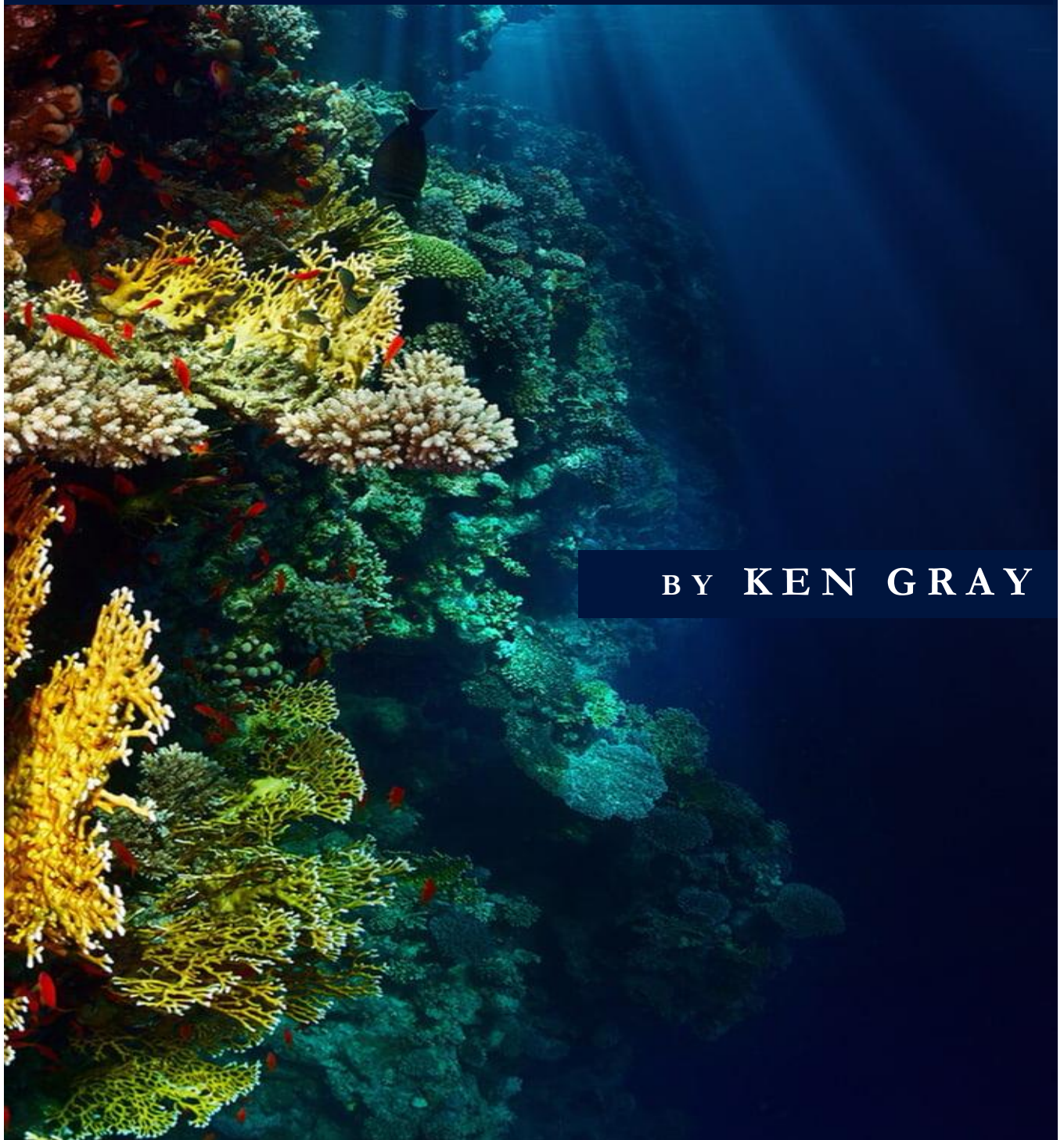


# THE ARTFUL ACTIVIST

HOW JOHN BUSST SAVED  
THE GREAT BARRIER REEF

BY KEN GRAY



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This is the full version of the John Busst story. An abbreviated version is also available on our web page as AB07, also named *The Artful Activist*.

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Cover

From Pintarest.

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## FORGOTTEN HERO

He saved the Great Barrier Reef. It was about to be plundered by miners and oil explorers.

John Busst boldly put his hand up, quickly gathered his forces and stopped them.

John who? You've never heard of him?

You're not on your own. Even in the small town of Mission Beach in north Queensland where he weaved his magic, few locals have any idea of what he did.

Some people speak of John Busst as an artist, but that was just a hobby he dabbled at. Yet it mattered little, for it was not to be with oils and canvas that John Busst would make his indelible mark on this world. His genius lay in the halls of human interactions; in the fields of political persuasion. He was first and foremost a highly successful conservationist. For a conservationist, saving the iconic Great Barrier Reef is equivalent to being a Gauguin in the art world or a Churchill of politics. It's the pinnacle and that is where he sits.

The shame is that his life-defining achievement, saving the Reef, has not been recognized or properly remembered. Search the web for lists of the world's leading environmentalists, and his name will not appear anywhere. You will find many TV environmental celebrities like Sir David Attenborough, Jacques Cousteau, David Suzuki or even our own '*Crocodile Hunter*' Steve Irwin up in lights, as they should be. They have highlighted issues that need fixing and have made millions of people more aware of the value of nature and the dangers it faces.

You will find people like John Muir who helped create some United States National Parks, authors like Rachel Carson or Henry Thoreau who raised alarms, scientists like Jane Goodall who studied chimpanzees. Even today's climate change sensation, Greta Thunberg, a teenager who looks so angry and chastises us on global warming, is featured widely.

Richard Leakey, the anthropologist and author who wrote '*The Sixth Extinction*', shows us what we are doing to other species on the planet. Scientist Mario Molina, the Nobel Prize winner in 1995 for his work linking CFCs (chlorofluorocarbons) to the Ozone Hole, is another on the list of notable environmentalists. They are all well-known and important figures.

In many ways, John Busst was akin to Mario Melina in that his work caused quick, direct and highly favourable environmental *outcomes* rather than merely announcing a problem or enhancing awareness of threats we face. John Busst did not only ring a bell loudly on the Reef's dangers; he solved the problem.

He was an environmental hero, yet very few people know of this man or of his work.

Imagine his life.

You live in Australia in the 1960s. Having wealthy parents helps life considerably. You have lived the life of Reilly on an idyllic forest-clad tropical island nestled in the Coral Sea for 17 years. The war has come and gone and you managed to dodge that. Not sure how; perhaps through family connections to people in power.

Life has been a bountiful party. You've had a wonderful time for your first 55 years yet you admit, deep down, that until now, it has been somewhat wasted and lacking in direction. After much reflection and soul searching while listening to Wagner and reciting Tennyson with your ecologist chum Len Webb, and after frustratingly failing to capture nature's rich beauty on canvas, you have developed an acute awareness of your environment. You live in a special place and should perhaps give something back before you die.

You begin to see why and how nature is being threatened. You commit your life to changing nature's seemingly inevitable fate at the hands of uncaring humans who think merely of how they can collect more possessions.

Your wish is to achieve something truly meaningful and to retain nature's beauty. What can you, just one person, do that will make a difference? Fixing the hole in the ozone layer would be a big one. True; yet that was not discovered until 1985 so you are unaware of that new problem. Saving the Amazon from human development would be massive too, yet no one has found the solution to that dilemma. By 2020 it was getting worse. Stopping mass human-induced species extinctions would be a grand plan, yet that was not well known until Richard Leakey and Roger Lewin published their book, *The Sixth Extinction* in 1996. And stopping global warming would top all of those aspirations but no one was aware of that threat in the 1960s.

John Busst, our 'artful activist' started his conservation work in the obvious place for any north Queenslander; with small steps, protecting rain forests. He started working on small projects to protect some beautiful local rain forest tracts from devastation. He had some success. His close friend, ecologist Len Webb, was constantly influencing his thinking and dreams. Len went on with that important work and contributed greatly to saving the north Queensland forests with some urging and assistance from John Busst.

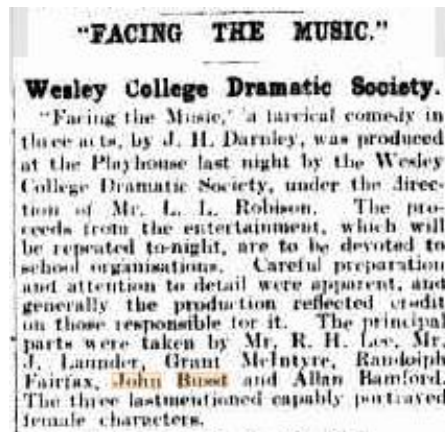
Yet the concept of John Busst's life-crowning dreams and achievements, to save the Great Barrier Reef from mining and oil exploration, came upon him quite by serendipity. His wife, Alison, saw that danger in the local paper when she read a notice of an application to mine a nearby reef. As it happened, this was the big one that he had dreamed of; the one that could generate gigantic positive consequences for Queensland, the nation and the world. Could succeed and stop the proposed development?

This is the story of how that dream unfolded and how John Busst led one of the planet's most significant and spectacularly successful conservation campaigns ever to be waged. Scientists and sociologists have picked over the skeleton of this campaign to discover why it worked so quickly and well. The one common factor they saw was John Busst, the artful activist.

## ORIGINS & FAMILY

John Busst was born in Bendigo, Victoria, in 1909 and died 05 April 1971. He went to school at Wesley College in Melbourne and was a prefect at one stage. This is where his old-school-tie network started. He studied law at Melbourne university for a little over a year before dropping out. While there, he shared a house with Harold Holt who he first met when he was only 12 years-old<sup>1</sup>. Harry Holt, as Busst called him, was to become Australia's Prime Minister and was a lifelong friend.

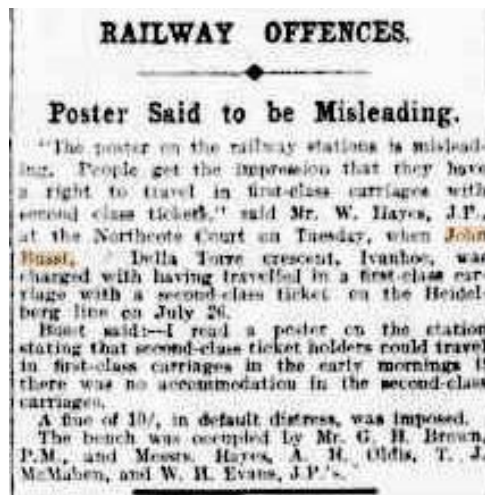
At Wesley College he often featured in dramas as an actor, sometimes starring in a female role:



*The Argus 14 August 1926, Trove. '... capably portrayed female characters.'*

He was a handy tennis player earning a 'blue' or sporting award at university.

He enjoyed being seen as a risk taker and that seems to have started early in life. At 19-years-age, he was charged by the railways for travelling first class on a train with a second class ticket and was fined 10 shillings in court. Sounds trivial yet that is equivalent to \$80 in 2020 currency.



*The Argus, 5 September 1928, Trove.*

After dropping out of Melbourne university, John lived in an artists' commune in Eltham and used his mining magnate father for income to survive the Depression. Beats working. He helped build

<sup>1</sup> Personal correspondence, Busst to Dr John Woodward Jr, 17 January 1968; accessed from Dorothy Woodward, Melbourne.



Monsalvat, which was made of stone and mud bricks. There he met environmental scientist, Len Webb and they became lifelong friends.

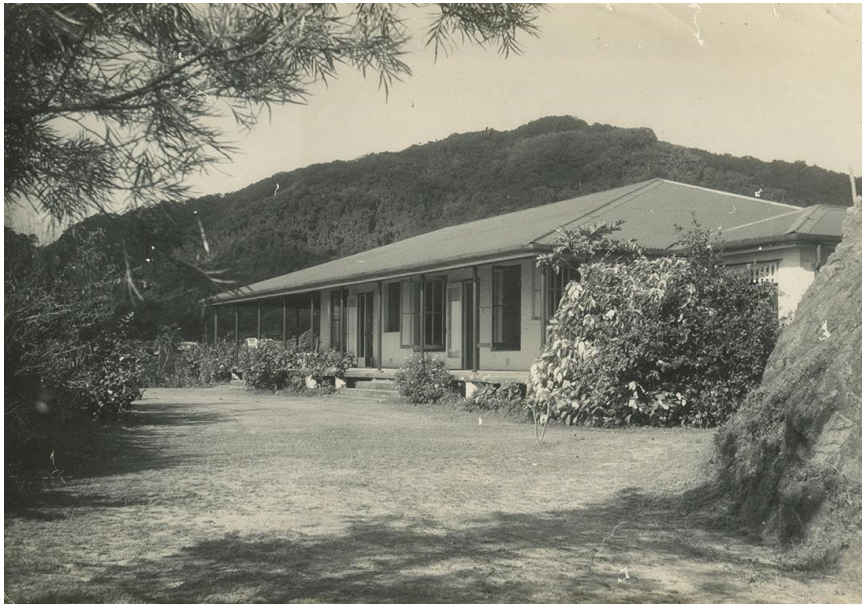
The well-known artist, Noel Wood, impressed John when he visited the commune briefly. A popular myth leads us to believe that Noel swapped his old Ford jalopy for a tropical island in north Queensland but it was not that romantic. He paid for 15 acres on Bedarra Island and lived there to be far from the distracting crowds. John listened to Noel's romantic tales and loved the idea of this remote, adventurous lifestyle so trekked north eagerly in 1940 and joined Noel in his humpy at Doorila Cove (image below) on the island soon after. Thereafter, he lived his life in north Queensland in the Mission Beach district.



Today, a resort on the site where the Bussts once had their mud-brick home costs a guest up to \$2,500 a night to stay there. To place that in perspective, the Bussts sold half of the island in 1957 for a little over \$6,000 but the dollar was worth far more then.

At age 31 years, John inherited half of the family fortune, and soon after he leased most of Bedarra Island with his sister, Phyllis. In 1947, they purchased this leased land. He lived grandly and spent the family fortune in true style. For John, that was easy as he loved a drink and had a flair for entertaining and partying.

At 41 years age in 1950, John married Alison Fitchett of Terang, Victoria, and she joined him on this idyllic island that he was leasing at the time. Seven years later they found it was too busy with noisy tourists, so they built a home on the mainland in a forest overlooking the Coral Sea at Bingil Bay, halfway between Cairns and Townsville. It's part of a beautiful little group of villages named Mission Beach which has 29 tropical forest-clad islands and 67 sensational beaches, all within a 50km radius.



The Bussts' home Bingil Bay. Image from Friends of Ninney Rise, Virginia Edlington Collection.

In 1957, Alison and John Busst sold their Bedarra Island property. They had purchased a home at Bingil Bay in 1955 then secured a further four hectares of land at Ninney Point and 62 hectares to the north of this. The land they built their new home on was once owned by the Alexander family and earlier by their relations, the Cuttens who were the first settlers in the district. The old building that was once '*Alexander's Inn*' or *Alexander's Guesthouse* remained in a derelict state on this land. This was probably the second significant tourist venture started in the district after Ted Garner's huts at Garners Beach, so the site already had some social significance.

It was at Bingil Bay that John and Alison's successful Reef activist roles began in the mid-1960s.

