

00:00:04 Speaker Bec Horridge
Walla Wani.

00:00:05 Speaker Bec Horridge
Welcome to Earth Matters Environment, Social Justice Storeys from Australia and around the world.

00:00:10 Speaker Bec Horridge
Produced at the studios of 3 Cr on Wurundjeri country in Naarm Melbourne and broadcast across this continent via the Community Radio Network.

00:00:21 Speaker Bec Horridge
I'm your show host, Bec Horrid.

00:00:29 Tony Fontes
The greatest threat to the reef by far is climate change.

00:00:35 Speaker Bec Horridge
Today we delve into the critical state of the Great Barrier Reef through the lens of Tony Fonts, president of the Whitsunday Conservation Council and a veteran diver with 45 years of immersive experience.

00:00:51 Bec Horridge
Tony, what country are you on?

00:00:53 Bec Horridge
I'm in Lismore on Widjibal Wal country.

00:00:56 Bec Horridge
Bundjalung Nation.

00:00:57 Bec Horridge
How about you?

00:00:58 Tony Fontes
Naro Country.

00:00:59 Tony Fontes

The sea people of the Whitsundays.

00:01:02 Bec Horridge

The sea people of the Whitsundays.

00:01:04 Bec Horridge

And I'd like to pay my respects to all the elders, past, present and any First Nation people out there listening today.

00:01:11 Bec Horridge

I pass on my respects.

00:01:13 Bec Horridge

Tony, tell us a bit about your background, or maybe I should call it underwater ground.

00:01:19 Tony Fontes

Yeah, probably appropriate.

00:01:21 Tony Fontes

But most people would immediately pick me as a.

00:01:23 Tony Fontes

As a Yank.

00:01:24 Tony Fontes

Originally from California, born and raised in a small seaside community known as Capitola 3000.

00:01:31 Tony Fontes

And that's where I got my interest in the underwater world.

00:01:34 Tony Fontes

Snorkelling and diving off the coast of California, which, of course you read about things like the Great Barrier Reef when you're sitting there with the National Geographic in the dentist office, waiting for a bit of pain.

00:01:48 Tony Fontes

And I thought, that's a place I got to dive.

00:01:51 Tony Fontes

So I had that opportunity later in life when I was probably 30, where I came out to

Australia to dive the reef.

00:01:58 Tony Fontes

And that was the end of my American career and the beginning of my Australian career because basically I never went back.

00:02:06 Tony Fontes

So that's where I am now.

00:02:08 Tony Fontes

That's where I've been for the last 45 years here in Airlie Beach and diving has been my.

00:02:13 Tony Fontes

My forte.

00:02:15 Bec Horridge

Can you remember that first dive?

00:02:17 Tony Fontes

Absolutely.

00:02:19 Tony Fontes

It's one that you never forget when you dive a place like the Great Barrier Reef.

00:02:23 Tony Fontes

It was a place called Bait Reef, which is one of the 2,900 reefs off the coast of Queensland, but one that's close to Airlie Beach.

00:02:31 Tony Fontes

And I'd never dived a coral reef before.

00:02:35 Tony Fontes

And the boat anchored off the reef, but dropped a mooring line down.

00:02:39 Tony Fontes

So we jumped in the water, went down the mooring line hand over hand.

00:02:46 Tony Fontes

But before I went down, I could see a vast vista of coral.

00:02:51 Tony Fontes

Clear water, coral fish.

00:02:53 Tony Fontes
I'm.

00:02:53 Tony Fontes
Oh, my God, this is unbelievable.

00:02:55 Tony Fontes
And there were a Bunch of divers behind me, move it, move it.

00:02:58 Tony Fontes
Because they can't get past me on the line.

00:03:00 Tony Fontes
Said, oh, yeah, okay.

00:03:01 Tony Fontes
And so down the line I went and had a magnificent diamond that just sticks in my mind, just seeing the moring line disappear in the distance and the reef appear: awesome.

