comms declare

REPORT

Queensland Museum Learning Resources: Climate Accuracy and Sponsorship Concerns

December, 2025

Comms Declare Inc.
Suite 14/20-40 Meagher St.
Chippendale NSW 2008.

hello@commsdeclare.org

ABN: 54182387071
ARBN: 686 257 474

CHANGING THE INFORMATION CLIMATE · CHANGING THE INFORMATION CLIMATE ·

01

INTRODUCTION

Queensland Museum (QM), the state's leading cultural and scientific institution, has long prided itself on protecting and communicating Queensland's natural heritage through independent, evidence-based education. Its public mission - to serve as custodian of the state's natural and cultural heritage - has made it a trusted source of scientific understanding for generations of Queenslanders[i].

However, recent disclosures have raised serious concerns about the Museum's ongoing partnership with Shell's QGC gas business - one of Australia's largest carbon polluters. Since 2015, Shell has contributed more than **$10.25 million** to Queensland Museum, funding children's education programs such as *Fossil Finders*, *Water Matters*, and *Future Makers*. These sponsorships have delivered extensive brand exposure for Shell to Queensland children from kindergarten age.

Shell has long been aware of the dangers of climate change, warning of its risks as early as 1991[ii] Yet, instead of acting on its own research, the company has continued to lobby against strong climate action and expand its fossil-fuel operations globally. The company is consistently named among Australia's largest climate polluters.

Responding to correspondence from Comms Declare regarding fossil fuel sponsorship, Queensland Museum has asserted that it "maintains full independence in its research, exhibitions, and educational activities." The Museum has also stated that partnerships like those with Shell are designed to foster "critical thinking, evidence-based learning, and engagement with Queensland's natural history," and are structured "without influencing scientific content, priorities, or public messaging."

Despite these assurances, Comms Declare's review has identified multiple examples where Shell-branded classroom resources, distributed under the Museum's authority, present a biased and incomplete picture of climate science and become a tool of climate obstruction.

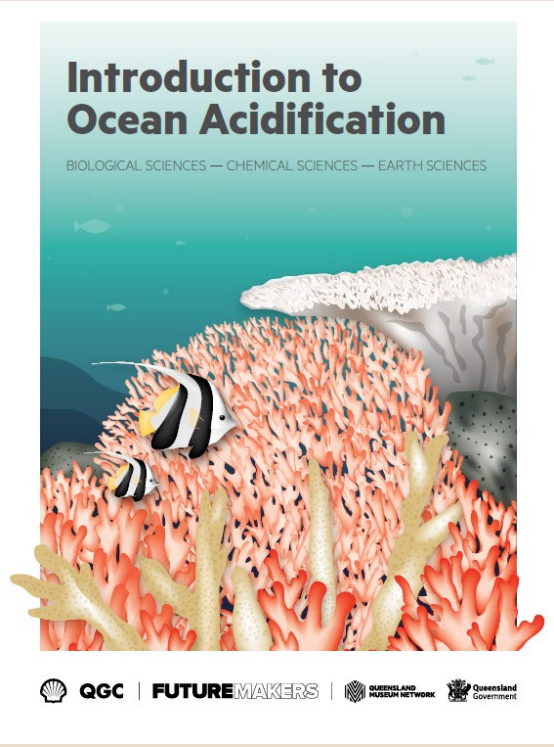
Specifically, these materials:

- **Omit fossil fuels** as the primary driver of global warming and ocean acidification;
- **Isolate climate disruption**, portraying it as a neutral technical problem solvable through student innovation rather than wide-scale reform;
- **Legitimise climate pollution**, granting Shell moral and social credibility through prominent "Future Makers" branding;
- **Position Shell as a "company of the future"** and an employer of choice, subtly encouraging students to view careers in the fossil fuel industry as part of the solution rather than the problem, *and*
- **Shift responsibility** from systemic causes to individual behaviour or invention, minimising corporate and policy accountability.

By promoting a major fossil fuel company through its educational programs, Queensland Museum risks compromising both its scientific integrity and its public trust. This report sets out the evidence of bias, the risks to educational integrity, and the urgent need for reform consistent with international standards for ethical sponsorship and museum governance.

02

CASE STUDIES



TEACHER TIPS

- Arrange students in groups of 3 – 4 to promote collaborative learning and communication.
- Use guiding questions when necessary, and include peer learning and feedback (for example, class discussions).

