

NOVEMBER 2021 ESSAYS

The spin and secrecy threatening the Australian environment

By Anthony Ham



Environment Minister Sussan Ley. © Lukas Coch / AAP Images

How the government is failing on the environment by hiding critical science

Every year, Australia’s threatened species commissioner invites people to send in photos of cakes depicting their favourite threatened Australian animal. The “Threatened Species Bake Off” produces some remarkably lifelike cassowaries and koalas, wombats and stingrays. It is at once a classic sugar-coating of a serious issue and a lighthearted attempt to raise awareness.

This year there were more than 700 entries. Among them was a cake of a dead greater glider alongside a fallen log and a sign



that said “Logging is criminal”. Clearly it wasn’t quite what the commissioner intended. One minute the photo was on the commissioner’s Facebook, the next it was gone. There was no explanation and Acting Commissioner Dr Fiona Fraser wasn’t commenting. When people started asking questions on social media, the entry quickly returned to Facebook.

If the government was trying to keep the image from public view, it failed spectacularly. The dead-glider cake took out the People’s Choice Award for 2021.

Even cakes, it seems, can be dangerous to a government desperate to avoid bad publicity.

Secrecy often lies at the heart of the Morrison

government’s public messaging. It’s not only a well-documented personal predilection of the prime minister’s, dating back to his invention of “on-water matters” as immigration minister, and beyond, including around his family travels to Hawaii and Cornwall, and for Father’s Day this year. His government deploys similar secrecy when formulating public policy of great importance to the nation, ranging from its attempts to keep secret the deliberations of national cabinet through to its routine abuse of freedom-of-information laws and most recently its blindsiding of close ally France in the lead-up to the AUKUS pact announcement.

This obsession with secrecy, and with the suppression of potential bad news stories, is especially pronounced when it comes to science and the environment.

In 2019, Professor Don Driscoll of Melbourne’s Deakin University and immediate past president of the Ecological Society of Australia, surveyed 220 Australian ecologists, conservation scientists, conservation policymakers and environmental consultants. The results, published this year in the international science journal *Conservation Letters*, found that one-third of government employees who responded had experienced “undue interference” when it came to public communications about their research.

Fifty-two per cent of government respondents had been prevented from publicly sharing scientific information. Of these, 82 per cent had been constrained by senior managers and 63 per cent by a minister’s office. For those respondents who had communicated scientific information in the public domain, 42 per cent reported being harassed or criticised for doing so. Just over half of respondents (56 per cent) believed that the suppression of scientific communications had worsened over recent years.

Some of the quotes to emerge from the study were deeply

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disturbing:

I was directly intimidated by phone and Twitter by [a senior federal public servant].

Not being able to speak out meant that no one in the process was willing or able to advocate for conservation or make the public aware of the problem.

It feels terrible to know the truth about impacts to the environment, but know you'll never get that truth to the public and that the government doesn't care at all. They want us to give them politically supportive information, not science.

I feel resentment when I am expected to "toe the line" and support decisions I consider wrong and not in the best interest of the environment and not based on sound scientific data.

I felt I was effectively lying by not revealing a major environmental threat, as if complicit in a crime.

The forms of suppression reported included "complete prohibition on communication, as well as alteration of communications to paint government or industry actions or decisions in a misleading, more environmentally friendly, light".

Speaking to the media can be problematic for all public servants. Watching over their shoulders at the federal level, the Australian Public Service Code of Conduct warns that: "An APS employee must not disclose information which the APS employee obtains or generates in connection with the APS employee's employment if it is reasonably foreseeable that the disclosure could be prejudicial to the effective working of government, including the formulation or implementation of policies or programs."

Social media guidelines – drafted in 2011 and tightened significantly in 2017 – further discourage a whole range of behaviours, from signing online petitions to making "personal comments about the character or ability of other people, including members of the parliament". Federal public servants can't even "like" social media posts without exposing themselves to sanction.

In a unanimous ruling in *Comcare v Banerji* in 2019, the High Court held that the federal government did not breach the Constitution's implied freedom of political communication when it dismissed a public servant who, in her own time, posted anonymous yet scathing criticisms of the government. The court accepted that posts critical of an employee's department were likely to do "damage to the good reputation of the Australian Public Service".