00:03:20 Bec Horridge
And you've made diving your career.

00:03:22 Bec Horridge
You're a PADI diving instructor and you even help other instructors.

00:03:26 Bec Horridge
You have some notes on how to switch them on to conservation and nature appreciation.

00:03:31 Tony Fontes
Well, you're absolutely right.

00:03:33 Tony Fontes
I trained instructors.

00:03:34 Tony Fontes
And at that point in time, in 1980 and onwards, I was the only one with that qualification in Queensland, which is great.

00:03:42 Tony Fontes

You got a monopoly on instructor training.

00:03:44 Tony Fontes

And if you're going to dive and train people, Queensland's the place to do it because of the Great Barrier Reef.

00:03:49 Tony Fontes

So with my instructor programme, you have a format you stick with with padi, but they allow you a bit of movement either one way or the other.

00:03:58 Tony Fontes

So I'd include kind of a. I call it "reef discovery" in the programme, saying, okay, this is what, the Great Barrier Reef, a little bit of lightweight marine biology, because I'm not a scientist, but more of a naturalist.

00:04:10 Tony Fontes

And also how to pass it on to their students, as well as how to dive with coral in mind because it's a very fragile environment.

00:04:18 Tony Fontes

And I have to admit, in the early days, divers did a lot of damage with their fins because they're an extension on your body.

00:04:25 Tony Fontes

You don't notice them.

00:04:26 Tony Fontes

You get close to coral, bang, you knock over a bit of stag on coral and you see that all the time.

00:04:31 Tony Fontes

Obviously there are techniques to avoid that and we'd include that in the training.

00:04:36 Tony Fontes

But, yeah, I feel it's very important and an opportunity not just to reach, over the years, 2000 instructors, but all of their students, I hope as well.

00:04:47 Bec Horridge

What did the early days of reef conservation look like?

00:04:52 Tony Fontes

I believe that came from.

00:04:54 Tony Fontes

And this isn't entirely true, but the diving industry, because divers are there, we see it.

00:05:00 Tony Fontes

I mentioned the kind of damage divers do with their fins.

00:05:03 Tony Fontes

We recognise that very quickly and.

00:05:06 Tony Fontes

And corrected it at the same time.

00:05:09 Tony Fontes

Dive boats with anchors, all boats with anchors that like to get close to the reef for snorkel or dive, literally drop their anchor right on top of corals.

00:05:19 Tony Fontes

And you can imagine how the corals feel about that.

00:05:21 Tony Fontes

And we saw this happening.

00:05:23 Tony Fontes

The dive boats I worked on were doing it.

00:05:25 Tony Fontes

And in those days, nothing was done.

00:05:28 Tony Fontes

We approached the government saying, this is happening.

00:05:31 Tony Fontes

Great Barrier Ridge Marine Park Authority, Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service, they kind of sloughed us off so we thought, we need to take matters into our own hands.

00:05:41 Tony Fontes

So we got a tape.

00:05:42 Tony Fontes

It wasn't staged, it was real of an anchor dragging through a bed of staghorn coral.

00:05:47 Tony Fontes

And it was like a bulldozer going through a grove of trees, just knocking everything down.

00:05:52 Tony Fontes

And we sent it to the ABC730 report, who put it on the air.

00:05:56 Tony Fontes

Two weeks later, the government was at our doorstep saying, what can we do because of the bad look?

00:06:02 Tony Fontes

Plus, it was a election year in Queensland, which is always helpful.

00:06:06 Tony Fontes

And before you know it, the community group became official.

00:06:10 Tony Fontes

We named ourselves the Ouch Volunteers, because when you drop an anchor on coral, what's it say?

00:06:16 Tony Fontes

Ouch.

00:06:16 Bec Horridge

Ouch.

00:06:17 Tony Fontes

And that stands for Order of Underwater Coral Heroes.