Little is written of Bussts' family life in Bendigo. John's mother, Dolly, was a more important and influential figure during his early life than his quite famous father. However, Dolly died when John Busst was only 22 years age.



Dolly (Emily Kate) Woodward. Image from [Ancestry.com.au](http://Ancestry.com.au)

His mother's name was Emily Kate Busst (nee Woodward). It was her family, his Woodward cousins, that John was closest to for his entire life. He wrote to them often and visited them in Melbourne when in Victoria and on one occasion the Woodward's stayed at Bingil Bay with the Bussts.



John's maternal grandparents were John and Mary Woodward and his uncle was Thomas Woodward. Thomas' son, the cousin that John regularly wrote to and visited, was Dr. John James Woodward who was a prisoner of war of Japan in WWII in Hong Kong. He won an MBE for saving the lives of many of his fellow prisoners. John J. Woodward was a surgeon. John Busst was also close to John J's son, Dr. John Michael Woodward whose widow Dorothy lives in Melbourne in 2021. John Busst affectionately called John M Woodward, '*Little Jack*' and signed his letters to him simply '*Thine<sup>2</sup>, J*' or '*Yours, J*'.

John Busst was estranged from his father's side of the family for much of his life, yet they reconciled things before his father's death. There is no evidence of contact during his adult life. That was probably due to more than one factor; his rejection of his planned career in law (possibly his father's dream) and dropping out of university early as well as his *Bohemian* ways, with his heavy drinking and living in a commune being quite unacceptable to his father. Being charged with misconduct in a high-society divorce case at age 23 would not have helped his relationships at home either.<sup>3</sup>

Horatio Busst, John's father, was quite notable in Bendigo society. He and his brother were well known cycling champions and Horatio played tennis quite well. He was a gold miner and eventually became Bendigo's mining warden. He unsuccessfully stood for Council election on one occasion and became Managing Director of the Bendigo Mutual Permanent Land and Building Society, which would later become the Bendigo Bank.

Despite being distant from his father, John inherited most of the family fortune equally with his sister Phyllis Victoria Busst. Some money went to Horatio's other family members which was enough at the time for one of the family to purchase a home. The Catholic Church also inherited considerable sums, and that trust account was successfully challenged later by some of the Busst family who won significant sums from the Church in a court case<sup>4</sup>. The estate was worth approximately \$7 million in 2020 currency.



Horatio Samuel Vincent Busst. Image from [Ancestry.com.au](https://www.ancestry.com.au)

Jean Ffrench, daughter of Billie Gill, who worked with John on the Reef campaign at Innisfail, remembers<sup>5</sup>, '*For most of his life, he believed he was of German descent, and even used to sign his name with an*

<sup>2</sup> Personal correspondence, Busst to Dr John Woodward Jr, 17 January 1968, 12 March 1968 and 2 August 1968; courtesy Dorothy Woodward, Melbourne.

<sup>3</sup> *Boileau Divorce Case, Full Court Hearing. The Age*. 4 October 1933, Trove.

<sup>4</sup> Phone conversation Ken Gray with John Busst's cousin David Busst of Emerald, QLD, January 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Personal message, Ancestry.com from Jean Ffrench, 21 November 2020.

*umlaut over the U in Busst. However, a year or so before his death he employed a genealogist to investigate his family history and was amazed and excited to discover that he had deep roots in England, back to the early 1700s.'*

When searching for John's next of kin with Jean Ffrench's assistance the earliest Busst name in John's family tree was a *John Busst* born in 1707. Further investigations showed that the name is perhaps derived from the old French word 'bois' or wood, that is, they lived near or in a forest. In the records of the Busst name use worldwide, this family name is not common. Over half of all Bussts in the United Kingdom today are from Staffordshire as John's ancestors were. Some suggest that the English derivation of the name Busst (with variations, Bust, Buest and Beust) stems from mid-16<sup>th</sup> century England's use of Busst to mean *maker of caskets* from the old French word 'boiste' or modern French word 'boite'. The first record of the family name found is a *Richard Bust* in 1560 England.

Analysis of the frequencies of the Busst family name appearing in different countries of the world today shows England with 177 records, Australia 124, New Zealand 26, Canada 21, Scotland 5, USA 5 yet there is only one Busst in Germany. Hence, John's use of the umlaut in his name was a figment of his vivid imagination and its continued use is probably invalid and inappropriate. He came to that conclusion himself towards the end of his life.

It does provide some clues though about how John Busst saw himself. What he did to save the Reef required determination and a strong belief in himself and an aura of confidence to access and influence powerful people during the campaigns. John was proud of his family and family name despite differences with his father over the way he would or should live his life. While John and Alison Busst had no children and there are no surviving descendants of his father, it would please John to know that the Busst name lives on proudly through his uncle Willian Busst's descendants. William Busst had one son, Stanley who had four children David, Christine, Mary and Margaret. This fine central Queensland family have flourished, and David Busst has two sons with families.

When the family reflect on and recall their great uncle John Horatio Busst, they will undoubtedly be proud of what he achieved in his starring role as the State's and the Nation's 'artful activist.'

## REEF ACTIVISM

John's stellar career as a volunteer conservation activist was partly documented by Phoebe Ford in her 2011 Honours thesis<sup>6</sup>. She was awarded First Class Honours at the University of Sydney for her work. The paper was titled, '*Consilience, Saving the Great Barrier Reef, 1962 – 1975*'. Ford was supervised by the eminent University of Sydney historian and author, Professor Iain McCalman, who had an enduring interest and love for the Reef and the Mission Beach district.

Phoebe Ford's thesis explains how the vastly differing skills, knowledge and backgrounds of the three main 1960s Reef and rainforest campaigners from the Wildlife Protection Society of Queensland (WPSQ) helped save the Reef from mining and oil-drilling. Ford hypothesizes that John Busst, Judith Wright and Len Webb together created a powerful confluence of forces that enabled them, and others they worked with, to succeed in a case that was incredibly difficult. Most felt it near impossible to win the campaign considering the powerful forces against it.

James Cook University political scientists and historians, Rohan Lloyd, Maxine Newlands and Theresa Petray wrote a paper<sup>7</sup> on the Reef campaign in 2016, *Coral Battleground? Re-examining the 'Save the Reef' campaign in 1960s Australia*. Their insightful analysis showed that while most authors and journalists of the day referred to the campaign in war terminology, the way it was run was far from combative. The success of this campaign was, they found, due to the inclusive ways that John Busst worked with a wide range of people, organizations and media, and interacted with people across the broadest political spectrum.

The most comprehensive account<sup>8</sup> of the Great Barrier Reef campaign of the late 60s and early 70s is found in *The Coral Battleground*, written by the Wildlife Protection Society of Queensland President, Judith Wright. Judith knew John Busst well in a professional sense and was his main co-activist during the Save-the-Reef campaign.

John Busst wrote to countless politicians, bureaucrats, scientists and newspapers and was highly effective at influencing high level people face to face. There are 19 letters held by James Cook University in their *John Busst Collection*, yet these are a minute fraction of his correspondence between 1966 and 1971. The Woodward family of Melbourne were the closest of all of his relatives, and they still have three illuminating letters, yet that is a small part of what he wrote to his cousin and close friend, *Little Jack* (Dr. John M. Woodward). Alison Busst often typed letters for John and estimated at one stage that he had sent over 4,000 letters to a myriad of people.

Billie Gill, Secretary of WPSQ at Innisfail typed other letters on his behalf. Furthermore, he wrote many of his personal letters without typing them.

In the mid-60s, world awareness of the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) was minimal, especially compared to today. People like David Attenborough have since shown the world what a unique and beautiful

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<sup>6</sup> Ford, Phoebe, 2011. *Consilience: Saving the Great Barrier Reef 1962 – 1975*. Honours thesis, University of Sydney, History Faculty. Accessed January 2021 at: [https://www.missionbeachcassowaries.com/uploads/5/9/8/7/5987112/ford\\_p\\_consilience.pdf](https://www.missionbeachcassowaries.com/uploads/5/9/8/7/5987112/ford_p_consilience.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Lloyd, Rohan, Newlands, Maxine & Petray, Theresa, 2016. *Coral battleground? Re-examining the Save the Reef Campaign in 1960s Australia*. Environmental Sociology.

<sup>8</sup> Wright, Judith, 1977. *The Coral Battleground*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Spinifex.

place it is and how important this and other reefs are to global survival in the face of human-induced species extinctions.

Conservation movements were just beginning to emerge at this time, and their voices were far from powerful. Many people thought of the conservationists as being weird or crazy. When Alison Busst saw the development application advertisement in a local paper for a mining lease on Ellison Reef, she alerted John and they must both have been daunted by the prospect of somehow stopping such destruction. Until then, the Queensland mining warden's courts had blocked no projects of any note at all, so why would this one suddenly be the exception?

Undeterred, John Busst initiated a burst of disciplined, strategic actions. And stop it he did. But not alone. He mustered the necessary forces to make the case compelling and leave the magistrate with little option but to refuse the mining lease on this rare occasion. It was a close call, and they all but lost the case on the first day of the hearing when much of John's evidence was disallowed.

That was the start of it all. A pivotal win was achieved, and this was the first significant win for the recently formed Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland. John Busst, in that moment in history, gave the Australian conservation movement the start and the belief that it desperately needed to enter the next, much more dangerous, battle to save the Reef from oil exploration.

The way that John Busst ran the initial five-month conservation campaign ensured maximum world-wide publicity for the Reef. Australia and the world were awakening to the perils of unabated industrial development. There needed to be some boundaries set where development was taboo and Busst had drawn a small yet vital line in the sand. The state and the mining industry at this time were looking greedily at the opportunity and primed to exploit the Reef, so even the smallest development permit on the Reef would open the floodgates.

This was a vital test case to win.

It took a further six months after this initial Ellison Reef case was won in court for the state to formally concede that it could not mine the Reef. However, soon after this win, the pro-development Bjelke-Petersen Government had joined hands with the oil industry, ready to pounce once more and exploit the Reef.

Once again, it was John Busst who alerted the world to the oil leases which were being let for the Reef and the disasters that were impending. Once more he was heard, loudly and clearly.

Sadly, yet fortuitously for the campaign, oil industry accidents around the world were increasingly causing widespread alarm with numerous oil spills being reported. Some of these were large scale, highly destructive and visually ugly. That generated many international headlines. Then a large spill occurred on the Cape to show Australian's close-up exactly what they were facing. Events were conspiring against the Queensland Government.

Despite this monumental failure, the Queensland Government continued to insist that the industry could carefully exploit the resources beneath the Reef's sea-floor without significantly damaging it. That claim was being tested, and the conservation movement was quickly winning Queensland voters over to Busst's point of view: that no oil and mining exploration is safe and no risks could be contemplated with such an iconic natural wonder.

The world soon agreed.

However, the Queensland Government emphatically disagreed. While the Commonwealth Government was on side, it lacked the political will and ability to enact the changes that John Busst demanded of the Commonwealth: to take control and ownership of the Reef. Forcing the issue could cause a damaging rift between factions in the Liberal-National coalition so most in the Federal Government were averse to acting.

It was inevitable that, given time, any Commonwealth Government, whatever its political persuasion, would respond to rapidly changing public opinion and enact legislation to determine the sovereignty of the Great Barrier Reef. However, an Ampol<sup>9</sup> oil rig was already on its way to central Queensland to begin drilling and, for now, public opinion alone could not stop that.

This was another pivotal strategy. Once again, it was initiated and enacted by John Busst. He did not do it alone, yet he master-minded the move and took the necessary on-the-ground actions by engaging closely with Queensland's unions, mentoring their key players, introducing them to scientists like Eddie Hegerl and working with Senator George Georges of the Queensland Labor Party. That led to the highly effective union black ban of any oil rigs operating on the Reef<sup>10</sup>.

That was the winning mechanism to stop oil exploration in its tracks long enough for a new Commonwealth Government, led by Gough Whitlam, to enact the necessary legislation and make the Reef safe from oil and mining.

John Busst had been a large part of another strategy he was running at the same time, which aimed to have a Royal Commission examine the issue of mining and oil exploration on the Reef. This took considerable time to set in motion yet, once more, the strategy succeeded and the investigation was to start mid-1971. John Busst had fought hard with his fellow conservationists to secure that win and was prepared to present his testimony at the Commission hearings. However, cancer ended his life before he was able to reach that critical moment.

Others would then see the campaign to its full conclusion with the formation of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority in 1975 and the World Heritage listing in 1981. Eddie Hegerl took over where John Busst left off and saw that these goals were achieved.

John Busst though had led the campaign to a point where these conclusions were inevitable. There was much work to be done to ensure that all of the Reef was protected, yet John could reflect on the legacy he had left the state, the nation and the planet.

Despite his amazing achievements, his funeral was a quiet event and the leadup to his death was sad. The cancer had prevented his attendance at important meetings and hearings that were deeply important to his very being, and he became extremely melancholy and looked to alcohol for solace.

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<sup>9</sup> Wright, Judith, 1977. *The Coral Battleground*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Spinifex, page 69.

<sup>10</sup> Wright, Judith, 1977. *The Coral Battleground*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Spinifex, pages 92, 93.



## SAVE-THE-REEF CAMPAIGN

### BUSST IGNITED THE CAMPAIGN

John Busst was the one to raise the alarm in 1967 then take direct action to organize the necessary court defence at Innisfail. He reached out to organizations to support his objections to mining Ellison Reef. Some were forthcoming but some important ones were not. He then, after losing the first round of the trial, recruited (via Judith Wright) scientists from the ACF (Director, Dr Don McMichael) and from the Queensland Littoral Society (students Eddie Hegerl, Ross Robertson and photographer, Peter Brockel). They provided vital testimony at the second session of the court hearing after Eddie's diving team had conducted the scientific reef survey organized by John<sup>11</sup>.

That was the first battle waged to save the Reef. As one of co-conservationist, Billie Gill, said in a memoir<sup>12</sup>, it was largely arranged and completed by John Busst and was the conservation movement's first major win for the Reef.

A year later, John once more raised the alarm and took action to begin the second, longer campaign opposing oil drilling on the Reef. John was the one to engage with national newspapers and politicians, demanding action to protect the Reef. He maintained these effective efforts for the rest of his life.

*John was President, I was Secretary when it was formed in 1966. John Busst's wife Alison was reading the Innisfail Advocate and saw a small notice applying to the Mining Wardens Court for a license to mine limestone ... from the 'dead' Ellison Reef. An application for a license to mine anything had so far never been refused in NQ. Thus began the 'battle for Ellison Reef' followed by the 'Save the Barrier Reef' campaign. It was John who led the battle. Actually, he did it all [for Ellison Reef].*

Billie Gill, Innisfail branch, Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland. Memoir, as cited above.

Eddie Hegerl and his two fellow University of Queensland zoology graduates, who were invited by John to conduct the scientific reef survey, were vital cogs in the court case. Eddie gave compelling testimony as did Dr Don McMichael, Director of the Australian Conservation Foundation, who had studied Ellison Reef earlier. Eddie testified strongly using the study he had conducted for John Busst pre-trial where he and his team determined the status of Ellison Reef, that is, was it alive or was it dead as alleged by the protagonists for the development application. Accounts of the court proceedings reveal that, while Eddie Hegerl was merely 23 years old at the time, his calm and effective countering of the opposing barrister's combative cross-examination was both impressive and telling. Evidence of John's mentoring of the young Eddie was there for all to see.