Activity 1

- Distilled water may be used for Activity 1 if tap water is already acidic.

Activity 2

- Your class may want to host a technology display for other classes, or parents.
- There are many local, national and international science competitions. You may wish to submit student carbon capture and storage prototypes to one of these competitions.

Introduction to Ocean Acidification

(Years 9–10, ages 14-16)

There is a clear consensus among climate scientists that anthropogenic activities such as burning fossil fuels are the main drivers of ocean acidification[iii] [iv].

Yet this resource explains ocean acidification but never identifies fossil fuels as its cause. The lessons instead focus on the chemistry of CO_2 while avoiding any mention of coal, oil, or gas combustion.

Most concerningly, students are also tasked with designing their own carbon capture and storage (CCS) technology. Carbon capture and storage has been described by energy experts as an expensive fraud and PR fig leaf and has a long history of failure[v]. This framing aligns with fossil-fuel industry talking points and encourages students to see technological innovation, not fossil fuel phase-out, as the central climate solution.

By removing fossil fuels from the causal chain and highlighting CCS as a "solution," the resource reframes a fossil-fuel-driven crisis as a neutral scientific challenge. It effectively provides corporate greenwashing in the guise of STEM learning.

Investigating Ocean Acidification

(Years 9–10, ages 14-16)

This companion experiment reinforces the same bias. Students observe acidification caused by seemingly benign "anthropogenic CO_2," but the material never identifies fossil fuel combustion as the dominant source.

Hands-on experiments involving water, shells, and dry ice are scientifically valid, yet entirely de-contextualised from real-world energy systems and emissions. The partnership is repeatedly highlighted as "building a capable STEM workforce," positioning Shell as an educational benefactor.

The result is an erasure of industrial accountability: students learn accurate chemistry but leave unaware of the political and energy-system realities that drive ocean acidification.

States of Matter: Our Warming World

(Year 8, age 13)

Fossil fuels (coal, oil and gas) are by far the largest contributor to global climate heating, accounting for around 70 per cent of Australia's total greenhouse gas emissions and nearly 90 per cent of all global carbon dioxide emissions. Yet this resource introduces global warming through physics but, despite its title, never connects energy use to emissions. "Fossil fuels" appear only once, buried in a teacher note, not as part of any core learning outcome.

It references a 0.7°C rise over the past century, a statistic now outdated and misleading given current warming of over 1.2°C. The central "Rate of Change" activity models warming over 5,000 years, deflecting attention from the urgent decades ahead.

This technical framing produces students who can describe molecular movement but not explain why the atmosphere is warming. The omission of fossil fuels, coupled with Shell branding, normalises the company's presence in climate education while stripping the issue of moral and political context.

Revealing Marine Ecosystems

(Years 5–10, ages 10-16 years)

A marine biology program that explores coral reefs, food webs, and acidification, but avoids identifying fossil fuels as the primary cause of harm to marine ecosystems. "Human impacts" are presented as diffuse and collective, with no mention of industrial emissions or fossil fuel extraction and its impacts.

Shell's *Future Makers* branding appears throughout, accompanied by museum scientist profiles and "STEM career" prompts. Students are encouraged to consider futures in marine science and engineering, without questioning fossil-fuel-driven environmental decline.

The net effect is normalisation: Shell's image as a responsible science supporter replaces honest discussion of its role in marine degradation.

Water Matters: Teacher Resource Book

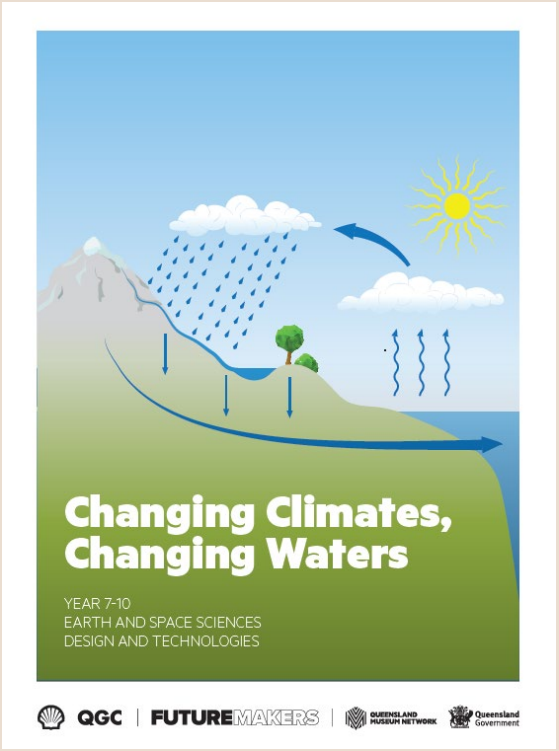
(Years 5–10, ages 10-16 years)

A 70-page unit on water, sustainability, and climate adaptation, Water Matters encourages students to invent devices and design solutions but never discusses fossil fuels or emissions reduction.

