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Committee Secretary
Health and Environment Committee
Parliament House
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To the Health and Environment Committee members

Re: Environmental and Other Legislation (Reversal of Great Barrier Reef Protection Measures) Amendment Bill 2021

Thank you for your invitation to make a submission on the above Bill**.** The Townsville Branch of WPSQ was established in April 1968, as a Branch of the Society founded by four remarkable Queenslanders: Judith Wright, Kathleen McArthur, David Fleay and Brian Clouston. This was at a time when Queenslanders, and Australians, were becoming increasingly aware of the unique beauty and properties of the natural environment surrounding them and were also alert to the actuality and possibility of loss. By raising awareness in the wider community our Society's founders hoped to encourage not only greater environmental appreciation and understanding but also to establish a watchfulness over this natural world, its wildlife and wildlife habitats on land and at sea. There was a determination not to allow this unique heritage to be squandered, crushed or destroyed.

Within a few short years of its foundation, while already campaigning to protect the sands of Cooloola and the flora and fauna of the State's south-east, the Society found itself spear-heading what were to become the two greatest environmental campaigns in Queensland's history: the fight to protect the wet tropical rainforests of north Queensland and to save the Great Barrier Reef. The latter at the time was under serious threat from projects which would have seen it mined for limestone or, much more widely, drilled for oil. Both activities were ultimately prevented when – due to the leadership of individuals like Judith Wright, John Büsst and Eddie Hegerl and of organisations like WPSQ, QLS[1] and ACF, supported by both the International and Australian public and media – leaders on both sides of politics recognised the need for action.

[1] Queensland Littoral Society, now the Australian Marine Conservation Society (AMCS)

Knowing this history[2], it seems almost incomprehensible to find that half a century later – despite that campaign, despite that victory, despite the ensuing Royal Commission, despite the Reef's World Heritage listing, despite the creation of the GBR Marine Park and the Authority established to manage it, and despite a raft of State and Federal legislation – we are now facing the inescapable truth of the Reef's grave decline and the dire prospects for its future. Nothing could make this clearer than the latest report[3] from GBRMPA stating the Reef's outlook is "very poor" and the UNESCO judgement – which many might argue is long overdue – recognising this precious and irreplaceable site is now "in danger".

In this situation the idea of introducing a Bill designed – as its title explicitly states – to *reverse GBR environmental protection measures*, appears bewildering, or indeed, bizarre. Titles aside, however, and much more seriously, it appears that the Bill introduced by the Honourable Member for Hinchinbrook, Mr Nick Dametto, has been prompted by incorrect assumptions, information and claims.

It is disturbing, for example, that Mr Dametto's justification for introducing this Bill seems to be based on a far-reaching mistrust of the scientific findings coming from reputable institutions such as GBRMPA, AIMS, TropWATER and the ARC Centre for Coral Reef Excellence. He appears to base this mistrust on three "core arguments" incorporating some quite sweeping, but unsubstantiated, statements:

- that the peer review process is "deficient" and "*almost guarantees* groupthink" (our emphasis)
- that "major errors" have been identified but that these institutions allegedly responsible have been "reluctant to rectify" the errors, are "in denial" and engage in "cover up"
- that there is "considerable doubt" about the reliability of the scientific evidence provided by these institutions.

However, with no specifics, examples or evidence to support these claims, we submit that they cannot and must not be used to throw out or discredit the tested research and advice on which the protective measures in the 2019 Act have been based. Rather we must be guided by the body of research which deals in realities rather than hints or what appear to be baseless allegations.

We submit to the Committee that there is no doubt at all in the Australian and international scientific community that the greatest threat to the Great Barrier Reef (and indeed to coral reefs around the world) is climate change, the impacts of which are already being felt and are accelerating. This is not the place to debate the efficacy or speed (or lack thereof) of either the national or global response to the climate crisis. Human-induced climate change is here, is already impacting many aspects of our lives and the natural environment and is already impacting and damaging the Reef. But what we can and must be doing at a national and state level is to take every possible action to build the Reef's resilience to withstand what climate change will inflict upon it – through more frequent, prolonged and extreme heatwaves, increased frequency and intensity of storms and floods and greater acidification of the oceans.