Billie Gill's daughter, Jean Ffrench, confirmed the recollections of her mother,<sup>13</sup> who was present for the entire trial. Jean was a teenager at the time and was enthralled by the approach of John Busst and inspired by his dedication and endless energy.

<sup>11</sup> Wright, Judith, 1977. *The Coral Battleground*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Spinifex. Pages 6-14.

<sup>12</sup> Gill, Billie. *Memoir: The Fight for Ellison Reef*. Innisfail, accessed 23 November 2020 from daughter, Jean F Ffrench, Canberra

<sup>13</sup> *Memoir* Billie Gill, as above.

The second phase of the Reef campaign was also started by John:

*At the end of 1968, a relatively unknown artist-craftsman sat at his home typewriter in Bingil Bay .... The man was John Busst, and as President of the Innisfail Branch of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland he wrote a letter to the Editor of The Australian newspaper. The letter aimed to make the public aware of the fact that the Queensland Government had for almost a year been clandestinely leasing areas of the GBR for oil and mineral exploration. Busst's letter recalled that 80,920 square miles of the Reef were now under lease to various companies, which upon discovery of oil or minerals, would automatically be granted leases to begin actively mining the Reef.*

Phoebe Ford, University of Sydney<sup>14</sup>

*Around the same time, Busst received a letter of reply from the Institute of Marine Sciences at the University of Miami, Busst sought expert advice on the issue ... to mine 'dead coral rubble' from the Reef. The Assistant Professor wrote back, confirming Busst's position. Thus, by the time 1968 drew to a close, Busst had actively grabbed the Battle by the horns.*

Phoebe Ford, University of Sydney. As above.

*Dr Charlie Veron, marine biologist and former chief scientist of the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS), said it was an extraordinary campaign. 'It was, I believe, Australia's biggest conservation battle ever – if it didn't happen we wouldn't have a Great Barrier Reef today – there would have been mining and oil drilling everywhere,' Dr Veron said.*

The New daily, 15 October 2017.

*Everybody seems to think he owns the Great Barrier reef .... The Premier of Queensland .... The Australian Prime Minister ... the oil industry ... Fortunately, John Busst, Judith Wright and other conservationists' managed to convince many Australians who have never seen the reef that it is theirs.*

*Is Australia Necessary? Part 5: Who Owns the GBR?* Owen Thompson and Geraldine Pascall, *The Australian* 1970.

The most telling late phase of the campaign was also initiated and led by John Busst, starting in 1969 and being fully translated into a black ban on oil rigs by early 1970:

*Throughout 1969, Busst worked behind the scenes on both the political and industrial fronts. He wrote personally to the Liberal and Labor federal leaders ... At the same time, he had been working with the trade unions in an effort that would have huge consequences for the fate of the Reef. In a stroke of genius the trade unions were enlisted to aid the cause of a grass roots conservationist campaign. In Wright's view, he had put in the bulk of the behind the scenes work that ultimately brought the union black ban to fruition.*

Phoebe Ford, University of Sydney. As above.

## BUSST: LEADER OF THE BAND

There was not one individual who led and enacted every step in these campaigns. However, the two primary organizations that forced the issue were the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland (WPSQ) and the Queensland Littoral Society (QLS). John Busst was their informal leader and source of inspiration. At the time, the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) was a minor player yet they provided important assistance to John and these two organizations when it was most needed. Judith Wright was the President of WPSQ and had an important leadership role as did Eddie Hegerl, President of the QLS. Eddie later ensured that the entire Reef area was included in the Marine Park.

<sup>14</sup> Ford, Phoebe, 2011. *Consilience: Saving the Great Barrier Reef 1962 – 1975*. Honours thesis, University of Sydney, History Faculty. Accessed January 2021 at: [https://www.missionbeachcassowaries.com/uploads/5/9/8/7/5987112/ford\\_p\\_consilience.pdf](https://www.missionbeachcassowaries.com/uploads/5/9/8/7/5987112/ford_p_consilience.pdf)

All players at the time acknowledged John Busst as the one who brought things together, created the bold winning strategies, made key breakthroughs when all looked lost, gathered resources from nowhere and inspired the throng to go further than they ever dreamed was possible.

*If ever it could be said that one person 'saved' the Great Barrier Reef, John Busst was that person. He it was who inspired and led the great world-wide save the Reef campaign that led to the Royal Commission on Oil Drilling.*

Larry Foley, *The Australian*, 23 June 1970. Trove.

*...master minded one of the most effective public political campaigns of modern Australian history.*

Phoebe Ford, *University of Sydney*.<sup>15</sup>

*WPSQ needed a political solution and John Busst came up with the first strategy."* [Personal representations to politicians and senior bureaucrats which Busst did himself]. *"Busst was crucial to the development of the GBR campaign.*

Hutton and Connors, historians.<sup>16</sup>

*John Busst does not get all the publicity, but he master minded the whole thing.*

Vince Serventy AM, Editor *Wildlife Magazine*.<sup>17</sup>

*And now, for the apostles of the new technology, the utilizers, it was not simply irritating, it was the wildest of bad luck that as they moved to exploit the Great Barrier Reef there was waiting for them a graduate of Monsalvat – a graduate who was not simply a romantic artist but John Busst, at once a man of emotion and a wickedly cool organizer.*

Patricia Clare, journalist and Reef historian<sup>18</sup>.

*John was our indispensable spokesman, contact with politicians, diplomat and tactician ... above all had been the leader, the one to get in and work on the people who really mattered – the political leaders and backbenchers and senators, the unions and the political parties. He had organized help when we needed it; he had planned what steps we would take next, written letters all over the world, and in doing so spent more than \$15,000 of his own money [on legal advice] ... All the way from the Ellison Reef battle to the black ban, the halting of drilling and the setting up of the Commission, his influence had been at work.*

Judith Wright, poet, co-conservationist, Reef historian.<sup>19</sup>

*With the death of John Busst of Bingil Bay, the Australian conservation movement lost an able, dedicated strategist and the human race lost one of its finer members. The full story of the successful opposition case, organized almost single-handed by John Busst, remains to be told.*

Barry Wain, Obituary, *The Australian*, April 1971, National Library, Canberra.

His leadership inspired those around him:

*All the lively enthusiasm and resource he had brought to the battle, even when he was ill and expecting much worse, had kept us all inspired and at work, not only in the Wildlife Preservation Society but in the Littoral Society too.*

Judith Wright, poet, co-conservationist, Reef historian. As cited above.

<sup>15</sup> Ford, Phoebe, 2011. *Consilience: Saving the Great Barrier Reef 1962 – 1975*. Honours thesis, University of Sydney, History Faculty. Accessed January 2021 at: [https://www.missionbeachcassowaries.com/uploads/5/9/8/7/5987112/ford\\_p\\_consilience.pdf](https://www.missionbeachcassowaries.com/uploads/5/9/8/7/5987112/ford_p_consilience.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Hutton, Drew and Connors, Libby, 1999. *A history of the Australian Environmental Movement*. Cambridge University Press. Page 102.

<sup>17</sup> Wright, Judith, 1977. *The Coral Battleground*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Spinifex. Page 160.

<sup>18</sup> Clare, Patricia, 1971. *The Struggle for the Great Barrier Reef*. Collins. Page 91.

<sup>19</sup> Wright, Judith, 1977. *The Coral Battleground*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Spinifex. Pages 160, 187-189.

*Whilst there is little doubt that Mr Busst's passing is in the nature of a calamity in the cause of conservationism, there is solace in the fact that his endeavours have promoted strong public opinion and resulted in a number of North Queenslanders being available to continue the work which is of such great importance to Australia ...*

Dr Len Webb, CSIRO Ecologist, co-conservationist. *Innisfail Evening Advocate*, 07 April 1971. Trove.

*Considering that the GBR Committee had supported the mining of Ellison Reef, such decisive action shows Busst's confidence in his own convictions which encouraged the dedication of others. He had also contacted members of the Press to cover the story resulting in several reporters from various newspapers attending the court case ... Busst caught the attention of the public, bringing the issues of conservation at the Great Barrier Reef to a broader audience.*

*John Busst's tactics of obtaining support from opposing factions of Australian politics, his diligence as a researcher, his skills as a spokesman and diplomat and his determination to push through the obstacles to the defence of the natural environment were inspirational. ...he influenced others who were actively involved ..., many of whom have continued their work in environmental protection.*

Annie Austin, Dr Jan Wegner, James Cook University<sup>20</sup>.



Ninney Point, land once owned by Alison and John Busst. Image copyright Susan Kelly.

This inspiration continues today. The current owners of the rich rainforest land pictured above read of the history of the Bussts' fight to save the Reef and rainforest and chose to do what John had dreamed of doing; protect this forest forever. The land title was placed under a permanent conservation covenant to protect the forest and its critters. In 2020, this 17-acre area had ten cassowaries (four adults, one juvenile and five chicks) regularly foraging in the forest. Over 60 percent of the Bingil Bay land once owned by the Bussts is now either National Park, Council reserve, State Nature Refuge or under strong privately applied conservation covenants as in the case above.

John Busst went above and beyond what anyone could have expected of him. With such an ambitious campaign there would always be setbacks that disheartened people working on the cause. That was ever present, yet John Busst always found the necessary energy and innovation to overcome the worst of obstacles and lift the morale of the campaigners.

<sup>20</sup> Austin, Annie and Wegner, January, 2007. *Defending Diversity: Strategies used by John Busst, Dr Len Webb and Geoff Tracey in the Conservation of North Queensland Habitats During the 1960s*, James Cook University, College of Arts, Social and Education. Downloaded January 2021 from <https://www.wet tropics plan.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Defending-diversity-Strategies-used-by-conservationists.pdf>

For example, all looked lost at the very first step when the Mining Warden dismissed all of his evidence, yet John managed to obtain an adjournment at the last minute then regathered his momentum to win the pivotal case and create a lasting euphoria among his ever growing group of helpers and disciples.

*... he arrived at the Innisfail courthouse on 29 September 1967, with an armful of books he had swotted up and marked for quoting. The hearing proceeded, and Busst began to quote from his authorities. 'But the barrister for the applicant objected,' Busst recalled. 'He said my references were not permissible as evidence because the learned authors were not present in the court to subject themselves to cross examination. The mining warden upheld the objection. So I was torpedoed in one. Somehow we got through to five o'clock and secured an adjournment. Then I shot south.'*

Patricia Clare, journalist and author.<sup>21</sup>

When preparing for the court case on Ellison Reef, John Busst, sought supporting objections from the powerful Great Barrier Reef Committee but they rejected his plea and said that the reef was 'dead':

One after another, scientists, not wanting to get involved in anything that might tarnish their professional status, [or dry up their funding] washed their hands of it, and even the longstanding Great Barrier Reef Committee, chaired at the time by Professor Bob Endean of the University of Queensland, declined to help. The University of Queensland even announced its 'official position': Ellison Reef was indeed dead. Where were the experts [to help John Busst]?

Charlie Veron, 'Godfather of Coral', first Chief Scientist of the Australian Institute of Marine Science.<sup>22</sup>

That was a bitter disappointment, yet Busst merely soldiered on. He then sought help from his friend, Prime Minister Holt. However, the Prime Minister could only promise to intervene if the mining started. Most people would have given up after such great setbacks, yet John Busst fought on and won the case.

An even larger obstacle to John Busst's drive to reach his self-imposed lofty goals emerged to test his resolve. He was diagnosed early in the campaign with throat cancer. From that day on, he endured long periods of pain and debilitating incapacity, even having to cease speaking at times and moderate his notorious chain smoking. He pushed on regardless of the personal consequences:

*Remarkably, during the battle to save the Reef, John Busst had been quietly dealing with worsening cancer. Tragically, he did not live to present the evidence that he had prepared for the Royal Commission that he was largely responsible for bringing about.*

Phoebe Ford, University of Sydney.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Clare, Patricia, 1971. *The Struggle for the Great Barrier Reef*. Collins. Page 94.

<sup>22</sup> Veron, Charlie. 2017. *A Life Underwater*. Penguin Books Australia.

<sup>23</sup> Ford, Phoebe, 2011. *Consilience: Saving the Great Barrier Reef 1962 – 1975*. Honours thesis, University of Sydney, History Faculty. Accessed January 2021 at: [https://www.missionbeachcassowaries.com/uploads/5/9/8/7/5987112/ford\\_p\\_consilience.pdf](https://www.missionbeachcassowaries.com/uploads/5/9/8/7/5987112/ford_p_consilience.pdf)



## CALENDAR OF CAMPAIGN EVENTS

The Reef campaign began when John Busst legally challenged Cairns cane farmers who applied to mine coral on the so called 'dead' Ellison Reef mid-1967.<sup>24</sup> The first step to stop the coral mining was not an easy one, and in the first two rounds of the Innisfail court case, John Busst was fighting a losing battle. It was made more difficult by expert witnesses from the University of Queensland who condoned mining of the Reef if it were deemed to be 'dead'. The Great Barrier Reef Committee, a group of around 120 scientists, were of the same opinion, so winning the trial was no walk in the park. Busst and his solicitor, Les Arnell of Innisfail, managed to win an adjournment at the end of the first day in court.

When the case stalled and was adjourned because John had no expert scientist witnesses, Judith Wright recruited three University of Queensland postgraduate zoologists via the Queensland Littoral Society to survey the reef and demonstrate that it was alive. This research dive team was led by Eddie Hegerl, who was to become another vital cog in this campaign.

Judith also recruited University of Queensland scientist, Don McMichael, who was the Director of the Australian Conservation Foundation. He provided expert testimony at the second phase of the trial in November 1967 based on research he had conducted on Ellison Reef in 1965. Eddie Hegerl of QSL acted as an expert witness presenting his Reef survey report to the court. The case was won because of their testimony. Don McMichael also went on to make many other vital contributions to Reef protection.

John Busst, Len Webb (a CSIRO environmental scientist) and Judith Wright (a Brisbane author and poet) became environmental activists late in life. After stopping this mining proposal, a larger and more radical threat emerged when the Queensland Government was found to be leasing huge tracts of the Reef for oil exploration. John made an urgent call to arms by writing to *The Australian* in August 1968 declaring this oil-drilling threat to the world. That opened the wider debate and, among other things, he demanded that the Federal Government act by claiming sovereignty over the Reef. He had already put that proposal to the Federal Government personally before this public utterance.

The Queensland Government was fiercely against proposals to stop mining or oil drilling so the focus was shifted to the Commonwealth. John and his co-activists worked hard to combat the strong forces opposing change and by 1969, when they had the Wildlife Preservation of Queensland (WPSQ) conduct an opinion poll on oil drilling on the Reef, they found 94 percent of Queensland residents were against all drilling<sup>25</sup>.

By late December 1967, which was early in the campaign, John no longer had his long-term mate Harold Holt to provide him with an easy path to victory. John Busst had stayed with the Holt family at The Lodge for a few days during 1967. Previously, Harold Holt and his wife Zara purchased land and built a holiday home at Garners Beach just north of Bingil Bay where the Bussts lived. Harold Holt regularly went spear fishing on the Reef so was always strongly in favour of saving it from exploitation. However, when Harold Holt died while diving in Victoria in December 1967, John had to fight on without this powerful influencer and was quite distraught

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<sup>24</sup> Wright, Judith, 1977. *The Coral Battleground*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Spinifex. Pages 4-13.

