



## **Climate science deniers and conservative media have a new hero**

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Climate science deniers and conservative media have found themselves a new “free speech” hero — an academic who is suing his own university and thinks the multiple human threats to Australia’s Great Barrier Reef are overblown.

Professor Peter Ridd might be a new name to some, but the marine geophysicist has a long association with groups pushing denial of the well-established links between human activity and dangerous climate change.

Outlets including Breitbart and Fox News have joined a steady flow of columns and interviews across Australia’s conservative media landscape covering Ridd’s case, sometimes handing over space to him in their column pages.

Each time, Ridd, of Australia’s James Cook University, has been painted as a bastion of truth pushing back against the establishment. But how does that image hold up to scrutiny?

### **Conservative Media Fawning**

News Corp Australia’s political commentator and climate science denier-in-chief Andrew Bolt has been especially enthusiastic, writing multiple blog posts and columns, inviting Ridd onto his Sky News show, and asking other stablemates to comment (News Corp columnist and climate science denier Terry McCrann called for James Cook University’s executive to be “sacked immediately”).

Ridd’s case, wrote Bolt, was “not only about free speech,” but was an issue of “whether scientific debates are settled by censorship or by debate.”

“A mainstay of Western civilization is on trial here,” added Bolt, with no fear of overstatement.

Climate science denier James Delingpole of the hyper-partisan Breitbart wrote that the “gagged” Professor Ridd had “plenty of solid scientific evidence” to show the reef was “doing just fine.”

### **Examining Ridd’s Case**

So what's actually been happening? Another, less hysterical way of looking at the case, is this.

Ridd has been happily criticizing the science linking dangerous climate change to greenhouse gas emissions, and the science showing the impacts of humans on corals, for more than a decade.

Ridd has also repeatedly, over many years, said that the impact of agricultural runoff and water quality on the health and growth rate of corals is overstated.

But his employer, James Cook University, initiated its own action against Ridd after he had criticized specific organizations at his own university in media interviews, saying they could not be trusted. This, the university alleged, went against the university's code of conduct.

So this is not about Ridd's "freedom" to say what he wants, but is about an alleged breach of the university's code of conduct — whether you agree with that code or not.

When the university censured Ridd in 2016, he ignored them. He gave an interview in August 2017 to another climate science denier, Alan Jones, on Sky News. Ridd was there to talk about his chapter in a climate science denial book produced by the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA).

Ridd said "we can no longer trust" the government-backed Australian Institute of Marine Science and the Center of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies, based at James Cook University.

The university alleged this constituted further "serious misconduct" so Ridd took the issue to his lawyers, and a case is proceeding.

To help fund his legal bills, Ridd got some help from the IPA (a key organization pushing climate science denial in Australia for two decades) to set up a crowdfunding campaign that raised the necessary \$95,000 in just 49 hours.

The IPA's executive director John Roskam was the first donor with \$500. Other notable givers included climate science denier blogger Anthony Watts, U.S. Interior Department employee and climate science denier Indur Goklany, Perth philanthropist and IPA funder Bryant McFee, and author and political scientist Don Aitken. (The Washington Post and others have reported how Goklany has had a key role in re-writing Department of Interior climate documents.)

Many of Ridd's cheerleaders have taken his scientific claims without skepticism and have not entertained the idea that he might be wrong.

### **Ridd's Marine Pollution?**

But Ridd repeated in detail several of his criticisms in a November 2017 "Viewpoint" article in the journal *Marine Pollution Bulletin* — opening up his arguments for scrutiny.

Now, as reported in *The Guardian Australia*, a team of nine scientists, many based at the Australian Institute of Marine Science and the James Cook University center Ridd has attacked, have issued a response through the same journal. Their assessment of Ridd's claims is sharp.

They say Ridd's criticisms are based on "misinterpretation, selective use of data, and oversimplification" and that they ignore "formal responses to previously published critiques."

While Ridd and his colleague Piers Larcombe argue their critiques are “largely ignored,” these researchers point out that in fact, many of Ridd’s arguments have been directly addressed in the scientific literature.

The Australian Institute of Marine Science researchers write: “To republish previous claims that have been addressed and refuted appears to be selecting information to support their statements and an example of the very issue Larcombe and Ridd (2018) are criticizing.”

### **Ideological Bent?**

Also in the 2017 Sky News interview, Ridd accused others scientists of lacking objectivity and suggested another problem was that “we also potentially have scientists with an ideological bent.”

This is the time to look at Ridd’s own “ideological bent” and his long history associating with climate science deniers whose “theories” are rejected by every major scientific academy on the planet, as well as governments around the world.

Ridd has been affiliated with several groups that reject the science linking human emissions of carbon dioxide to dangerous climate change.

Ridd is a director and “scientific coordinator” of the Australian Environment Foundation (AEF) — a group he has been associated with since its launch in 2005 (and not to be confused with the Australian Conservation Foundation).

The AEF, which emerged from a 2004 meeting organized by the Institute of Public Affairs, promotes the idea that wind turbines make people sick and that human-caused climate change is unproven.

Ridd is also listed as an adviser to the Galileo Movement — an Australian group that for many years was run by former One Nation Senator and climate science denier Malcolm Roberts.

Ridd joined a list of well-known climate science deniers in 2009 when he co-signed an open letter coordinated by the Cato Institute — a U.S. “think tank” funded by petrochemical billionaires Charles and David Koch.

The letter ran as a full-page ad in several newspapers, including The New York Times, and claimed that recent temperature changes were “modest,” that the “case for alarm regarding climate change is grossly overstated,” and global warming had stopped.

In 2011, Ridd called for a “Scientific Challengers Office” that “should start on Global Warming” and “the supposed threats to the Great Barrier Reef.”

Ridd is based at the “Marine Geophysics Laboratory” and, according to his university research profile, he “raises almost all of his research funds from the profits of consultancy work which is usually associated with monitoring of marine dredging operation.”

Several major coal and gas projects are listed as former clients of the lab, which was also home for the late Dr. Bob Carter who was, at one time, associated with 10 or more different climate science denial groups around the globe.

Ridd says he stands for “truth and honesty” and has “spent my whole life fighting for scientific truth.”

The problem is that the version of the “truth” he has been standing alongside, including his own arguments, have been repeatedly shot down by the world’s leading scientific institutions. Despite this, and despite the howls of his supporters, Ridd remains free to voice his “truth.”