



Too Much Coral Is Not Enough – But It’s Not Good Either

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The Australian Institute of Marine Science recently released its annual survey of coral on the Great Barrier Reef. It shows spectacularly good results. For all three major regions of the reef, once data uncertainties are considered, there has never been more coral since records began in the mid-1980s.

This despite three supposedly catastrophic and unprecedented hot water bleaching events in the past five years.

This great news about the reef poses only a minor problem for those science and management institutions that have convinced the world that the reef is on its last legs. They use three strategies: first, ignore the data and hope nobody points out the great news; second, discredit the good news with “fact checks”; and finally, contrive a spurious but apparently plausible reason that the good news is actually bad news.

Ignoring the good news was on display last month in the latest reef-doom story when the ABC, The Sydney Morning Herald and The Guardian all quoted an eminent reef scientist who stated that only 2 per cent of the reef had not bleached in the past few decades.

The implication was that bleaching was unprecedented and had destroyed almost the entire reef. The fabulous coral statistics this year were not mentioned by any of those articles.

Bleaching, cyclones and starfish plagues, which all occasionally kill parts of the reef, are akin to bushfires on land. They are completely natural and reset the ecosystem, which rapidly recovers, and are a necessary and important feature of many Australian ecosystems. I could guess that roughly 2 per cent of western Queensland was not affected by a bushfire in the past half century. That would be a good thing, certainly not worthy of concern. Neither should it be for the reef.

To counter the latest good news about the reef, as reported in The Australian, the fact-check gods of Facebook also swung into action. They deemed that the coral has actually declined in the past decade. So what does the AIMS data, which was cited in the fact check, actually show about the change in coral since 2011?

For the northern region, the amount of coral this year is excellent and about the same today as in 2011; for the central region, it has roughly doubled; and for the southern region it has almost tripled. There is a significant uncertainty in the data because of the difficulty of measuring such a vast system, and the measurements are partly subjective in nature, but there is absolutely no doubt that the fact-checkers are extraordinarily wrong. They appear to be incapable of reading simple graphs.

The final strategy is to turn good news into bad. AIMS and other reef science institutions such as James Cook University Coral Reef Centre dismiss the obviously fabulous coral statistics by arguing that it is only the fast-growing corals that have regrown.

But they ignore that it is the fast-growing corals, the delicate staghorn and plate corals, that were killed in the first place by cyclones, bleaching and starfish plagues. So of course it is the fast-growing corals that have recovered.

In 2012, when the reef hit record lows of coral after a couple of very destructive cyclones, these institutions did not say: "Don't worry, it is only the fast-growing corals – they will be back." Instead, AIMS published a paper stating that, without intervention, the reef would likely crash much further by 2022. This is yet another failed prediction of the imminent death of the reef in the past 50 years.

Back in the early '70s, scientists were claiming that plagues of crown-of-thorns starfish, a native Australian species, not an introduced pest, would totally destroy the reef. The plagues came and went, and we now know from geological evidence that the plagues have occurred across millennia.

The amount of coral on the reef fluctuates dramatically with time. The one thing that remains the same are the dire predictions of the loss of the reef. The other thing that remains the same is the



reality that the reef is one of the most pristine, best protected, and brilliant ecosystems on Earth.

Early next year Environment Minister Sussan Ley must prepare an updated report on why UNESCO should not declare the Great Barrier Reef as endangered. She will be up against activist scientists, environmental groups and public servants. And in the background the false gods of big tech turn a huge increase in the amount of coral into a decline. Institutions such as AIMS and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority that downplay the excellent condition of the reef will be a further problem.

After 50 years of doomsaying about the reef, and its stubborn refusal to die, how much longer will we have to wait before a government will audit the science institutions that have been scaring our children?

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