It remains unclear whether less vitriolic criticism might be permissible. Even so, it would take a brave public servant to test such nuances in court.

“The whole messaging within the system is about control of the story,” Professor Driscoll tells me. “If people break those rules they can be disciplined. They see the pressure for that coming most often from senior management, and senior management are very often political appointments ... People are aware of the work environment they are in and know that they will be disciplined by their superiors. Or in some cases, they’re afraid of what their peers will say to them, because often their peers have bought into the idea that the public service is about pleasing the minister rather than performing a public service.”

It doesn’t have to be like this. In 2018, the Canadian government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau implemented the Model Policy on Scientific Integrity. A key objective of the policy was to “[f]oster a culture that supports and promotes scientific integrity in the design, conduct, management, review and communication of research, science, and related activities”.

One provision declares that “No [departmental] employee shall suppress, alter or otherwise impede the timely release of research or scientific information in the absence of clear and compelling reasons for doing so.” Another requires that any government department “recognizes the right to freedom of expression by researchers and scientists on matters of research or science”, and, in fact, the policy actively encourages them “to speak about or otherwise express themselves on science and their research without approval or pre-approval”.

In Australia, with neither such protections nor a culture that recognises the value of independent scientific research in public debate, one in five of respondents in Driscoll’s study suffered job insecurity, damage to their career or job loss, or had left their field as a result of speaking out.

In the absence of informed and objective scientific participation, said one respondent, fake news often fills the evidence void: “I could see that social and media debate was exploiting the lack of information to perpetuate incorrect ... interpretations ... to further their own agendas.”

“What I find so devastating about the suppression,” says Euan Ritchie, professor in wildlife ecology and conservation at Deakin University, “is that at the very time that we need really good information for making decisions about the environment, and ideally doing much better, many are actively suppressed from doing so. The bigger picture is that it’s an affront to democracy. Supposedly when we go to the voting booth, we vote based on what we know and what we’ve been told. If information is actively being held back and kept away

from us, then we can't – as the voting public – make informed choices. That's not a democracy.”

When asked why he felt able to speak out, Driscoll was adamant: “I'm not afraid. If I have less success in getting external funding because I criticised the government, so be it. It's time that all scientists came out from the shadow of being afraid for their funding and shared with the public the truth of what they're finding.”

The consequences of scientific suppression go beyond individual researchers and questions of democracy.

Since European colonisation in 1788, at least 34 Australian mammal species, or one-tenth of Australia's endemic mammals, have been driven to extinction. That's the worst record of any country over the past two centuries. And the outlook for many vulnerable species remains perilous.

Launched in 2015, Australia's Threatened Species Strategy, now overseen by Threatened Species Commissioner Sally Box and Environment Minister Sussan Ley, is the government's response to this appalling record. Part of the strategy was to fund the Threatened Species Recovery Hub, which the government said would bring together “Australia's leading conservation scientists to help develop better management and policy for conserving Australia's threatened species”.

The Threatened Species Strategy's Year Five Progress Report, released in June this year, found very few successes to celebrate. Of the 70 priority species, for example, only 24 “significantly improved” in their population recovery. Even this was misleading: nearly a third of these simply had populations declining at a slower rate than they had in the previous decade.

Leaving aside the substance of the report, there was something more sinister afoot.

On June 26, 2019, Professor Brendan Wintle, director of the Threatened Species Recovery Hub, wrote to the then Department of the Environment and Energy to notify it that a scientific paper, of which he was the lead author, had been accepted for publication in *Conservation Letters*. Titled “Spending to save: What will it cost to halt Australia's extinction crisis?”, the paper compared Australia's spending on threatened species to spending by the United States government. The paper found that Australia's annual budget for threatened species recovery was “around one tenth of that spent by the U.S. endangered species recovery program, and about 15% of what is needed to avoid extinctions and recover threatened species”. The article also argued that: “The past decade has seen a rapid decline in expenditure on

environmental management in Australia, with cuts of 37% to environmental investments in the Australian Government budget since 2013.”