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[2] The history of this struggle and the first Save the Reef campaign is told in Judith Wright's *The Coral Battleground*

[3] https://www.gbrmpa.gov.au/our-work/outlook-report-2019

Building resilience means bolstering health and, since poor and/or declining water quality is seen as the second most serious threat to the Reef's health, it makes absolute sense that improving water quality by reducing sediments, nutrients, pesticides and other pollutants must be the most urgent priority

The GBR Marine Park Authority makes this very clear in its 2021 position statement on water quality, from which the following extracts are taken:

> *Poor water quality is a major threat to the Great Barrier Reef, particularly inshore areas. Improving the quality of water entering the Marine Park is critical and urgent. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority supports actions that reduce pollutant loads from all land-based sources. Good water quality is critical for maintaining the Great Barrier Reef as one of the most beautiful, diverse and complex ecosystems in the world. Since European settlement, Reef water quality has declined due to coastal development and agricultural activities in adjacent catchments. This decline in water quality is a major contributor to the current poor state of many inshore marine ecosystems.*
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> *Ongoing exposure to pollutants contributes to the of cumulative impacts on the health and resilience of the Reef. Good water quality supports ecosystem resilience and recovery from disturbances. This is particularly important under future climate change scenarios, where the frequency of destructive marine heatwaves and the intensity of rainfall events and cyclones is predicted to increase.*[4]

The suggestion Mr Dametto makes in his explanatory notes, and speech that, because land run-off has its biggest effect on inshore waters, reefs and habitats, it is of little or no relevance to the health of corals on outer reefs, indicates a failure to understand the complex nature and fundamental interconnectedness of the Reef system. It also indicates an absolute failure to understand the importance of the inshore systems.

One of our most respected and experienced marine scientists, Professor Ove Hoegh-Guldberg, has articulated this interconnectedness particularly well, while also pointing out the folly of trying to compartmentalise the Reef region and Reef system into separate, independent units:

> *Our Great Barrier Reef is not a set of individual pieces. It's really a continuous, integrated system that stretches from land to sea and from north to south over 2,400 kilometres . . . Just as offshore coral reefs are vitally important to the Great Barrier Reef, so are the specialised inshore regions with their World Heritage listed mangroves, seagrass and soft sediment ecosystems, among others . . . if you have healthy mangroves that are part of these systems you have healthy reefs, and vice versa. For example, many organisms, including many that are commercially important to Australia, spend part of their life cycles in these inshore reef areas, and if degraded we'll see the decline of these important species and industries.*[5]

In a 2020 submission to a Senate Standing Committee, the Centre for Tropical Water & Aquatic Research (TropWATER) spoke of the 'strong interconnectivity between the mangrove, seagrass and coral reef ecosystems from the catchment, and across the [Reef] shelf to the outer reef',

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[4] https://elibrary.gbrmpa.gov.au/jspui/retrieve/3a9336c3-b16d-457c-a815-f06fda711c36/v0-Position-statement-water-quality.pdf

[5] https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Hansard/Hansard_Display?bid=committees/commsen/282d32be-544f-4ae5-b681-6e2822465b54/&sid=0000

and emphasised that the Reef 'cannot be segmented into parts of relative importance.'[6] Any argument that toxins, pollutants and sediments are unlikely to damage the Reef because they do not directly reach one segment of it, cannot be sustained once one has acquired even a basic understanding of how the Reef's integrated ecosystems function.

As to the removal of the protective measures which Mr Dametto's Bill seeks to bring about, can we emphasise the following:

In 2017 the Australian and Queensland Governments published the *Reef 2050 Water Quality Improvement Plan*, setting the water quality targets for 2025.[7] Sadly, the subsequent joint government Reef Water Quality Report card showed in 2019 that these targets were largely not being met[8]. Of the 13 Reef-wide targets only 4 had a progress rating of Very Good (1) or Good (3). Seven of the remaining nine targets had a rating of Poor (4) or Very Poor (3). The remaining two showed only 'moderate' progress toward the target. While positive progress is recognised and efforts by farmers to establish and maintain good land management practices are acknowledged, as they should be, it is not surprising that the Report urges that "faster uptake of improved land management practices is required to meet the water quality targets".

It is because of this failure to progress towards the 2025 targets, thereby providing the Reef system with essential relief from the stresses induced by poor water quality, and the need to pick up the pace on this front, that the Queensland Government introduced the *Environmental Protection (Great Barrier Reef Protection Measures) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill* in 2019.

Given the immense scientific, environmental, economic, social and cultural importance of the Reef – locally, nationally and globally – we believe any attempt to weaken or remove the protection measures, as Mr Dametto's Bill seeks to do, at such a perilous time in the Reef's long history, is grossly irresponsible.

We strongly oppose the Bill introduced by the Member for Hinchinbrook.

With kind regards,

Liz Downes

Vice-President
Wildlife Queensland - Townsville Branch Inc

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[6] Inquiry into: Identification of leading practices in ensuring evidence-based regulation of farm practices that impact water quality outcomes in the Great Barrier Reef.

[7] https://www.reefplan.qld.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0017/46115/reef-2050-water-quality-improvement-plan-2017-22.pdf

[8] https://reportcard.reefplan.qld.gov.au/home?report=overview&year=5e858f29194b0655bc3c3111