<sup>25</sup> As above pages 88, 89.

at the loss: *I can't quite yet accept Harry Holt's death as a fact yet – 47 years chums is a long time. However, I've still got your old man – and you.*<sup>26</sup>

He engaged with the new Prime Minister,<sup>27,28</sup> John Gorton, who he pursued and met on Dunk Island where he was holidaying in mid-1968. The problem though was that Gorton was struggling to maintain power within his own party and was afraid of rocking the boat with the Queensland Government or with his conservative colleagues who were, in many cases, firmly against the conservation campaign.

In mid-1968, the Leader of the Opposition, Gough Whitlam, was in Cairns and John managed to wheedle an interview with him and put his case strongly. One of the most effective moves that John Busst made later was to urge unions to ban oil rigs on the Reef.<sup>29</sup> That was effective in stalling the exploration companies until legislation could be enacted. Thereafter, the movement quickly gained traction.

Bowen and Bowen noted:<sup>30</sup> *At the annual general meeting (of the Australian Conservation Foundation) in October 1968 Busst spoke passionately against any mining activity and presented a motion that was seconded by Wright and carried by a wide margin:*

1. *that the Commonwealth Government take immediate control of the whole Great Barrier Reef area to the 200 metre mark;*
2. *that an immediate moratorium on all mining for at least five years be declared in the whole Reef area;*
3. *that since the control and safety of the Great Barrier Reef is a matter of international concern which can no longer be left in parochial State hands and must be raised to both a Commonwealth and international level, a national committee, under the auspices of the Academy of Science, and with power to co-opt international scientific advice, be set up to determine the future of the Great Barrier Reef, probably the most important scenic and recreational area in the world, and certainly with the potential to become the most important marine biological laboratory on the face of the planet.*

Sadly, yet fortuitously as it turned out, a freak event turned the tide further in the movement's favour. A fully laden Ampol oil tanker ran aground on the Reef in April 1970 releasing an alarming 10 Km oil slick. There was a federal enquiry already planned for oil drilling on the Reef and that accident caused a swell of indignation and the new Prime Minister, John Gorton, turned the enquiry immediately into a vastly more effective tool: a Royal Commission.

In April 1970, John Gorton introduced a Bill to have the Commonwealth assert sovereignty over the Reef as John Busst had continually argued for. That stalled and Gorton was deposed as leader by his own party in March 1971. Gough Whitlam won the election in October 1972 after promising to stop mining and oil drilling on the Reef pre-election and promising to establish sovereignty over the Reef. That caused a seismic shift in the Save the Reef campaign.

After John Busst's death in April 1971, the fight was not over, yet the momentum was nearly unstoppable because an ALP win in a federal election would ultimately ensure that the necessary changes were legislated. Judith Wright and Len Webb bravely and effectively continued the

<sup>26</sup> Personal correspondence Busst to Dr John Woodward Jr, 17 January 1968, courtesy Dorothy Woodward, Melbourne.

<sup>27</sup> Bowen, James and Bowen, Margarita, 2002. *The Great Barrier Reef: History, Science, Heritage*, Cambridge University Press. Pages 332-33.

<sup>28</sup> *Reef Ahead for P.M. Sydney Morning Herald*, 01 September 1968.

<sup>29</sup> Wright, Judith, 1977. *The Coral Battleground*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Spinifex. Pages 92, 93, 152.

<sup>30</sup> Bowen, James and Bowen, Margarita, 2002. *The Great Barrier Reef: History, Science, Heritage*, Cambridge University Press. Page 331.

campaign against Reef exploitation along with the quickly increasing band of activists and organizations that had joined the campaign.

The Reef movement took actions that made the creation of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority possible and imperative. By the time of John's death, public opinion along with the necessary political will to act, was strong and the creation of a marine park was inevitable. It came four years later under the Whitlam Government.

Phoebe Ford concluded: *Whilst Busst did not live to push his conservationist philosophy to its final operation in a statutory authority with control over the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, he was indispensably instrumental in bringing about the possibility of such an authority.*

In December 1973, the Whitlam Government enacted the *Seas and Submerged Land Act*. This gave the Commonwealth sovereignty over the continental shelf and the Reef and was essentially the same legislation as John Gorton had introduced to parliament earlier. That led to the expected state challenges when, in 1974, the governments of Queensland, WA and NSW asked the Privy Council to intervene. The Queen would not refer them to the Council, so the states had to issue writs in the High Court of Australia, as predicted.

In November 1974, after two years of witness submissions and two further years to complete their report, the Royal Commission handed down its findings and recommended that no oil drilling be allowed on the Reef. The newly elected Queensland Government won in a landslide in December 1974 and continued to resist the Reef lobby and to ignore public opinion on the matter.

In 1975, legislation was passed by the Whitlam Government to form the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority. This was supported by both sides of parliament. In November 1975, the Whitlam Government was dismissed by Governor General, Sir John Kerr and there remained a few actions to ensure the Reef was safe. The Fraser Government tied up the loose ends in 1976. Sir Garfield Barwick released the High Court decision which went in favour of the Commonwealth, as he had predicted it would.

In 1981, the Great Barrier Reef gained World Heritage status.

#### s u c c e s s f a c t o r s

It would be easy to conclude that John Busst was successful merely because he was born privileged and met and made friends with many people who became famous and influential, most notably Prime Minister Harold Holt. However, Busst had far more strings to his bow than being part of the old-school-tie brigade and having a close friend in Harold Holt. Almost all of the Save-the-Reef action occurred after Harold Holt died. John lived for more than three years after that and those were the years when all the most telling actions occurred.

Some key success factors relating to John Busst's leadership of the Reef campaign were:

- His network which started early in life at Wesley College and continued to expand throughout his 62 years. It was nurtured by his love of people and parties. He was widely loved, developed friendships quickly and was humorous and engaging.

- Fortunately, he found a cause he truly believed in and was passionate about. Until he was 48 years old, one could say John was an eccentric, charismatic drop-out on an island who received and entertained friends and was somewhat akin to a Paris Hilton without her looks or her fame that he would undoubtedly have enjoyed in today's media-frenzied world. He was the party animal who people flocked to. He relocated to Bingil Bay and found his *raison d'être*: saving the Reef.
- He was not tied to one side of politics. His friendship with Harold Holt may have led him to pursue and be heard only by the right side of politics. However, he managed to access and influence all sides. When Harold Holt died, he met with his successor, John Gorton and met with the Leader of the Opposition, Gough Whitlam, on more than one occasion. He was also able to access and influence many important international scientists and leaders of the union movement.
- He was bold and brazen with no fear of failure. If he needed to hook up with a senior politician, or an important scientist or witness, he found a way to achieve an audience. Gaining one-on-one time with people at that level is difficult, yet he always did so. He met Gough Whitlam when he came to Cairns and John Gorton when he holidayed on Dunk Island. Even Harold Holt was not always easy for him to connect with. John found a way to fly alongside him and chat for three hours once when Harold travelled to Cairns. At one stage, he tried to meet Sir Reginald Ansett thinking he would be an ally with his resorts being at Mackay where the first oil rig was headed. On that occasion, he was refused yet learned soon after why. Ansett's company was the fourth largest shareholder in Ampol who were bringing the oil rig to Mackay. That was a rare miscalculation.
- He was persistent and was unphased by temporary setbacks. In both the court case to fend off the mining of Ellison Reef and the longer campaign to win legislation to stop oil drilling on the Reef, there were severe setbacks with things going heavily against the movement. At times, things looked bleak, yet John Busst intensely believed in himself and his cause so recovered and drove headlong into the fight once again, undaunted by barriers or delays.
- John's persuasive ability, especially face-to-face was impressive. For example, in the four hours he initially spent with Gough Whitlam, he left Gough believing in both the need to stop the oil exploration dead and the need to assume sovereignty for the Reef. That counted hugely when Gough won the 1972 election. These were complex cases and arguments yet Busst managed to have powerful people quickly understand them and adopt his position, in just one meeting.
- Part of that success was his planning and strategic thinking. He never addressed a leader without ploughing the ground thoroughly first. In his letters you can see that strategy working as he used his correspondence to start the debate before winning full support in the face-to-face encounters.
- He engendered belief and created impetus for action in those around him.
- He was not technically qualified, yet he was able to quickly understand scientific data and make a strong case and compelling presentation. He was creative in his ability to make a case and find angles that would capture peoples' imagination and buy-in. He even won membership to the Great Barrier Reef Committee<sup>31</sup> which was exclusively confined to

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<sup>31</sup> Personal correspondence, Busst to Dr John Woodward Jr, 12 March 1968, courtesy of Dorothy Woodward, Melbourne.

eminent scientists prior to his appointment. He did not even have a basic university degree, let alone the doctorate that the Reef committee required as a prerequisite for membership.

- He worked night and day on the Reef cause and lived the campaign in every fibre of his body and every minute of his time, day and night.
- He was robust in his debates with friends and colleagues and never pulled his punches. In other words, he would face the brutal facts yet do so positively and with integrity to achieve the target outcomes and retain his important alliances. A good example was when he replied to a letter from Len Webb and argued strongly and very bluntly for immediate action rather than education.
- Another critical factor was John's urgency and strategic focus on actions that mattered most. He worked feverishly as if tomorrow would be his last day on Earth.
- Busst was adept at using the quantitative economic arguments to show the Reef had more value to tourism long-term than it did via short-term exploitation. The trio still faced heckling and cries of '*cranks*' from those afraid of what the impacts of protection would be on the economy, yet the use of data helped quell the criticism.
- The concept of '*consilience*', as explained by Phoebe Ford,<sup>32</sup> was important. His ability to bring science and the humanities into the debate together to *understand the human condition with a higher degree of certainty* was ground-breaking. He was able to import data and converge evidence from all sources; from sciences and the humanities, to support the case and appeal to a broader audience.

Despite his unconventional ways, John Busst was highly effective in running the Reef campaign. The timing of the campaign's beginning was set by the cane-farmers' application for approval to mine Ellison Reef yet it coincided with a time when the world was quickly awakening to the need for more balance between development and conservation. Len Webb observed that Australia was quickly changing and becoming more environmentally active and aware from 1966 onwards.

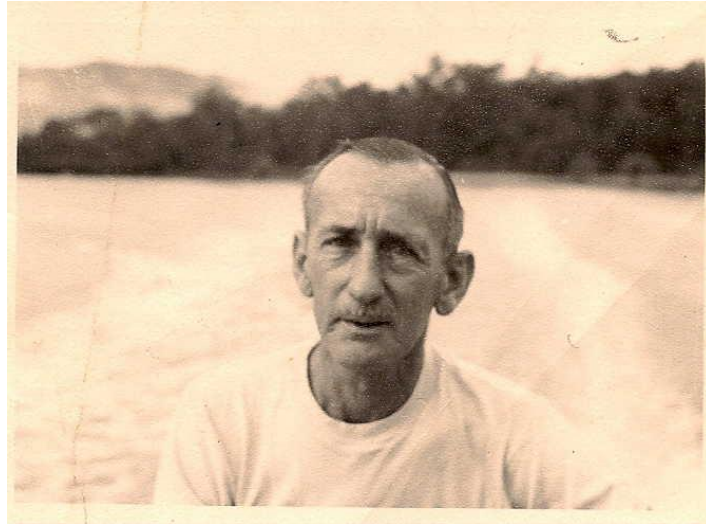
John Busst was acutely aware of trends and public opinion and astute in his timing.

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<sup>32</sup> Ford, Phoebe, 2011. *Consilience: Saving the Great Barrier Reef 1962 – 1975*. Honours thesis, University of Sydney, History Faculty. Accessed January 2021 at: [https://www.missionbeachcassowaries.com/uploads/5/9/8/7/5987112/ford\\_p\\_consilience.pdf](https://www.missionbeachcassowaries.com/uploads/5/9/8/7/5987112/ford_p_consilience.pdf)



## UNIQUE CHARACTER



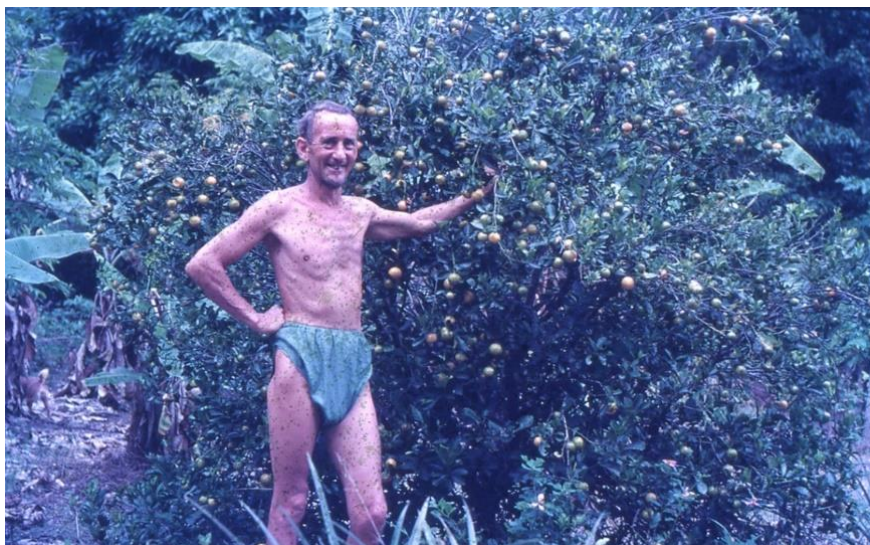
*The memories are many ... of a slightly built man with deep blue penetrating eyes ...  
a competent painter ... a bit of an individualist ... a mischievous smile ...  
a capacity for work in a great, unselfish cause.*

John Messer, The Age, Obituary 10 April 1971. Trove.

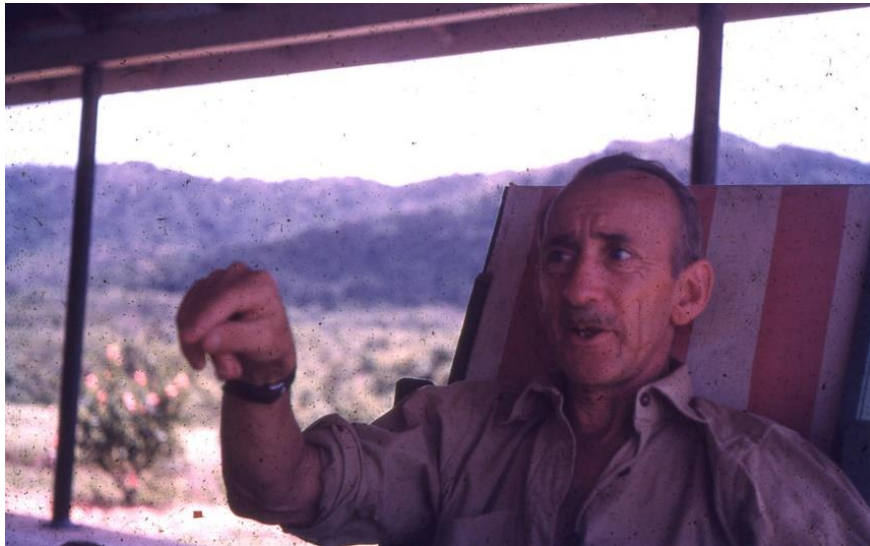
He was an enigmatic man. Certainly memorable.

