

---

# Between pride and despair: Stories of Queensland's Great Barrier Reef and Wet Tropics Rainforests

Iain McCalman and Kerrie Foxwell-Norton

[Iain.McCalman@acu.edu.au](mailto:Iain.McCalman@acu.edu.au), [k.foxwell@griffith.edu.au](mailto:k.foxwell@griffith.edu.au)

The Great Barrier Reef and Wet Tropics Rainforests occupy a crucial but conflicted space in Queensland's history: once symbols of conservation triumph, they are fast becoming portents of ecological collapse. Until relatively recently, these reef and rainforest ecologies were icons of a rich natural and cultural heritage that has brought pride to Queensland and to the nation at large, while our First Nations communities can celebrate relationships to northern reefs and rainforests that span at least 60,000 years. The ancient Gondwana rainforests of the Wet Tropics match the biodiversity of the Great Barrier Reef, with both having been recognised for their 'outstanding universal value' in UNESCO World Heritage Listings. Stories have repeatedly celebrated their beauty and biodiversity, and their rich and complex associations with the local peoples and communities that live there.

Yet those inspiring stories of the Great Barrier Reef and Wet Tropics Rainforests have now taken a dire turn as the emergence of severe threats to the health of both ecosystems threatens death and demise. The damage caused by mass coral bleaching events, acidification and super-cyclones is paralleled by deforestation, fire and species extinctions within the rainforests. Rising land and sea temperatures are proving to be ecologically devastating for both these wondrous ecosystems and equally grim in their associated social, cultural and political ramifications. Yet we editors have been pleased to observe that the contributors to this special edition have still been able to find some sources of inspiration and hope within these calamitous outlooks.

In this special edition of *Queensland Review*, we invited the contributors to reflect on the Great Barrier Reef and/or the Wet Tropics, and their relationship with people and places nearby and further afield. Perhaps not surprisingly, we found that the urgency of the Barrier Reef's current crises has tilted the contributions in that direction. Nevertheless, the interwoven plight of the rainforests is explicit in some articles and implicit in others. We also chose to commission both scholarly analyses and personal reflections, entwining the professional with the personal to generate representative expressions of insight, expertise and experience. The authors of the

personal reflections chose an object or a photo to stimulate their writing, again revealing diverse relations with these spectacular natures.

It is thus with a great sense of pride that we present the tapestry of these stories of the Great Barrier Reef and Wet Tropics Rainforest, where personal reflections are interwoven with scholarly articles to showcase a broader humanity of environmental care. Here scholarly analyses are ranged beside the private memories of individuals who have dedicated lifetimes to conserving and protecting these two natural wonders. We also hope this approach will dilute the arbitrary divisions between ourselves and nature, and capture something of the resulting richness and complexity of human and non-human relationships.

As is inevitable in any such a contemporary collection on these subjects, a mammoth question looms over our special edition — both spoken and unspoken. Anthropogenic climate change, as a consequence of the destabilising interference of humans in the natural systems of our planet, demands critical and sobering reflection on ourselves. Should we, as humans, nevertheless attempt to save the Reef and the rainforest by creating a ‘good Anthropocene’ of restorative anthropogenic geophysical and technological interventions? Are there other ways of figuring human relations with our Reef and rainforests that might better secure a future for ourselves and the nature we love? While some contributors have addressed these questions explicitly, others have left their answers unstated. We editors do not attempt any definitive answers. Probably like most our contributors, we feel that that the jury is still out, although these are questions that humanities, arts and social sciences scholars will continue to ask.

We bookend our volume with personal reflections from Chrissy Grant, an Aboriginal (Eastern Kuku Yalanji) and Torres Strait Islander Elder (Mualgal from Moa Island) and Djiru Traditional Owner and artist Leonard Andy. As First Nations people with deep connections to Far North Queensland ‘Country’, their reflections rightfully launch our issue and demonstrate the enduring power of their cultural science and practice, and how these have also sometimes become enmeshed with Western systems of knowledge and management. These contributors bring into sharper focus the timelessness and indivisibility of First Nations natural and cultural practice and heritage.

We pair a sparkling provocation from Killian Quigley to refigure a proper caring for coral colours that elevates the vital importance of aesthetics in our reckoning of Reef value with Irus Braverman’s rich personal reflection on ‘coralations’ as a challenge to thinking that similarly privileges the sensory. Ann Elias’s pairing of art and environmental history to explore the ‘reef aquarium’ lithographs of 1930s tourism links with Carden Wallace’s reflection on her later encounters as a coral scientist wielding the baskets used to collect corals. In both Elias’s and Wallace’s work, the exploration of underwater coral reefs from below and above the water’s surface highlights continuing tensions, as well as odd synergies, between tourism and science.

Celmara Pocock’s critical examination of World Heritage brings into sharper focus the actual frailty of ostensibly powerful international protections enlisted to protect the Reef. World Heritage listing based on the division of humans from nature — and the power of humans to commandeer Reef health — is and perhaps always has been ‘in danger’. Anthropogenic climate change where the motherlode of human impacts and nature meet is evidence enough of the inseparability of

human and non-human ecologies. Diane Tarte, as a founder of the Australian Marine Conservation Society and a fifty-year veteran of Reef protection, reflects on the despair that follows climate change impacts on Reef health, but finds hope in what has already been achieved, and what might be possible with the political will to limit global warming.

Claire Konkes, Cynthia Nixon, Libby Lester and Kathleen Williams skilfully dissect the recent furore surrounding the Adani Mine proposal and the 2015 legal challenge from the Australian Conservation Foundation which catapults the Reef into the mire and politics of media, law and protest. The ongoing work of the Mackay Conservation Group — a key player in Adani protests — to protect inland catchments is similarly outlined in Peter McCallum’s reflection on the ongoing challenges of connectedness between the Reef and places distant. Kerrie Foxwell-Norton, Deb Anderson and Anne Leitch remind us, through the story of one valiant woman scientist, that the Reef is a gendered space that needs to revise its history in ways that elevate the achievements of women. Similarly, from the margins, Bill Wilkie celebrates passionate conservation activists, telling their Daintree Blockade story through a reflection on the humble radio log. The final scholarly article in the issue is Josh Wodak’s vivid interrogation of turtle conservation on Raine Island, where the question of why and when we should intervene in conservation is complex and rife with contradictions about our best human work to save crucial species in an era of grave ecological threats.

Iain McCalman’s Epilogue lands the key themes of this issue in reflections on his ongoing engagement with Mission Beach and the Cassowary Coast communities. These communities tread the fine line between caring for economy and ecology, where navigating the terrain traversed by our authors is an everyday lived experience.

We would like to thank *Queensland Review* editor Dr Mike Davis for his carriage of this project and Susan Jarvis for her well-renowned editorial prowess. Thanks to Camille Page for her editorial assistance and special mention too of Ms Christine Howes and Dr Valerie Boll for supporting personal reflections during a difficult pandemic when travel was not possible for us. We congratulate our authors and thank them for their commitment to this project. Finally, to our readers, we hope you enjoy this special issue even half as much as we have enjoyed collating it. Like us, may you find hope and comfort in the extraordinary minds, innovation and creativity of our authors. If you leave with nothing else, let it be the sense that in stories told of the Great Barrier Reef and Wet Tropics Rainforests, we are far from finished yet.