Scientists to unlock Great Barrier Reef genome

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This file photo shows the 345,000-square-kilometre Great Barrier Reef which runs along the northeastern coast of Australia. Australian scientists have announced a ground-breaking genome-mapping project that could help the Great Barrier Reef fight off the twin threats of climate change and toxic farm chemicals.

Australian scientists on Thursday announced a ground-breaking genome-mapping project that could help the Great Barrier Reef fight off the twin threats of climate change and toxic farm chemicals.

Geneticists said they would unlock the secrets of the colourful 'acropora millepora' coral, one of the main components of the northeastern tourist

attraction, the growth of which has slowed markedly in recent years.

"This gene-mapping project has both practical and scientific significance," said professor David Miller of Australia's Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies and James Cook University.

"It will help us to understand how corals build reefs -- and why they fail to do so when they are under stress."

The project, Australia's first attempt to gene-sequence a complex animal, is expected to yield insights into why the Reef's growth has been hampered by warmer sea temperatures and chemical run-off.

The World Heritage-listed, 345,000-square-kilometre (133,000-square-mile) reef is one of Australia's top attractions and has been short-listed in a competition to find the world's seven natural wonders.

However, the reef has come under growing threat from climate change and chemical run-off with Australia announcing a crackdown in January on farmers who let pesticides and fertilisers leak into the sea.

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