James Cook University trashes science and ethics

By Dr Walter Starck, Quadrant Online, 4 June 2018

JCU's Curious Lack of Curiosity

Officially, Professor Peter Ridd was axed from James Cook University for allegedly mocking of its reputation as a home to serious scholars and research -- a handy way to avoid addressing his very specific charge that Reef scientists are playing fast and loose with facts.

The firing of Professor Peter Ridd by James Cook University for making public his concerns about the ongoing and highly dubious environmental claims of some university researchers regarding the Great Barrier Reef has unleashed a strong surge of public response in his favour. The position taken by the JCU administration has been characterised by a complete avoidance of the actual substance of Professor Ridd's concerns and a blanket denial of anything improper while ignoring and obscuring the actual concerns with a smokescreen of procedural obfuscation.

Supporters of the university's action are few in number and, predictably, have taken an evidence-free approach. Ridd, remember, raised specific concerns about research. The university has countered with appeals to authority, personal denigration and waffle about procedural matters. Coverage by the mainstream news media has been noticeably muted, which is hardly surprising. When your editorial policy is steeped in catastropharianism, as is the case with both the ABC and Fairfax, stories which might ruffle the narrative are studiously ignored.

To better understand what is really going on, a bit of background.

UPDATE: The National Tertiary Education Union sides with Professor Ridd

"…Of most concern is that Professor Ridd was sacked primarily for an alleged breach of confidentiality and insubordination. To summarise the University's apparent position, Professor Ridd was required to keep quiet about the formal censure he received last year.

That censure was the result of a misconduct process that management ran about his comments on the science pertaining to the Great Barrier Reef and scientific method used to underpin that science. They said that those comments were made inappropriately and disrespectfully. They said his comments denigrated his colleagues. They said that the findings and the censure were confidential.

It is ironic in the extreme that JCU management appear to have been trying to protect the reputation of the University and bodies like the Australian Institute of Marine Science…"

The 1980s saw a blossoming of marine research in Australia, and the Great Barrier Reef as a national icon received a great deal of attention. Most of this work was basic research. That is, it was aimed at simply trying to better understand the Reef, not at trying to develop it or to "save" it. For a short while it was a golden age for pure research and a quite a lot of new knowledge was produced. However, an ongoing expansion of universities plus the ever-increasing role of grants in their funding was making grant-getting a major factor for status in the academic hierarchy. Things in the academy became a lot more competitive. At the same

time, environmental concerns were beginning to gain much more public and political attention. Grant-seekers found that suggesting a proposed study might enhance understanding of some possible or purported environmental threat greatly increased the likelihood of funding approval.

This proved to be a very slippery slope and the descent soon went from suggesting possible eco-threats, to having to defend them, to the need to find more threats and thence to manufacturing them. Then came the mother of all such threats: Global Warming, which after a few years morphed into the even more inclusive Climate Change. Now we have a whole generation of researchers whose entire training and experience of the Reef has been in the context of studying and investigating environmental threats to it

The fact that reefs are highly varied, variable and dynamic communities exhibiting large differences from reef to reef, place to place and time to time has afforded a cornucopia of hypothetically possible "threats" needing study by grant-seekers programmed to see ever fluctuation of nature as evidence of some human-caused "impact". Better still, it is all out there over the horizon and beneath the sea, where the reality is safely out of sight and claims by researchers are likely to be accepted without much dissent.

The crusade to "save the Reef" has enjoyed huge popularity. To researchers it is a perennial $100 million-plus font of funding that is ever increasing and with all-expense-paid Barrier Reef holidays as a fringe benefit. To the news media it is an ongoing source of dramatic, attention-getting stories of threats to a national icon and wrong-doers to be identified. To activists it is a spectre of dire threats to generate healthy contributions. To politicians it affords a cheap non-controversial appeal for greenish votes. And, for anyone who chooses, it affords an enticing opportunity for virtue signalling at no personal cost or effort with a delicious serving of moral righteousness thrown in.

As the preeminent university in the GBR region, JCU has enjoyed a prominent seat on the "Save the Reef" bandwagon — and the institution has not failed to hitch this onto the even bigger and more luxurious Climate Change gravy train. A few years ago, a survey was conducted to rate the leading climate change research institution in accord with the number of citations of their studies in scientific journals. The Climatic Research Unit (CRU) at the University of East Anglia in the UK, with it's close links to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, was rated number one. Number two, though, was a surprise. It was the modestly titled Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies at JCU, which studies reefs, not climate change and doesn't employ any climatologists. This was achieved by leveraging the global iconic status of the GBR with alleged dire threats to it health from climate change, plus vigorous hype fed to a gullible media by the JCU PR department.

A few more relevant facts to consider:

- JCU has a dozen senior executives on the Vice-Chancellor and Deputy or Pro Vice-Chancellor level. For example and comparison, Manchester University in the UK has two such persons for about twice the number of students, staff and budget.

- JCU is funded almost entirely by government and the salary of the Vice-Chancellor is near twice that of the Prime Minister or even the President of the United States.

- The ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies brings about $6 million *per annum* into JCU coffers for hosting it.