He was a little bloke. Some would say cocky, others would see him as assured and confident in his capability. He had a keen, self-deprecating sense of humour. John Busst wrote so many letters yet seldom completed formal reports; not because he was unable to do so, more through choices on how he used his time. He took delight in his use of colloquialisms to shock his audience and while he came from a privileged background, he liked to show he was not really part of that.

There are various descriptions of John's appearance and character. The few images available depict a short, slender man with large ears, a craggy moustache and sometimes a goatee beard. He managed to look confident no matter what the situation; even in a ridiculous loin cloth he beams at the camera while being photographed.



John's proud loin cloth look. Image from Friends of Ninney Rise, Virginia Edlington Collection.



Regular John. Image from Friends of Ninney Rise, Virginia Edlington Collection.

Judith Wright described him<sup>33</sup> as a *slender, enthusiastic man full of laughter, a compulsive smoker and a lover of good company*. That is similar to many descriptions. He had several teeth missing in later life, apparently caused by laryngoscopies when he was diagnosed with throat cancer.<sup>34</sup>

His close friend, Len Webb, was more familiar with and open about who John Busst was and said in his correspondence for example, we often, *listened to Wagner and got pissed ... or We listened to Wagner on a wind-up gramophone, recited Tennyson and explored the metaphysical world in a euphoric state induced by ethyl alcohol*. Drinking booze was common among North Queenslanders but listening to highbrow German opera and reciting Tennyson's poetry were not typical of people living here at the time (or even now).

Some spoke of his *bohemian* lifestyle and appearance, yet author, Patricia Clare, who met him once and stayed at his Bingil Bay home for a short while, was of the opinion that his attire, appearance and character were more reminiscent of a *colonial administrator*.<sup>35</sup> He dressed often with tailored suits and cravats and sometimes had an oversized woollen jersey or waistcoat as well. Not a typical north Queensland look.

John Busst had a forceful character with a quick temper and was said to be assertive and sometimes too critical of his fellow activists for being soft or lacking urgency. Of all his friends and co-activists, the one who knew him best and spoke most candidly of his character was Dr Len Webb. Len often stayed with the Bussts on Bedarra as well as at Bingil Bay and the two men enjoyed sparring verbally. Len loved John Busst dearly and spoke very highly of him in a eulogy he wrote for the local press.

John was popular yet few people knew him well. A fellow worker said,<sup>36</sup> *Sometimes, I think that Len, Frank Corsi and I were the only friends John had*. He lost his other good friend, his 'chum', Harold Holt in December 1967 and his Woodward cousins were true, valued life-long friends. Judith Wright was also quite close to him yet not a drinking buddy. Few people knew of his cancer, even his closest

<sup>33</sup> Wright, Judith, 1977. *The Coral Battleground*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Spinifex. Page 4.

<sup>34</sup> As above pages 56, 99.

<sup>35</sup> Clare, Patricia, 1971. *The Struggle for the Great Barrier Reef*. Collins. Page 88.

<sup>36</sup> Memoir Billie Gill transcribed from diaries by daughter, Jean F Ffrench, accessed 23 November 2020.

friends. Some friends did not know he was Catholic until he died. His alcoholism was also hidden from most.

A friend, reflecting on his funeral, observed:<sup>37</sup>

- Because the funeral was rushed and happened only two days after his death, few people attended.
- People who were there included his sister Phyllis, his wife Alison, best friend Len Webb, friend and associate Billie Gill, friend Frank Corsi, Kate Bate (Dame Zara), Frank Crome, a birdwatcher, and Phil and Peg Theodore. No mention was made of his closest cousins, the Woodward's, but they phoned a few days later and were obviously unable to make it north at that short notice. Correspondence from the Woodward's tells us John senior was on holidays and John junior and his wife Dorothy were in the UK at the time of the funeral.
- There were some young women at the funeral, *crying as though their hearts were broken*. What did that mean?

John Busst was commonly regarded as charming, humorous, fun, generous, a good host and entertainer, a chain smoker, a heavy drinker and an enthusiastic party goer.

One close acquaintance said, *I believe he had returned to his love affair sadly, with alcohol at the time of his death...* This aspect of John Busst's life is not visible to most but a search of the correspondence, memoirs and oral histories of several people reveals the issue. Fortunately for the Reef, he stopped drinking for the last 13 years of his life. It was only in the last three months, after Christmas 1970, that he returned to binge drinking when suffering from terminal cancer. Alison Busst was in Melbourne with her friends for that sad chapter of his life, so John was alone in Bingil Bay.

John had many exemplary qualities. He was intuitively inclusive:

*Mr Busst had the ability to meet people of all classes and creeds on a common footing and enthuse them to work together as conservationists.*

Dr Len Webb, CSIRO Ecologist, co-conservationist.<sup>38</sup>

*Busst reached out to both sides of politics, and, in a pioneering and innovative strategy, enlisted the support of unions to the conservationists cause.*

Phoebe Ford, University of Sydney.<sup>39</sup>

*The historical struggle over power and control of the GBR shows the positive outcomes which emerged from broad coalitions, as opposed to an adversarial and combative approach to activism ... When activists work with politicians and scientists the media and the public the outcomes are positive...The coalition [between conservationists and trade unions] was an unlikely one between highly educated middle class 'greenies' and blue-collar workers. Busst explained: 'The submission I wrote some time ago for the ACTU eventually stirred things up ...' [letter to Wright 04 Feb 1970].*

Rohan Lloyd, Maxine Newlands & Theresa Petray, James Cook University.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Memoir Billie Gill, transcribed from diaries by daughter, Jean F French, accessed 23 November 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Obituary, Len Webb, Innisfail Evening Advocate, 07 April 1971.

<sup>39</sup> Ford, Phoebe, 2011. *Consilience: Saving the Great Barrier Reef 1962 – 1975*. Honours thesis, University of Sydney, History Faculty. Accessed January 2021 at: [https://www.missionbeachcassowaries.com/uploads/5/9/8/7/5987112/ford\\_p\\_consilience.pdf](https://www.missionbeachcassowaries.com/uploads/5/9/8/7/5987112/ford_p_consilience.pdf)

<sup>40</sup> Lloyd, Rohan, Newlands, Maxine & Petray, Theresa, 2016. *Coral battleground? Re-examining the Save the Reef Campaign in 1960s Australia*. Environmental Sociology.

He was ahead of the world and visionary in his understanding of what the Reef meant for the globe:

*The last paragraph of Busst's untabled submission to the Royal Commission revealed the prime motivation of his intense, personal involvement in campaigning to save the GBR. This was, 'his fundamental belief that the Reef and its associated marine and terrestrial environment are unique in this world.' He saw the Reef as ... the world's most important marine area.*

Phoebe Ford, University of Sydney.<sup>41</sup>

He always aimed far higher than most dared:

*... I have been swamped with work lately – the Battles of the Barrier Reef, the Rainforest and the Hold Memorial Scheme (6 national Parks and Marine Parks in each State.)*

Correspondence Busst to cousin Dr John M Woodward, 12 March 1968

*The environmentalists' strategy was twofold: first to encourage the media to focus on the scientific evidence [Busst recruited journalist Barry Wain to actually be on the Ellison Reef survey]; and second, to build on personal networks. [also John Busst mainly]*

Rohan Lloyd, Maxine Newlands & Theresa Petray, James Cook University

John understood where power lay and found unique ways to obtain a share of it. The 120-member Great Barrier Reef Committee included only eminent, experienced scientists. John had no scientific qualifications whatsoever, yet he managed to be elected to that powerful committee which was a thorn in the side of the conservation movement with many geologist members siding with industry. That achievement demonstrates not only the confidence and determination of John Busst but also shows how well respected he was among scientists for his efforts and his depth of understanding of the complexities of Reef science:

*A furious, ferocious battle is going on quietly behind the scenes - the result will emerge shortly in Press Headlines. I have now been elected a member of the Great Barrier Reef Committee. More later - if I live!!*

Correspondence Busst to cousin Dr John M Woodward J, 12 March 1968, courtesy Dorothy Woodward, Melbourne.

His use of media was ahead of its time. He met with journalists on his journeys south and wrote to them prolifically to achieve vital coverage. He formed his closest relationship with Barry Wain of *The Australian*:

*Wain wrote six articles in less than five weeks due to the Ellison Reef campaign. Busst maintained contact with Wain and sent him letters for publishing, briefed him on developments, and asked him to convince cartoonists Aubrey Colette and Bruce Petty to draw cartoons.*

Rohan Lloyd, Maxine Newlands & Theresa Petray, James Cook University.<sup>42</sup>

John's colourful personality, self-deprecating humour and use of colloquial language was a magnet for journalists. Barry Wain travelled to north Queensland to cover the Ellison Reef case and was in court for it all. John always understood that to win the campaign they needed to win widespread Australian and international support.

<sup>41</sup> Ford, Phoebe, 2011. *Consilience: Saving the Great Barrier Reef 1962 – 1975*. Honours thesis, University of Sydney, History Faculty. Accessed January 2021 at: [https://www.missionbeachcassowaries.com/uploads/5/9/8/7/5987112/ford\\_p\\_consilience.pdf](https://www.missionbeachcassowaries.com/uploads/5/9/8/7/5987112/ford_p_consilience.pdf)

<sup>42</sup> Lloyd, Rohan, Newlands, Maxine & Petray, Theresa, 2016. *Coral battleground? Re-examining the Save the Reef Campaign in 1960s Australia*. Environmental Sociology.

More than anyone, he understood the power of the union movement as well as the media. He worked with union leaders, Eddie Hegerl and ALP Senator Georges and it was the telling blow in the end:

*Meanwhile, John Busst applied pressure on the government and the oil drilling companies through mediation with the Trade Unions and potential legal avenues. His successful enlistment of the Trade Unions was also effective in generating public interest in the issue .... as was his use of the Press to disseminate information*

Annie Austin and Dr Jan Wegner, James Cook University.<sup>43</sup>

*On 13 January, a shaken Ampol announced the suspension of its Repulse Bay survey, and a month later their Japanese affiliate, Japex, cancelled the contract. 'Now at last,' John Busst declared, 'It has taken two and a half years to find the weapon.'*

Professor Iain McCalman, University of Sydney.<sup>44</sup>

John and Alison were financially generous. There is enough data to make a conservative approximation of costs paid by the Bussts for the Reef campaigns without including the value of their labour. John travelled widely to meet people. In one letter, he said he had travelled *8,000 miles* interstate in the last month.

Their costs of travel, accommodation, phone calls and legal fees are estimated at \$380,000 in 2020 dollars.

John possessed great determination and resolve.

He was diagnosed with a pre-cancerous condition of the larynx in late 1967, soon after he started his Reef activism. He travelled to Melbourne on several occasions for medical evaluations and treatment and was at times told to stop smoking and talking for a couple of weeks. Both constraints caused him much angst, yet he seldom mentioned his malady. He was deemed to have been cleared of the illness later, but it returned soon after.

He struggled considerably with this illness for the majority of the campaign but was always positive and uncomplaining and drove himself on despite his pain and incapacity. One of his close friends involved in the campaign said she was unsure of the cause of his death as he had not divulged his condition. He made an aside about it after returning from Melbourne on one occasion, but she dismissed that as one of his common, *macabre jokes*.

There is a much-cited court case involving the Bussts in 1960 which gives an indication of how determined John Busst was. When they sold part of Bedarra Island for £3,157 to the Halls, there was a clause in the contract that said the buyer was obliged to notify the seller if he or she sold the property. This clause enabled the Bussts to buy back the property if they wished to at the same price with adjustments for improvements and depreciation. Busst was seeking damages for breach of contract, saying Hall did not comply with the need to notify them before the sale. The case came to the Supreme Court of Queensland and John Busst lost it. He appealed in the High Court of Australia and won that in a split decision, 3/2. One cannot imagine the cost of such an embroiled legal challenge both in terms of money and stress, yet he ruthlessly pursued it to the end.

<sup>43</sup> Austin, Annie and Wegner, January 2007. *Defending Diversity: Strategies used by John Busst, Dr Len Webb and Geoff Tracey in the Conservation of North Queensland Habitats During the 1960s*, James Cook University, College of Arts, Social and Education. Downloaded January 2021 from <https://www.wettropicsplan.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Defending-diversity-Strategies-used-by-conservationists.pdf>

<sup>44</sup> McCalman, Iain, 2013. *The Reef: A Passionate History*. Penguin Viking.



While £3,157 (the sale price) sounds like a trifling amount, in 2020 dollars that is equivalent to \$100,000. However, that was not the amount at stake in the court case; a far smaller amount was being contested, so at face value it seems that John Busst was prepared to do practically anything to win, whatever the cost. This was a stand on principle as appeals in these two courts are highly expensive in any age. Furthermore, cases on contract law are usually complex and involve considerable court time and legal preparation.

The Hall v Busst case has been used as a precedent in several legal cases since and is often used in law student case studies. The Bussts will be long remembered in the law precinct as well as in environmental circles.

This case was probably John Busst's third involvement in the courts. The first was at only age 23 years in a widely reported high-society divorce case in Melbourne. He was named on charges of misconduct with 30 year-old Monica Mary Boileau (nee Sumners) the wife of the petitioner (Dr. Gilbert Boileau). Boileau eventually won his *decree nisi* in an appeal that Busst was not entangled in, but the judge in the initial case clearly saw Busst as complicit when he expressed his frustration at being unable to make him pay the petitioner's court costs.<sup>45</sup>

In his second court case, he initiated legal action against his *friend*, Noel Wood, while Wood was working in Europe. One can only wonder why he would take such dire action against a friend. They had some spectacular disputes. The first one was in 1940 when they lived together on Bedarra Island and it was all about a girl on Dunk Island who they both found attractive.<sup>46</sup> Guy Morrison wrote, *Paul's [Noel] got a girl on Brown [Dunk] Island and I'm pretty sure Merton's [Busst] been trespassing – he goes off in a dinghy – Paul hasn't got a dinghy, see?* And later Morrison added several references to the relationship being very fraught: *Relations between (them) became worse and worse. ... So much malice.*

In the early 1950s, when Noel was in Europe, Busst looked at a copy of the crude Wood land title and felt it was flawed as it was written informally. He took the opportunity to exploit that alleged flaw, hoping to win the 15 acres of land Noel Wood owned on Bedarra.<sup>47</sup> He tried to win title in court. However, Noel Wood won that case because John Busst had made an earlier legal agreement with him making it necessary to offer Busst first option on the land if Noel sold it. That demonstrated to the court that Busst had previously acknowledged Wood's legal ownership.

Busst's distasteful opportunism on that occasion was far from endearing yet his determination to win by whatever means possible was never in question as became increasingly evident during his Barrier Reef campaign.

John was also a powerful influencer.

How does anyone obtain significant face-to-face time with a Prime Minister or Opposition Leader let alone win their support or spend four hours with them as Busst did, for example, with Gough Whitlam? It's easy to understand in the case of his lifelong *chum*, Harold Holt, but he did the same thing more than once with John Gorton and Gough Whitlam. Personal correspondence with his cousin, Dr John M. Woodward Jr, reveals part of his *modus operandi*:

<sup>45</sup> Boileau Divorce Case, Full Court Hearing. *The Age*, 04 October 1933.

