



CTA-026-Australia

United Nations World Heritage Committee

Vic Ferguson

The World Federation for Coral Reef Conservation 281.886.7428 P.O. Box 311117 Houston Texas 77231

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Barrier reef row builds ahead of UNESCO review

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Australia has about a year to demonstrate and implement greater protection of the World Heritage-listed Great Barrier Reef, or the reef will be listed as an 'in danger' site. (AAP)

Calls to protect the World Heritage-listed Great Barrier Reef are intensifying ahead of a United Nations World Heritage committee meeting later this month.

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(Transcript from **World News Australia Radio**)

Calls to protect the World Heritage-listed Great Barrier Reef are intensifying ahead of a United Nations World Heritage committee meeting later this month.

The meeting's agenda includes making an assessment of the health of the reef, and making recommendations to the Australian government to enhance protection of the marine ecosystem.

But while scientists say the system is already deteriorating, industry representatives believe the issue is being inflated by environment groups.

Australia has about a year to demonstrate and implement greater protection of the World Heritage-listed Great Barrier Reef, or the reef will be listed as an "in danger" site.

The United Nations agency for heritage protection has recommended protection measures be implemented by the Queensland and federal governments.

And calls from scientists and environment organisations to curb industrial development along the Queensland coast have recently intensified.

A UNESCO World Heritage Committee meeting in mid-June in Cambodia is set assess Australia's marine policy.

Queensland University professor of ecology and mathematics, Hugh Possingham, says if results fail to meet the committee's expectations, another meeting in 2014 will consider referring the site to the World Heritage's "in danger" list.

"Well it's somewhat unprecedented. I don't think any Australian world heritage site has ever been listed as "in danger". I don't know to be honest how often they do this. I am told it has never happened before in Australia. So I suppose it's going to potentially damage our tourism industry and it's going to be a major international embarrassment, whether it happens soon or whether it happens in a year or two. They have obviously asked the Australian Government to do a number of things and they are particularly concerned about port development."



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Professor Possingham is among a group of 150 scientists, mainly from Australia, who are calling on the government to rein in development.

The scientists warn the Great Barrier Reef ecosystem is already in crisis and that continued industrialisation along the coast will further harm it, if better protection measures aren't adopted.

They're demanding restrictions on port developments to within existing major port areas, as well as improvements to all aspects of the management of shipping through the World Heritage area.

Professor Possingham says natural disasters and port expansions have already caused a significant decline in water quality and a 50 per cent loss in coral cover over nearly three decades.

But while disasters such as flooding or cyclones can strike without warning, Professor Possingham says human activities can be controlled.

"The nutrients and run-off that comes from agriculture, grazing, canegrowers, is certainly doing some damage. However, a lot of that is being addressed. The governments, federal and state, have invested in a lot of land management activities. There was a big Reef Rescue package of \$200 million that was there to try to improve that situation. And some improvements have already occurred. However we also have on the agenda a significant expansion in ports and shipping in the Great Barrier Reef, largely presumably to move coal out of Australia. That means many more ships but it also means a lot more dredging and that dredging process, and the disposal of the dredge material also puts sediments into the in-shore system and they have negative effects on this really important ecosystem."

The excavation of seabeds, known as dredging, is often performed to ensure waterways are navigable.

A recent draft research by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority has revealed dredging for port developments can affect areas much larger than previously thought.

The authority says the study shows dredging spoils can travel up to 50 kilometres from the excavated area and threaten the health of the Reef in regions previously deemed as "safe".

Greenpeace's Queensland Campaigner Louise Matthiesson says the practice has negative effects on the environment.

"First is in the area that's actually dredged, sometimes that would contain important habitat, like seagrass beds, which are food for dugongs and turtles and other marine life that are an important part of what we love about the Great Barrier Reef. And then secondly, dredge spoils, the mud and the sand that's dug up, sometimes contains things like acid-sulphate soils or heavy metals or other contaminants that either occur naturally or have been disposed OF in the ocean decades ago."

In a report published ahead of the World Heritage Committee meeting, UNESCO says it is concerned poor water quality and ongoing coastal development are continuing to damage the Reef.

Although the UN agency acknowledges some progress has been made, it also asks the Australian government to ensure no port developments or associated infrastructures are permitted outside existing major port areas.

Queensland Resources Council chief Michael Roche maintains the growth of local industry will be modest.

He says the claims being made by environment organisations of larger expansion are false.

Indeed, he says those claims may have misled the group of 150 scientists who are calling to limit development.

"We welcome the commitment of Australian and international scientists to support ongoing protection of the Great Barrier Reef and we share their position around the need to protect the Great Barrier Reef. We believe they are a set of people that have also been alarmed by unrealistic, exaggerated stories about proposals for development."

Mr Roche says the state government and the Queensland Resources Council share the same view of future progress.

"Both industry and the Queensland government believe that for the foreseeable future any further port expansions or development are most likely to be targeted at existing port precincts. I don't see any inconsistency between industry plans, Queensland Government plans and the sentiment from the World Heritage Committee."



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Executive Director

P.O. Box 311117

Houston, Texas 77231

vic.ferguson@wfcrc.org

www.wfcrc.org

281.886.7428 (office)

281.309.1201 (cell)