

# Who Owns the Great Barrier Reef?

Everyone is concerned to save the nation's greatest tourist asset, but no one seems to be getting very far in his efforts.

By Owen Thomson and Geraldine Pascall

**IS AUSTRALIA NECESSARY?**  
Part 5

**EVERYBODY** seems to think he owns the Great Barrier Reef.

The Premier of Queensland, Mr J. Bjelke-Petersen, is sure that it is his. The Prime Minister, Mr Gordon, is in the process of making sure that at least the minerals and oil that may be there are his. The tourist industry was one of the first to put in its claim and if possession counts, much of the reef belongs to it.

The oil industry has leases over much of the reef but whether these will be of any practical use remains to be seen. Miners have from time to time tried to claim parts of it and failed. Scientists, from geologists to zoologists, are sure it is theirs as a sort of private laboratory. There are even a few resident reef dwellers who feel it is home.

Fortunately, John Buss, Judith Wright and other conservationists have managed to convince many Australians who have never seen the reef that it is theirs.

Sir Percy Spender, a former Australian External Affairs Minister and president of the International Court of Justice, has tried to clear up the legal sovereignty of the reef.

His conclusions must have gladdened Mr Gordon's heart. THE TERRITORIAL boundaries of Queensland, and other Federal States, end at low water mark.

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Mr Buss sees the main dangers to the Barrier Reef as oil drilling, tanker spillage, and the pollution caused by excess use of pesticides and fertilisers on the adjacent mainland.

He does not see tourists as a major danger, as they are already controlled and can be further controlled. If they become a threat, live coral for the tourists' trade can only be collected by 20 licensed collectors from specified leases which are heavily policed.

At the moment the reef protects itself from tourists. Mr Buss said, "There are only 40 leases a year in which you can walk out on to the reef and collect, and only four of these are in the tourist season."

**TO UNDERSTAND** Mr Buss's reasons for wanting conservation on the reef you have to understand why he thinks it is worth protecting.

"It is the seventh wonder of the world and the world's biggest marine laboratory," he said.

"If it is damaged in any way it just cannot be replaced. I agree with Mr Gordon when he said any damage to the reef is too much damage."

You also get the feeling that it is Mr Buss's front garden and he does not want to see it messed up.

"The international legal position is also disturbing," Mr Buss said. "Australia is not sure that it owns the reef. Countries like Indonesia, Japan, China and Russia have not signed the territorial waters agreement."

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With tanker spillage, he is not so sure. He says his first thoughts were that tankers should not be allowed within the reef. But reef pilots, and every ship in the area has to carry one, have told him it is safer to have tankers inside the reef where they know the waters than outside — where it is virtually uncharted.

"If ships ran around outside the reef and the pilots think they would, then the tide would carry oil on to the reef," Mr Buss said.

What he is sure about is that, although oil does damage to the surfacrafts used to get rid of it when the Oceanic Grandeur ran aground in Torres Strait do even more damage.

On shore pollutants, Mr Buss says that the Queensland Government is doing something about pollution from sugar mills and he is willing to wait and

see how effective this is. But he says even if it is effective it will not be enough.

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Whether because of Mr Buss's influence or not, the Commonwealth is taking some action that could lead to conservation of the reef. It has announced a \$3 million tropical marine research institute for Townsville.

It also pushed the Queensland Premier, Mr Bjelke-Petersen, into a committee to inquire into all aspects of exploitation and development of the reef. The Commonwealth has already announced the members of a joint committee with Queensland to investigate the crown of thorns starfish on the reef.

While the tanker Oceanic Grandeur was aground in Torres Strait—the Commonwealth rushed through legislation to make shipowners responsible for oil spillage. The law, which must be reviewed after six months, gives the Government power to confiscate a tanker if necessary.

