

## Defending Diversity:

### Strategies used by Conservationists John Busst, Dr. Len Webb and Geoff Tracey in the Conservation of North Queensland Habitats During the 1960s.

The aim of this work is to examine the role played by Mission Beach conservationist John Busst in the protection from exploitation of the Great Barrier Reef and lowland rainforests during the 1960s. It also briefly examines the work of Dr. Leonard Webb and Geoff Tracey in the protection of lowland rainforests during the same period. This essay seeks to answer the following questions: how they (with other conservationists) achieved positive outcomes for north Queensland habitat conservation, what other factors contributed the process, and why the Reef campaign was more successful than that of the rainforest. The proposed answer is that they achieved protection of reef and rainforest ecosystems through a combination of skills, strategies and circumstances, including national and international support. Because public attitudes were more favourable towards the Great Barrier Reef than the rainforest, and perceived the former as a whole entity, the Great Barrier Reef achieved protection before the rainforests.

#### Methodology

Primary sources consulted included books such as Judith Wright's *The Coral Battleground*, Patricia Clare's *The Struggle for the Great Barrier Reef*, Dr. Leonard Webb's 'The Rape of the Forests' in *The Great Extermination* and his book *Environmental Boomerang*. Other primary sources included interviews with people who were involved with some of the key figures and events examined in the essay, various government records such as Parliamentary Debates, government reports, legislation, as well as conservation society reports and newsletters, personal correspondence and newspaper articles.

#### Limitations

This research is part of a project examining conservation at the Mission Beach area. In order to comply with the constraints of a five thousand word essay it was necessary to narrow down the period and the people researched. The period examined in this essay is

the 1960s, and while many individuals contributed greatly to both the reef and rainforest campaigns, this essay is specific to the roles of John Busst, Dr. Len Webb and Geoff Tracey during that time frame. Although Webb and Tracey were not technically residents of Mission Beach, they often stayed at Busst's Bingil Bay residence during long periods of detailed research in the region. Their contribution to the conservation of the natural environment in the Mission Beach area is significantly linked to Busst.<sup>1</sup> Access to significant primary sources was impeded by the lack of access to the John Busst collection (which contains nine cartons of highly relevant information) which was not permitted to be transferred from the Townsville JCU library to the Cairns JCU library. It is for this reason that Ian Frazer's essay, particularly where it contains quotations from those relevant primary sources, has been useful. However, access to primary sources through the Queensland State Archives, the Special Collection at the Cairns campus of J.C.U., various letters which were available online, and newspaper articles which are stored on microfilm were very helpful.

### Literature Review

There has been some work written about the 1960s campaign to save the Great Barrier Reef from mining and drilling but less about the campaign to protect the north Queensland rainforests during the same period. *The Coral Battleground* was written by one of the major activists, Judith Wright, and provides an exceptionally accurate narrative of the events leading up to and during the Reef campaign.<sup>2</sup> Patricia Clare's *The Struggle to Save the Great Barrier Reef* was written by a journalist who visited the north Queensland region and interviewed a diverse range of people including scientists, sugar cane farmers and local indigenous people. This book provides important information including insight into developing industries such as reef tourism and sugar cane farming during the 1960s, and attitudes towards environmental change during this period. While both *The Coral Battleground* and *The Struggle to Save the Great Barrier Reef* are important as primary sources of information, they are not analytical in their approach to the subject.

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<sup>1</sup> Map 92, 'Town of Bingil Bay', parish of Hull, County of Nares, Innisfail land Agent's District, 18 May 1981: one of the streets in Bingil Bay, Webb Court, is named after Len Webb

<sup>2</sup> Eddie Hegerl, taped interview with Annie Austin, 17 August 2007.

In 'Guardians of Nature', chapter five of Ian James Frazer's Masters thesis, 'Conservation and Farming in North Queensland, 1861-1970', four activists who worked for the conservation of north Queensland habitats and their relationship with the farming community are examined. This included an analysis of the motivations of John Busst and Dr. Leonard Webb in their activism, and the changing development of those motivations. It also compares the motivations of pre-WW11 naturalist groups with that of the conservation groups from the 1960s. It shows the strong influence of Webb's ecological reasons for conservation on John Busst who previously had been inspired to protect the environment for mainly aesthetic reasons.

The following essay 'Defending Diversity' focuses more on the operational aspect of environmental activism by analysing the methods employed by Busst, Webb and Tracey to achieve positive outcomes for the conservation of north Queensland rainforests and (in the case of Busst) the Great Barrier Reef, against substantial obstacles. Due to the complexity of the Reef campaign, the study focuses in more detail on it than that of the rainforest. This work also examines why the campaign to protect the Reef was more successful than that of the rainforest during the 1960s campaigns.

### Background

During the 1960s the boom in resource exploitation in north Queensland generated rapid and unsustainable development.<sup>3</sup> Some of the most diverse biological systems in the world were situated on the coastal fringe and offshore from it: the lowland rainforests and the Great Barrier Reef. While the science of ecology was in its infancy and the few who understood the complexities of tropical rainforest or coral reef ecosystems had little economic or political power, large areas of rainforests were bulldozed for development purposes.<sup>4</sup> The deforestation of riparian regions in the tropical monsoon climate caused soil erosion into the tidal river systems and the flushing of pesticides, nutrients and phosphates out to sea where the Great Barrier Reef is located.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, drastic changes to the Reef environment became alarmingly apparent as hordes of crown of

<sup>3</sup> Judith Wright, 'The Coral Battleground', p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Leonard James Webb, 'Environmental Boomerang', 89, 90.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp.16, 32, 33: Webb describes soil ecology and the damaging effects of the use of DDT in agriculture; Patricia Clare, 'the Struggle for the Great Barrier Reef', pp. 161, 162.