The government was not happy.

On June 28, Beth Brunoro, a departmental first assistant secretary, asked in an internal email for meetings to be set up with Wintle, and spoke of “a fundamental difference of perspectives on the role of the hub”.

Four days later, the department’s Dr Nicholas Post, an assistant secretary, wrote to, among others, Sally Box, that: “Beth and I are meeting with Brendan Wintle later this week to remind him of the importance of focusing on science rather than policy matters.” A week later, after departmental officials had met with Wintle, Post wrote again to the commissioner about plans to “commence detailed revision of the proposed research paper”.

In late August, after a meeting between Wintle, Box and senior departmental officials, a departmental memo laid out three possible scenarios:

“Option 1: The authors publish the paper without hub affiliation, after consulting the Department on their calculations of Australian Government spending on Threatened Species.

Option 2: They don’t publish the paper.

Option 3: They publish the paper with a different set of authors, individuals who do not represent the Hub leadership and/or knowledge brokering team.”

The memo acknowledged that “it is not really within our remit to instruct them not to publish it or to drastically change the authorship, but we may mutually arrive at this point through a discussion of how best to achieve their objectives”.

In the end, the authors agreed to remove any branding of the Threatened Species Recovery Hub from the paper, and it was published in November 2019 to very little public fanfare.

Speaking nearly two years later, Wintle remains bemused by the whole experience: “I was surprised that the publication of a paper that provides a scientific basis for estimating the funding we would actually need to recover our threatened species caused so much anxiety for the public service.”

Many in the scientific community were appalled. Don Driscoll called it a “disgraceful example of scientific suppression”. Professor Martine Maron, another of the paper’s co-authors, expressed similar dismay, telling *Guardian Australia*, “We expect our governments to welcome robust, peer-reviewed

science, regardless of what it reveals.”

Wintle is keen to point out that he has had different experiences elsewhere. “Not all governments are the same,” he says. “I currently find working with the Victorian state government to be very different to working with the Commonwealth. They are much more open to constructive criticism ... Unlike the Commonwealth, the current state government doesn’t view scientists providing policy critique as crossing the line.”

With Threatened Species Commissioner Sally Box on extended leave, Acting Commissioner Fiona Fraser was also unavailable for comment for this article. The department’s media team instead referred me to the department’s statement from May 14, 2021: “We strongly reject any assertion that department officials sought to pressure researchers in relation to the non-publication or authorship of the paper.”

What happened after the paper was published was even more concerning.

The funding that supported the Threatened Species Recovery Hub ran for five years, ending in mid 2021. In the department’s new 10-year round of funding for the Threatened Species Strategy, Wintle, his co-authors and the hub lost out – the hub was closed.

“The net result,” Wintle says, “will be a significant reduction in focus on threatened species. That is a politically good outcome for the current Commonwealth government because their performance on threatened species is pitiful.”

Funding for threatened species will now be more diffuse, spread across a number of other hubs, none of which is focused primarily on threatened species. Euan Ritchie says that “there are many people who think that the federal government went with another research group in part because they didn’t like the fact that members of the first group told them things they didn’t want to hear, nor make public. If you look at the group that Brendan had composed, it was pretty much a who’s who of ecology and conservation in Australia. And the group Brendan led were extraordinarily productive, in terms of new research insights and on-ground work. With all of this in mind, it did seem an odd decision.”

Wintle admits that he had always understood “the prospect that the future of that hub depended on how comfortable the government felt with my commentary ... It did definitely place constraints on what I felt I could say and when.” And he cannot escape the conclusion that speaking out on the government’s performance on biodiversity, threatened species and climate change ultimately came with consequences.

“I wake many nights,” Wintle says, “wondering if we might

still have a national threatened species recovery research hub if I hadn't published on the current government's underspend on threatened species, and hadn't conveyed the depth of our policy failure to stem the extinction crisis on [the ABC's] *Four Corners*."

For a government obsessed with controlling the message and avoiding embarrassment, the Great Barrier Reef has presented an even greater challenge.

