

Uni breached work deal: axed professor

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Lawyers acting for sacked James Cook University professor Peter Ridd say the institution breached its enterprise agreement in firing him for publicly criticising colleagues over claims made about the impact global warming had on the Great Barrier Reef.

Professor Ridd, who worked at JCU for 40 years, has challenged the dismissal in the Federal Circuit Court, saying the university breached its own enterprise agreement, which permitted intellectual freedom and let staff express controversial or unpopular views.

The professor's lawyers say the Townsville-based university, renowned for its marine science expertise, dismissed Professor Ridd last year for breaching its code of conduct. But they argue that the code was secondary to the enterprise agreement.

In the opening of a three-day hearing in Brisbane, barrister Stuart Wood QC said Professor Ridd had "every right" to criticise colleagues and JCU's perceived lack of quality assurance processes.

The first alleged breach of the code occurred in April 2016, when Professor Ridd emailed a journalist to accuse the Australian Institute of Marine Science, JCU's Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority of publishing misleading images.

He said pictures of bleached coral near Stone Island, at Bowen in north Queensland, were misleading as they showed poorly affected coral, which was selected over nearby healthy coral and used to portray "broad-scale decline" of reef health.

Professor Ridd, whose expertise includes coastal oceanography, the effects of sediments on coral reefs, past and future climates and atmospheric modelling, said in the emails the use of the pictures was "a dramatic example of how scientific organisations are happy to spin a story for their own purposes".

He also said colleague Terry Hughes, the director of JCU's Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies, would "wriggle and squirm" when asked to explain the discrepancies in the images.

"Mr Ridd said the photos being used were not, in his view, an accurate representation of what was going on at the site," Mr Wood said about the email, which was sent to Professor Hughes by the journalist, seeking a response.

"The complaint was that there should be much more care taken when representing the photos to ensure the story is not based on sensationalism but on science."

Professor Hughes made a formal complaint about the email.

Professor Ridd was sceptical of the photos and warnings about the health of the reef, which had undergone extensive bleaching, because his own work had shown the change in coral health was not affected by sediment run-off or increased water temperatures, as claimed by other scientists.

After receiving a warning from the university, Professor Ridd was censured again in November 2017 after appearing on Sky News and making similar claims about the lack of quality assurance processes on coral reef science.

After a third alleged violation of the code of conduct, Professor Ridd was dismissed last April.

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