<sup>46</sup> Morrison, Guy, 1951. *We Shared an Island*, The Travel Book Club.

<sup>47</sup> Porter, James G; illustrated by Kerswell, Kath, 2000. *A Family of Islands: Dunk and Bedarra Island group, North Queensland*, Boolarong Publications.

*Battle for the Barrier Reef progressing furiously. Have just about persuaded the new P.M. Gorton to claim the Reef for Australia. Will be seeing him at Dunk Island on Monday. Had a productive four hour session with the Opposition [leader, Gough Whitlam] in Cairns yesterday – he is all in our favour. We also agreed to try to grab the Gulf of Carpentaria as well.*

Correspondence Busst to cousin Dr John M Woodward Jr, 02 September 1968, courtesy Dorothy Woodward, Melbourne.

John planned his approaches assiduously and started by writing to them, so he was not meeting them cold. As we see from the correspondence above, he had already all but won their favour before he met them. Nonetheless, achieving such rapport and personal contact with the three most senior politicians in the land at that time is an impressive achievement for anyone not in politics.

*John Busst's strong persuasive manner, his overall confidence in dealing with high profile politicians and businessmen, his uncompromising determination and business-like approach were fundamental to his success as a campaigner.*

Annie Austin and Dr Jan Wegner, James Cook University.<sup>48</sup>

*Thanks largely to Busst, the Reef began to occupy a large place in the minds of those in Canberra.*

Phoebe Ford, University of Sydney.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Austin, Annie and Wegner, January 2007. *Defending Diversity: Strategies used by John Busst, Dr Len Webb and Geoff Tracey in the Conservation of North Queensland Habitats During the 1960s*, James Cook University, College of Arts, Social and Education. Downloaded January 2021 from <https://www.wettropicsplan.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Defending-diversity-Strategies-used-by-conservationists.pdf>

<sup>49</sup> Ford, Phoebe, 2011. *Consilience: Saving the Great Barrier Reef 1962 – 1975*. Honours thesis, University of Sydney, History Faculty. Accessed January 2021 at: [https://www.missionbeachcassowaries.com/uploads/5/9/8/7/5987112/ford\\_p\\_consilience.pdf](https://www.missionbeachcassowaries.com/uploads/5/9/8/7/5987112/ford_p_consilience.pdf)

## RAINFOREST

John Busst made some contributions to the campaigns to save north Queensland's rain forests.

However, he did not lead these campaigns. Len Webb did that. This was not the primary issue for John Busst, yet it was how he learned to be an effective conservation activist in the decade before he started the Save-the-Reef campaign.

The Reef was his consuming passion and that took 99 percent of his time, so while Busst spoke of his aspirations to save large tracts of rain forest,<sup>50</sup> the reality was he lacked the time and resources to do so and left that mainly to Len Webb. He encouraged and assisted Len Webb who was the lead activist on the rain forest campaigns. John's friendship with Prime Minister Holt helped Len Webb gain the funding he sought for a critical flora study (Len Webb AO and Geoff Tracey AM).

In 1979, in a letter, Alison Busst explained that she and John had decided to fight for Clump Mountain to be a National Park when they first arrived in Bingil Bay. Their interest in the environment was first evident in 1956 when they joined the Flora and Fauna Protectors Association and Alison conducted an informal study of bird life on Bedarra Island. However, they did not become full-on environmental activists until 1965 when John first set up the *Tropical Rainforest Preservation Committee*, an organization with one member, himself initially, and later three members. Then, in August 1966, he responded to suggestions to open an Innisfail branch of the WPSQ. John was its inaugural President. Judith Wright came to Innisfail amidst much fanfare and addressed the public meeting about the new branch.

John's assisting role in the Rainforest campaign was to encourage a more urgent, action-based approach. He implored Len to seek direct action by influencing senior politicians rather than take a long-term approach through education of the public. John and Len had robust discussions about the merits of different approaches to conservation activism. John said in a letter replying to Len Webb that, ... *on the subject of rainforest preservation, there is a need for action not education*. That letter included some more robust criticism of Len saying he was *soft* in his approach, yet the two had such a strong relationship that their alliance endured.

Finally, they agreed that it was better to do both, direct action and education.

A rainforest study was conducted by Len Webb and Geoff Tracey who went on to successfully preserve much of north Queensland's rainforests. Len applied for the funds and John helped encourage the Federal Government to fund it via his friend, Harold Holt. The rainforest work started in 1965 and momentum was shifting. Len Webb assessed the mood and felt that 1966 was the turning point for Australia's interest in conservation.

Following the flora study, Len Webb, with help from Judith Wright, was able to present a proposal to conserve some north Queensland rain forests. From then on, the game shifted and National Parks were formed with many levels of protection for the ancient rain forests.

John and Ali Busst took some small yet quite significant steps on rainforest protection on their own. The Army applied for a permit to use a small piece of rainforest for defoliation experiments at

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<sup>50</sup> Personal correspondence, Busst to Dr John Woodward Jr., 17 January 1968, courtesy of Dorothy Woodward, Melbourne.

McNamee Creek near Innisfail.<sup>51</sup> The application did not state what they wished to use the rainforest for and John was suspicious. Judith Wright<sup>52</sup> recalled, *John had swung into battle in his inimitably polite, even amusing, but dogged way. It took all his wiles and persistence to discover that it was wanted for defoliation experiments in connection with the Vietnam War. Barry Wain closed his article titled, The Bingil Bay Bastard, with, 'The Army lost that one to the Bastard'.* After this small success, John Busst had proudly awarded himself the title, *The Bingil Bay Bastard*.

If we look at John's personal actions regarding conservation of rain forests on his own property, his commitment to their preservation and protection looks less than convincing. Photos<sup>53</sup> of his house construction in Bingil Bay around 1960 were donated to Friends of Ninney Rise by Virginia Edlington, a relation of Alison Busst, who inherited her estate. Some of these show clearing and excavation that was incredibly brutal even by 1960 standards. He benched the site with an approximately eight metre sheer clay drop at the rear then cleared the site of minor vegetation right up to the edge of the escarpment at the seafront, clearing almost every tree that was blocking his sea view. Clay was pushed over the escarpment and erosion would have been extreme in a storm.

This clearing and excavation was far greater than needed for the home's construction. For example, he put an excavator over the escarpment and built a wide private access track to the beach. Was this merely the way it was done in 1960, or was that John Busst's way?

The photo below shows the result of similar careless excavation around the year 2000 with a massive orange clay bloom in the sea at Ninney Point arising from construction work in the area. We cannot apply standards of today to 1960, but the works done by the Bussts on their building site and the State-owned beachside land beside it would be harshly viewed today by any true rain forest conservationist.



The estate the Bussts left was later Heritage listed by the Queensland Government and is an enchanting property, now called Ninney Rise. The gardens are described by some in glowing terms, yet someone with a smattering of knowledge of the endemic flora can quickly see there are many weeds and exotic species such as lantana, morning glory and even thunbergia which have invaded the

<sup>51</sup> Correspondence, as cited earlier.

<sup>52</sup> Wright, Judith, 2014. *The Coral Battleground*. Spinifex Press. Page 188.

<sup>53</sup> Friends of Ninney Rise, *Virginia Edlington Collection*, (images) accessed January 2021 at <https://www.ninneyrise.com/virginia-edlington-collection.html>

land behind the house. Much of that may have been caused by the next owner, Kate Tode, who loved to plant exotics, but I cannot imagine that Len Webb would have left us such a garden.

The Bussts purchased Portion 19v (62 hectares) from Margaret Bunting in 1955 in Alison Busst's name. In 1971, Alison Busst sold rights to cut lumber from the ridges of Portion 19v. She was living alone and probably struggling to make ends meet after being left with limited liquidity. Alison still owned the house and much of the land, including most of Portion 19v. She sold a portion of the Ninney Rise land to Ginder and Hazel Schmidt in 1975 and in 1979 a New York philanthropist, Mrs Kate Tode, came to her rescue and purchased the rest of the Ninney Rise land and the house and allowed Alison to remain in the home thereafter.

Logging tracks were cut across the ridges on Portion 19v, some with quite sheer faces (still existing) and there were semi-permanent invasions of guinea grass and lantana that were preventing regrowth of the rainforest. These extensive logging tracks are apparent on cadastral maps.

Fortunately, the loggers did not access the rich deep valleys where the best quality trees are. On the ridges, cyclones wreak havoc periodically, so the trees there are usually younger. Further, the forest is quick to heal in areas where the weeds are not thick. By the time of cyclone Winifred in 1986, the tree stumps left by the loggers had all rotted down and disappeared. Later owners of lots subdivided from Portion 19v, Thelma and Ken Gray (the author) removed the thickets of lantana and guinea grass found on the land and replanted the forest with endemic species after carefully building a narrow-width and erosion free access road along the ridges where it had been cleared by Alison's loggers.

Ten cassowaries grazed the fruit on this rainforest floor daily in 2020. Owners of the land today observe that the cassowaries look entirely happy with the outcomes for Portion 19v which remains their home.

We assume that the Bussts would be well pleased with the outcomes for the 66 hectares of rainforest land they once owned. Approximately 40 hectares of it is now conserved in some way with 18 hectares being under a state nature retreat covenant and being used for a small backpacker resort with a maximum capacity of 70 people, ten hectares are under council conservation covenants and six hectares were donated by Mrs Kate Tode to the state for national parks use. 1.4 hectares ended up as a Council reserve in Plantation Drive and approximately three hectares became common conservation land in a group title for five homes.

Hence, 90% of their forest remains intact in 2020 and that outcome should endure long-term. There are only 31 homes built or planned on the 40 hectares of the land, so the density is incredibly low at only one home per 1.4 hectares, which is ideal for wildlife.

It has ended well for the rainforest once owned by Alison and John Busst despite some mistakes on the way.

## V O C A T I O N

Apart from his volunteer Reef conservation work, John Busst was sometimes referred to as an *artist*. However, his inner circle of friends did not regard him as an artist or certainly not as an artist of any note. The evidence shows that he was not a professional artist however you define that term and while he had the desire to be one, he had neither the skill nor the discipline needed.

One could readily assume that the reason he was commonly referred to as *an artist* stemmed from his friends' embarrassment when asked what he did in life. He had no other vocation after spending a few days as a journalist. On reflection though, to be a successful activist, he could not easily be described to high-level people or the wider world as a *rich, fun loving playboy* or similar. He needed credibility and a basic mindset of many Australians is that people of good character usually have a job unless they are retired. Hence, it suited the cause to embellish things a little and assign to him a noble vocation. So, the Wildlife Protection Society of Queensland team comprised a *Poet* (Judith Wright), an *Ecologist* (Len Webb) and .... a *Practical Artist* (John Busst). Some may snigger at the pretensions of the latter title, yet it served a purpose.

John worked as a journalist for four days at *The Argus* newspaper in Melbourne in 1930 at age 21 before giving that away. After assisting with the construction of buildings at Monsalvat commune he worked in a forge for a short while and learned to paint. For the next 10 years though, there is a blank in his documented history and he was probably at the commune. The only public record of that period is his infamous involvement in a high-society divorce case.

Most people who knew John Busst, or wrote about him, were polite about his art so they either used qualifiers like, *practical artist* or referred to it as a *bobby* or more often did not speak of his art at all. Phoebe Ford, in her thesis had no difficulty in stating that Judith Wright was an accomplished and well recognized poet and that Len Webb was a well-qualified and successful ecologist yet she balked at saying John Busst was an *artist* and certainly did not say he was a skilled or successful artist. She indicated that John aspired to being an artist though and that in the early days he modelled his life and philosophy on that of Melbourne artist Colin Colahan.

John's burial plaque in Tully cemetery declares: *Artist and Conservationist ...* His co-activist friend, Judith Wright, placed a memorial plaque on the rocks at the north end of Bingil Bay saying, *In memory of John H Busst – Artist and Lover of Beauty Who Fought that Man and Nature Might Survive.*

An obituary in *The Australian* 06 April 1971 said, *The rarely photographed Mr Busst did not sell many of his paintings. His income was mainly from returns on investments of family inheritance.*

While staying for two months in Melbourne with the Holts in 1950, just before his marriage, John Busst spoke to Frank Doherty, a writer for a gossip column in *The Australasian Post* about his life and art. Bold as brass, John was happy to be spoken of in the same sentences as Gauguin and van Gogh, probably without even blushing. The article said, *A Modern Gauguin ... Island Hermit is going to wed after all.* Busst says, *Many people, when first they saw the vivid colours of Gauguin's paintings, criticised them, saying they were overdone. People have said the same of my work too – that there are no blues as blue as those I paint, no greens as lush, and no yellows as rich.*



John Busst 1950 age 41 just before marriage (*The Australasian Post*, 13 July 1950). Trove.

His mate, Len Webb described Busst as, *a practical artist who built his own home and furniture but who struggled to capture the thousand hues of the sea in his art*. That was a polite way of saying he was not an artist. It is what is *not* said by people though that has more meaning than what is said. People around him did not critique his work, for no one really took it seriously apart from his close *chum*, Harold Holt. They used qualifiers to the word to indicate he was not an artist or said nothing to save confronting a proud man who took himself far more seriously as an artist than the world did.

The region's famed artist, Noel Wood though pulled no punches and said simply,<sup>54</sup> that John was a *... lousy painter but a good drinker!*

Working as an artist usually means that your works are at some stage acknowledged by art critics. The one time that an art critic mentioned John Busst's work, the words were scathing.



Laurence Thomas, *The Herald* 24 April 1950. Trove.

Among the barbs it does say, *There are patches of good painting*. Unfortunately for John Busst's aspirations as an artist, this critic who reviewed his exhibition was the notable Laurie Thomas who in the following year would pose for artist Ivor Hele and that painting won the Archibald Prize for 1951. This review would have been devastating for John Busst.

<sup>54</sup> Morrison, Guy, 1951. *We Shared an Island*, The Travel Book Club. Page 17.





Ivor Hele's 1951 Archibald Prize portrait of art critic Laurie Thomas (Art Gallery NSW).

You would also expect that John would have many paintings in circulation and in galleries if he were working as an artist. However, a search of the web reveals there are only a few remnants of art attributed to John Busst existing. The one work that people cite as evidence that he was an artist is a self-portrait that was owned by Cardwell environmentalist Margaret Thorsborne. That gives us some clues about how John Busst saw himself as it is a romanticised version of his image. There is also a black and white portrait of a woman (Dame Zara Holt) and a clown-like figure plus a few landscapes inside his home and with Virginia Edlington who inherited the art he left.



Virginia Edlington with a Busst landscape donated to Friends of Ninney Rise. Image from Friends of Ninney Rise.

There is no evidence either that John made a living from his art or sold many works. There are no independent citations on the Internet of Busst's art being sold locally or internationally.

An article in the *Cairns Post* in September 1952 and another similar one in 1953 mentioned many people including Wood who exhibited art at the annual *Cairns Art Society's* exhibition. John was one of many art dabblers who showed their art there.

Harold Holt was his only friend who is quoted as saying he regarded John's art well. He secured an exhibition for John in the *Stanley Coe Gallery*, a commercial gallery in Melbourne. However, there is no mention of that exhibition in the records of that ephemeral gallery and Busst is not mentioned in the list of artists exhibited by its curator, Helen Ogilvie.

