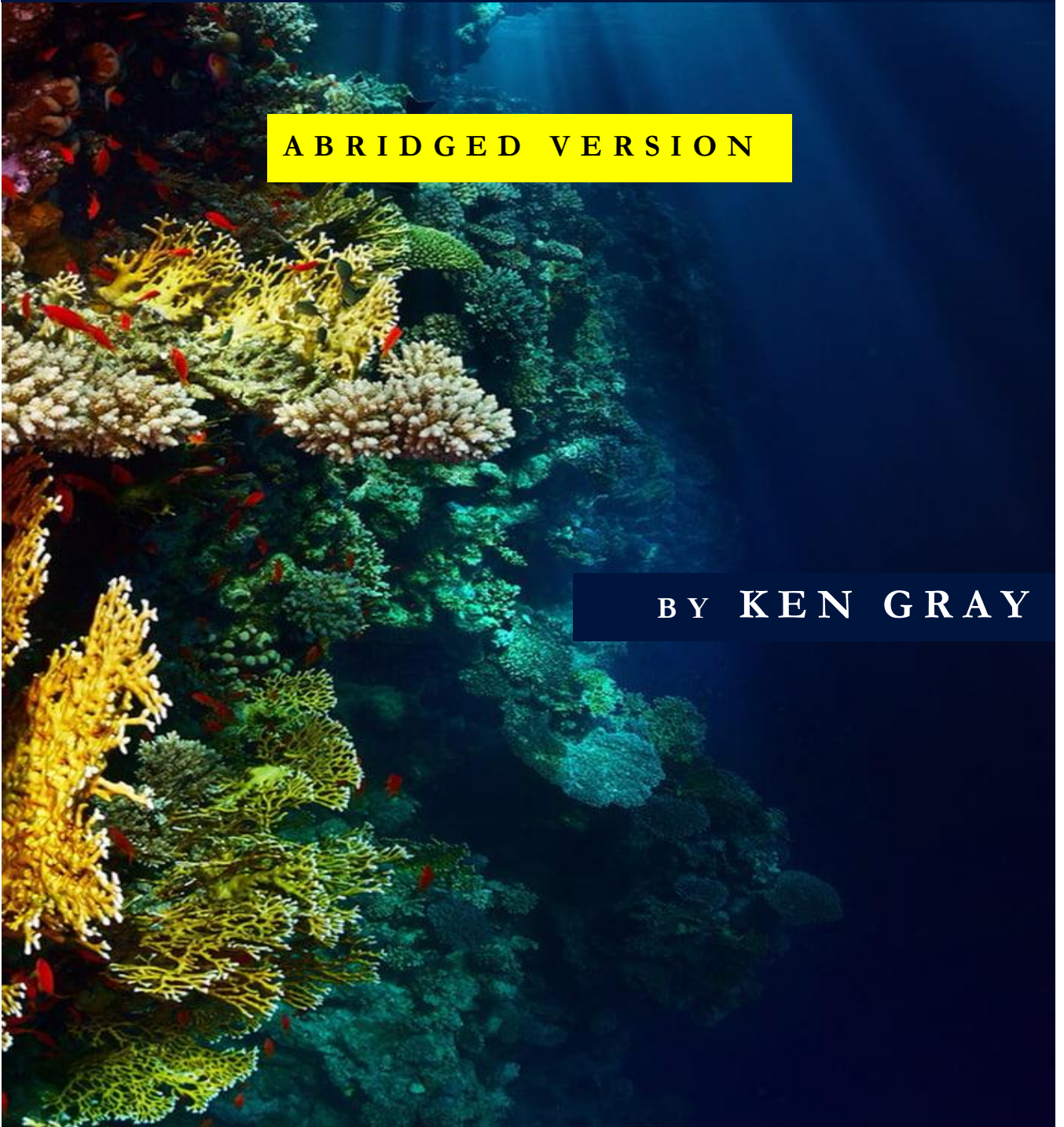


# THE ARTFUL ACTIVIST

HOW JOHN BUSST SAVED  
THE GREAT BARRIER REEF

ABRIDGED VERSION

BY KEN GRAY



*Published by*

Mission Beach Historical Society.