- The director of the ARC Centre is credited with an extraordinary 43,000 citations for his research, with Climate Change heading the list of his interests. In comparison this is over five times more than for the director of ARC's own much larger Centre of Excellence for Climate Science. Understandably, JCU might wish to protect such a valuable cash cow and its attractive publicity.

- The well-founded and unrefuted criticisms by Professor Ridd included specific mention of the ARC Reef Centre and its director.

JCU Has Form in Not Addressing Concerns About Research Integrity

For a more detailed insight into the dubious claims of the reef salvation, academics and how they deny, deflect and ignore any questioning of their claims, but never address the substance of any of the points raised, a link is provided below to a .pdf file of a dozen relevant documents. These pertain to some 40 false or misleading claims I identified in a 2010 publication authored by some 21 reef researchers and generously self-described as comprising, *"…a 'who's-who' of Australian coral reef scientists…."* A dozen students and staff from JCU and/or the ARC Reef Centre were involved and the portion of the file pertaining to JCU runs from pages 34 through 40. However, the file — the link in red below — is worth reading from the beginning to appreciate the full extent and nature of the falsehoods involved as well as the complete refusal by all of the responsible authorities to address any of the specific concerns set forth. It may also be worth noting that for legal purposes an unrefuted claim must be treated as proven, and that my claims remain unrefuted. It is further worth noting that my exchange with JCU on this was with the same Vice-Chancellor who has presided over the firing of Professor Ridd.

Extraordinary Claims Regarding GBR Green Zones+++.pdf

It is clear from both my own experience with JCU and Professor Ridd's that the administration has shown no interest in addressing any evidence of malpractice in their domain.

So, where is all this going?

The empirically based, objective, rationally consistent approach to understanding on which science is based has been by far the most potent intellectual tool in human history. With the boom in science following the Second World War the traditional liberal arts core of academia was in danger of being eclipsed in prestige and funding and the so-called social sciences briefly tried to become more scientific. However, it soon became apparent that to do so would require discarding too much of the established beliefs and reputations. This was found unacceptable. The liberal arts establishment soon came up with the idea that some truths are so self-evident they cannot be disputed, that even to question them was unethical. Thus, was born the notion of political correctness and it's expansion into a postmodern philosophy. In this view the whole empirical, objective, truth-seeking ideal of science is a dangerous delusion and the only ethical path to understanding is through the inherent truth on which all right-thinking persons agree and recognize as indisputably correct. There are numerous academics of the highest authority who stand ready and willing to tell us what we should think.

To a large degree they have been successful. The teaching of how to think was made subordinate to that of what to think. Then, with a liberal arts degree becoming an increasingly necessary qualification for a career in the media and entertainment industries, the capture of public forums by PC has been completed. Although engineering, medicine and the core natural sciences of physics, chemistry and geology have managed to retain some adherence to the scientific ethos, PC values have made deep inroads across the sciences. This is especially so in environmental studies where "noble cause corruption" has so heavily infected the ethos that

in some areas the evidence-based approach has all but disappeared in preference to computer modelling which can be "optimised" until it produces a desired outcome and is effectively closed to independent examination. For those occasional instances when empirical data may be needed to plug into the models this has also been solved by "homogenisation" and other "adjustment" to yield preferred outcomes. This data-diddling also has been largely unexplained and made inaccessible to independent examination.

There is now a very real and present danger of a debilitating corruption of the credibility of science as well as the entire academic system. It also comes at a time when it is critically needed in dealing with the unprecedented complexities and rate of change with which our advancing technology is confronting us. This is now happening on every level, from the personal through the family, local, national and global realms with massive socio-political, environmental and economic impacts.

As currently conducted, scientific research is largely free of any clearly defined and widely established code of ethics or standards of practice and there is no formal consideration of such in scientific training. Such things are simply assumed to be absorbed from the prevailing scientific culture. Unfortunately, what tends to be absorbed, along with varying bits and pieces of the classical scientific ethos, is a thorough indoctrination in a decidedly unscientific postmodern philosophy. This is heavily slanted to the liberal academic Left and strongly critical of most productive activity and the productive sector of our society.

In the absence of any clear code of ethics or standards of practice for science these vary greatly between individual researchers and different institutions, as does the experience of individual students. Although it is common for research institutions to make claims to "world standard" or even "worlds best practice", there are in fact no such standards and the claims are self-awarded. In today's world and the one into which we are headed, a clear well-defined and widely accepted code of ethics and practice for science is badly needed. The call by Professor Ridd for the establishment of a formal process to critically examine and verify any research claims that are to be used as a basis for decision making by government is also badly needed.

Although there are many honest researchers who will acknowledge in private the corruption of science that is taking place, it is rare for any to be willing to do so publicly and the treatment of Peter Ridd proves why. His is a rare stand on principle. There has been nothing in it for him but grief and he deserves every bit the public support he has received. As for the JCU administration responsible for his dismissal, they have grossly violated the fundamental intellectual principles a university should stand for and indeed of basic justice and human rights as well. It is they who fully deserve dismissal along with a thorough examination of the concerns raised by Professor Ridd.