Australia said it had made "substantial" progress on UNESCO benchmarks for protection of the Great Barrier Reef Sunday in a report aimed at staving off a world heritage downgrade.
Environment Minister Greg Hunt said a progress report delivered to the world heritage committee "demonstrates unequivocally the government's commitment to better managing and protecting this natural wonder".

UNESCO has warned that without action on rampant coastal development and water quality the reef—which covers an area roughly the size of Italy or Japan—will be declared "World Heritage in Danger" in June.

Hunt released Canberra's latest state party report on the reef Sunday which he said showed significant progress was being made to address UNESCO's concerns.

This was despite the government in December approving a massive coal port expansion in the region and the reef's governing body—which is under investigation for its links to mining companies—green-lighting the dumping of up to three million cubic metres of dredge waste within its waters.

Conservationists have warned it could hasten the demise of the reef, which is already considered to be in "poor" health, with dredging smothering corals and seagrasses and exposing them to poisons and elevated levels of nutrients.
"The report shows that the Great Barrier Reef’s outstanding universal value and integrity remain largely intact and Australia has made substantial progress and commitment in responding to the requests of the World Heritage Committee," Hunt said.

"We are confident that we have the appropriate processes, resources and environmental protection mechanisms in place to ensure that the Great Barrier Reef continues to be among the best managed and protected World Heritage areas in the world," he added.
According to the report for UNESCO, Australia was taking steps to bolster the reef's resilience to the major threats of extreme weather events and climate change which it said "cannot be managed directly".

Working to reduce outbreaks of the coral-feeding crown-of-thorns starfish was a priority, as was tackling nutrient and sediment run-off from land-clearing and agriculture, the report said.

On port development, it said no projects "have been approved outside the existing and long-established major port areas within or adjoining" the reef.

"In addition, no developments that would have an unacceptable impact on the outstanding universal value of the property have been approved," it said.

"Australia does not consider that the (reef) warrants inclusion on the list of World Heritage in Danger," the report added.

"Australia is taking corrective action and has demonstrated substantial progress and commitment in responding to the requests of the World Heritage Committee and to mission recommendations."

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