thorn starfish marched across the ocean floor eating live coral, swiftly reducing it limestone rubble. <sup>6</sup>

While the fishing industry and tourism were both dependent on the biological viability of the Great Barrier Reef, both were major contributors to its despoliation. Commercial and recreational shell-collecting were commonly practiced and caused the depletion of species like the triton, a major predator of crown of thorn starfish. <sup>7</sup> While international law on the ownership of the Reef was ambiguous, exploitation of the Reef environment also occurred through overseas fishing boats.<sup>8</sup> When local boating operators reported Taiwanese fishing boat crews to the authorities for poaching the Reef waters for giant clams they were confounded by the apparent political inertia.<sup>9</sup>

As the majority of the Australian population lived in the south-eastern corner of the continent, they knew nothing of these changes. Those who understood the Reef environment knew to blame these changes on human activity, but many were apathetic to the destruction, feeling a lack of control over the situation.<sup>10</sup> Conservationists and scientists joined forces to save the lowland rainforest, a campaign which extended to a bitter battle to save the reef from exploitation. Initially seen as ‘fringe-dwellers’, these vocal activists were genuine in their concern but were perceived as ‘anti-progressive’ radicals by many. <sup>11</sup> Their opponents were wealthy, powerful international companies supported by the Queensland government.<sup>12</sup> This was a period in Queensland’s history

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<sup>6</sup> Perry Harvey, taped interview with Annie Austin, 6 September, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp.43-74; Clare describes degradation of the Reef due to exploitation and cites Green Island in the early 1970s where crowds of tourists walked on the reef collecting shells and corals, garishly painted dead coral and shells for sale in stores, and the sewage outlet from the resort flushing out to sea, returning to the beach with the tides and currents.

<sup>8</sup> Parliamentary Debates, Senate, Senator McKellar re. ‘Continental Shelf Living Natural Resources Bill’, 1968, 22 October-28 Nov., 1968, pp.2566, 2567, 2568.

<sup>9</sup> Patricia Clare, ‘The Struggle for the Great Barrier Reef’, pp.21, 22, 23, 30, 63, 64; Perry Harvey, taped interview with Annie Austin, 6 September, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., Patricia Clare, ‘The Struggle for the Great Barrier Reef’, pp.62, 63, 106, 107.

<sup>11</sup> Judith Wright, ‘The Coral Battleground’, pp.3,5; Frazer, ‘Conservation and Farming in north Queensland, 1861-1970’, p.171; Leonard James Webb, ‘The Rape of the Forests’, p.168, Webb describes the ‘progress ethic’: that of conquering nature as linked to morality in the European Australian tradition.

<sup>12</sup> Eddie Hegerl, taped interview with Annie Austin, 17 August 2007; Judith Wright, ‘The Coral Battleground’, p.23, 69, 100, 101, 148; Perry Owens, taped interview with Annie Austin, 6 September, 2007; Martin Mulligan & Stuart Hill, ‘Ecological Pioneers’, p.158; Patricia Clare, ‘The Struggle for the Great Barrier Reef’, p.57.

when the concept of ‘progress’ was linked with development. The local conservationists who took up the ‘David and Goliath’ battle gained strength by uniting with state and national conservation groups, eventually enlisting international assistance to save the Reef. Using limited financial resources but shared talents, they achieved the protection of the Reef, while rainforest conservation was realised much later. Traditional government perceptions of forests were as potential exploitable resources to be either managed by forestry for their cabinet timber, or cleared for farming or grazing country through government funded development.<sup>13</sup> While the Great Barrier Reef had historically been exploited commercially for its resources, it had national and international renown, if not for its biological significance, for its tourism potential. These differences in public attitudes towards the Great Barrier Reef and the rainforest influenced the various outcomes for their conservation.

The general clearing and exploitation of land for agricultural purposes was challenged by two CSIRO scientists, Dr. Len Webb and Geoff Tracey. They maintained that, while agricultural development was appropriate in some regions, it was catastrophic in others. Some regions were unsuitable for clearing because of the ensuing ecological problems in both the cleared country, and through erosion, also into the geographically linked water catchment areas.<sup>14</sup> Their shared knowledge of north Queensland rainforests was profound, partly due to ten years involvement with the Australian Phytochemical

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<sup>13</sup> Samuel Dansie, taped interview with Annie Austin, 31 August, 2007. Dansie describes how the lowland rainforest regions were the main source of timber, much of which had been cleared as soldier settlement blocks for dairy farming. The sawmilling companies were politically powerful and, through the Forestry department, some region were maintained as state forest;

Peter Stanton, telephone conversation with Annie Austin, 27 August 2007; Leonard James Webb, ‘The Rape of the Forests’, pp.191, 192: Webb describes how ‘The Report of North Queensland Land Classification Committee’ in 1962 had concluded that the development of virgin land for cattle grazing as uneconomic, but their recommendations were ignored by the government when 51,000 acres of crown land near Tully were made available to the wealthy U.S. ‘King Ranch’ company, resulting in the clearing of rainforest and hill slopes contrary to the advice of the committee;

Barry Wain, ‘The Bingil Bay Bastard’, *Australian*, p.14, 14 May, 1971: ‘To want to save the rainforests of northern Australia was to be dismissed as a crank in Queensland.’; Geoff Tracey, taped interview with Gregg Borschmann, Tape 2, ‘The People’s Forest’, 9 May, 1992: Tracey refers to how government scientists were paid to turn ‘useless country’ into agriculturally productive country.

