevity of the Great Barrier Reef, there are still many different organizations intervening in how coal mining and other factors influence the reef. One group that has been particularly effective in pushing the Queensland government to make a plan to save the reef is UNESCO. This international organization is dedicated to achieving sustainable development goals and preserving human and natural history for generations to come. The Great Barrier Reef has long been on the UNESCO list of world heritage sites and in recent years the group has put a great deal of pressure on the GBRMPA and the Australian government to step up their preservation of the reef. The suggestions that UNESCO made to improve water quality and address the destruction of coral are actually being acted upon by the government. The GBRMPA has announced the reefs 2050 long term sustainability plan and is beginning to take the steps necessary to improving coral habitat. UNESCO responded to these steps toward improvement in a draft for the agenda of an upcoming world heritage committee meeting commending the GBRMPA for what they are doing but encouraging them to “accelerate efforts to ensure meeting the immediate and long-term targets of the plan, which are essential to the overall resilience of the property, in particularly regarding water quality” (Wahlquist, 2017). This “reef 2050 plan” is a direct result of UNESCO intervening and I believe that the continued involvement of UNESCO on this issue is an excellent way to push the Australian government in a positive direction.

The high-ranking people controlling the GBRMPA and the Adani Group are largely fueled by a markets approach and a capitalist way of thinking. The GBRMPA allows mining operations to increase and exceed regulations in the marine park due to the promise of an influx of jobs and more revenue to grow the economy. Both groups have commodified the reef as something that they can use and manipulate to gain more profit. Therefore, I propose that we view the issue of coal mining on the Great Barrier Reef from a more social constructionist perspective and question whether the information that the government and conservation groups are feeding us is true. Once we start to understand this issue from a social constructionist approach, we will begin to understand what truly motivates these different stakeholder groups. Ultimately viewing the issues that the Great Barrier Reef faces from this approach has allowed me to develop a new intervention strategy that has not been addressed. I think that the Australian government should pass legislation that requires much higher taxes on the shipping and transport of coal for foreign companies. Additionally, I think that they should commit to using the revenue from these taxes to fund the implementation of the “reef 2050 plan” so that the correct steps can be taken to preserve the reef. From analyzing the motivations of foreign mining companies such as Adani from a social constructionist approach, I have determined that they have no concern at all for the sustainability of the Great Barrier Reef or the ecosystems they exploit. Therefore, by taxing them more to mine in Queensland, smaller Australian companies that have less of an environmental impact will start to take over.

As Queensland’s minister for natural resources, mines and energy, I implore you to push for the use of sustainable business practices regarding coal mining in the region. Large foreign companies such as the Adani Group do not have any concern for the preservation of coral or the improvement of ocean water quality. In addition, I firmly believe that the citizens of Queensland will stand behind you if you advocate for better reef protection and people around the world will benefit. Without politicians such as yourself making a stand on coal mining, the future of the Great Barrier Reef is uncertain.

Sincerely,

Asa Smith

Citations

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