Some suggest that he exhibited at the *Cairns Gallery* in 2014 and *Perc Tucker Gallery* in 2013 when Ross Searle exhibited the works of artists who had lived on the Family Group of Islands. If John were an artist at all he would certainly have been featured in these exhibitions. The works of many local island-based artists were shown: Noel Wood, Yvonne Cohen, Valerie Albiston (the main exhibitors) plus some by Fred Williams, Bruce Arthur, Roy Dalgarno, Joseph Brown and Deanna Conti. No works of John Busst were exhibited. His name, along with Helen Wiltshire's, was mentioned in passing in

an extensive text in the exhibition catalogue, yet their works were passed over and not included. Helen did however sell much of her artwork during her life (and posthumously) but John did not.

None of John Busst's works are held by public galleries. An online site named *Australia and New Zealand Art Sales Digest* lists 420,000 works by 12,100 artists so if John Busst was an artist we should find him listed there. Not known. Noel Wood, Yvonne Cohen, Valerie Albiston, Roy Dalgarno and Helen Wiltshire are listed with several works each, but not John Busst.

A site named *Design and Art Australia Online* lists Australia's artists with their associates, exhibitions and collections. There we find Noel Wood again and none of his exhibitions were conducted alongside John Busst and Busst is not named among his many listed associates. On that site we also find Yvonne Cohen, Roy Dalgarno and Valerie Albiston. John Busst is not mentioned as an artist or even an associate of any local artists on that site.

It is probable that if John had conformed with conservative society norms and held down a regular job he would never have come to north Queensland let alone achieved the great things he did. However, it would be difficult for his co-activists to introduce him to senior politicians and influencers. One could imagine starting with, *Hi Gough, this is my good friend John Busst. Fun guy! We're drinking buddies.* It was probably better to start with something like ... *my good friend John Busst - an artist from Bedarra Island.*

The forces that railed against Reef conservation were strong and miners described the environmentalists as irrational people or layabouts in order to discredit their opinions. It therefore helped to look legitimate.

John Busst has also been spoken of as a leader of cyclone-proof home design. He was neither an architect nor a house designer and in reality his *ad lib* house designs were no better than many other homes in the Mission Beach district that survived three cyclones from 1986 to 2011. His experience with mud brick and bamboo home building on Bedarra (three years in the making) and at Monsalvat in Victoria was significant yet was never going to influence main-stream building trends, but he contributed to improving those seldom used designs. Very few mud brick homes are built in Australia today, yet it was a fad in the 1960s and 70s in places. Mudbrick homes are commonplace in countries such as India, but the bricks start to erode after 30 years and are handmade, so it is rare that builders use that medium in Australia. The Bedarra Island mudbrick home he built was destroyed in 1980 and Ninney Rise was half built by Kate Tode.

John Busst could be described as a highly successful *Great Barrier Reef conservationist*. That was for four years of his 62-year life, yet that time was enough to make a far more indelible and important mark on the planet than the vast majority of humans could ever dream of.

While he did not end up leaving money or land to National Parks or similar, he spent considerable amounts of money and masses of volunteer hours to save the Reef. That would fit the definition of philanthropy. That term usually implies donations to good causes, yet it does include spending your own funds to promote a cause or achieve positive outcomes for a cause.

John was adept at seeking funding and in-kind assistance for the cause as well. He was able to have the air travel for the marine biologists to survey Ellison Reef paid for by TAA, an Australian airline at the time. Local reef launch owner, Perry Harvey, provided the divers with daily supplies from his Reef boat without charge and Avis provided hire cars (all organized by John). John and Alison

provided the base camp and food and entertainment in the evenings. Innisfail solicitor, Les Arnell, appreciated what John was doing for the Reef and provided considerable *pro bono* advice.

*Great Barrier Reef conservationist and philanthropist* is an apt description of John Busst.

Yet there was so much more to him than that, and the largely untold stories of his partying, drinking, chain-smoking, dreaming, arguing, appreciating art and music with friends and his endless enjoyment of life are an important part of this man's life.

## ALISON BUSST

To most people she knew, Alison Busst was referred to as *Ali*.

One may ask what role Alison played in the Reef rescue. Most are well aware of how males have, throughout history, managed to take credit for nearly everything including the achievements of females such as their spouses. Clara Schumann always comes to mind, yet there are countless examples of this and female authors not so long ago used male pen names to gain publication.

It is usually said that John Busst saw an advertisement in a local paper for mining coral from Ellison Reef and that sparked off the Save the Reef campaign. That was not so. Alison Busst saw the advertisement and drew it to John's attention. Not much is written of Ali Busst's actions in the Reef campaign, yet reading the fine print, one can readily see that she was a significant contributor. Her passion equalled John's and her actions were different yet also vital to the cause.

In a letter to Len Webb early in the Ellison Reef defence, John Busst wrote to his friend Len Webb crying for help and added, *You got me into this, you bastard – and I am enjoying every moment of it, so is Ali, who is even more ferocious (if possible) than I am!*

When John took actions, there was often much work to do in organizing people to travel etc. and following things up. Ali did most of that logistical and administration work. She organized the catering and entertainment when the many Bingil Bay meetings and stopovers occurred. No doubt she was the one to pick up the pieces after John's drunken binges and there would have been much pain and endurance required on her part when John was drinking heavily.

In his correspondence with close relatives, John claimed that it was Alison who was the alcoholic in the family, but we know John certainly struggled at times with alcoholism. In a letter to a solicitor in 1968, he described himself as *a somewhat miraculously reformed drunk* and from the family correspondence we know Alison was a very heavy drinker too.

Alison travelled internationally with Dame Zara Holt on one occasion to seek the assistance of the World Wildlife Fund. That venture was unsuccessful, yet Alison did her best no doubt. It is difficult to see what she did for the cause in total, yet I imagine that it was probably far more than we will ever know.

John Busst was single minded about the Reef and one suspects that he had little time to plan for Alison's economic well-being after his death. He knew it was coming for he was diagnosed with a pre-cancerous growth in his throat in late 1967 so had time to plan and ensure that Ali would have sufficient income to continue a comfortable life. Indications are that Reef campaign always took precedence over his family life.

On John's death, Alison first tried to earn a living by logging her forest then started to subdivide and sell the land so it all ended well with the sale of most of the land before Alison died.

There is no doubt though that this fine couple endured significant periods of conflict and prolonged separations late in their lives. The campaign took its toll.

## LEGACY

Few humans achieve a fraction of what John Busst did in his life, particularly in his last four years. With his wife Alison and his fellow environmental activists, John was one of the key conservation leaders who eventually convinced the Australian Government to ban mining and oil exploration on the Great Barrier Reef. He died before this objective was fully reached yet it was largely complete before his death. He only began being an operational activist in 1965 and was not involved in Reef politics fully until August 1967, so he unknowingly had less than four years of his life remaining to frantically make this all happen.

His friends, at Alison's request, placed a plaque on a beachside boulder at Bingil Bay. Local conservationists applied for and won a Queensland Heritage listing for the Busst home, yet John Busst was not awarded any of the medals or honours that would invariably be bestowed on such an incredible contributor to the nation.

John Busst's legacy could be summarised as:

- John, with the help of a strong supporting team, saved Ellison Reef from coral mining. John and Ali Busst initiated that action and spent their own funds on the defence. The Queensland Littoral Society and Wildlife Protection Society of Queensland supported John and wrote separate objections to the development application. This was a major win for the Reef and much of the credit for it rests firmly with John Busst.
- His largest achievement was the part he played in stopping oil exploration on the Reef. That was largely won by the time of his death. He was the main protagonist, with Judith Wright's assistance, to cause the Reef enquiry that ended up as the all-important Royal Commission. With Judith Wright, he effectively co-led the WPSQ component of the Save-the-Reef campaign and while many feel the battle was only temporarily won most would say the miners and oil companies will find it difficult, if not impossible, to overturn. Yes, there are other threats to the Reef today not the least of which is global warming. That will take longer to fix and not be as quick to resolve.
- John, with the WPSQ team (and others), successfully awakened the world to the global value of the Great Barrier Reef and that greatly assists future campaigns to save the Reef from further threats.
- The team's success in saving the Reef culminated in the formation of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Authority which was the mechanism for achieving his long-time dream to have the Commonwealth assert sovereignty over the Reef. John Busst did not deliver that outcome entirely, but he and his co-activists undoubtedly paved the way and made the necessary prerequisites happen.

Would the Reef have been saved without John and Alison Busst's skilled and energetic intervention? Hindsight indicates that the Reef would, ultimately, still have been rescued. Continuous reef and ocean oil spills and drilling blowouts were in the news often as the campaign expanded and, even without environmental organizations fanning the flames of discontent, this was news that created strong changes in public opinion. Large Alaskan and Californian oceanic oil disasters caused intense headlines for long periods. In March 1970, when an Ampol tanker, the *Oceanic Grandeur*, ran aground

in the Torres Strait and spewed oil across six square miles of the Reef, public opinion in Australia hardened quickly and permanently against drilling on the Great Barrier Reef. Soon after, newspapers were covering a fire in the Gulf of Mexico. This fire was extinguished by dynamite blasts, but the oil kept gushing out into the sea; out of control.

In 1968, an engineer, Louis Salzman, who had worked on an oil rig for five months in Santa Barbara, California, and witnessed the massive oil spills there first-hand, wrote to the press with many photos attached. A rig, the *E. W. Thornton*, was now on Swain Reefs on the GBR and Louis had worked there too. He had read evidence given by Queensland state's Mining Engineer, Mr Morley, to a Senate Select Committee saying the Santa Barbara blowouts had not affected marine life. Louis was highly indignant and described the massive environmental devastation that the Santa Barbara events had caused (and were continuing to do so). He went on to say,<sup>55</sup> *Australia has something that exists nowhere else on the face of the earth. The idea that anyone would take the remotest chance of damaging the Reef is absolutely beyond belief ... Perhaps Mr Morley should visit California and see for himself.*

In 1969, the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland ran a state-wide poll on Reef oil-drilling. The total (nearly 5,000 votes) was 94% against drilling. The tide had turned against drilling. In 1970, WPSQ gained an influx of new members and opened five new branches. Their membership quickly rose to 1,600.

Most likely, John Busst, Gough Whitlam, Judith Wright and Eddie Hegerl made the most difference for the Reef at this time and Queensland's trade unions played a key role with their black bans on oil-drilling, giving politicians the time they needed to generate permanent solutions to make the Reef safe.

If the Bussts had not intervened, it would have taken a lot longer to achieve and the oil rigs would have started drilling for a time. Ellison Reef would have been destroyed. I feel sure though, that even without John and Alison, Gough Whitlam would have slammed the door shut on the miners and oil companies in the early 1970s. However, there would have been considerable damage done to the Reef before that if John had not made the effective call to action in 1967 then worked hard with the unions to buy time via the black ban.

Public opinion was turning quickly in the late 1960s and early 70s and environmental movements were emerging all over the world, so it was bigger than any nation, organization or individual. It is doubtful that Gough Whitlam heard of the threats to the Reef only from John's letters or interviews. He was quick to read public opinion and understand the gravity of significant issues and whether he was awakened by John Busst first we do not really know. By late 1967, he was already asking questions about the Reef in parliament and that was before he met John Busst.

Malcolm Fraser, who would follow Gough Whitlam as Prime Minister, was also well aware of the campaign and in early 1968 he said that his government regarded the Reef as a priceless asset, and it would<sup>56</sup> *use all the powers it had to prevent the Reef from being despoiled*. Both sides of Federal Parliament were keenly aware of the issue and its political impacts soon after the campaign began and when it came time for legislation to protect the Reef, there was an unusual bipartisan approach.

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<sup>55</sup> Wright, Judith, 1977. *The Coral Battleground*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Spinifex. Page 67.

<sup>56</sup> As above, page 62.

Generating political action and necessary new legislation, even for an urgent crisis like a threat to the Reef, is difficult. It always will be. It takes an inordinate time to execute the many essential steps and to persuade legislators to make such vital changes.

There is no doubt that the Bjelke-Petersen Government in Queensland was determined to develop the Reef and was little concerned about the real risks that mining and oil exploration posed for the Reef. John Busst was the first one to halt that madness. One could liken the Ellison Reef trial to the Battle of the Coral Sea in WWII. The Bussts won the crucial first Reef battle at Ellison Reef for the nation and for the planet.

Overall, John and Alison Busst had a strong and effective voice and were a potent, dominant force among the large coalition that won the ensuing campaign to save the Reef from mining and oil-drilling.

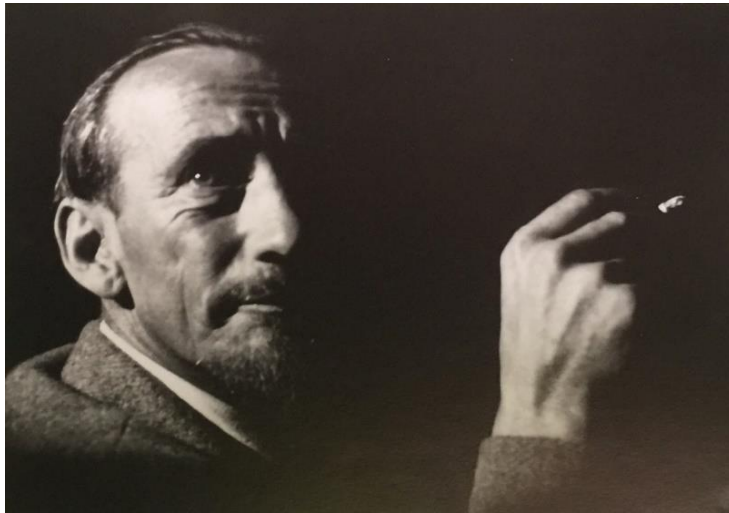
*He has a stone ... in front of his old home [on the beach] ... I wrote a few words to be engraved on it, and I am proud that they are there:*

**JOHN BUSST**

**ARTIST AND LOVER OF BEAUTY**

**WHO FOUGHT THAT MAN AND NATURE MIGHT SURVIVE"**

Judith Wright, poet, co-conservationist, historian, first President WPSQ.<sup>57</sup>



Photos of John are from the Friends of Ninney Rise Virginia Edlington Collection.

## John Horatio Busst 1909 – 1971

Philanthropist, Leading Great Barrier Reef Conservationist.  
Saved the Reef from mining and oil exploration.

<sup>57</sup> Wright, Judith, 1977. *The Coral Battleground*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Spinifex. Page 190.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This small story had its beginnings back in 1991 when my wife, Thelma Gray and I purchased 16 acres of beachside rainforest land at Brookes Beach, north Queensland. We knew the beach well and had seen the land from a distance yet had never ventured onto the land. We knew it was wild, steep, heavily forested land and figured we would find a way to build a home there somehow. We had no idea of the challenges that would present, yet we prevailed and moved into our home in 1994 to share this idyllic place with the trees, cassowaries, butterflies, birds and insects that live in this ancient rainforest.

We came to live in the Mission Beach area early in 1993 and as we began to build the road, water and power infrastructure for our home, we spoke to people about previous owners of this land and learned of its rich heritage. My parents visited us while we were building and were mortified to see what a challenge the site was. Our friends called it *Jurassic Park* yet they soon saw the reasons we chose to become owners of this precious land; for a short time in its history.

