Coral vs. Coal
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Full Text:

MELBOURNE, Australia -- Tim Flannery, a scientist and environmentalist who was named Australian of the Year in 2007, lost his job in 2013. The right-wing government of then-Prime Minister Tony Abbott shut down the Climate Commission that Flannery headed in a peremptory move designed to demonstrate its contempt for climate change. The commission had been established two years earlier to provide "authoritative information" to the Australian public.

Abbott, of the conservative Liberal Party, had no time for such information. Climate change, he argued in his autobiography, was bunk. It had been "happening since the earth's beginning." Therefore it made no sense to "impose certain and substantial costs on the economy now in order to avoid unknown and perhaps even benign changes in the future."

"To Abbott, I was the devil incarnate," Flannery told me. Throughout the developed world -- from the "Drill, baby, drill!" crowd in the United States to Abbott's "ax-the-tax" attack on clean-energy legislation in Australia -- denial of climate change has become a tribal, almost masonic badge of the coal and fossil-fuel loving right. In today's culture wars it's as much of a wedge issue as any.

Through crowdfunding, Flannery raised enough money in short order to turn the state-funded commission into the Climate Council, an independent nonprofit organization with the same role. Earlier this month, he headed for the Great Barrier Reef to see what "benign changes," as Abbott would have it, global warming has produced in the world's largest coral reef. He found what he saw northeast of Port Douglas on the outer rim of the reef devastating.

The reef, one of the largest living things on earth, has started to fail. Whether it can recover is unclear. An organism roughly the size of Germany is bleaching to death. More than 90 percent of the reef that Flannery saw had suffered. Bleaching occurs when excessive heat and sunlight cause the algae that give coral reefs their shimmering colors to create toxins.

The toxins repel the tiny animals called polyps essential to the ecosystem of the corals. As my colleague Michelle Innis put it, "When heat stress continues, they starve to death." Because the coral reefs support vast fish stocks, the livelihoods -- sometimes the very survival -- of countless people depend on them.

The causes of this disaster are clear enough. The impact of rising water temperatures caused by climate change was compounded by the El Niño or -Jo cycle and by an underwater heat wave. This year, in a survey of 520 reefs that form the northern section of the Great Barrier Reef, scientists found only four free of bleaching. About 620 miles of previously pristine reef had been affected.

"I knew there was bleaching but not to this degree," Flannery told me. "For me, it was almost like watching my father die, seeing his organism slowly shut down."

Besides having the world's largest coral reef, Australia also is the world's fourth largest coal producer. Coal-fired power plants provide about a third of the nation's energy, and coal exports to China, Japan, South Korea and India bring in billions of dollars annually. The country has been described as "Asia's quarry." But of course the coal plants, some old, are spewing carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

So it's coral versus coal, the earth's health against a big industry, and science versus the Abbott-inspired denial gang. As if to illustrate Australia's divisions, Queensland's environment minister, alluding to climate change, warned last month of the need to "reduce as many pressures" as possible
on the Great Barrier Reef just after the state approved leases for what would be Australia's largest coal mine.

Malcolm Turnbull, the Liberal Party prime minister who replaced Abbott and faces a tight election in early July, knows exactly what's at stake. In 2010, he called for moving to a situation "where all or almost all of our energy comes from zero or very near zero emissions sources." He described forecasts of the devastating effects of climate change as likely erring "on the conservative side." He called for "expenditures today so as to safeguard our children." He advocated concentrated solar thermal power, calling it "a more proven technology than clean coal." Global warming, he declared, would lead, if unchecked, to "truly catastrophic consequences."

The state of the Great Barrier Reef is one such consequence. Yet, Turnbull, beholden to Abbott's right wing of the Liberal Party, has, as leader, done his best to forget what he said six years ago. Climate change? What climate change? "I've known Turnbull for 30 years, I know what he believes, but he's fallen victim to his tribe," Flannery told me.

That's a great pity. The reef is as irreplaceable as this planet. Australia has overcapacity in electricity generation. It should close several of its old coal-fired plants. Rich in renewable and clean-energy sources, Australia should be a leader, not a laggard, on climate change. Reputations, like the reef, are easily bleached.

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