<sup>14</sup> Leonard James Webb, ‘The Rape of the Forests’, p.178; Leonard James Webb, ‘Environmental Boomerang’, p.32: Webb refers to the problem of residues of pesticides in the food chain through erosion into the rivers and streams; Geoff Tracey, interview with Gregg Borschmann, ‘The People’s Forest’, Tape 2, 9 May, 1994: In 1957 Webb wrote in the *Australian Journal of Science* about catchment deterioration along the eastern highlands and previously cleared rainforest areas.

Research Program, during which they had collected rainforest specimens in north Queensland for analysis for their medicinal properties.<sup>15</sup> Tracey recalls how they had taken advice from timber cutters and haulers, and foresters (such as Samuel Dansie) whose first-hand understanding of the forest was invaluable. He also mentions that this period in the forest was akin to an apprenticeship in forest ecology as they developed knowledge of the varying distribution of species in particular regions.<sup>16</sup> Dr. Len Webb and Geoff Tracey became pioneers in Australian rainforest ecology as well as the conservation of rainforest systems.

Their promotion of lowland rainforests for conservation as national parks began in cooperation with John and Alison Busst. The Bussts had moved from Bedarra Island to Bingil Bay and were concerned about the level of development and consequent destruction of the rainforest. John Busst, who came from a wealthy Victorian family, had been leading an alternative lifestyle as an artist at Bedarra Island and, on marriage with Allison, the couple decided to move closer to facilities. Bingil Bay was a farming community in an exceptionally beautiful part of the north Queensland coastline where the lowland rainforest extended to the beach. With Len Webb and Geoff Tracey, the Bussts successfully lobbied for protection as a national park of 268 metres of rainforest on a basalt hill at Bingil Bay, called 'Clump Point'. Other locals became involved in the conservation of the region and in 1961, Mr. Owen Perry, a local farmer, donated eight acres of private land to provide a public access walking track to the forested hill.<sup>17</sup> The Bussts achieved an audience with government policy makers regarding the establishment of the Clump Point National Park through the formation of a local rainforest committee.

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<sup>15</sup> Claude Culvener, personal correspondence with Annie Austin, 31 August 2007: Culvener summarized the phytochemical research program and stated that Len Webb later regretted his work in this area because of the destruction to rainforests through extraction of species.

<sup>16</sup> Geoff Tracey, interview with Gregg Borschmann, 'The People's Forest', Tape 2, 12 May 1994: Tracey refers to their development of ecological perception of forests through this period.

<sup>17</sup> Minister for Agriculture and forestry, letter of acceptance of the land to E.O. Perry, 21 February 1961; Mrs. Rosa Perry, personal correspondence with Annie Austin, 6 September 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Eddie Hegerl, taped interview with Annie Austin, 17 August 2007; Ian James Frazer, 'Guardians of Nature', pp. 161

As the pressures of development on natural resources accelerated, so did the urgency for their conservation. In 1963 Judith Wright and Dr. Len Webb established the 'Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland' as a means for lobbying for environmental protection and by 1966 they were involved in the establishment of a national forum for conservation issues, the 'Australian Conservation Foundation.' Another group of people concerned about land and water degradation were students and biologists interested in marine and freshwater systems who formed the 'Queensland Littoral Society.'<sup>19</sup> Conservation groups were also established at the local level and John Busst formed the Innisfail branch of the Wildlife Preservation Society with people such as the amateur ornithologist, Mrs. Billie Gill.<sup>20</sup> These conservation societies were an effective tool for conservation advocacy as they unified individuals and invited international support.<sup>21</sup> The newsletters which they produced created a forum for ideas and the publication of scientific information which reinforced members' interests as well as influencing new readers.<sup>22</sup>

Other published works which were significant for the success of the environmental campaigns were books and scientific papers written by Dr. Len Webb. Len Webb and Geoff Tracey had published the first major Australian ecological paper, 'A Physiognomic Classification of Australian Rainforests' in the English *Journal of Ecology* in 1959.<sup>23</sup> This period saw the birth of ecology in Australia with Webb and Tracey working in the newly formed rainforest ecology section at CSIRO.<sup>24</sup> By 1966 Webb's writings had reached a wider audience with the publication of 'The Rape of the Forests' in *The Great Extermination*, a book which demonstrated historically repetitive problems as a result of land clearing, government policies and public perceptions. This work, with its visionary statement 'a fundamental ecological principle is that the land is a unity...' was seen by

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<sup>19</sup> Judith Wright, 'The Coral Battleground', pp.1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.4.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.5.

<sup>22</sup> Eddie Hegerl, personal conversation with Annie Austin, 17 September, 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Geoff Tracey, taped interview with Gregg Borschmann, 'The People's Forest', Tape 2, 12 May, 1994; "...it was the first time in Australia that we had come to grips with the great variety of vegetation types which were masquerading under the heading "rainforests."

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Tracey as a turning point in Australian attitudes towards conservation.<sup>25</sup> During the same year Webb had published *The Identification of Conservation of Habitat Types in the Wet Tropical Lowlands in North Queensland* as a result of a one year study of rainforests from Cardwell to Cape Tribulation in 1962. This became the basis for the proposal of twenty regions of lowland rainforest in north Queensland for the location of national parks. This work achieved the establishment of about ten of the proposed national parks in some of the suggested regions, but others were vetoed by government departments such as the Lands Department which wanted land reserved for development purposes.<sup>26</sup> In the early 1970s Len Webb wrote *Environmental Boomerang* which provided easy explanations of ecological processes and a methodical analysis of environmental problems ranging from tree clearing and the ecological consequences, to the use of pesticides and fertilizers and other pollution issues. In this way Webb informed, and inspired environmental action from, the general public.