00:06:20 Tony Fontes

That was totally tongue in cheek.

00:06:22 Tony Fontes

But we joined with the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service, applied for a great big grant and initiated what's called the Reef Protection Programme, which to this day has spread from Lady Elliot island in the south up to Cooktown in the north.

00:06:40 Tony Fontes

And it involves marking reefs so that people can see where the coral is and are not

allowed by law to anchor on the coral.

00:06:49 Tony Fontes

And they have surface markers to show them, so they can't say, oh, I didn't know it was there.

00:06:54 Tony Fontes

And also moorings have gone in to allow boats to tie to a mooring which gets them in close to the corals.

00:07:00 Tony Fontes

And that programme, Reef Protection Marker Buoys and Moorings, started here in Whitsundays with the Ouch Volunteers.

00:07:08 Bec Horridge

So that's the Ouch Volunteers.

00:07:12 Bec Horridge

You've also worked with the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority?

00:07:16 Tony Fontes

Well, I worked alongside for quite a while, about 10 years.

00:07:19 Tony Fontes

I was a Great Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority trainer, which meant on their behalf, I trained tourism operators best reef practises, which is how to organise the boat so it was coral safe, how to brief their, their tourists, their passengers, on looking after the reef best reef practises.

00:07:41 Tony Fontes

And that was a really great programme that the Marine Park Authority organised.

00:07:44 Tony Fontes

And so working alongside them as a trainer, but also getting involved in, there's lots of committees that like to tell the marine park how to do it.

00:07:54 Tony Fontes

And any committee that got that opportunity I tried to get on to, the one that I've spent the most time with is called the Whitsunday Local Marine Advisory Committee, commonly known as ILMACs, because they're ILMACs from Bundaberg in the south to Cooktown in the north and all the towns in between.

00:08:13 Tony Fontes
And we advise the marine park on local issues.

00:08:16 Tony Fontes
And I've done that since the year Don about 20 years.

00:08:19 Tony Fontes
Still on that committee.

00:08:21 Bec Horridge
That's such a service, Tony.

00:08:22 Bec Horridge
I'll thank you from the fish and the coral.

00:08:25 Bec Horridge
Thank you.

00:08:26 Tony Fontes
No worries.

00:08:26 Tony Fontes
It's, you know, I've got a lot from the reef over the years.

00:08:30 Tony Fontes
It's been my livelihood.

00:08:31 Tony Fontes
Admittedly a dive instructor.

00:08:33 Tony Fontes
Money's a fringe benefit, but the lifestyle is great.

00:08:37 Tony Fontes
So I owe the reef.

00:08:38 Tony Fontes
We all owe the reef.

00:08:40 Tony Fontes
Happy to repay it.

00:08:42 Bec Horridge
Well, I love the reef too.

00:08:44 Bec Horridge
My first visit to Heron island when I was about eight changed my life.

00:08:49 Bec Horridge
It's so beautiful under there.

00:08:51 Bec Horridge
And I recently went to Lady Musgrave island and that was a beautiful experience.

00:08:59 Bec Horridge
The snorkelling was great and the reef walk was great.

00:09:03 Bec Horridge
There was still plenty to see in that location.

00:09:07 Bec Horridge
There's a lot of threats to the beautiful reef.

00:09:09 Bec Horridge
Should we just go through a few of them?

00:09:11 Tony Fontes
I just have to warn listeners, this is starting to get into the depressing part of this, this interview.

00:09:19 Tony Fontes
Unfortunately, the reef threats are many and varied.

00:09:22 Tony Fontes
And historically the most serious reef threat probably started about 1850 with the first cane farm on the Queensland coast in the Great Barrier Reef region.

00:09:33 Tony Fontes
Because poor water quality has been part of the reef ever since we started farming and developing coastal development, so on.

00:09:42 Tony Fontes
It remains a serious problem for the Great Barrier Reef today.