Late in the resource, an appendix quotes museum scientists acknowledging human-driven warming, but this material is buried outside the main curriculum tasks.

The central message is technocratic: climate impacts are something to engineer around, not prevent. Students are taught to innovate within the problem rather than question its causes.

This is STEM education as social licence, giving Shell credibility as a climate educator while omitting its own responsibility.



Changing Climates, Changing Waters

(Years 7–10, ages 12-16 years)

This unit describes rising CO_2, sea-level rise, and extreme weather, yet - despite its title - never once names fossil fuels.

Students are tasked with designing flood-resilient infrastructure and drought solutions, not reducing emissions.

Accurate scientific voices appear in late appendices: Dr Paul Oliver and Dr Michael Rix explicitly mention greenhouse gases and human activity. However, these statements are framed as personal reflections, not as part of the curriculum itself.

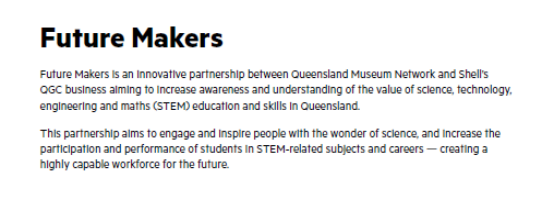
By separating fact from learning objective, the resource lends credibility to Shell's sponsorship while shielding it from critique, a textbook case of corporate influence through selective framing.

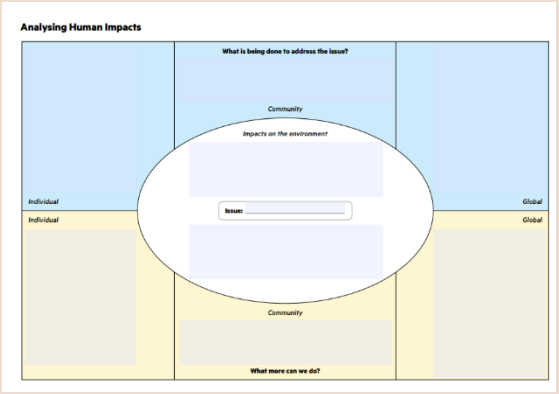
[Threatened Animals in Queensland]

(Years 4–7, ages 10-13 years)

Climate change, driven primarily by fossil fuels, is driving widespread losses among threatened species worldwide[vi]. Yet this material discusses habitat loss, predators, and invasives, but only once, briefly, mentions fossil fuels: "Reduce the use of fossil fuels to mitigate climate change." Climate change, a leading driver of biodiversity loss, is otherwise absent.

By minimising industrial causes and allowing fossil-fuel sponsorship of a biodiversity unit, the resource teaches care for wildlife while ignoring the systemic causes of their decline.





[Analysing Human Impacts (Years 4–12)] (ages 9-18 years old)

A short, one-page worksheet that invites students to consider human activities affecting the environment. Fossil fuels are never mentioned, even as options.

By structuring "impacts" across individual, community, and global scales without distinguishing between personal and industrial responsibility, the resource implies all actions are equally culpable.

This "shared responsibility" framing mirrors fossil-fuel industry communications strategies: blame everyone a little, blame no one entirely, and certainly don't hold the fossil fuel companies responsible.

03

SCIENTIFIC ACCURACY, CLIMATE RISK AND MISLEADING FRAMING

A core responsibility of any publicly funded science institution is to convey the state of scientific knowledge accurately, especially on issues with profound implications for Queensland's environment and communities. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Australia's National Climate Risk Assessment, CSIRO, and other national scientific bodies have established an extremely robust, globally peer-reviewed understanding of the causes and consequences of climate change. This body of evidence is unambiguous: the combustion of fossil fuels is the primary driver of increasing atmospheric CO_2 concentrations, global warming, ocean acidification, and widespread ecosystem decline.