Len Webb and Geoff Tracey had long been advocating the use of scientific studies as the basis for land management and wrote to John and Alison Busst in April 1961 regarding this issue.<sup>27</sup> Under the umbrella of the 'Rainforest Preservation Committee', John and Alison Busst had lobbied politicians for funding for scientific investigation of northern rainforests for medical research. The result was a two week survey of Australian northern lowland rainforests by Dr. Len Webb, Geoff Tracey, Dr. Jiro Kikkawa and Mr. Ian Straughan in order to identify representative habitats containing plants with properties useful for medical research for diseases such as leukaemia.<sup>28</sup> Busst was politically well-

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<sup>25</sup> Leonard James Webb, 'The Rape of the Forests', p.197; Geoff Tracey, interview with Gregg Borschmann, 'The People's Forest', Tape 2, 12 May, 1994

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.; Peter Stanton, personal correspondence with Annie Austin, 27 September, 2007: one area was cleared soon after Webb's proposal, another large area near the Cardwell Range was opposed by the Forestry Department because of its capacity as a Carribean pine plantation, while another area in the Daintree region was opposed by the Mossman Sugar Mill; 'Report of the Conservator of Forest for the Year ended 30<sup>th</sup> June, 1969' in *Queensland Parliamentary Papers*, p.2, (1306): "Further progress was made in the reservation of National Parks representative of the Tropical Lowlands with the proclamation during the year of six reserves..."

'The Forestry Amendment Act 1968' in Queensland Parliamentary Papers, 1969, p.34 (1338): "Tropical Lowlands: In the previous report mention was made of the series of twenty proposed reserves intended to preserve representative samples of the tropical wet lowland. Reservation of these areas is now well in hand."

<sup>27</sup> Ian James Frazer, 'Guardians of Nature', pp.166, 167.

<sup>28</sup> Larry Foley, 'Mankind in Northern Rainforests', *Cairns Post*, 16 November 1965.

connected and used his close friendship with Prime Minister Harold Holt to advocate rainforest conservation for aesthetic, ecological and utilitarian reasons, such as unknown properties of plants for medical research.<sup>29</sup>

Busst's advocacy for the conservation of natural systems using scientific evidence as the fundamental basis for his argument extended to the defence of the Great Barrier Reef in 1967. The campaign to save Ellison Reef from destruction through limestone mining demonstrates how John Busst's powerful influence in motivating people, his clever tactics, assiduous approach to liaising with high level politicians and the media, coordination of a scientific expedition, and the unification of conservation groups achieved positive outcomes. This episode in Queensland history also demonstrates the control of the State government over scientific research and the problems pursuant to this influence.

In 1967 an application was lodged to lease Ellison Reef, offshore from Innisfail, for the purpose of limestone mining. It had been lodged by a local sugar cane farmer who saw the close proximity of the reef to farming regions as a means of convenient access to exploitable limestone for local agricultural purposes.<sup>30</sup> The limestone was to be obtained from the coral and, as hard corals are largely composed of calcium carbonate, the Great Barrier Reef could potentially become a major supply of limestone. John Busst (a resident of Bingil Bay) saw the application advertised in a local newspaper. Through the Innisfail branch of the Wildlife Conservation Society, he contacted other groups such as the Australian Conservation Foundation and the Queensland Littoral Society regarding objections to such exploitation of the reef environment. His concerns were not just for the health of Ellison Reef but because the mining of it could become a 'dangerous legal precedent' for the granting of other mining leases over the Great Barrier Reef.<sup>31</sup> The Littoral Society were concerned about the effects on marine organisms by siltation as a result of mining on the Reef.<sup>32</sup> This co-ordination of conservation groups strengthened

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<sup>29</sup> Ian James Frazer, 'Guardians of Nature', pp.167.

<sup>30</sup> Patricia Clare, 'Canefields and Coral', p.105,106; Patricia Clare interviewed Donald Forbes, who was also the secretary of the Cairns District Canegrowers' Executive.

<sup>31</sup> John Busst, letter to Minister for Mines, 11 September, 1967.

<sup>32</sup> Judith Wright, 'The Coral Battleground', p.5, 6, 7.

their ability to achieve positive outcomes, through shared talents and knowledge, a greater ability to disseminate information to the public and by lobbying business and political forces.

Marine research in Australia was inadequately funded and the only scientific body researching the Great Barrier Reef (the Great Barrier Reef Committee) was funded by the pro-development State government. When John Busst contacted members of the Great Barrier Reef Committee at the University of Queensland regarding the proposed mining at Ellison Reef their response was that it was ‘dead reef’, which became the foundation for the argument for mining it. It was for this reason that the conservationists, coordinated by John Busst, prepared to refute this ‘dead reef’ theory through scientific evidence, which would be the basis for their objection to the application, which they challenged in court.<sup>33</sup> The director of the Australian Conservation Foundation was Dr. Don McMichael, a marine biologist who, coincidentally, had worked at Ellison Reef.<sup>34</sup> He and a team of divers such as Eddie Hegerl, a young marine collector from the U.S.A. and founding member of the Littoral Society, conducted a two week survey of Ellison Reef to determine its scientific viability. Hegerl recalls how John Busst, due to the controversial nature of the project, was unsuccessful in coercing more senior scientists to assist.<sup>35</sup>

John Busst overcame the problem of inadequate financial resources through the enlistment of support from various businesses and individuals. Although both Ansett and TAA (the two major national airlines) had substantial interests in Reef tourism operations, paradoxically the former company declined to assist the scientific expedition, for reasons which became apparent later in the campaign. However, TAA provided aircraft transport for the crew and their heavy diving equipment, while Avis provided motor vehicle transport from Cairns to Bingil Bay, Kodak supplied film, Perry Harvey (who was a friend of John Busst and the local tour boat operator at Bingil Bay) took daily supplies out to the reef while the researchers’ accommodation at Ellison Reef was

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<sup>33</sup> Judith Wright, ‘The Coral Battleground’, pp.6, 7, 8; Eddie Hegerl, interview, 17 August 2007.