00:09:46 Tony Fontes

Primarily runoff from the mainland, bringing sediment from land clearing, herbicides, pesticides, nitrates from the farming.

00:09:54 Tony Fontes

Obviously there's point source pollution like sewage treatment plants and developments and ports along the coast.

00:10:02 Tony Fontes

So that's an ongoing problem.

00:10:04 Tony Fontes

Fishing is well controlled today.

00:10:07 Tony Fontes

It wasn't always, but fortunately it is by and large.

00:10:11 Tony Fontes

But there are some fishing practises such as trawling that are still allowed some of the net fishing, although they've just removed gillnet fishing from the reef, which is a huge victory for endangered animals like turtles and corals.

00:10:25 Tony Fontes

But there's a lot of illegal fishing.

00:10:28 Tony Fontes

That's tough, it's tough to control.

00:10:31 Tony Fontes

And then you have.

00:10:33 Tony Fontes

The greatest threat to the reef by far is climate change.

00:10:37 Tony Fontes

And this one has probably only been recognised in the last 20 years, 30 years.

00:10:44 Tony Fontes

But it's in that short amount of time, it's become worse and worse and more and more obvious.

00:10:51 Tony Fontes

Because climate change brings a number of impacts.

00:10:53 Tony Fontes

The best known as coral bleaching.

00:10:54 Tony Fontes

But there's also severe weather events that include a lot of very wet, wet seasons.

00:11:01 Tony Fontes

And that brings a lot more sediment into the water.

00:11:04 Tony Fontes

Stronger cyclones, not necessarily more, but stronger cyclones that are real danger of the reef.

00:11:10 Tony Fontes

Ocean acidification, which is a very technical one.

00:11:13 Tony Fontes

But as the ocean from carbon dioxide, which is our Carbon emissions becomes more acidic.

00:11:19 Tony Fontes

It affects things like corals, which are built out of calcium carbonate, and that dissolves in an acidic environment, as do seashells and anything else made of calcium carbonate.

00:11:30 Tony Fontes

That's kind of the.

00:11:32 Tony Fontes

You'd almost call it the hidden elephant in the room, because it's slow and insidious and you don't see it so much as you have to measure, like a scientist.

00:11:43 Tony Fontes

And sea level rise, you wonder, well, how does that affect the corals?

00:11:47 Tony Fontes

Or corals obviously can grow up, but at the same time, animals like sea turtles, for example, they nest on beaches like Heron island, and the sea level rises, the beaches disappear.

00:11:59 Tony Fontes

So where do the nesting turtles go to lay their eggs?

00:12:04 Tony Fontes

That's something that only the future can answer, but it's a concern.

00:12:09 Tony Fontes

So those are all climate change impacts brought on by carbon emissions, brought on by the burning of fossil fuels, which is a problem in Australia that we haven't quite accepted.

00:12:22 Bec Horridge

Tony, if you think about those impacts and what you've been seeing underwater for the last 40 years, what are some of the changes you've actually seen if.

00:12:31 Speaker Bec Horridge

You click into your visual memory there,.

00:12:34 Bec Horridge

Say, around coral bleaching?

00:12:36 Tony Fontes

Well, first of all, in the Whitsundays, I've been very fortunate.

00:12:40 Tony Fontes

We've been very fortunate that the major coral bleaching events, of which there's been six in the last 10 years, what we call mass coral bleaching events, have missed the Whitsundays, but they've certainly impacted other parts of the reef hugely.

00:12:54 Tony Fontes

Far north has been impacted a couple of times.

00:12:58 Tony Fontes

The south has been impacted once really badly.

00:13:01 Tony Fontes

And then the central section where I am up towards Townsville, had been impacted, but down this way with Sundays, not so much.

00:13:09 Tony Fontes

But obviously my diving isn't just in the Whitsundays, and so I've had the displeasure of diving a recently bleached reef.

00:13:18 Tony Fontes

I've done a number of citizen science surveys over bleached reefs and it's.