Against this backdrop, the omissions and distortions within Queensland Museum's Shell-branded learning materials are not minor.

They constitute a fundamental miscommunication of scientific reality.

Excluding Fossil Fuels from the Causal Chain

Several resources, including *Revealing Marine Ecosystems* and *Investigating Ocean Acidification*, explain the chemistry of CO_2 but do not identify fossil fuels as the overwhelming source of rising emissions. This omission is scientifically indefensible. Ocean acidification cannot be meaningfully separated from the combustion of coal, oil, and gas, which are responsible for almost 90% of global CO_2 emissions.

This is extraordinary given the severity of the findings established in the latest IPCC assessment. As the IPCC notes:

"Coral reefs… are projected to decline by a further 70–90% at 1.5°C (high confidence) with larger losses (>99%) at 2°C (very high confidence). The risk of irreversible loss of many marine and coastal ecosystems increases with global warming, especially at 2°C or more (high confidence)." [1]

"The level of ocean acidification associated with global warming of 1.5°C is projected to amplify the adverse effects of warming, and even further at 2°C, impacting the growth, development, calcification, survival, and thus abundance of a broad range of species, from algae to fish (high confidence)." [2]

To present marine science without identifying the cause of these threats undermines scientific integrity and creates a false impression that climate impacts occur in a vacuum or arise from diffuse, collective "human activities" rather than the industrial systems responsible.

Trivialising Unprecedented Change Through "Natural Cycles"

Some Shell-branded resources, including States of Matter: Our Warming World, introduce global warming alongside statements such as "the climate has changed over time and will continue to change." While technically true in a geological sense, this framing is a well-known climate-denial trope that trivialises the unprecedented rate and scale of the current surge in global temperatures.

Equating today's rapid, fossil-fuel-driven warming with "natural climatic fluctuations" over hundreds of thousands of years is scientifically misleading. Modern warming is faster, larger in magnitude, and driven by an entirely different set of causes than historical variations. There is no scientific justification for presenting 21st-century climate change as a continuation of natural patterns without clearly and explicitly identifying its anthropogenic origin.

Minimising the Severity and Urgency of Climate Impacts

Several resources reference outdated climate data (e.g., using a 0.7°C warming figure rather than the current >1.2°C) or shift students' attention to extremely long-timescale modelling (e.g., 5,000-year projections). These choices downplay the urgency of the next two decades—the critical window identified by the IPCC and national risk assessments.

This selective framing obscures the stark reality documented by the IPCC, NASA, CSIRO, and Australia's National Climate Risk Assessment: Queensland faces escalating risks to coral reefs, fisheries, water security, biodiversity, cultural heritage, and community safety. Any climate education provided by the state's leading scientific institution must foreground these realities, not soften them.

Consequences of Misleading Framing

By:

- omitting fossil fuels as the dominant cause of warming and acidification,
- presenting climate change as a neutral or purely technical challenge,
- equating unprecedented anthropogenic warming with natural variability, and
- downplaying the severity of projected impacts

... these Shell-branded materials misrepresent the scientific consensus and risk leaving Queensland students with an incomplete and inaccurate understanding of the world they are inheriting.

Such omissions are not compatible with the standards of evidence-based education, nor (in our view) with the Museum's statutory obligations to provide leadership and excellence in communicating Queensland's natural heritage. When these misrepresentations occur within materials carrying the branding of a major fossil fuel company, the educational and ethical concerns intensify.

04

RISKS TO QUEENSLAND MUSEUM

Conflict With Queensland Museum's Own Partnerships Policy

Queensland Museum's Partnerships Policy sets a clear expectation for ethical alignment, stating that: "QM engages in Partnership with individuals, organisations or groups whose values and ethical standards align with its own."

Shell's actions and public record do not meet this threshold. As one of Australia's largest carbon polluters, Shell continues to expand fossil fuel production, lobby against stronger climate policy, and promote technologies such as carbon capture and storage that delay the transition away from fossil fuels. These activities directly conflict with the Museum's statutory obligation to communicate evidence-based science, protect Queensland's natural heritage, and promote the long-term wellbeing of its communities.

By allowing Shell-branded materials into Queensland classrooms - materials that systematically omit fossil fuels as the primary driver of global warming and ocean acidification - the Museum enables messaging that contradicts the scientific consensus it is entrusted to uphold. This misalignment between the Museum's mission and Shell's business model means the partnership cannot reasonably be said to satisfy the Museum's own standards regarding its partnerships.