<sup>34</sup> Judith Wright, ‘The Coral Battleground’, p.10.

<sup>35</sup> Eddie Hegerl, interview, 17 August 2007

provided by two local Italian brothers through loaning their home-made boats.<sup>36</sup> The expedition was achieved because of the dedication of those who gave their time and energy, the combination of their various skills and expertise, John Busst's persuasion of businesses and individuals, and because of the professional approach to co-ordinating the logistics of the expedition by himself and his wife, Alison Busst.

The scientific survey successfully proved the biological viability of Ellison Reef. Eddie Hegerl explained to the court how they had identified eighty-eight species of coral, sixty species of mollusc and one hundred and ninety species of fish at Ellison Reef.<sup>37</sup> As well as this biological evidence which unequivocally refuted the 'dead reef' theory, Hegerl also produced geographical evidence demonstrating potential negative impacts of the proposed mining on other areas of the Reef. This was a map which the scientific team had drawn of the area showing the position of reefs and cays and the measurements of the currents. This showed how, consequential to mining at Ellison Reef, the pressure of the currents would change and destabilise other regional reefs and cays.<sup>38</sup> This strong scientific evidence convinced the mining warden to dismiss the application. However, the Minister for Mines, Mr. Camm still had the power to over-rule the mining warden's decision, leading to an anxious six month delay before the official rejection of the application.<sup>39</sup>

Busst's diligence in communicating the issues to a broad range of individuals, groups and newspapers contributed to the success of the campaign. The letter of objection to mining at the Ellison Reef which he sent to the Minister of Mines, Mr. Camm, is an example of his assiduous approach to activism. He forwarded the letter to the Prime Minister, the Premier, and the Ministers for Tourism, Conservation and the Director General of the Queensland Government Tourist Bureau. He listed objections to the granting of the application by eight separate groups, including Australian universities, national and local conservation societies, the local chamber of commerce, and local shire council.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p.11; Eddie Hegerl, interview, 17 August 2007; Perry Harvey, interview, 6 September, 2007.

<sup>37</sup> Judith Wright, 'The Coral Battleground', p.12.

<sup>38</sup> Perry Harvey, interview with Annie Austin, 6 September, 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Judith Wright, 'The Coral Battleground', p.14; Eddie Hegerl, interview, 17 August 2007.

<sup>40</sup> John Busst, letter to Minister for Mines, in personal correspondence to Prime Minister Harold Holt,

Considering that the GBRC had supported the mining of Ellison Reef, such decisive action shows Busst's confidence in his own convictions which encouraged the dedication of others. He had also contacted members of the Press to cover the story resulting in several reporters from various newspapers attending the court case. One of the journalists, Barry Wain from the *Australian*, had also gone to Ellison Reef with the diving team where the conditions were primitive and dangerous. The crew had to jump from boat to boat in strong winds, rough seas and a ripping current.<sup>41</sup> By persuading the Press to cover the story, Busst caught the attention of the public, bringing the issues of conservation at the Great Barrier Reef to a broader audience.

John Busst's strong persuasive manner, his overall confidence with dealing with high profile politicians and businessmen, his uncompromising determination and business-like approach were fundamental to his success as a campaigner. According to some who knew him, if he had been a mining magnate, the entire reef would have been mined. Luckily for the biological sustainability of the Great Barrier Reef, his goal was for its conservation.<sup>42</sup> His income was provided through regular funds from his wealthy family, allowing him the time to devote to conservation of the reef and rainforests. Busst's background as a student of Wesley College provided powerful connections and a 'start at the top' attitude, as well as a direct link with the Federal government through his relationship with the Prime Minister, Harold Holt, an old school friend. The Holts spent much of their leisure time at their holiday home at Bingil Bay and Harold Holt, a keen snorkeller, had arranged to learn to scuba dive with Eddie Hegerl.<sup>43</sup> Then suddenly in late 1967, Harold Holt drowned. This was not only a personal tragedy, but a disaster for marine conservation because of Holt's strong support for it.<sup>44</sup> John Busst proposed, in Holt's honour, for the establishment of a marine park in the Great Barrier Reef, as well as marine parks in each state in coastal regions adjacent to wilderness regions. In this way

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11 September, 1967, <http://naa.12.naa.gov.au/scripts/Imagine.asp>, p.28, accessed 28 July 2007.

<sup>41</sup> Judith Wright, 'The Coral Battleground', p.13.

<sup>42</sup> Eddie Hegerl, interview, 17 August 2007

<sup>43</sup> John Busst, personal correspondence to Prime Minister Harold Holt, <http://naa.12.naa.gov.au/scripts/Imagine.asp>, p.28, accessed 28 July 2007; Perry Harvey, interview with Annie Austin, 6 September, 2007.

<sup>44</sup> Eddie Hegerl, interview, 17 August, 2007; Perry Harvey, interview, 6 September, 2007.