00:13:23 Tony Fontes

It's really, really sad.

00:13:26 Tony Fontes

I've seen divers cry.

00:13:28 Bec Horridge

What's it look like?

00:13:29 Tony Fontes

Well, it depends on when you're in there.

00:13:31 Tony Fontes

When the coral first bleaches, it turns.

00:13:34 Tony Fontes

Well, it can fluoresce, which means it's a.

00:13:38 Tony Fontes

A pale, a pastel, a bright, glowing pastel green, pink, blue, as opposed to their normal colours.

00:13:46 Tony Fontes

And it's very beautiful, but then it goes to white.

00:13:50 Tony Fontes

Hence the term coral bleaching.

00:13:52 Tony Fontes

Because what's happened is the.

00:13:55 Tony Fontes

The coral's colour are due to an algae that's in their tissue, a microscopic algae that lives in their tissue and supplies them with all sorts of nutrients in what you might refer to as a symbiotic relationship.

00:14:07 Tony Fontes

But the algae becomes too efficient as the water temperature increases, because coral bleaching occurs during marine heat waves and the coral recognises that the

algae is poisoning in it.

00:14:18 Tony Fontes

So it sloughs the algae off, it loses its colour, it turns white because the coral skeleton is calcium carbonate, which is white.

00:14:28 Tony Fontes

The animal is translucent.

00:14:30 Tony Fontes

So the animal's still there, the tiny little coral polyps, but you don't see them, you see through them and they're white.

00:14:37 Tony Fontes

But they've lost up to 90% of their nutrients because they've lost their algal partner.

00:14:42 Tony Fontes

So they will starve to death.

00:14:44 Tony Fontes

If the water temperature remains hot and the algae doesn't return in within two weeks, they could, or a month, depending on the species of coral.

00:14:54 Tony Fontes

So they die and then brown algae grows over it and it becomes ugly, ugly, ugly, ugly.

00:15:03 Tony Fontes

And when you're out there, when they're flushing, you recognise it, you think, oh, maybe the water temperature will drop.

00:15:09 Tony Fontes

Then it goes white, you think, oh, it's not looking too good and it starts to go brown, you know it's dead.

00:15:15 Tony Fontes

And then the tissue sloughs off and it floats to the water, it looks like mucus and it sticks to your wetsuit and you come out of the water, you smell of dead coral tissue, which just reinforces what you've seen and makes it even more heart wrenching.

00:15:34 Tony Fontes

So it's not pleasant.

00:15:35 Tony Fontes

I really feel sorry for the scientists who have to go out there and do proper surveys in the water for hours every day, looking at this coral graveyard, that's coral bleaching.

00:15:48 Speaker Bec Horridge

You're listening to Earth Matters, broadcast nationally across this continent via the Community Radio Network.

00:15:56 Speaker Bec Horridge

I'm your show host, Bec Horridge.

00:16:34 Speaker Bec Horridge

Now more from Tony Fontes on the new federal nature laws and the Queensland Fast Track Development Bill that threatens to dismantle critical environmental protections, eroding public consultation and transparency.

00:16:50 Bec Horridge

Do you think Australia is doing enough to protect the reef?

00:16:53 Tony Fontes

Well, you can never do enough.

00:16:55 Tony Fontes

Australia is not doing anywhere near enough.

00:16:57 Tony Fontes

I imagine a lot of the listeners may follow some of the World Heritage comings and goings.

00:17:04 Tony Fontes

The Great Barrier Reef is a World Heritage area, which is something to be proud of.

00:17:09 Tony Fontes

It happened in 1981, became a world Heritage area because it's one of the.

00:17:14 Tony Fontes

The, for my point of view is the coral reef in the world, but it's one of the many beautiful coral reefs in the world.

00:17:20 Tony Fontes

But there are certain obligations that come with that listing in protecting that World Heritage Site.

00:17:27 Tony Fontes

And since about 2012, Australia's been on the watch list with UNESCO.