In June this year, UNESCO's World Heritage Committee announced a draft decision to add the Great Barrier Reef to its List of World Heritage in Danger. The government was outraged. Environment Minister Sussan Ley claimed that Australia had been "blindsided" and denied due process by UNESCO. Prime Minister Scott Morrison described the process as "appalling".

It was a difficult argument for Australia to make on its merits. After all, UNESCO had based its decision in large part on Australian government data and scientific reports on the state of the reef. At no point did the government claim that the Great Barrier Reef *wasn't* in danger – because it couldn't.

The federal government has a statutory requirement to publish an "Outlook Report for the Great Barrier Reef" every five years. Prepared by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA), the report bases its findings on an exhaustive array of data on everything from the health of the reef's coral and its other marine populations to water quality.

In 2014, the report described the reef's outlook as "poor". In 2016 and 2017, the reef experienced major bleaching events, which occur when ocean temperatures rise and stressed coral expels its symbiotic algae, turning it white and making it highly vulnerable to mass die-offs. The GBRMPA's next Outlook Report, in 2019, downgraded the reef's prognosis from "poor" to "very poor".

Another mass bleaching event occurred in 2020. Later the same year, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) completed its own World Heritage Outlook report, in which it described the conservation outlook for the Great Barrier Reef as "critical". In the 40 years since it was inscribed on the World Heritage List, the Great Barrier Reef has lost half of its coral cover.

Against this backdrop of scientific data and devastating projections, the recommendation by the IUCN to UNESCO that the Great Barrier Reef be added to the in-danger list was not at all unexpected. If the Australian government had been blindsided, as it claimed, it can only have been because it

wasn't paying attention.

Traditionally, adding a World Heritage site to UNESCO's in-danger list was neither political nor controversial. In 2010, for example, the US government *asked* UNESCO for Florida's Everglades to be returned to the list. America's largest subtropical wilderness was imperilled and they wanted the world to know what was required to save it.

Nor is such a designation meant to be punitive. "That's not its purpose," says Professor Terry Hughes, Australia's leading reef scientist at the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies. "Its purpose is to first highlight that a particular property is in trouble. And it triggers a process whereby the state party has to come up with a pathway forward in order to get the property off the in-danger list as soon as possible."

The Australian government instead took the draft decision as an affront.

On June 23, just a few days after UNESCO announced its recommendation to the World Heritage Committee, Megan Anderson, Australia's permanent delegate to UNESCO, wrote to the agency's director-general, Audrey Azoulay. Her letter reminded UNESCO of "the need for intergovernmental and international institutions to continue to apply due process in interactions with their States Parties". She also reiterated all recommendations of this kind "should be based on transparent, extensive and close consultation processes with the States Parties concerned".

Despite the diplomatic language, it was a warning shot.

On July 12, Sussan Ley flew to UNESCO headquarters in Paris and began an eight-day diplomatic offensive, meeting with ambassadors and officials from 18 countries on her whirlwind tour. Even as Australia called for transparency by UNESCO, the minister's delegation worked behind the scenes to secure the support of World Heritage Committee members to have the reef kept off the in-danger list.

"There wasn't any accountability or transparency over what she was doing, or what she was saying," says Imogen Zethoven, an adviser to the Australian Marine Conservation Society. "Her trip was all about deal-making with these countries to ensure the reef wasn't listed on the in-danger list at this meeting. We don't know what those deals were. We don't know what went on behind closed doors. And we paid for it."

Back in Australia, the government launched a charm offensive to go along with its diplomatic one, taking 13 foreign ambassadors snorkelling on the Great Barrier Reef. At the same time, in Canberra, it was scrambling to find some good news about the reef's health. On the day that the minister

arrived in Europe, chief executive of the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS) Paul Hardisty received a call from a public servant who asked him to fast-track the AIMS long-term monitoring program report. In an email to senior AIMS staff at 8pm that night, Hardisty wrote: “government wants LTMP report released this week. It is not ideal but we must comply.”