Busst tried to continue for perpetuity Holt's strong influence on the conservation of marine and coastal hinterland.<sup>45</sup>

However, John Busst's concern that mining at Ellison Reef was a precedent for further exploitation was confirmed with the proposal to drill for oil at the Great Barrier Reef. This new threat resulted in a campaign which enlisted assistance from the Australian public, international scientists and conservation bodies to overcome the linked obstacles of wealthy multi-national forces and the pro-drilling Queensland government. John Busst's tactics of obtaining support from opposing factions of Australian politics, his diligence as a researcher, his skills as a spokesman and diplomat and his determination to push through the obstacles to the defence of the natural environment were inspirational. In this way he influenced others who were actively involved in the campaign, many of whom have continued their work in environmental protection.<sup>46</sup>

The campaign was so extensive partly because of the massive area under threat of exploitation. By September 1967, eighty thousand, nine hundred and twenty miles of the Great Barrier Reef region had been leased out by the Queensland government for oil drilling. John Busst had written to the Prime Minister providing information which was unpublished by the Queensland government regarding the details of the leases. He proposed a ten year moratorium on oil drilling at the Reef and financial support for a school of tropical marine scientific research at Townsville. He also contacted the leader of the opposition, Gough Whitlam, and the *Australian* regarding this information and proposals.<sup>47</sup>

Through research, Busst and other campaigners discovered information regarding the relationship between business and the State government on the issue of oil drilling. When he examined the shareholders' register of Ampol he found that, although a major marine tourism operator in the Great Barrier Reef, Ansett was the fourth major shareholder in

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<sup>45</sup> Dr. Everingham, Parliamentary Debates, Representatives, question no. 602, p.2221, 22 October, 1968.

<sup>46</sup> Eddie Hegerl, interview with Annie Austin, 17, August, 2007: Hegerl describes his subsequent research work in marine and freshwater systems as under-remunerated and using the assistance of volunteers; throughout the campaign he, and everyone involved, worked as volunteers.

<sup>47</sup> Judith Wright, 'Coral Battleground', pp.31, 32,33,34,35.

‘Ampol Exploration Pty. Ltd.’ which leased 8007 square miles for oil drilling purposes.<sup>48</sup> Although the Great Barrier Reef was a significant potential resource for tourism, industry representatives and the State Minister for Tourism were remarkably reticent about possible impacts of oil drilling there.<sup>49</sup> The Premier of Queensland, Joh Bjelke Petersen, owned substantial shares in ‘Exoil No Liability’ which had applied for one of the major leases in the Barrier Reef.<sup>50</sup> However, the conservationists did have allies within the Queensland government with Sir Sydney Schubert influencing the Premier in the argument towards conservation of the Great Barrier Reef.<sup>51</sup> Ammunition for the conservationists’ side was unwittingly provided through a series of uninformed and ridiculous comments made by the State Mines Minister, Mr. Camm. He had given unsubstantiated assurances of adequate safeguards for drilling at the Reef and had remarked that an oil spill at the Reef would not endanger it as the currents would take the oil in the opposite direction to the reefs. Another time, on stating that eighty percent of the Reef was leased for oil drilling permits, he suggested that research could be conducted by pouring oil on the Reef to determine its effect.<sup>52</sup> The publication of his outrageous comments through the Press demonstrated the ineptitude of the state government regarding (by this time) controversial conservation issues and generated interest, probably contributing to the success of the campaign.

Busst formed new allies and also used the forum of an Australian Conservation Foundation meeting to help realise his vision of a marine science school at Townsville and for Commonwealth control of the Great Barrier Reef. He had contacted Professor Burdon-Jones (the newly appointed Professor of Zoology at Townsville University College) regarding the proposed establishment of the marine science school at Townsville. Professor Burdon-Jones had also written to the Prime Minister regarding this issue.<sup>53</sup> John Busst proposed at a meeting of the Australian Conservation Foundation for Commonwealth control of the Great Barrier Reef, a moratorium against

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.101.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.124.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., pp.69, 148; Martin Mulligan & Stuart Hill, ‘Ecological Pioneers’, p.158; Patricia Clare, ‘The Struggle for the Great Barrier Reef’, p.57.

<sup>51</sup> Eddie Hegerl interview with Annie Austin, 17 august, 2007.

<sup>52</sup> Judith Wright, ‘The Coral Battleground’ pp. 75. 52.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., pp.31,32.

mining there, and the establishment of a Commonwealth Commission under the auspices of the Australian Academy of Science, using national and international scientific organisations. As he was ill from a pre-cancerous throat condition, he was unable to speak. However an amendment of his proposal achieved a positive vote by most members present at the meeting.<sup>54</sup> The conservationists had also generated interest in Commonwealth control of the reef through politicians and newspapers.<sup>55</sup> Publicity for Reef conservation had been assisted by world events as a series of disastrous oil spills in various marine regions generated public debate regarding the possible impact of an oil spill at the Reef.<sup>56</sup>

Meanwhile, John Busst applied pressure on the government and oil drilling companies through mediation with the Trade Unions and potential legal avenues. His successful enlistment of the support of the Trade Unions was also effective in generating public interest in the issue of oil drilling at the Reef, as was his use of the Press to disseminate information. He had helped a local Innisfail member of the Amalgamated Engineering Union draw up a submission for the black banning of mining or oil-drilling at the Great Barrier Reef and sent it to the Prime Minister and the Premier.<sup>57</sup> Also, due to the collusion of business with the State government regarding oil drilling at the Reef, John Busst planned to issue a writ on the State government. He published this proposal in the Melbourne Press, and maintained correspondence with the Prime Minister and the leader of the Opposition regarding this issue.<sup>58</sup> The issues of oil drilling at the Reef despite the secrecy shrouding such operations, reached the public through daily newspaper reports.<sup>59</sup> For example, in September 1969 the *Courier Mail* published a map of the reef region leased for oil drilling, naming the companies with leases.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp.41, 42.

<sup>55</sup> Senator Georges, Parliamentary Debates, Senate, 13 August-17 October, 1968, p.1315: Senator Georges vocally supported the conservationists' objectives during parliamentary sessions; O. Thompson & G. Pascall, 'Who Owns the Great Barrier Reef?', *Australian*, 24 April 1970, p.9.