00:17:32 Tony Fontes

The people look after World Heritage sites and we're warned that they're not doing enough, not with water quality.

00:17:38 Tony Fontes

And in 2012, climate change got a mention, but not much, not with fishing.

00:17:43 Tony Fontes

Those are the two big things that the UNESCO kind of focused on.

00:17:48 Tony Fontes

And that was the first time that this term "in danger" was tossed about.

00:17:53 Tony Fontes

And since 2012, Australia has been on the watch list and warned four times that they could go on the endangered listing if they don't improve their looking after the Great Barrier Reef.

00:18:06 Tony Fontes

Each time, the government sends a delegation to the cost of Australian taxpayers to the UNESCO committee and lobbies them not to do it, saying, we've done this, this, this.

00:18:17 Tony Fontes

And look, just last week we put in \$300 million to do that.

00:18:21 Tony Fontes

Just last week, just when the World Heritage Committee came out and said, we might put you in danger.

00:18:25 Tony Fontes

Bit of a coincidence there.

00:18:27 Tony Fontes

They've done it now this year again, and UNESCO folded up shop, said, okay, we won't put you in danger listing this time, but we're watching you.

00:18:36 Tony Fontes

The fact of the matter is, you ask any scientists or any diver, is the reef in danger?

00:18:43 Tony Fontes

Yes, yes, for all those reasons I mentioned before.

00:18:46 Tony Fontes

Coral bleaching, poor water quality.

00:18:49 Tony Fontes

And it is in danger.

00:18:52 Tony Fontes

It needs much more work than what the federal government is doing at the moment.

00:18:57 Tony Fontes

I mean, our policy to reduce our carbon emissions almost doesn't exist.

00:19:02 Tony Fontes

We got, you know, we're going to reduce it by this much by 2035.

00:19:06 Tony Fontes

This much by 2050.

00:19:07 Tony Fontes

At the same time, the federal government is permitting new coal mines to open and gas projects too.

00:19:15 Tony Fontes

That's not going to stop climate change and water quality.

00:19:18 Tony Fontes

The improvement over the last 40 years, since the government's been working on water quality, the improvement has been almost negligible, despite all the money they've thrown at it.

00:19:29 Tony Fontes

So they've just given it \$300 million from the state government.

00:19:33 Tony Fontes

Another big bunch of money from the feds.

00:19:36 Bec Horridge

Is that to clean up agricultural runoff primarily?

00:19:39 Tony Fontes
Absolutely.

00:19:40 Tony Fontes
Yep.

00:19:40 Tony Fontes
They work with the, the farmers and the graziers because the graziers clear the land for cattle.

00:19:46 Tony Fontes
And then you get sediment runoff, whereas sugarcane, you get nutrient runoff.

00:19:52 Tony Fontes
And that's a combination that's really hard on the reef.

00:19:55 Tony Fontes
Sediment blocks the sunlight that the corals need, and nutrients causes the algae to grow, which smothers coral.

00:20:02 Tony Fontes
So the closer you are to shore, the quality of coral reefs diminishes because you fall underneath the runoff from the mainland.

00:20:12 Tony Fontes
So much more needs to be done, need to stomp on climate change.

00:20:16 Tony Fontes
We need to lead the world in that because it is a world problem.

00:20:20 Tony Fontes
It isn't just Australia, but Australia with the Great Barrier Reef has a lot more to lose.

00:20:25 Tony Fontes
So they should be leading the world and not sort of just coming in towards the rear.

00:20:31 Tony Fontes
And then water quality, that's a homegrown problem.

00:20:34 Tony Fontes
It's our problem.

00:20:36 Tony Fontes

We can solve it or not, but we can solve it.

00:20:39 Tony Fontes

And you need to do that because that allows the reef to build resilience if you have clean water and better, perhaps better survive the bleaching events in the future.

00:20:50 Bec Horridge

The federal government has some new nature laws.

