



Butts in the Burdekin Dry Tropics

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Dr Ian Dight Profile

By Terry Butts

He is an internationally respected marine scientist.

He is a JCU graduate and though his origins are south of the border he is a fiercely devoted North Queenslander.

He is Dr Ian Dight and he's on a mission to save our sacred Barrier Reef.

A daunting task, by any measure of the imagination, fraught with a multitude of obstacles. He admits it is not easy at times to juggle the politics, or to win the confidence of landowners to change age-old farming practices.

Yet, while he repeats the warnings already openly expressed by his learned colleagues that the future of the iconic Great Barrier Reef is in danger Dr Dight believes the battle, to at least sustain it, can be won.

Dr Dight is two years into a Burdekin Dry Tropics Natural Resource Management (BDTNRM) project to improve the water quality of the massive Burdekin River catchment, all 138,000 square kilometres of it. It is not only one of the biggest water catchment areas of the country, and of course the state, but commands an enormous influence on our precious Great Barrier Reef.

Similar water quality improvement plans are also being carried out simultaneously in the Mackay Whitsunday catchment area and further north in Tully, where cane farming is the major influence on the water quality, and in particular upon the fragile reefs that are contaminated by sediments, herbicides and nutrients that find their way into creeks and rivers and eventually the sea. Known simply as run-off.

But the project being undertaken by Dr Dight in the Burdekin is by far the biggest and differs considerably.

"We are dealing with a much more dispersed population, and with far wider climatic variations. You know our Burdekin catchment area, north to south covers six degrees of latitude. People in Brisbane don't realise just how vast the area is," he said.

Explaining the diversity he points out that the Burdekin catchment backs on to tropical rain forest along the coastal range to the north and south, which are wet and heavy rainfall areas, and by contrast, the very dry and arid areas of Belyando where the Burdekin meets the Suttor River.

"When it comes to terrain, we've got the lot," he snorts.

Yet, while the Burdekin is widely acclaimed as one of the richest cane growing areas in the state, interestingly the industry represents only one per cent of the Burdekin catchment area. Grazing accounts for 93 per cent.

He says the project, which he described as large and complex, required planning skills and a multi disciplinary approach. It involves working closely with both the sugar and grazing industries, and he describes the relationship as good.

“After all we are all working to address what is generally accepted as a decline in health of the Great Barrier Reef.”

He says the causes are many. There is run off from agricultural lands, including herbicides and nutrients from the sugar farms, and sediments from the grazing lands, effluent from cities along the coast, coral bleaching associated with climate change, cyclones, and others.

“Certainly some deterioration is caused by land based pollution, particularly from the agricultural activities. When you mix unnatural herbicides to the marine environment you know you will have problems. Herbicides can kill coral reef, mangroves and the vital sea grass,” he asserts.

So is the situation as bad as Dr Dight thought it might have been when he took on the assignment? Thankfully the answer is a guarded no.

“There are issues out there, without a doubt, but we think they are manageable. The problems are not all centred on involving land-based activities. Commercial fishing also has a role and, as the population increases, recreational fishing will also play a larger part.”

He says the taking of the large fish, the predators, such as sharks, reef fish and other carnivorous fish, is leaving an imbalance in the eco system.

This creates a proliferation of herbivores that chomp away at the algae and other plant life that effects the recruitment of corals. There has to be a balance out there - and it's delicate.

Dr Dight is confident, however, that with the support of industry there can be significant reductions to the loads of sediments nutrients and herbicides entering the reef waters.

“Mind you it's a win-win situation. If the farmer can retain his sediments and nutrients it is better for his land, his production and for the community, and of course it is much better the reef.”

Reefs most vulnerable to the Burdekin fallout of sediment are those near Magnetic Island. There is however another danger looming, the phenomenon of climate change.

“When there has been heavy rain after a long period of dry conditions, our water testing has revealed a much higher concentration of sediment and so vast is the river that some sediment from the Burdekin as been transported as far north away as Cairns. With climate change we are being told to expect greater climate variability with periods of more intense rainfall and longer periods of dry in between.

Ian Dight's project is now at the stage where it's up to the landowners to implement the management strategies that have been devised and agreed upon by their industry leaders. There is also an incentive program to encourage the graziers and sugar farmers to implement these water quality management practises

“A lot of the practises are quite simple to undertake and there is no cost to the land holder. It is important however that the land holder simply understands the importance of water quality on his land. That's the bottom line. Otherwise the government will come in, as it has threatened, and I doubt anyone wants that involvement.”

He talks with first hand experience about government meddling. Dr Dight worked on projects in Ecuador in the world famous Galapagos and in the magical Maldives where, as an advisor for AUSAID, he helped implement a network of protected areas for conservation. He spent two and a half years in Ecuador working for the Galapagos National Park Service helping to implement their zoning scheme.

“There were problems in both places,” he recalls “mainly political.”

In Ecuador the local fishing population, while being forced to make sacrifices, were not given compensation or offered any alternative opportunities. In the Maldives there was a plan to offer those affected by the new laws, a chance to set up small retail outlets and earn a living from the expected upturn in tourism.

“I don’t think it has been terribly successful local politics,” he says.

Add to his involvement in two of the world’s most famous and sought after tourist meccas five years with the UN in Kenya in the 1990s and you have not merely a proud record of achievement but a pretty exciting record of employment.

In between jaunts to Ecuador and the Maldives there was two years work for the Indonesian government in coastal planning around Bali which he describes as “pretty exciting stuff.”

Who would argue?

In the case of Dr Ian Dight life must be a beach!