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Government polices have been dictated by neo-liberal economics which has no regard for our environment and indeed tries to obscure any threat by providing false information as has occurred with the GBR. It is therefore up to individuals and community groups to expose the dangers so that the public can make informed decisions. There is no doubt that the prospect of the Adani coal mine proceeding has galvanised public opposition in a way not seen since the fight over the Tasmanian dams. That the proposal should be supported by both sides of politics, including extinguishing native title on the land seems outrageous. It should and must be opposed for many reasons – most importantly perhaps because of its impact on the worlds Green house gas emissions but also the impact of its water use, its highly dubious economics and the impact it will have on the Great Barrier reef. This later issue has come close to dominating the anti Adani campaign since the reef is already badly damaged, something that lends itself to dramatic documentation such as that from the world famous naturalist and broadcaster David Attenborough.

Yet while the Adani mine will be another blow for the reef its present torment - and a long term threat - comes from a far more insidious problem which is largely ignored by all those wishing to save it. When the Great Barrier Reef became Australia's first World Heritage listing in 1981, the population from Cairns to Bundaberg was about 425,000. Since then it has more than doubled and it is projected to be 1,577,000 by 2026. Significantly most of the damaged areas of the reef have occurred in proximity to the human development along the shore with less damage in the relatively undeveloped northern section of Cape York. While farming practices have been blamed for some damage, (Australian Institute of Marine Science figures showing that nutrient and sediment loads were five to nine times higher than before European settlement) urban run off is more difficult to contain, harder to trace and the pollutants are more numerous.

Former World Heritage Wet Tropics Authority chairman Professor Tor Hundloe said while governments, scientists, conservationists and the mining industry fought over what was damaging the Reef most, he feared urban growth could be the big sleeper issue. Professor Hundloe said he was not downplaying the impact of farm pollution, but suggested there are far more city dwellers who will have to change their behaviour, otherwise very costly engineering interventions will be required. This is because our society has become dependent on consumerism and every year thousands of new contaminants enter households in the form of products like shampoos, toothpaste, cosmetics, disinfectants and pharmaceuticals - and that is just the bathroom. In the kitchen there are some powerful cleaners while the garage holds an array of paints, garden chemicals and car products that inevitably end up being washed down our drains without effective treatment.

These contaminants range from the so called flushable wipes to micro-beads found in cosmetics and micro-threads produced from synthetic clothing and the cancer causing NPEs and pthalates which are chemicals used in dyes and plastics and found in clothing. Then there are all the medications we use that pass through the body or are discarded down the loo. Antibiotics are know to disrupt important micro-organism in the environment reducing their capacity to break down organic matter and they also play a role in development of super bugs. There are endocrine disruptors that mimic naturally occurring hormones in the body like estrogens (the female sex hormone), androgens (the male sex hormone), and thyroid hormones, potentially producing over stimulation. Oestrogen, which is a naturally or synthetic hormone will cause feminisation of fish if it is not broken down in the sewerage system. And of course there is our plastic usage which includes 3.92 billion plastic bags/year, and 3 million tonnes of plastic in water bottles making us the second largest producers of waste in the world.

Yet despite the threat to our environment and health Australian governments remain

paralysed by market economics and have failed to introduce regulations to control the barrage of dangerous chemicals entering the market. In the US researchers have identified around 80,000 chemical contaminants in waste water while the EU has found 140,000 so it is logical to assume that Australia will have similar amounts. Recently even the EPA was accused of hiding data on contaminated land in Sydney because it might have interfered with market values. This was not the first time, housing estates are being built on the many defunct industrial sites that have been found to be contaminated with dangerous products like asbestos and even radio active waste. While other countries have begun regulating hazardous compounds Australia is falling behind. A Greenpeace report called Toxic Threads showed that Australia is at risk of becoming a dumping ground for products not acceptable to the western world. This is a situation made worse by free trade agreements which increase imports without the necessary checks on the product which are or likely to occur in locally made products.

Fig 1. Comparison of Waste Generation and Population Growth, MRA Consulting Group, October 2015

The graph above shows the problem in the starkest terms. Our population is growing exponentially and the number of people will double every 42 years. Our consumption of disposable products is growing both due to this population increase and to increased individual consumption, a double whammy. That we cannot continue along this path should be obvious to all, economics based on continuous growth has not only failed but could never work because despite technological developments sooner or later population growth confronts biophysical limits.

In the past we have managed to starve of resource depletion by extracting ever more difficult resources, but we have ignored the impact on the environment which has limited assimilative capacity as well as the harmful effects of these products on human health. Even halving our individual consumption would not be sufficient, recycling does have limits and reuse is often only a temporary process that delays the inevitable. All of which makes the mythical cliff march of the Lemmings seem like a logical decision.

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