00:20:53 Bec Horridge

Do you want to say something about them?

00:20:55 Tony Fontes

Yeah.

00:20:56 Tony Fontes

The new nature laws, which in fact are a step, a great step in the right direction.

00:21:02 Tony Fontes

A lot of people know it as the EPBC, but it basically allowed the federal government to monitor and assess any kind of project that would impact matters of national significance.

00:21:16 Tony Fontes

And believe it or not, the Great Barrier Reef is a matter of natural significance, which is great.

00:21:22 Tony Fontes

It's great.

00:21:23 Tony Fontes

But prior to these new nature laws, the federal government did not monitor land clearing, if you can believe that.

00:21:32 Tony Fontes

And so the amount of land clearing going on in Queensland, Queensland is the number one state in Australia as far as land clearing goes.

00:21:39 Tony Fontes

And the land clearing within the catchment of the Great Barrier Reef was just mind boggling, very destructive.

00:21:45 Tony Fontes

But with the new laws, they can monitor land clearing and assess within the catchment of the Great Barrier Reef because it's a matter of national significance and that's what the law is now allowing.

00:22:00 Tony Fontes

So people that want to clear their land now have to apply for a permit which would take on rigorous assessment from the federal government before they get that permit.

00:22:09 Tony Fontes

And the assumption that I'm making, what's on the Conservation Council and other conservation groups is they will not get that permit.

00:22:17 Tony Fontes

They should not get that permit, whereas before there was no need for that permit.

00:22:22 Tony Fontes

So that's in the right direction.

00:22:25 Tony Fontes

The concern, this is where it becomes a little bit hazy is how will this be monitored?

00:22:32 Tony Fontes

Who's responsible for making that decision to assess or not to assess?

00:22:39 Tony Fontes

And until we see it on the ground happening, because they're brand new, they haven't been used yet.

00:22:44 Tony Fontes

Until there's a court case, it's hard to see whether the government will have the backbone to actually enforce it or kind of let things slide a bit.

00:22:53 Tony Fontes

And if I could just jump on the Queensland government, as soon as those laws came out, they immediately started pushback.

00:22:59 Tony Fontes

They start pushing back on that, saying, well, we're going to do this and we're going to do that.

00:23:03 Tony Fontes

We're not happy with these new laws.

00:23:07 Bec Horridge

What about their Fast Track development bill?

00:23:10 Tony Fontes

Well, that's just another example with unfortunately current Queensland government.

00:23:15 Tony Fontes

Since they've been in power, they started pushing back on renewable energy projects.

00:23:20 Tony Fontes

They were talking about, we're going to have coal forever and making it easier for large infrastructure projects.

00:23:29 Tony Fontes

This new development bill that is being considered in Parliament as we speak.

00:23:35 Tony Fontes

Well, simple terms strips away the red tape, but also the green tape and it takes away the public's voice.

00:23:45 Tony Fontes

It doesn't allow for public submissions and so on.

00:23:48 Tony Fontes

That's one of the things the EPBC act would do.

00:23:52 Tony Fontes

If it came under that assessment.

00:23:54 Tony Fontes

We would have a say.

00:23:57 Tony Fontes

But that's if it comes on the EPBC.

00:24:00 Tony Fontes

But in Queensland, they're going to fast forward these things no matter what.

00:24:04 Tony Fontes
And so.

00:24:06 Tony Fontes
Well, what we lose is scrutiny of major projects, opportunity for public consultation from groups like Whitsunday Conservation Council.

00:24:16 Tony Fontes
Transparency goes out the windows.

00:24:18 Tony Fontes
It's all behind closed doors and the end result is irreversible damage to the environment, including the Great Barrier Reef.

00:24:27 Bec Horridge
Is this aimed at rare earths in particular or it's all minerals they're looking at?

00:24:32 Tony Fontes
Well, they kind of throw that name in there.