Reputational Risk to Queensland Museum

As a publicly funded scientific institution, QM's independence and credibility are essential. Shell's classroom presence compromises that independence and may be perceived as endorsement of fossil fuel interests, weakening public trust in the Museum's impartiality.

Educational Integrity and Climate Literacy

By omitting fossil fuels from lessons on climate change, these materials undermine students' understanding of cause and effect. Students may know what CO_2 is but not where it comes from or why reducing fossil fuel use is central to solving climate change. This erodes climate literacy at the foundational level.

Misalignment with Curriculum and Climate Policy

The Australian Curriculum requires students to understand the causes and consequences of climate change and to propose sustainable responses. The frequent omission of fossil fuels contradicts these objectives and misaligns Museum content with national education and climate frameworks.

Ethical and Child Protection Risks

Corporate branding and messaging embedded in school materials constitute indirect marketing to minors. Students as young as nine are exposed to Shell's logo and career messaging, shaping perceptions of fossil fuels as normal and acceptable, an ethical breach comparable to tobacco or gambling sponsorships in schools.

Long-Term Social and Economic Consequences

A generation taught that climate change is a technical problem to be engineered around, rather than an energy-system problem to be reformed, will be less equipped to address the climate transition. This represents intergenerational harm to Australia's civic and policy capacity.

05

RECOMMENDATIONS

Pledge to end Shell's sponsorship of children's education materials at the conclusion of its current contract and commit to rejecting all future fossil fuel sponsorships.

In line with recent UK museum guidelines[vii], QM should transition away from sponsorship by fossil fuel companies.

Acknowledge the Conflict of Interest

Recognise that fossil fuel sponsorship presents a clear conflict when producing climate-related educational materials. Update and reissue all Future Makers resources with explicit reference to fossil fuels and climate causality, reviewed by climate scientists.

Commission an Independent Audit

Engage external climate education experts to review all *Future Makers* materials for scientific omissions and potential bias, publishing results publicly.

Reissue Corrected Materials and Teacher Notes

Publish updated versions with clear errata and contextual framing, ensuring accuracy and accountability in all future classroom use.

Develop a Public Climate Literacy Program

Redirect sponsorship or equivalent government funds toward an independently governed climate education initiative grounded in evidence, justice, and energy transition.

06

REFERENCES

[1] Queensland Museum, "About," Queensland Museum, accessed October 15, 2025, https://www.museum.qld.gov.au/about.

[2] Carrington, D. & Mommers, J., "'*Shell knew': oil giant's 1991 film warned of climate change danger*", The Guardian, 28 February 2017, accessed 23 October 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/feb/28/shell-knew-oil-giants-1991-film-warned-climate-change-danger.

[3] University of New Hampshire, *Ocean Acidification Definition and Causes: An In-Depth Exploration*, December 6, 2023. https://colsa.unh.edu/blog/2023/12/ocean-acidification-definition-causes-depth-exploration

[4] IPCC, "Chapter 30," in *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Part B: Regional Aspects*, WGII AR5 (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2014), https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/02/WGIIAR5-Chap30_FINAL.pdf.

[5] Robertson, B. '*Carbon Capture has a long history. Of failure*', Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, September, 2022 https://thebulletin.org/2022/09/plagued-by-failures-carbon-capture-is-no-climate-solution/

[6] IPCC, *Fact Sheet: Biodiversity* (WGII, AR6), accessed October 15, 2025, https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/downloads/outreach/IPCC_AR6_WGII_FactSheet_Biodiversity.pdf

[7] Museums Association, *Code of Ethics 2025*, https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/ethics/code-of-ethics/responsible-and-sustainable/

comms declare

CHANGING THE INFORMATION CLIMATE

Comms Declare promotes sustainable communication, and is dedicated to shifting the narrative around climate action. We exist to reduce the social licence of climate polluters and champion those that integrate sustainability into their communications practice.

At our core is our unwavering belief in the power of communications to create cultural change and shape a safer, healthier future for each of us and our planet.

We represent dozens of communications agencies and hundreds more professionals across advertising, marketing and media.

Comms Declare is a registered charity and member of CANA.

Comms Declare Inc.
Suite 14/20-40 Meagher St.
Chippendale NSW 2008.

hello@commsdeclare.org

ABN: 54182387071
ARBN: 686 257 474