

TITLE: Abbot Point expansion will threaten, not create jobs

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PUBLICATION: The Daily Mercury

PUBLICATION DATE: 31/05/13

LINK: <http://www.dailymercury.com.au/>

When Federal MP for Dawson George Christensen said the Abbot Point coal port expansion was “critical to the community for jobs and security”, he was absolutely right. Not because the project will create long-lasting job opportunities, but because it could put hundreds of the region’s workers out of sustainable jobs and permanently damage the region’s vital tourism industry.

Abbot Point, 50km from the Whitsunday Islands, is set to become the largest coal port in the world. Dudgeon Point, just south of Mackay, is set to become the second largest. If these port expansions go ahead, the Whitsunday Islands may soon find themselves bordered by the world’s two biggest coal ports.

The contribution that the tourism industry makes to the Whitsundays is enormous. It makes up 17.7 per cent of the region’s GDP.

In 2011, it employed more than 2200 people, or 15 per cent of total jobs, more than double those employed in mining. In 2012, the Whitsundays’ attractiveness as a tourist destination earned the local economy \$2 million a day.

The 700,000 visitors who come to the Whitsundays each year come for its unique natural beauty and its pristine waters, and their money filters through the local economy, supporting small businesses, retailers and tourism operators. If tourism in the Whitsundays is valuable, the worth of the Great Barrier Reef is itself incalculable. It is the backbone of a \$6 billion a year tourist industry, employing 63,000 people.

An evaluation in 2009 by Oxford Economics found the present day value of the Reef, including its tourist use, its fishing potential and indirect usage, to be around \$52 billion.

Of course economists are often accused of knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing. The estimates of the economic contribution of the Great Barrier Reef are enormous, but the value of the Reef is far greater than its short-term economic contribution. It took millions of years to form and if damaged or destroyed it literally cannot be replaced.

Concerns have been raised about Abbot Point's plans to dredge three million tonnes of seabed and dump the spoil in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. Locals have expressed fears over the impact the increase in shipping traffic will have on the health of the Reef.

Tourism operators are worried the dumping of dredge spoil will make the Whitsundays' renowned clear waters cloudy and polluted, and fishermen and environmentalists alike are concerned at the prospect of fish diseases akin to Gladstone, whose fish are now banned from commercial sale.

In 2012, 4500 ships went through the Great Barrier Reef area. With the Abbot Point expansion, that number is set to rise to 8000 by 2020. Considering that between 1987 and 2009, the Australian Maritime Safety Authority recorded 230 reports of oil spillage – more than 10 a year – it is inconceivable that the expansion will not significantly increase the harm already being done.

The expansion of the Abbot Point port will fundamentally alter the nature of the Whitsundays region.

From being a destination of international renown for its relatively untouched environment, the Abbot Point port expansion will industrialise the region and threaten the jobs of those who rely on its attractiveness. As Felicity Wishart, AMCS Great Barrier Reef campaign director, recently reminded locals “no one is going to want to come halfway around the world to see the world's biggest coal port”.

Mining jobs are by their nature unsustainable. Most of the jobs are in building the mine and the rest run out when the coal does. The port expansion will only deliver benefits until the mines run dry, the world price of coal slumps or the world moves on from its current reliance on burning fossil fuels.

When one or more of these things occur, the ports will be about as useful to the citizens of Queensland as an investment in video cassette recorders.

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