The land had been owned by Alison Busst who lived on the other side of the hill in a home on the beachfront on Bingil Bay. We knew little of the Bussts who had long since died, but over time we started asking about them then slowly researched their history in more depth.

In 2020, when I agreed to be Secretary of the newly formed, Mission Beach Historical Society, I began to document this history and as the story evolved I was amazed that John Busst had never been recognized despite leading one of the most successful environmental campaigns ever embarked upon. He had saved the Great Barrier Reef yet received no formal recognition of his achievements whatsoever.

I looked at the Order of Australia (Companion, Officer, Member or Medal) process but found they cannot be applied posthumously. However, the Premier of Queensland has the '*Queensland Greats Awards*' which started in the year 2000 and on six occasions these have been awarded posthumously. The Society was hoping to rectify the Busst anomaly and have this incredible environmentalist recognized.

The awards are well organized and have clear guidelines and the first step was to identify who John Busst's next of kin were, for they must support any nominations. Sounds simple, but his parents left no living descendants at all so we had to explore the cousins in the family trees which was more difficult.

We found them from John Bussts paternal and maternal families. Thanks to the amazing genealogical research already conducted by Jean Ffrench of Canberra, we located the next of kin. Jean's mother had been the Secretary of the Wildlife Protection Society of Queensland at Innisfail when John was there and Jean met John personally on many occasions when she was a teenager and she has relayed many stories. Jean also gave us access to rich materials from her mother's recollections of those times and this was valuable foundation research.

Dorothy Woodward, now living in Melbourne, had married John Busst's cousin, Dr. John Michael Woodward, and provided highly valuable correspondence between him and John Busst. We are deeply indebted to both Jean Ffrench and Dorothy Woodward and to her son Joe for the start they

gave us on this search for the truth from over 50 years ago. They provided much needed certainty on many aspects of our search.

*Ancestry.com.au* was a vital tool for this search and we soon found the closest Busst relatives in Emerald, Queensland. David and Wayne Busst and their family welcomed our surprise intrusion into their lives and eagerly encouraged us to seek out the answers needed to achieve due recognition for their cousin John.

From that point, we extensively used the newspaper search tools provided by *Trove* which provided a rich and rewarding source of information.

Many people who had worked with John and Ali or had known them or known people who worked with them also embraced our research openly and offered all the assistance they possibly could. Some of the key people involved were:

- Eddie Hegerl AO, Director Marine Ecosystems Policy Advisors, and his wonderful partner, Diane Tarte, who were vital to our research and award nomination,
- Professor Iain McCalman AO, author and historian, a fabulous researcher in the Reef field who will one day we hope finish this story off properly,
- Dr Charlie Veron, Australia's eminent Coral researcher,
- Friends of Ninney Rise Secretary, Sandal Hayes who made the story possible, without Sandal and the Friends of Ninney Rise Collections I cannot see how the project could have been completed properly,
- Tony O'Malley Rainforest Project Leader at Terrain Natural Resources Management, who was a major researcher of the Reef conservation movement and applied for the Ninney Rise home to be Heritage listed,
- Des Boyland, Secretary of WPSQ QLD, who provided a very useful reference for the project,
- Political Scientist, Maxine Newlands of James Cook University Townsville who was one of the James Cook University Team who uncovered the MO of John Busst and the reasons for his amazing success,
- Rohan Lloyd the author of that compelling sociology thesis that Maxine was involved in creating.
- Meredith McKinney, daughter of Judith Wright, who gave us vital insights as well,
- Jan Petroff, daughter of Len Webb, who also provided essential reference testimony,
- Brenda Harvey, OAM, wife of Perry Harvey (deceased) who helped John Busst in his Ellison Reef survey by supplying the scientific dive team,
- Suzanne Smith, Secretary of WPSQ Cassowary Coast-Hinchinbrook Branch, who also supported the nomination.

Penelope Goward, fellow member of the Mission Beach Historical Society, bravely took on my rough manuscript and did a fabulous job of editing it. A few colloquialisms remain despite her eagle

eye and my excuse for not accepting all of her excellent advice is that John Busst used colourful colloquial language himself so he would probably forgive me.

We were unsuccessful in our application for a *Queensland Greats Award* for John Busst for reasons unknown. We made another application in 2022 with the same disappointing outcome. Perhaps it was too far in the past for the judging panel to come to grips with, but one day this man's huge achievements must be recognized.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

ACF	Australian Conservation Foundation
ALP	Australian Labor Party
AO	Officer of the Order of Australia
AM	Member of the Order of Australia
CSIRO	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Organization
GBR	Great Barrier Reef
GBRC	Great Barrier Reef Committee
GBRMPA	Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority
NQ	North Queensland
OAM	Medal of the Order of Australia
PM	Prime Minister
UQ	University of Queensland
QLS	Queensland Littoral Society, now known as Australian Marine Conservation Society
WPSQ	Wildlife Protection Society of Queensland

## APPENDIX 1: THE WIDER CAMPAIGN

Phoebe Ford's thesis focuses on the Wildlife Protection Society of Queensland and their three primary activists in the Reef and rainforest campaigns.

While the WPSQ activists led the campaign, they were one of many organizations and individuals actively involved. The main organizations that were campaigning during that period were:

- Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland (WPSQ formed by Judith Wright and others in 1962).
- Queensland Littoral Society (QLS formed in 1965 by Eddie Hegerl at UQ) later to be named the Australian Marine Conservation Society. Eddie also started the Queensland Conservation Council in July 1969 and used this to influence change.
- Save the Reef Committee (formed in 1968 by ALP Senator George Georges).
- Great Barrier Reef Committee (GBRC formed in 1922, a group of scientists).
- Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF, formed 1965).
- Trade Unions, including the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU), Transport Workers Union (TWU) and the Queensland Trades and Labour Council.
- *The Australian* newspaper (provided much of the publicity for the campaign)

The role of each organization and the relative importance of their contributions is not always easy to elucidate for they all pitch a different story to emphasise their own impacts. The WPSQ were one of the most effective and well supported conservation organizations during the Reef campaign.

The QLS were also involved early when Judith Wright, President of WPSQ, asked for their help on the Ellison Reef case. John Busst was foundering in the court case because he was not qualified as an expert scientific or environmental witness. Judith contacted Eddie Hegerl and fellow marine science-zoology postgraduates of UQ to conduct a five day, 30 man-hour survey of Ellison Reef. When you read the web-site of the AMCS it says, ... *we legally contested and successfully defeated an application to mine coral on the Great Barrier Reef* ... Clearly that was not entirely so. QSL founder and marine scientist, Eddie Hegerl, was the leader of the dive team who provided the necessary evidence that Ellison Reef was alive so they were essential to this court case, but it was John Busst who contested the application and led the case. Having said that, QSL were vital contributors throughout the Reef campaign and Eddie Hegerl devoted himself almost full-time to the cause for several years.

The Save the Reef Committee were always in sync with the WPSQ and they certainly helped the cause.

The Great Barrier Reef Committee (GBRC) were a group of scientists with a goal to protect the Reef yet with no statutory backing, so their recommendations were often ignored by the Queensland Government and they, like the organizations mentioned above, were not well funded. At the start, when the Ellison Reef case surfaced this group did not support John Busst or the WPSQ and they suggested that controlled exploitation of Ellison Reef was both permissible and inevitable. However, one of their members, a medico, Dr Barnes, joined John Busst at the trial and tried to provide testimony, but he was not regarded as an expert witness by the Warden either. The problem for

GBRC was that many of their members were geologists who supported proposals to exploit the Reef, so they were conflicted. They said Ellison Reef was dead and were offended when Eddie Hegerl and Don McMichael proved that was not so. The chair of the GBRC, Bob Endean, withdrew from the Reef debate and concentrated his efforts on Crown of Thorns rather than oil-drilling.

In August 1969, at the Committee's annual conference, delegates heard from Professor Joe Cornell on the disastrous Santa Barbara oil spills. He explained that the slick was over 100 miles long and after six and a half months and massive resources being applied to the clean-up, oil was still gushing out of the well. His credentials were impeccable, yet the GBR Committee still prevaricated. Towards the end of the Reef campaign the Committee supported the campaign to save the Reef, but for much of the campaign they were not a positive force.

The Australian Conservation Foundation was the national conservation group with the greatest ability to secure a positive outcome for the Reef. They were better funded than any conservation organizations. John Busst was an ACF member but not a member of the ACF Council (Judith Wright and Len Webb were). John sought election on their Council once and did not win but was granted access to Council meetings later in the campaign. There are vastly differing opinions on the ACF's role and its impacts during this period. Judith Wright saw them as being severely conflicted suggesting that they did not want to rock the boat with their sponsors (governments and industry) for fear of losing funding. The ACF at their 1969 symposium argued that they must be balanced and include all sides of the debate. A Sydney conservationist, Milo Dunphy, who later invigorated the ACF, recalled his frustrations with them when he was drafted onto the ACF executive in 1969: *I .... thought, good grief, this thing is pretending to be a national conservation organization and it isn't. It's just an old boy brigade.*

The ACF was undoubtedly conservative at the time and was losing membership quickly with many people feeling it was not up with public opinion, let alone leading it. When its first President, Sir Garfield Barwick (ex-High Court judge) retired, he said, *the Foundation must continue to eschew spectacular protest and undue emotional involvement.* Reef author James Bowen saw the ACF very differently to Judith Wright of the WPSQ when he stated, *the ACF symposium on the Reef held in May 1969 was a conservation event of great national significance and one of the most important contributions to conservation of the Reef.*

Judith Wright did not attend the ACF symposium such was her level of disappointment with this event and the way it was planned. She was outraged at the agenda and the amount of time given to industry and other pro-exploitation speakers and the lack of time for feedback from others or input from conservationists. John Busst was scathing after unsuccessfully attempting to make amendments to the major motion of the ACF symposium.

My reading of it all is that the ACF made it difficult for the WPSQ and QSL conservationists at the time, yet the ACF strategy was to be patient and seek a legal outcome rather than a scientific one. That is, they followed President Sir Garfield's lead and asked the Commonwealth to legislate to gain Commonwealth sovereignty over the seas (and Reef) and that would lead to a High Court challenge and the necessary changes. The WPSQ agreed on that point but wanted much more and asked to have the governments stop oil drilling now and thereafter until an independent scientific study had been implemented.

In the end, the legal solution was implemented by the Commonwealth and that was what achieved the goals of the movement rather than a scientific survey.



We must not forget that the ACF contributed significantly early in the campaign by providing the WPSQ and John Busst with the expert witness they had to have to win the court case and stop coral mining. They sent their Director, Don McMichael, who was highly respected and perfectly qualified and he provided some of the telling testimony that won the case. They certainly contributed effectively to the overall scheme of things.

Trade Unions, including, most notably, the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU), Transport Workers Union (TWU) and the Queensland Trades and Labour Council were incredibly important and effective in this campaign. Their actions were popular, even outside Australia. The AEU worked first with John Busst and put up a proposal to ban mining and oil-drilling on the GBR (among other things). The TWU took this to the Queensland Trades and Labour Council and in January 1970 the Council issued a black-ban by all affiliated unions on oil-drilling on the Reef. That was incredibly important and a game changer. This action stopped the impending oil drilling at Mackay in its tracks and gave the whole save-the-Reef campaign time to enact permanent solutions. It was not until 1976 that the Fraser Government finalised and appointed the GBRMPA, so the union bans kept the Reef safe while the world awaited the Federal Government legislation and its full enactment. These unions saved the day and John Busst was the main person who approached them and worked with them to develop their proposals and achieve this vital steppingstone.

In summary, there were many individuals who made considerable contributions to this campaign. This was not a coordinated campaign where all organizations and individuals sang from the same song-sheet or agreed on the best strategies. That is, there was not one person who led it all and masterminded the broad campaign despite many claims that there was.

Judith Wright and Phoebe Ford made a strong case for the primary leader being John Busst. That is very credible; he was the one leader who had most influence and impact. The Sydney Environment Institute's Iain McCalman acknowledges the role of John Busst yet says, *Between 1965 and 1975 Judith Wright led a successful popular war to save the Great Barrier Reef*. I would add Eddie Hegerl and conclude that there were three significant Reef campaign leaders, John Busst, Judith Wright and Eddie Hegerl with Busst being the major player. Between them they had many significant wins and influenced many important people in their different ways.

There were several other significant leaders, influencers and actors, some achieving more than others yet the whole effort was what made it effective. Some of the other prime leaders, influencers and actors apart from John and Judith were (not in any order):

- Gough Whitlam, PM. Also, before him, Harold Holt, PM and John Gorton, PM. All strongly supported the need to act and protect the Reef from mining and oil-drilling. Gough Whitlam committed strongly to acting on Reef protection at both the 1969 and 1972 elections raising the profile of the campaign immensely.
- Eddie Hegerl, UQ marine scientist, President QLS, led the biological survey of Ellison Reef then advocated thereafter throughout the campaign. In particular, Eddie ensured that the whole of the GBR area was included in the new Marine Park and that took many years of persistent advocacy to achieve. Eddie had a role in the campaign to achieve a union black-ban and spoke to several large union gatherings with John..

- Don McMichael, first Director of the ACF, who also worked for NSW National Parks, was an expert witness at the Ellison Reef trial and later led the Commonwealth tasks to implement the Royal Commission recommendations and deliver on the GBRMPA Bill.
- Vince Serventy was a dedicated and effective publicist who became editor of WPSQ's *Wildlife* magazine where he was able to communicate widely and effectively influence public opinion. He organized an important news conference for WPSQ and wrote key articles and aided John Busst when drafting the ACF Symposium motion amendments. Judith Wright underlined the importance of such media when she said, *In the end it was the overwhelming public hostility to drilling that won the day.*
- Patricia Mather, Secretary, Great Barrier Reef Committee, UQ Zoologist, drafted a Bill for the statutory authority. She also played an important role in the Royal Commission working hard to circulate documents for comment by scientists and made statements to the press on occasions.
- Senator George Georges was also influential at times via his Save the Reef Committee and created much public concern via the Parliament. He worked closely with John Busst when he was working with the unions to achieve the black-ban on oil rigs.
- American marine scientists, such as Fred Grassle, Joe Connell and Thomas Lovell provided expert advice, support and advocacy. So too did Australian scientists such as the QLS and marine biologist Frank Talbot of the Australian Museum who was on the GBR Committee executive. Frank summed up the ACF Symposium of 1969. Des Connell, Griffith University, President of QLS, was another Australian scientist who made important contributions by speaking to conventions and publishing articles.
- Sir Garfield Barwick, President ACF and past High Court judge obviously had much passion for the cause and great influence. He and Sir Percy Spender (President of the International Court of Justice) provided important advice on the ownership of Australia's coastal waters. Both stated that the state's rights ended at the low-water mark and that a High Court case needed to be initiated to give the Commonwealth certainty and control of the sea and seabed, including the Reef. Sir Percy stated that clearly at the ACF Symposium in May 1969.
- Barry Wain of *The Australian* was the journalist who did most for the cause. Among other things, he went to north Queensland in 1967 and covered the story of the Ellison Reef survey. He wrote an obituary for John Busst. Just before the trade unions imposed their black-ban on oil-drilling, *The Australian* announced, *The black ban will have an unprecedented measure of public support and will probably succeed. It deserves to.*