Document AB07 Version 1.2.

Website: mbhs.com.au



Copyright © Mission Beach Historical Society, 2022

First published 2022.

*Author:* Ken Gray. *Editors:* Margaret Remilton and Diane Bull.

This is an abridged version of the John Busst story. The full story is also available on our web page as H007, also named *The Artful Activist*.

This publication is copyright. Apart from fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review as permitted by the Copyright Act, no part of this work may be stored, reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission. Inquiries should be addressed to the publisher.

A record of this title is held at the National Library of Australia (Ebook) and the State Library of Queensland (Print and Ebook).

The text and opinions expressed in this book are those of the author and of people interviewed by the author, and do not reflect the views of the Mission Beach Historical Society or its members.

Mission Beach Historical Society's logo is designed by Leonard Andy, copyright © Leonard Andy. The design depicts a Djiru shield with a cassowary which is the endangered, iconic flightless bird living in the north Queensland rainforests.

The histories published by Mission Beach Historical Society are as accurate as we are able to make them. Few accounts of history are 100% correct and there are going to be more errors when we recall events of many years ago. We always welcome suggested edits and additions or deletions and where possible we will edit where we find we are in error. However, the oral histories we record are the words of the people we interview and we can only alter those with the authorisation of the people we interview. At times we record the full story of a family and have it on record for research purposes yet publish an abbreviated version on the web page to make it more readable and relevant to our regular audience. For references and explanatory figures see the full version.

Cover

From Pintarest.

## THE ARTFUL ACTIVIST

He saved the Great Barrier Reef. It was about to be wrecked by miners and oil explorers. John Busst boldly put his hand up, gathered forces and stopped them. Never heard of him? You're not alone.

His genius lay in the halls of human interactions and political persuasion. 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. John's avid fans, and there are a few, speak of his art and two mud brick homes, and of his small role in saving rainforests. Those were interesting yet trivial beside his gigantic Reef-saving achievements.

He remains all but unrecognized. Search the web for notable environmentalists. You'll find TV celebrities David Attenborough, Jacques Cousteau, David Suzuki or even our own Steve Irwin up in lights, as they should be. They made millions of people aware of threats to nature.

Another colossus is Mario Molina, a Nobel Prize winner for linking CFC's to the Ozone Hole. In many ways, John Busst was akin to Mario, as both caused vital outcomes rather than merely announcing a problem. John rang a bell loudly on the Reef's dangers; and he solved the problem.

Our 'artful activist' started his conservation work by taking small steps for rain forests. He had some success and his ecologist friend Len Webb went on to deliver amazing results with John's urging.

Busst came from Bendigo and at a private school in Melbourne he befriended people who were destined to go far, including Harold Holt, later to be PM. Horatio Busst, John's father, was notable in Bendigo society. He was a gold miner who became Bendigo's mining warden then Managing Director of the Bendigo Mutual Permanent Land and Building Society (later to be Bendigo Bank.)

At 31, John inherited half of the family fortune. While in a hippie commune in Eltham, he met famed Bedarra Island artist, Noel Wood. He followed Wood later and rented part of the island which he then purchased and lived there from 1941 to 1957. His wife, Alison joined him in 1950 and was an important player in these successful campaigns. In 1957, they moved to Bingil Bay, and there they took up the task of saving the Reef from mining and oil exploration.

John Messner of *The Age* wrote in an obituary:

*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.*

Many books mention his work and correspondence and there are a host of colourful press articles in the nation's library archives, yet most of his story is hidden from view unless you go out of your way. He was not at all like a regular North Queenslander in the way he dressed or lived. A friend said,

*We listened to Wagner on a wind-up gramophone, recited Tennyson and explored the metaphysical world in a euphoric state induced by ethyl alcohol.*

A fellow activist observed that he,

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

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 qualifications whatsoever, yet he managed to be elected to that powerful committee, due to his knowledge, confidence and determination. That shows just how well connected he was.

His use of media was way ahead of its time. He wrote to journalists prolifically to achieve worldwide coverage. He had a unique personality and language that made him newsworthy. He understood the power of unions and was the one to convince them to ban oil rigs entering the Reef. John and Alison were generous. Their costs incurred for the campaigns are estimated at \$380,000 in 2021 dollars.

