



The Hon Mark Butler MP
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TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW ABC 702 with DEBORAH KNIGHT

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Topics: Great Barrier Reef, climate change

DEBORAH KNIGHT:

If you've ever visited the Great Barrier Reef you'll know why so many people want to protect it. It is simply amazing and while there's plenty of stories and anecdotal evidence of the Reef's decline, a new report card has been issued on the state of the Great Barrier Reef with some disturbing news. The health of the Reef has been downgraded from moderate to poor.

And some of the pollution targets supposed to be achieved to protect the Reef have been pushed back by the Federal Government. The new Environment Minister Mark Butler joins us on the line. Good morning to you.

MARK BUTLER:

Morning Deborah.

DEBORAH KNIGHT:

Why have these pollution targets been put back?

MARK BUTLER:

The advice from the scientists that we received yesterday at that joint meeting between the Commonwealth Government and the Queensland Government, which obviously has a very significant role to play, is that the extreme weather events of those years between 2009 and 2011, particularly Cyclone Yasi have had a major impact on the Reef.

It was a cyclone event the likes of which they hadn't seen for a very long time, probably a hundred years in terms of how it ripped through the Reef. Rather than just crossing it, Cyclone Yasi really went straight down the Reef. So I think the takeout message from yesterday is there still is a great deal of work we need to do in the agricultural sector, the cane growing sector, the grazing sector, to reduce

agricultural run off, particularly nitrogen which feed these crowns of thorn starfish that are responsible for more than forty per cent of the depletion of the Reef.

There's a lot more work there to do, but this report card was heavily impacted by Cyclone Yasi.

DEBORAH KNIGHT:

If there is so much more to be done and if that impact is being felt so much higher than we thought, surely that's even more reason not to downgrade the pollution targets?

MARK BUTLER:

Well it's really about pushing the pollution targets out to something that we think is realistic. I mean the events of those years simply mean that the best advice we have is that we're just not going to reach those targets. It's not only what the cyclone events do directly to the Reef but it's also the very severe rain downpours that you get that lead to much more run off.

The rivers push much more stuff out onto the Reef. But I think the really important message from yesterday's report card is: there is a commitment by both governments to a new reef plan for 2013 to 2018 to really redouble our effort, not only by governments, but by all of the communities living along the Reef, enjoying the benefits of the tourism and other sectors that thrive because of the Reef.

DEBORAH KNIGHT:

Will you be looking at downgrading some of the industry projections? The oil and the gas industries are looking to do quite major developments along the area of the Queensland coastline and directly impacting the Reef?

MARK BUTLER:

Well those developments need to come across my desk as the Environment Minister and be considered in a particular legal way according to Commonwealth legislation. So I don't get into the business of talking about how I might deal with those development applications through the media. But look, it's very clear there's a whole range of stresses on the Reef, associated with industry development, associated with other coastal developments, particularly agriculture which leads to significant run off going out of the water catchments, nitrogen, pesticides as I mentioned.

So it really is about the Queensland Government, the Commonwealth Government and local communities ensuring there's a proper balance between development along this area of Queensland and ensuring the protection of Australia's most iconic environmental asset.

DEBORAH KNIGHT:

We always hear the anecdotal stories and evidence of the decline of the Reef. The Reef health report card which was also released shows that it has been

downgraded from moderate to poor. What does that mean in practical sense to the actual Reef itself? What are we seeing and what are we losing?

MARK BUTLER:

Well we're seeing quite significant Reef depletion. The coral has been depleted over a long period of time and while the scientists tell us we'd have expected that to recover over recent years because the crown of thorns starfish breed in cycles and they are very, very rapacious starfish. They are responsible for more than forty per cent of the depletion of the coral.

Where we would have seen a recovery in the Reef over the last few years we've had the extreme weather events like Yasi. So this has really been an awful perfect storm for the Reef if you like, continuing breeding of the starfish along with the extreme weather events like Yasi have seen a very significant depletion in coral but also the sea grasses and so on around it.

The Reef is under very severe stress, but I think the takeout message from the scientists and also from those experts who developed the next iteration of the Reef plan is that we are headed in the right direction, but we do have a lot more work to do.

