

Sceptical climate sacking

'Mind-blowing' excuse for firing uni professor

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COURT REPORTER

THE barrister for a JCU professor who was fired after publicly questioning his colleagues' "deficient" and "misleading" environmental research says the university's justification for the sacking is "mind-blowing" and "implausible in the extreme".

Professor Peter Ridd had worked for James Cook University for 30 years when he was fired in May last year after he told journalists that he was concerned about the quality assurance of research papers on the poor health of the Great Barrier Reef.

Dr Ridd is suing the university in the Federal Court to get his job back.

His barrister Stuart Wood QC yesterday argued JCU had wrongly used its code of conduct to justify the sacking but failed to adhere to the enterprise agreement which allowed staff to express controversial or unpopular views.

The professor was first censured by the university in April 2016 after he emailed a journalist about his concerns "sensationalist" photos of the reef were being distributed by authorities, including the Australian Institute of Marine Science.

He said the before and after images showed the reef quality in an area off Bowen declining, but argued they were selectively taken to leave out the "spectacular" coral that was thriving in the same area.

"This is a relatively trivial though visually spectacular example of bad science on reef," he wrote.

Dr Ridd also suggested a series of questions for the journalist to ask Professor Terry Hughes, the head of JCU's Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies, about the veracity and quality of the research, saying he would "wriggle and squirm".

Mr Wood told the court Prof Hughes complained to his boss Professor Chris Cocklin about the questioning of the science, saying it attacked his integrity and that of the Centre of Excellence and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority.

"And it's true it did attack their integrity because what it was saying is the science is not justifiable, there are problems with this and questions need to be asked," Mr Wood said.

"Professor Cocklin as the senior deputy vice chancellor, instead of commencing an investigation should have said why don't you answer his questions."

In November 2017, Dr Ridd was again censured by the university after he made comments about reef research on Sky News, saying he was sceptical of researchers warning the reef was in dire health due to global warming because his research showed otherwise.

Prof Ridd was then sacked by the university in April last year over claims he had further violated the code of conduct.

The trial continues.



FIRED: Former JCU climate scientist Peter Ridd. Picture: Lian