The government was clearly confident that the report would contain at least some data it could use to support its case to UNESCO. If so, by demanding that AIMS supply its report early, the government was using an independent statutory authority – whose responsibility is to provide non-political scientific advice – to serve its own political ends. (Through a spokesperson, the minister rejects this criticism: “The information in the report was complete and all results verified. It was entirely appropriate, therefore, for the government to request its publication.”)

As the government likely knew, 2021 was a relatively good year for the Great Barrier Reef. Unlike in 2020, there was no bleaching event and there were signs that coral cover had improved in places. Although the long-term outlook for the reef remained of great concern, the 2021 AIMS report noted the temporary improvements in some areas, and it was exactly what the government wanted to hear.

“The report announced an uptick in coral cover in the most recent survey,” Professor Hughes says. “Since 2020 we’ve had a year of La Niña, a year of cooler conditions, so depending on whether a reef last bleached in 2016, 2017 or 2020, they’ve had a window for some recovery. The report was misrepresented to give the impression that the Great Barrier Reef has magically recovered. That’s not what the report says, but you’d have to actually read the report and dig into the facts to see what’s really going on.”

There was, it must be said, no suggestion of any impropriety on the part of AIMS. According to Hughes, “you have to read the numbers and the detail to get the nuances, which, to their credit, the AIMS scientists wrote about. They would have been under intense pressure to gild the lily. And they resisted that.”

As Hardisty wrote in *The Australian* in July, “the longer-term picture is not so positive ... The evidence is clear and unequivocal ... Mass bleaching, unheard of before the 1990s, is now becoming a regular occurrence, with major events in 1998, 2002, 2010, 2016, 2017 and 2020. We now know coral reefs take about a decade to recover after serious damage.”

According to Hughes: “The bottom line is that the corals that are coming back are the ones that are the most susceptible to bleaching and crown-of-thorns and cyclones ... It’s actually setting up the reef for an even bigger fall in the inevitable next

bleaching event ... For every stable trajectory, or upward trajectory, there's half a dozen more that are down. And when they're up, they're temporary. You get windows of regrowth, followed by the next disaster."

That's not the story the government told UNESCO.

On July 14, two days after the government leaned on Hardisty to release the AIMS report ahead of schedule, emails between public servants and AIMS staff discussed a "targeted pre-release" (also referred to in the emails as a "leak" or a "drop") to two News Corp newspapers. In the days that followed, *The Australian* dutifully published an article titled "Coral repair raises hopes for reef as heritage vote looms". "Historic signs of Great Barrier Reef regrowth," read the headline in *The Courier-Mail*.

Not content with leaking to sympathetic media outlets, the government released a carefully edited three-page summary of the report to the other members of the World Heritage Committee. "I trust you will find this report valuable," wrote Ambassador Anderson in an accompanying email, "including its findings of widespread recovery of coral at key sites across the property."

"The governments of Russia, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, all saw the AIMS data before we, the Australian people did," says Zethoven. "It's outrageous."

There are numerous theories as to why the government has gone to such lengths to prevent UNESCO from adding the Great Barrier Reef to the in-danger list.

Publicly at least, the government claims that it is to protect UNESCO processes. "Australia's concerns have always been about ensuring a fair and transparent World Heritage process for the reef and the people who work tirelessly to protect it," according to a spokesperson for the minister.

One reason for the government's opposition to UNESCO's recommendation may be economic: prior to the pandemic, reef tourism employed nearly 65,000 people and brought in \$6 billion annually. Even so, a 2016 assessment published in *The Conversation* found that the Everglades, the coral reefs of Belize and the Galapagos Islands saw no discernible fall in tourist arrivals after appearing on the in-danger list.

The government also perhaps fears the damage such an adverse listing could have on Australia's international reputation. "They're afraid of falling from grace, the ignominy, as they see it," says Zethoven. "They see themselves as the best reef managers in the world. They beat their drum everywhere they

go internationally, so for them to have the GBR on the in-danger list is an international embarrassment, the harshest of all possible judgements.”