<sup>56</sup>Parliamentary Debates, Senate, v.s. 40, p. 979, 25 Feb.-29 April, 1969; Judith Wright, 'The Coral Battleground' pp.51.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., pp. 92, 93, 119.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp. 10, 107, 108.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p.110.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p.71.

Another tactic used by the conservationists in the battle to save the Reef from exploitation was to address the local community level. They had launched a nationwide ‘Save the Reef’ campaign with the help from both sides of politics. Members of the public were given the opportunity to participate in the oil drilling campaign through opinion polls held at venues such as shopping malls. These were hugely successful and the publication of the poll results generated more interest (there was a ninety-two percent vote against drilling at the Reef in the Brisbane district alone). Further pressure was applied to politicians through informing them of the poll results.<sup>61</sup> Also scientists like Eddie Hegerl were very active at the local level through constant regular liaising with community groups and the provision of scientific information.<sup>62</sup>

Hegerl has since described the motivations of the activists as ‘sheer blind altruism’. Their passion and dedication to defending the Reef, based on strong scientific evidence, would have been infectious and generated enthusiasm from others to save the Reef from exploitation. However, Hegerl has retrospectively compared the enormous success of conservationists like Steve Irwin in inspiring support from the public through appealing to emotions to the scientific approach of the 1960s campaigners. The latter were careful to avoid emotionalism, but Hegerl thinks that if he had Irwin’s panache, the 1960s campaign might have been more successful.

Busst’s political influence gave their issues representation in Parliament where these were fairly constantly debated. During Parliamentary Debates in May, 1968, Senator Cant had revealed that the government had contributed ninety million dollars towards oil exploration and that the exploration companies received substantial taxation concessions on their investments.<sup>63</sup> Senator Georges (a Queensland Labor member of the Senate and founding member of the ‘Save the Reef’ campaign) pressured Ampol for definite assurances regarding their mining lease, and requested assurances of compensation for damages to tourist operators and the Queensland people in the case of an oil spill from

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp 84, 85, 88.

<sup>62</sup> Eddie Hegerl, interview with Annie Austin, 17, August, 2007: Hegerl spent three to four nights a week speaking at gatherings like Rotary Club meetings and Liberal party meetings.

<sup>63</sup> Senator Cant, ‘Price of Petrol and Petroleum Products’, *Parliamentary Debates*, Senate, pp.1222, May 29 1968.

the rigging company. Soon after this, Ampol postponed operations, offering financial assistance for an Inquiry.<sup>64</sup> Georges had often used Parliamentary debates as a forum to challenge the government about issues like Commonwealth control of the Reef, pollution from the mainland into Reef waters, the possibility of an oil spill there, the crown of thorn starfish problem, and exploitation of the Reef.<sup>65</sup>

Although the Commonwealth and State governments did propose a joint Inquiry into oil drilling at the Reef, the conservationists questioned its integrity due to the pro-development ethos of the State government and the powerful influence of the relevant business groups.<sup>66</sup> While wealthy parties like the Australian Exploration Association had announced that it would ‘provide as much expert evidence (as) it could muster’, the conservationists were refused any funding by the State government to bring expert witnesses to Australia from overseas (Australia had conducted very little marine science research due to lack of funding).<sup>67</sup> The conservationists’ issues were represented by a visiting U.S. scientist, Dr. Grassle, who was working in Australia on an overseas research grant.

The political pressures surrounding the issue of oil drilling at the Reef presented an obstacle for reef research. For example, Dr. Grassle was concerned about the potential termination of his visa as a result of his work for the conservationists.<sup>68</sup> Another American scientist, Theo Brown of the World Life Research Institute, was conducting research at Magnetic Island. When his studies delved into the problem of the Crown of Thorns starfish and the unhealthy state of the Reef, the State government suddenly terminated its permission for the research.<sup>69</sup> Another example of the State government’s attitude to Reef research is its appointment of an overseas geologist (without qualifications as a biologist), Dr. Ladd, to conduct a brief two week survey of the Great Barrier Reef (which is over two-thousand kilometres in length) to determine the

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., pp.110, 111, 121.

<sup>65</sup> Senator Georges, *Parliamentary Debates*, Senate, p. 1315, 13 August- 17 October, 1968.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 116; ‘Barrier Reef Oil Drilling Inquiry: ‘Piece of Eyewash Claim’, *Cairns Post*, 2 Feb., 1970, author unknown, p.3.

<sup>67</sup> Judith Wright, ‘Coral Battleground’, pp.116, 117.

<sup>68</sup> Eddie Hegerl, interview, 17 August 2007.

<sup>69</sup> Judith Wright, ‘Coral Battleground’, p.101.

suitability of mining there. His findings were that, though indiscriminate mining should not be condoned, it was possible to mine ‘...parts of the Reef that do not now support living coral ...’<sup>70</sup> Contrary to this, marine biologists from the Littoral Society and Australian Conservation Foundation stressed the importance of the inter-relationship between coral reefs and pushed for the management of the Great Barrier Reef as a whole system.<sup>71</sup> While the Great Barrier Reef Committee, funded by the State government, supported ‘controlled exploitation’ of the Reef region, the conservationists were uncompromising in their determination to save the Reef from exploitation.<sup>72</sup>

In the end it was an accident which forced both the State and Commonwealth governments to address the issue of oil drilling at the Reef. On March 3, 1970 the Ampol-chartered oil tanker *Oceanic Grandeur* ran aground in the Torres Strait, causing a spreading oil slick through the waters.<sup>73</sup> This resulted in the Commonwealth decision to upgrade the Inquiry into oil drilling at the Reef to a Royal Commission and the Commonwealth Government planned legislation for sovereign control over underwater resources on the Continental Shelf.<sup>74</sup> The conservationists, still under-funded and pitted against wealthy multi-national oil companies, had enlisted free representation from the solicitors, Lippiatt & Co. as well as thirty –five members of the Bar.<sup>75</sup> The results of the Royal Commission were not to be published until 1974 and were not welcomed by the conservationists as they failed to recommend banning oil drilling.<sup>76</sup> However, the conservationists’ request for the management of the Reef as a national marine park were finally realised by the establishment of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority in 1975.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> D.S. Caruthers, ‘Limestone Mining’ in *The Future of the Great Barrier Reef*, Papers of an Australian Conservation Foundation Symposium, p.50, 3 May, 1969.