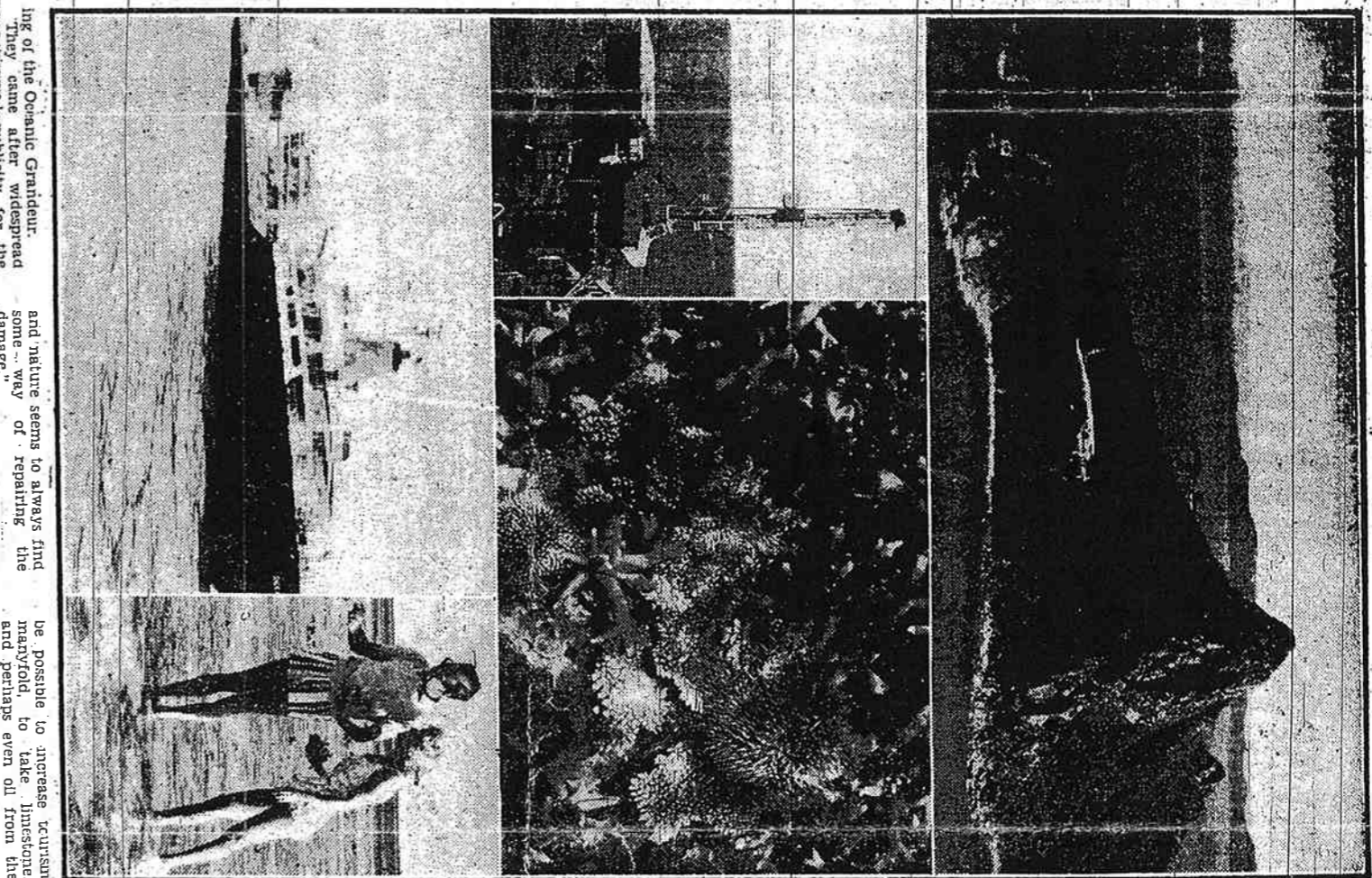
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The last gesture is seen by conservationists in the wake of the Oceanic Grandeur's stoppage of shipping.

In 1967, long before the Oceanic Grandeur incident, a retired naval officer, Lieutenant-Commander J. T. Roberts, wrote to the Barrier Reef Committee drawing its attention to the danger of large tankers moving through Torres Strait waters. He pointed out that the sailing directions by the authority of the Marine Board of Queensland said: "This route cannot be considered a safe route for a vessel of 38ft draught."

**WHEN TOLD** of this, the Portmaster of Queensland, Captain J. Beckingsale, replied, "Regarding the element of risk by deeply laden tankers grounding in the Torres Straits and Great Barrier Reef areas thereby causing widespread pollution, I feel that the danger, while present, is remote."

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ing of the Oceanic Grandeur. They came after widespread emotional publicity for the Santa Barbara oil leak off California and pollution from the wrecked Torrey Canyon in the English Channel.