00:24:35 Tony Fontes
It's all large infrastructure projects.

00:24:38 Tony Fontes
Mining is the first one that comes to mind.

00:24:40 Tony Fontes
Gas projects come to mind.

00:24:42 Tony Fontes
Mining not just coal, but the minerals and stuff you need for renewables, which is fair enough, but any large infrastructure project could be a bridge, could be a road, could be a tourism project.

00:24:55 Tony Fontes
If it gets the green light from this bill, it'll just go through the assessment process in the blink of an eye and before you know it, it's there.

00:25:04 Tony Fontes
Now, people often ask, well, we need these rare earth minerals.

00:25:07 Tony Fontes

Of course they do.

00:25:07 Tony Fontes

We're getting them now with proper assessment.

00:25:12 Tony Fontes

Not passing this bill doesn't mean you can't mine coal or rare earth or anything else.

00:25:16 Tony Fontes

It just means you need to do a proper environmental assessment.

00:25:20 Bec Horridge

And so are we not going to be doing environmental assessments?

00:25:23 Tony Fontes

Pretty much comes down to.

00:25:26 Tony Fontes

I mean, I can't speak on the government's behalf, but they'll decide what kind of assessments need it and they'll do it and we won't know anything about it.

00:25:33 Tony Fontes

But the Minister, Blythe I believe his name is, he's the main proponent for this bill, has said, and I can't quote exactly, but basically he said green groups are concerned about this and they should be.

00:25:48 Tony Fontes

What does that tell you?

00:25:50 Bec Horridge

Well, we'll have to look into this further as it progresses.

00:25:53 Bec Horridge

Tony Fontes, thank you very much for talking with Earth Matters.

00:25:57 Bec Horridge

Is there anything else you'd like to say?

00:25:59 Tony Fontes

I guess a point, because we started very positive and then floated into reality.

00:26:06 Bec Horridge

Yeah.

00:26:07 Tony Fontes
The future of the reef.

00:26:08 Tony Fontes
Okay.

00:26:09 Tony Fontes
It's.

00:26:09 Tony Fontes
It's not written, is it?

00:26:10 Tony Fontes
We don't know.

00:26:12 Tony Fontes
Scientists don't know.

00:26:13 Tony Fontes
They predict, on various climate scenarios, 1.2 degrees, 1.5, 2.0, 3.0, and I'm pretty certain they're comfortable with what they're saying there.

00:26:25 Tony Fontes
But we don't know if we're going to get to 2.0, although it's looking that way.

00:26:30 Tony Fontes
We don't know if we're gonna get 3.0, so it's not too late.

00:26:35 Tony Fontes
Every little bit of a degree that we pull back on gives the Great Barrier Reef, all coral reefs, not to mention terrestrial life, including people, a better chance of a good future.

00:26:49 Tony Fontes
So I don't want to create despair.

00:26:51 Tony Fontes
I want to.

00:26:52 Tony Fontes

If you're like me and you do feel a bit of despair, the best way to fight that is with action.

00:26:58 Tony Fontes
Stand up, fight for the reef.

00:27:00 Tony Fontes
We can still win this.

00:27:02 Speaker Bec Horridge
Tony Fontes, president of the Whitsunday Conservation Council.

00:27:08 Speaker Bec Horridge
You've been listening to Earth Matters, Community Radio's national Environment justice programme.

00:27:14 Speaker Bec Horridge
If you missed any of today's show, you can find our podcasts@3cr.org.au or earthmatters.

00:27:22 Speaker Bec Horridge
Earth Matters would like to thank the Community Broadcasting Foundation for their financial support and the Community Radio Network for getting the programme out to you.

00:27:31 Speaker Bec Horridge
Earth Matters is produced in the studios of 3CR on Wurundjeri Country.

00:27:36 Speaker Bec Horridge
If you'd like to get in contact, you can send us an email at earthmatters3cr@gmail.com or go to our Facebook page.