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# Coal Mining: A Substantial Component Of Queensland's Diverse Economy

## Coal Mining

The mining industry is a substantial component of Queensland's diverse economy, contributing \$38.8 billion during the 2017-18 financial year. (Queensland Treasury, 2019) This equates to 11.8% of the overall economy. With mining being the largest contributor to the economy, the laws surrounding it are very complex to ensure it is strictly regulated and kept under control. But do these laws work? Governments are generally focused on short term gains to assist with their reelection prospects, often with negative long term impacts. This largely involves economic initiatives which assist in job creation and prosperity during boom times, however this is often short lived. Unfortunately, politicians with their own immediate agendas in mind, fail to consider the long term environmental impacts of approving mines such as Adani. Queensland has some of the world's largest and highest grade coal reserves making it extremely sought after for mining. Australia signed the Paris agreement in 2015, where they agreed to lower their carbon footprint. (The Conversation, 2019) However, the Government put themselves in a precarious situation after they allowed the Adani mine to begin work, which is a gateway to one of the largest coal reserves in the world. This shows that environmental laws are not playing their part in protecting the environment.

Coal is the single biggest contributor to climate change, which is a major issue given the increased risk of drought, floods, hunger and diseases resulting from the climate crisis. If the Australian government is serious about lowering their carbon footprint, they should be reconsidering their stance with allowing Adani to operate in the country. At the very least, they should ensure that the penalties for breaking environmental laws are harsher so our most important natural resources are protected. This is especially important when examining historical actions of Adani impacting water supply and corporate dishonesty. The Adani mine is situated in central Queensland and is tapping into the world's largest coal basin, which is 247,000 square kilometres. (ABC News, 2019) It is also causing a threat to the world heritage listed Great Barrier Reef with its Abbot Point port. Mining companies require a range of different approvals from both state and federal governments to begin work on a mine. Some of these include a mining lease under the Mineral Resources Act 1989 (QLD), an environmental authority under the Environmental Protection Act 1994 (QLD) and approval under the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (Cth). (Enlaw, 2019) These acts were first established to protect the environment, but with new information on climate change they are out of date and may not be providing the protection they were established to enforce.

The current process can be seen as effective in regards to protecting the wildlife at the mine site. The black throated finch is an endangered bird that has been found near the leased site. Before Adani was allowed to begin work on the mine, they had to get the environmental plan for the black throated finch signed off from the government under the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (CTH). (ABC, 2019) Their first plan was rejected as the government needed "more accurate finch population data, they were required to limit the amount of cattle grazing in the conservation area and determined food availability throughout

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the year.” (The Conversation, 2019) The revised plan outlined items such as water source management, fire management, pest animal control, grazing management practices, weed control and water source locations. (Adani Australia, 2019) These additional requirements will ensure that the mine does not interfere with the species, meaning that the final plan meets the requirements of the Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999, Environmental Protection Act 1994 and the Nature Conservation Act 1992.

Another aspect of the mine that was delaying its approval was the proposed groundwater management scheme. The scheme set out to monitor and minimise impacts to water resources of the Great Artesian Basin; ensure groundwater drawdown at Doongmabulla Springs Complex does not exceed 0.2m and that there is no ecological impact at the springs; and monitor and minimise impacts to other groundwater-dependent ecosystems. (Environment, 2019) The scheme needed to comply with the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (Cth). As a result of these changes it is assured that if the plan is stuck to the groundwater will be protected. The main stakeholders to this are the nearby farmers present and future. This scheme ensures that the water is used in a sustainable way.

The implementation of laws needs to ensure that they protect the longevity of the environment, whilst fostering a booming economy. Adani have broken environmental laws as seen at the Abbot Point port. This was due to Adani breaching their Temporary Emissions Licence (TEL) during Cyclone Debbie. A TEL gives companies like Adani permission to release contaminants into the environment in both a natural and sabotaged event. (Business, 2019) They spilled water that was 800 percent dirtier than what was approved to drain into the wetlands. (NITV, 2019) The maximum fine for breaching this licence is \$2.7 million, but when taken to court they were only fined \$12,000. (ABC, 2019) This fine is not enough for a breach of this size and for such a large company, so is not a deterrent. Therefore, Adani should get fined much greater amounts if they breach other contracts and licenses. This demonstrates that the penalties for breaching the law are ineffective.

The current laws are out of date with the serious threat that mining has on climate change. The current processes are not in Australia's best interest to uphold treaties such as the Paris agreement. The Paris agreement is a legally binding treaty that aims to combat world wide climate change. Shadow minister for energy and climate, Mark Butler, stated what he thought about the Adani mine saying, “I think that opening up a new coal basin in the Galilee Basin in Queensland is not in the national interest.” (Australian Financial Review, 2019) The Paris agreement was a landmark agreement that came to life in 2015 at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The main aim is to keep global warming below 2 degrees. The pledged fossil fuel emissions between 2015-2030 is 480 billion tonnes of emissions, but Australia isn't doing anything to support this. (The Conversation, 2019) The Adani mine is estimated to generate 4.7 billion tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions. This is concerning as this amount is over 0.5% of the remaining worldwide carbon budget. (APH, 2019) Currently, the average level of CO<sub>2</sub> pollution per person in Australia is four times the world average. The generation of electricity from coal burning creates 73% of Australia's carbon pollution. (WWF, 2019) These figures clearly demonstrate that Australia needs to be actively taking steps to improve their carbon emissions and improve on these figures. Instead, Australia is looking on old energy sources and in the process, causing irreversible damage to the environment. Through the Paris agreement it shows that Australia is legally required to reduce their emissions of fossil fuels, but this doesn't mean they should just export it to other countries; this can be seen with 87% of Australia's coal being exported globally. Additionally, as the

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government has allowed Adani to tap into the Galilee Basin, this is a gateway to allow more mines in the area such as the proposed Clive Palmer mine. This mine will be able to produce 33% more coal than the neighbouring Adani mine. (Envlaw, 2019) The stakeholders of such a problem are not just the Australian population, but everyone in the world, as climate change will have catastrophic effects if treaties such as the Paris agreement aren't held as high as they should.

Thus, proving that environmental laws are not playing their part in protecting the environment. Although sections of the law have played a vital role in protecting the endangered black throated finch and the waterways surrounding the mine, they do not appear to have broader powers. This is evident with the extreme impact on climate change that this mine will have. Also, the impact that the contaminated water had to the wetlands surrounding the Abbot Point port. The Australian government need to seriously consider the way in which they use laws to allow large companies like Adani to operate in Australia in a way that has such a negative effect on the environment.