Australia’s standing has, in fact, suffered thanks to the government’s double standards. In 2017, when Australia took up its four-year seat on the World Heritage Committee, Stephen Oxley, Australia’s then head of delegation to the committee, made a speech berating other countries for eroding the authority of UNESCO and its advisory bodies, for how members of the committee were voting in blocs to overturn draft decisions, and for placing national interests ahead of international responsibilities. “During our term on the committee,” he promised, “Australia will be an advocate for upholding the technical integrity of the committee. We will place great weight on the analysis and advice of the advisory bodies.” Among those advisory bodies are UNESCO’s World Heritage Centre and the IUCN, both of which recommended placing the Great Barrier Reef on the in-danger list.

The Monthly has seen internal IUCN data that shows “an increasing trend to overturn and weaken Advisory body technical recommendations”. In 2005, according to the document, more than 70 per cent of advisory body recommendations were approved by UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee. In 2021, the figure was around 4 per cent. Sources within the United Nations told *The Monthly* that there is widespread anger at Australia’s role in this dramatic turnaround.

Australia has history in this regard, too. In 1999, the Howard government mounted a campaign to prevent Kakadu National Park appearing on the in-danger list thanks to the proposed Jabiluka uranium mine. Australia won that battle but alienated many. “It left a really bad taste in a lot of people’s mouths,” says Dr Jon Day, one of the former directors at GBRMPA and a one-time delegate to the World Heritage Committee.

Twenty-two years later, it is a similar story. “The way Australia has conducted themselves,” Day says, “they’ve really shot themselves in the foot without realising the implications of what they’ve done by upsetting other countries.”

“I don’t think Australians fully recognise how much we are now considered such a poor performer on the environment and climate,” says Zethoven. “I think there was a profound shift during the summer bushfires in late 2019, early 2020. Based on conversations I’ve had, there was such a global shock and an incredulity that a country so severely vulnerable to climate change would be so unwilling to act.”

In 2017, UNESCO released its landmark study,

“Impacts of Climate Change on World Heritage Coral Reefs: A First Global Scientific Assessment”. The report carried stark warnings about the effect of regular severe bleaching, and that these precious regions, including the Great Barrier Reef, “will cease to host functioning coral reef ecosystems by the end of the century unless CO₂ emissions are reduced”. It went on to argue that “drastic reductions in CO₂ emissions are essential – and the only real solution – to giving coral reefs on the World Heritage List a chance to survive climate change”.

At the 44th session of the World Heritage Committee this year, the committee endorsed a draft policy that recognises climate change as a major threat to many World Heritage-listed properties and allows for the effects of climate change to be a factor when considering whether to add a World Heritage-listed site to the in-danger list. UNESCO also reiterated “the importance of States Parties undertaking the most ambitious implementation of the Paris Agreement”.

It was perhaps this shift in UNESCO policy that frightened the Australian government more than anything else. As an in-danger listing requires the government with stewardship of a World Heritage-listed site to take measures to address the site’s decline, the fact that climate change is understood to be the overwhelming threat to the reef would present a problem for a government hostile to climate action.

“That means, of course, that they have to deal with climate change,” says Zethoven. “They would have to act on the issue of climate change consistent with a 1.5-degree pathway ... So they were hell-bent on trying to avoid an in-danger listing because they knew what it meant.”

The Australian government claims to have been unfairly treated by UNESCO. According to a spokesperson for the minister, “The draft climate change policy, for which Australia has been a strong advocate, recognises that climate change is a factor affecting many World Heritage properties, and almost all reefs, which is why singling out one property on the basis of global climate change is a concern.”

Such an argument rings hollow when you consider that Australia now ranks third in the world for the export of fossil fuels. Only Saudi Arabia and Russia export more. Australia’s “scope 3” carbon emissions – which include the emissions produced elsewhere by its exports – range from 5 to 9 per cent of the world’s total, and Australia has the highest per capita emissions of any country with World Heritage coral reefs.

Even so, the government’s lobbying resonated with Australia’s supporters on the committee, among them oil-rich Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Nigeria and Russia. Terry Hughes cites another reason these nations might have been persuaded by Australia’s entreaties: “if they can do this to Australia, they can

do it to you”.