<sup>71</sup> Dr. Grassle, in ‘Off-Shore Petroleum Exploration & Production’, in *The Future of the Great Barrier Reef*, Papers of an Australian Conservation Foundation Symposium, p.55, 3 May, 1969; Eddie Hegerl, interview with Annie Austin, 17 August 2007; Judith Wright, ‘The Coral Battleground’, p.178.

<sup>72</sup> Patricia Clare, ‘The Struggle for the Great Barrier Reef’, pp.84, 85, 86, 87.

<sup>73</sup> ‘The Report on the Oil Tanker *Oceanic Grandeur* in the Torres Strait on March 3<sup>rd</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> 1970 and The Subsequent Removal of Oil from the Waters’, *Queensland Parliamentary Papers*, 1970, pp.1821, 1851.

<sup>74</sup> Judith Wright, ‘The Coral Battleground’, pp.141, 142;

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p.155.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.174, 175.

<sup>77</sup> Eddie Hegerl, taped interview with Annie Austin, 17 August, 2007. The conservationists were afraid of ineffectual management if the Great Barrier Reef was managed as a series of marine parks, instead of by one cohesive authority.

Although this legislation and the later listing of the Great Barrier Reef internationally as a World Heritage site were partially due to the hard work and significant influence of John Busst, he had already died at Bingil Bay in 1972.<sup>78</sup> His tenacity as an activist, skills as a communicator and political strategist and absolute determination to prevent ‘controlled exploitation’ of the Great Barrier Reef had a continuing effect on those who were associated with him. In 1982, Dr Len Webb, David Allworth from the Australian Conservation Foundation and Don Henry, the Director of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland, used funding from a bursary left by John Busst for a five day north Queensland rainforest tour. This tour took locals from various north Queensland regions into their local rainforest, with lectures and demonstrations regarding rainforest ecology.<sup>79</sup> This tour addressed the future conservation of these regions by instructing and inspiring school children on these issues and by raising community awareness at a personalised local level.

Many people who were actively involved in the 1960s reef and rainforest campaigns have continued their work in environmental protection and made significant contributions in this area. Perry Harvey continued to work to prevent infestations of crown of thorn starfish in his local area and is actively involved during his retirement in the local Mission Beach conservation group, C4.<sup>80</sup> Eddie Hegerl became a pioneer in Australian mangrove ecology research as well as providing practical advice to other conservation groups.<sup>81</sup> During the Whitlam government in the early 1970s Len Webb wrote the chapter on the national environment for the National Estate Report which became the basis for policies of the Australian Heritage Commission. He also contributed the section on the evolution of Australian rainforests in the Dutch publication *Ecology and Biogeography of Australia* in 1980. After his retirement from the CSIRO in 1980, Webb continued to influence positive attitudes towards the environment through his work with

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<sup>78</sup> Barry Wain, ‘The Bingil Bay Bastard’; Don Henry,

<sup>79</sup> ‘Wildlife North Queensland Rainforest Tour’, *Wildlife*, v.19, no.4, December 1982.

<sup>80</sup> Perry Harvey, taped interview with Annie Austin, 6 September 2007.

<sup>81</sup> Douglas Shire Wilderness Action Group, letter to the Australian Littoral Society Inc. 27 September 1987; Eddie Hegerl, taped interview with Annie Austin, 17 August, 2007.

students as an honorary professor at Griffith University. Geoff Tracey continued his and Webb's work with re-establishing rainforests in cleared areas and formed a volunteer tree-planting program, TREAT (Trees for Evelyn and Atherton Tablelands) which was one of the most successful 'in terms of interacting between community and state agencies.'<sup>82</sup> After the Wet Tropics were nominated for World Heritage listing and with the Queensland government's subsequent High Court challenge, Tracey provided the scientific evidence for deciding the boundaries whilst working at the Rainforest Unit of the Federal Department of Environment.<sup>83</sup>

National and international recognition of the rainforests and the need for their conservation were realised much later than that of the Great Barrier Reef. The fight to save the Great Barrier Reef was more successful at the time because it was nationally and internationally renowned. Another reason was because people viewed it as a whole, while rainforests were viewed as disparate entities. The conservationists in the 1960s campaigns to save the Reef and the rainforest were so under-funded in their work that they used as many strategies as they could.<sup>84</sup> Their use of the media, published works, communication at the local level, lobbying politicians, the establishment and unification of societies, and the use of scientific evidence as the basis for their arguments achieved positive outcomes. These included the establishment of a marine park in the Great Barrier Reef, and that of a marine science school in Townsville. Their work was also fundamentally influential in the eventual protection of both the Great Barrier Reef and the northern rainforests through World Heritage Listing.

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<sup>82</sup> Geoff Tracey, taped interview with Gregg Borschmann, 12 May 1994.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, tape 4; Peter Stanton, personal correspondence with Annie Austin, 28 August, 2007.

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