DEBORAH KNIGHT:

The UN body UNESCO is set to deliver its verdict on the Reef's health next June. It has already placed major concerns over the world heritage listed site, saying it is in danger. How much are these measures by you in terms of the pollution targets simply a way to avoid having a further downgrade from the World Heritage listed site?

MARK BUTLER:

Well that's obviously in our mind. I mean the last thing the Queensland community or the Australian community want is for the Reef to be placed on the endangered list. It's not there yet but there is a process underway between the World Heritage Committee of UNESCO and governments to ensure that we have proper processes in place to restore the health.

But really our major focus is not on UNESCO or any other international body. It's on making sure that for the benefit of the Australian community at large their most important environmental asset survives well into the future. So that's what we're doing. The Reef plan, the two hundred million dollar reef rescue package that we put on the table yesterday, matched by a hundred and seventy-five million dollars from Queensland is about getting actual change, particularly on land to reduce land run off, actual change to the way in which we've treated our Reef over the last few decades.

DEBORAH KNIGHT:

UNESCO has voiced serious concerns about the impact of the major oil and gas developments that are planned for the Queensland Coast. Surely that should bear

some pressure on you when you're deciding about the development future?

MARK BUTLER:

Well look the other - the thing that I bear in mind as the Environment Minister is that the points set out in the legislation and obviously protection of the environment is the most important criterion there. But there's no question that UNESCO is asking questions about port developments in addition the governments putting together a comprehensive strategic plan for the Reef into the future, which is something we're working on with UNESCO between now and 2015.

They've also asked us to do an independent review of the Port of Gladstone which is underway as well and which has led to a good deal of debate and discussion up in that part of Queensland. So there is I think a good process underway with UNESCO. Its helping us think through the way in which we're going to be able to change practices in that part of Queensland to ensure the long term health of the Reef.

DEBORAH KNIGHT:

What about the farming community, because the amount of pollution run off onto the Reef is having a big impact? Nitrogen has been reduced by seven per cent I think between 2009 and 2011 as farmers change some of their land management practices. What can we do further? It seems the decline of the Reef is happening so, so quickly that we need to take more drastic action.

MARK BUTLER:

We do and this is the most significant thing that we have under our direct control. I mean the two major impacts on the Reef that scientists tell us are agricultural run off and extreme weather events rising because of climate change. And obviously we've got a long term plan about climate change but the immediate thing we can do is to reduce that run off.

And you're right, nitrogen went down over those years but dissolved nitrogen which is the particular food for these crown of thorns starfish went down by - I can't remember exactly but by more than ten per cent which is very good and we're seeing improved land management practices by industries like cane growing which is probably the most significant industry along that stretch of Queensland coast.

But the Queensland Government and the Commonwealth yesterday at our meeting really did focus on the need to improve agricultural sector practices, particularly grazing and cane growing. That is going to be a very significant focus for both of us and a significant focus of the funding rounds that the Queensland Government and the Commonwealth talked about yesterday.

DEBORAH KNIGHT:

Mark Butler, have you ever been to the Reef in recent years yourself, gone diving or snorkelling?

MARK BUTLER:

I haven't gone diving since I had kids. My kids aren't old enough but we go up to Far North Queensland every year or two if we can and before I had kids, my wife and I and friends would go diving. It is truly one of the wonders of the world and as soon as my kids are old enough and brave enough to get in there we'll be doing that as well.

DEBORAH KNIGHT:

It's sad to think that the kids, that your kids may not see the Reef in its true beauty as previous generations would have.

MARK BUTLER:

Oh it's unthinkable, which is why we simply have to redouble our efforts to make sure that we ensure the long term health of the Reef. It's truly one of the wonders of the world.

DEBORAH KNIGHT:

Alright Mark, well thank you for your time this morning.

MARK BUTLER:

Thanks Deborah.

DEBORAH KNIGHT:

Mark Butler there, who is the newly appointed Environment Minister, speaking about that quite disturbing report with a downgrade of the rating of the Great Barrier Reef to poor.

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