In an upbeat diplomatic email in July, Ambassador Anderson expressed confidence that the lobbying had worked and that Australia had enough support to block UNESCO’s recommendation. The whole process, she wrote, would “send a good message about consensus and that the committee would not need to spend a lot of time discussing [the reef]”.

And so it proved. Just as it had with Kakadu in 1999, Australia won the 2021 battle to keep the Great Barrier Reef off the in-danger list.

It was a temporary reprieve.

The new UNESCO policy document on climate change will become binding upon ratification by the general assembly in November. The Australian government must report back to UNESCO on the reef’s outlook by February 1, 2022. Even with a government commitment to net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 at the Glasgow Climate Change Conference, it’s difficult to imagine UNESCO letting Australia off the hook again. A commitment to net-zero would appear to be a bare minimum if the government is to avoid an in-danger listing.

“Having documented in exquisite detail the ongoing decline of the Great Barrier Reef and the causes thereof, it’s hard to see how they could spin it,” argues Hughes. “I’m sure it’s going to be promoted heavily in the next few months that the clever scientists can fix the reef. The general public loves the concept of clever people rescuing ecosystems. But I can’t see the next report saying anything except the outlook is very poor ... and nor can I see the site visit coming to any other conclusion than the reef doesn’t look anything like it did in 1981.”

After receiving Australia’s report, UNESCO will reconsider its in-danger recommendation at the World Heritage Committee’s 45th session, to be held in Russia in June 2022. When that happens, Australia will no longer hold a seat on the World Heritage Committee. Nor will it be able to claim with a straight face that it was denied procedural fairness, or that it was blindsided. There can be no more excuses.

Whatever happens, the reef will remain in danger, whether the government says so or not.

All across the environment minister’s portfolio, the obsession with secrecy, the attempts at suppression and the costly battles to silence the messenger (such as the legal fees spent trying to appeal a High Court ruling over a government’s duty of care, and the millions spent on Minister Ley’s mission to Europe to convince UNESCO to reverse its

Barrier Reef decision) are a precursor to actual abdications of environmental responsibility.

With no Threatened Species Recovery Hub to advocate for threatened species in the public sphere, in September this year the government abandoned recovery plans for around 200 endangered habitats and species. Recovery plans (which set out the research and management actions necessary to stop the decline of listed threatened species) will be replaced by conservation advices, which carry more limited legal force. Recovery plans for a further 500 threatened species are also in doubt. According to Martine Maron, Australia has cleared more than 7 million hectares of threatened species habitat over the past 20 years. Brendan Wintle says, “It takes a brave government to fund research that might reveal and communicate something uncomfortable. The current federal government is neither brave nor committed to threatened species conservation.”

Also in the past couple of months, Minister Ley, who makes a mockery of the notion that the environment department is there to advocate on behalf of the natural world and our sustainable place within it, has approved at least three new coalmining -projects: the Mangoola mine in the Upper Hunter region of New South Wales, the Wollongong Coal expansion and Whitehaven Coal’s Vickery mine extension near Gunnedah in northern NSW. The latter came after a Federal Court challenge to the mine by eight teenagers who sought an injunction to prevent the mine from going ahead. Although the court refused to grant the injunction, it found that the minister owed a duty of care to protect young people from the harm caused by climate change.

The government has launched what it called a “gas-fired recovery”, which includes “unlocking key gas basins”, including the controversial Beetaloo Basin in the Northern Territory. In October, on the eve of the Glasgow Climate Change Conference, WWF-Australia released a report in which it criticised the government for paying lip-service to global diversity targets at a time when 1500 of Australia’s unique ecosystems are entirely unprotected. And a major study published this year in the peer-reviewed journal *Global Change Biology* found that at least 19 ecosystems spanning from the Great Barrier Reef to Antarctica were “collapsing”. It was, the report found, an issue “pivotal for the future of life on Earth”.

Collapsing and unprotected ecosystems, massive underspending on threatened species in peril, new coalmines and coal-fired power stations, a gas-fired recovery, and a government that has appealed against the very idea that it owes a duty of care to future generations – little wonder that the government wants to tell a different story.

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