



MARK CARWARDINE

AUSTRALIA HAS SPECTACULAR WILDLIFE AND HABITATS THAT SHOULD BE CHERISHED. IT'S A SHAME ITS GOVERNMENT DISAGREES.

OPINION

Australia has been reprimanded by the United Nations several times recently for a string of scandalous environmental misdemeanours.

Quite right, too. We worry about David Cameron viewing our wildlife and wild places as worthless annoyances – but thank goodness we don't have Australia's prime minister Tony Abbott, or its environment minister Greg Hunt. They are nothing less than environmental vandals. So much so that Australia is rapidly becoming one of the least environmentally friendly countries in the world, and its conservationists are tearing their hair out.

Since coming to power in September 2013, Abbott and Hunt have (among other things) pushed the Great Barrier Reef closer to ruin, tried to undo a hard-won peace deal between conservationists and loggers in Tasmania, and withdrawn from global attempts to tackle climate change.

Australia is lucky to have the Great Barrier Reef. It's one of the most precious places on Earth, no less. So why are the Liberal

Party's dastardly duo treating it with such contempt? Surely it can't be about money?

The reef already generates an astonishing £3.2 billion annually from tourism alone, yet they want to dredge millions of tonnes of the ocean floor from its sensitive waters, increase heavy shipping through its narrow straits and develop 'mega-ports' on the adjacent coast (part of a plan to triple Australia's fossil-fuel exports by 2030).

Admittedly Abbott and Hunt are merely exacerbating 30 years of decay due to threats such as coastal development, pollution, fishing and climate change: the reef has already lost more than half of its coral cover. But that's no excuse.

UNESCO is now likely to give Australia 18 months, until December 2016, to get its act together. If it doesn't, the reef will be reclassified as a World Heritage Site in Danger.

Exporting fossil fuels is typical of the Abbott–Hunt approach to climate change. Australia is already one of the world's highest greenhouse-gas polluters per capita, yet it resists meaningful action. Indeed Abbott is so contemptuous of the science behind climate change (of any science, for that matter) that he once described it as "absolute crap". The dastardly duo have done everything from abolishing the

Climate Commission (created to provide independent information to the public about global warming) to drastically cutting back the renewable-energy target. Not surprisingly they have just been heavily criticised by an international climate-change panel led by the former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan.

Meanwhile they want to reignite decades of bitter conflict between conservationists and loggers over Tasmania's precious rainforests. Despite protests by the logging industry itself, and a poll showing that 91 per cent of Australians want proper protection for their ancient forests, Abbott and Hunt tried to persuade the World Heritage Committee to delist 74,000ha

specifically to allow logging. It was such an outrageous request that the committee unanimously rejected it after just seven minutes of debate. Thank goodness the rest of the world holds Tasmania's treasure trove in the highest regard, even if Australian Liberals do not.

You can (sort of) understand why it's so difficult to protect wildlife and wild places in Britain, with 265 people per square kilometre. But Australia has just three people per square kilometre, so how can the Liberals justify such an extraordinarily heavy environmental footprint? Perhaps because there is so much space – and so much of it is uninhabitable – politicians think they can get away with more? Or perhaps Abbott and Hunt just don't give a damn? ❧

“AUSTRALIA IS LUCKY TO HAVE THE GREAT BARRIER REEF. SO WHY ARE THE LIBERAL PARTY TREATING IT WITH SUCH CONTEMPT?”



The Great Barrier Reef is under threat from the very people paid to protect it.

Jurgen Freund/naturepl.com

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