He was diagnosed with a pre-cancerous condition of the larynx and struggled with this illness for most of the campaign yet remained positive and drove himself on despite his pain and incapacity.

His ability to achieve an audience and be heard by Prime Ministers and major influencers was near to unbelievable. How does any average punter obtain significant face-to-face time with Prime Ministers let alone win their support or spend four hours with them, as Busst did, for example, with Gough Whitlam? He met and influenced three Prime Ministers and countless eminent scientists, judges, politicians ... anyone who could change the future of the Reef was in his sights and boldly approached without fear or timidity.

John started his activism by challenging a development application in an Innisfail Court for mining of Ellison Reef. He won that and went on to conduct a world-wide campaign.

Journalist Larry Foley summed it up well:

*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.*

Vince Serventy AM, editor of Wildlife Magazine agreed:

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

Historian, Patricia Clare was hugely impressed when she stayed with the Bussts to capture his story:

*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.*

Barry Wain of *The Australian* in an obituary added:

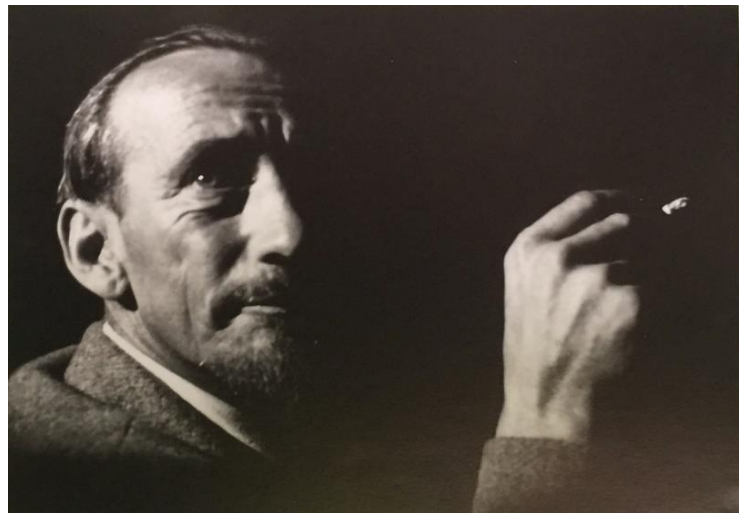
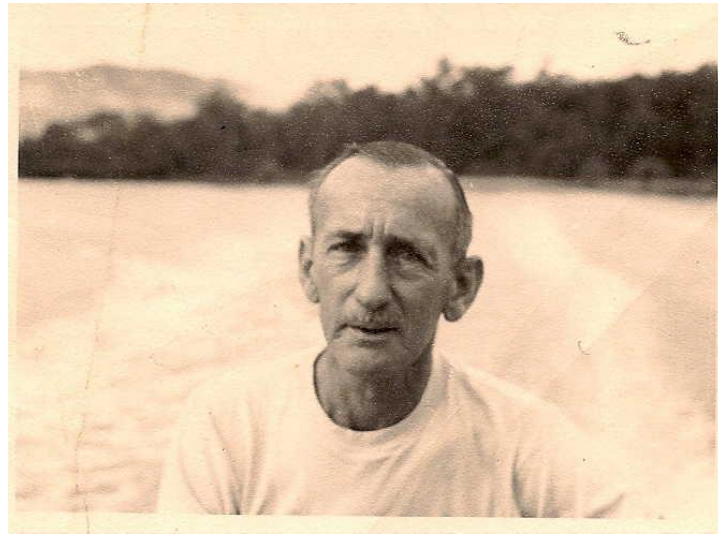
*With the death of John Busst of Bingil Bay, the Australian conservation movement lost an able, dedicated strategist and the human race lost one of its finer members. The full story of the successful opposition case, organized almost single-handed by John Busst, remains to be told.*

Poet, author and fellow activist Judith Wright had the last say:

*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*

He 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 well. The common factor they saw was .... John Busst.



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

**JOHN BUSST 1909 – 1971**  
Philanthropist, Leading Great Barrier Reef Conservationist.