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The drilling mud, normally allowed to wash away into the sea, was taken ashore and dumped from barges and the crew faced stiff penalties for allowing even a cigarette packet to fall over the side.

Dr John Stevenson, lecturer in University of Townsville, says the restrictions taken on the Japex rig were probably adequate to allow safe drilling.

"I do not agree with the almost hysterical arguments by the conservationists to stop drilling at all costs," he said.

"These people quote the worst possible disasters such as Santa Barbara when they apply here. At Santa Barbara the geological conditions were unusual and the precautions taken were inadequate."

The conservationists need to take into account the lessons that can be learned from other places and realise that companies can be forced to follow adequate safety measures."

He regards himself as a conservationist, but feels there is a middle path between the needs of exploitation and preservation.

Even on such things as mining lime from the reef, Dr Stevenson doubts any catastrophic disasters would occur.

A major man-made disturbance such as mining probably would not be as extensive as some of the natural disasters which occur regularly," he said.

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On exploiting the reef, he says that the extent of resources in the world is limited and the time must come when we have to use those we know of, whether we like it or not.

"Within 100 years the situation with some of these materials will be critical," Dr Stevenson said. "Even if we preserve the reef now the question will have to be asked again whether we can afford not to use its resources."

**SOME** prospecting of reef waters for oil had already taken place for the same reasons. Dr Stevenson says that the reef is not a virgin territory, it was carried out to sea, it was that there would be prospecting for oil-shore mineral sands.

Dr Stevenson is far from alone in his belief in the inevitability of exploiting the reef. The director of the Australian Museum, Spencey Dr F. H. Talbot, says that given enough safeguards and knowledge it will

be possible to increase tourism manyfold, to take limestone, and perhaps even oil from the reef — but not now.

"There are not enough safeguards on oil rigs yet, and we do not know enough about oil drilling sludge pollution," Dr Talbot said.

Another geologist at the Townsville university is not so conservative. He says, with a smile you can take either way, that the whole Barrier Reef should be mined and turned into concrete so they can have some decent surfing beaches in north Queensland.

The Australian oil industry is confident it can safely drill on the reef. The chairman of the Australian Petroleum Exploration Association, Mr D. J. McGarry, says the industry has always co-operated, observing all safety precautions and is anxious to observe all precautions in the future.

"It is our job to convince critics that conservation is led by our industry and not fought by our industry," he said.

