



The Reef Is Strong, So Stop The Scare Campaign

Publish Date:

August 2022

The latest data on coral cover on the Great Barrier Reef, produced by the Australian Institute of Marine Science, should be a cause for celebration. Church bells should be ringing and children given a day off school. AIMS says two of the three main regions of the reef are at record-breaking high levels. The other region is at record-equalling levels (once uncertainty margins are taken into account).

AIMS, which has been releasing data on the reef every year since 1985, does not give the aggregate of coral cover for the entire reef; it stopped doing that in 2017. So I have done it for AIMS, and the reef as a whole is at record high levels. This result is proof many science institutions have been misleading the public about the state of the reef. They claimed we had four devastating and unprecedented bleaching events since 2016. So much bleaching, death and destruction supposedly has never happened before and is because of climate change – and now we have record high coral cover.

Imagine if we were now at record low levels instead. The institutions would be screaming for



emissions cuts and proclaiming the end of the world. AIMS now meekly says “these gains can be lost quickly with another large-scale disturbance that causes extensive mortality”. Talk about a bunch of killjoys. Or maybe AIMS means like one of the last four bleaching events that clearly had little effect.

The gross misrepresentation of the state of the reef is not a victimless crime. Schoolchildren around the world have been indoctrinated to believe the reef is almost finished. The reputation of the Queensland tourist industry’s premier attraction has been smashed in world media. And there are now many pointless but expensive regulations affecting north Queensland farmers including reductions in the use of fertilisers. All because the reef is supposedly in a dire predicament.

AIMS should be congratulated for its work across many decades. I estimate in these surveys it has towed a diver behind a small boat a distance equivalent to around the world. This work has paid off as it demonstrates that the reef cycles through periods of high and low coral cover. This is natural. It demonstrates that we should be more optimistic about the fate of the reef than we were when pioneering scientists discovered huge plagues of coral-eating crown-of-thorns starfish in the 1960s. We knew almost nothing about the reef in those genuinely scary days.

The data also shows that cyclones are the main contributor to temporary coral loss and that bleaching events are comparatively minor. The biggest mortality event was Cyclone Hamish which, in 2009, tracked down the southern and central reefs, and the waves it generated destroyed up to 75 per cent of coral in its path. Hamish was devastating mostly because of its path. And despite what is often stated, cyclones have not got worse in the past century.

Old frail people easily can be killed by diseases such as flu that more robust people will easily survive. This is also true for ecosystems. If the reef were on its last legs because of climate change and pollution, it would not recover as strongly from stresses. The decades of AIMS data have shown the reef is strong, resilient and fabulous. We must never take any risks with its future but neither should any institution use scandalous claims of its supposed imminent demise for political purposes.

It is time for politicians to ask hard questions about the quality-assurance processes in some of our institutions. I have no doubt that any political party that asked for additional quality assurance of reef science, based on the latest data, would be maligned in much of the media. But the average voter would not think this denialism; it is prudence and common sense.

By definition, record high coral cover does not happen every year. It is a golden opportunity to start the necessary political process of making all of our reef science institutions trustworthy again.

Original Link:

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/commentary/the-reef-is-strong-so-stop-the-scare-campaign/news-story/edc8df5f78b30b4920c0f682ed0faf87>

Originally published in:

The Australian