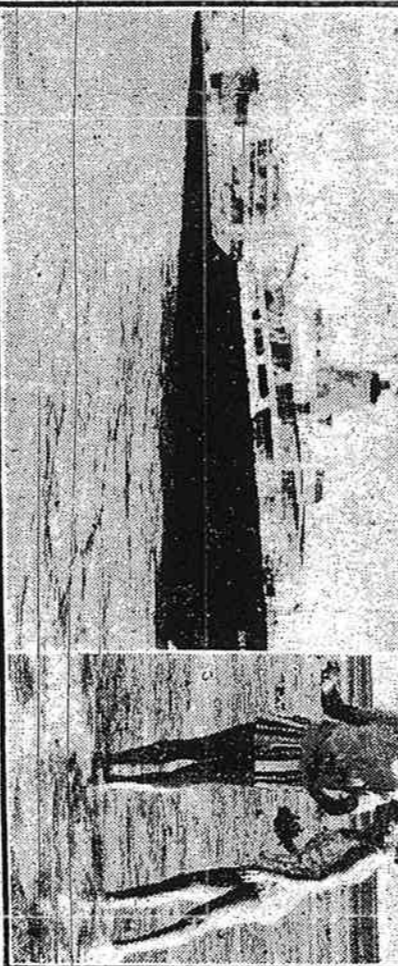
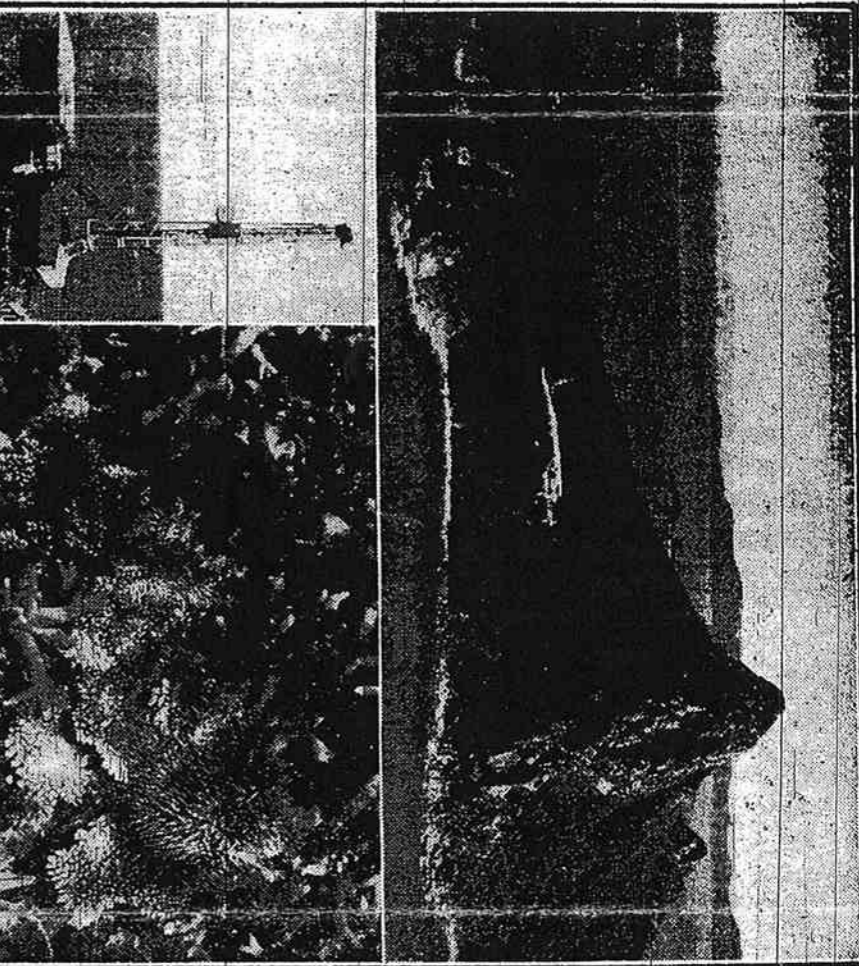
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day, to give way to development. The Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland — Judith Wright is the president — said this year in a policy statement: "Our policy of preservation would be maintained until it were shown that no alternative sources of oil existed elsewhere." No matter what decisions are made about drilling and mining the crown of the reef, whether the conservationists and politicians like it or not.

Since the original scare last year, when everybody got the impression that the reef was more or less being eaten over-might, both scientific and lay opinion seems to have calmed down to a wait-and-see attitude. Had the scare continued the reef could have easily added to its tourist attractions with the spectacle of the many yachting control measures suggested, some-fishes-by-leashed-men.

These included an electric barrier, to be placed over electric puns, chemically impregnated ropes as repellants, suction dredging, massive nets, ranges of cotton waste, baited traps — granular quicklime dropped on the starfish, injections of formalin and calcium chloride and inundating the area with triton shells which would eat the starfish.

Perhaps fortunately, the most drastic measure taken so far has been a banning of the harvesting of triton shells.

What everybody is waiting to see is the results of research into the starfish. This, was recommended by a committee set up by the Australian Academy of Science which reported in March.

The Queensland Government took the first practical step. It is granting \$30,000 for research to Mr Robert Pearson, who has already done considerable work on the starfish with Dr. R. E. Bidean, from the Department of Zoology of the Queensland University.

Mr Pearson is setting up a research station at Mourilyan, just south of Innisfail.

There is some doubt that Mr Pearson will be able to do the extensive research necessary with only \$20,000.

While he is spending it there are a lot of ethnocentric guesses on the cause of the sudden plague of starfish John Bust admits he does not know, but feels there could be some link between the starfish and pollution from the shore.

Brian Vicary, the president of the Queensland branch of the Queensland and Littoral Society, who has done some amateur research, says the plague does not extend further north than Moesman, which has the most northern river polluted by a sugar-cane mill.

On the other hand, Mr Vicary says he has spoken to many old Thursday Island pearl divers who remember the starfish in plague proportions at the turn of the century.

Judith Wright sees the starfish simply as a warning of ecological imbalance on the reef.

Like everything else to do with the reef she says we must admit we don't know, and leave everything we possibly can alone until we do.

**MONDAY:**  
The case of the hairy-nosed wombat

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