

Australia says UNESCO reef deferral 'a win for logic'

June 19 2014



Australia calls a decision by UNESCO to defer listing the Great Barrier Reef as in danger "a win for logic", but environmentalists say it is a final warning

Australia Thursday called a decision by UNESCO to defer listing the Great Barrier Reef as in danger "a win for logic", but environmentalists said it was a final warning.

The UN cultural agency on Wednesday said the reef could be put on a list of endangered World Heritage Sites if more was not done to protect it.

It voiced alarm at a "serious decline in the condition" of the reef, and said "a business as usual approach to managing the property is not an option".

Australia was given until February 1 next year to submit a report on what it was doing to protect the natural wonder. The Queensland state government saw the deferral as "a tick of approval".

"I welcome this decision by UNESCO's World Heritage Committee, which gives Queensland a big tick and it gives the work we are doing a big tick," state Environment Minister Andrew Powell said.

"Our strong plan to protect the Great Barrier Reef is already producing positive results, creating a brighter future that Queenslanders and tourists from around the world can enjoy.

"This decision is also a win for logic and science rather than rhetoric and scaremongering."

The reef is one of the most biodiverse places on Earth, but is under pressure not only from climate change and the coral-eating crown-of-thorns starfish, but agricultural runoff and development linked to mining.

UNESCO raised particular concerns about the approval in December of a massive coal port expansion in the region and allowing the dumping of millions of tonnes of dredge waste within the marine park waters.

Strong said the concerns were being dealt with.

"We have significantly scaled back the development at Abbot Point and imposed more than 140 conditions on the project," he said.

"We have delivered our Ports Strategy, limiting development to existing port areas for a decade, and we have outlined our plans to enshrine that commitment in legislation."

Green groups said the government was on its final warning, and had "clearly not lived up to the standards expected by the international community".

"The World Heritage Committee has resisted intense pressure from the Australian and Queensland governments to water down its decision on the reef," said WWF-Australia reef campaigner Richard Leck, who is in Doha for the committee's annual meeting.

"Instead, the committee has put Australia firmly on notice to take stronger action to protect the Great Barrier Reef.

"This is a victory for the millions around the world who say our reef is not a dump."

The World Heritage Committee is also due to consider a request from Australia to de-list 74,000 hectares (183,000 acres) of the Tasmanian Wilderness, one of the last expanses of temperate rainforest in the world.

The move, which could give access to loggers, has been denounced by environmental groups and led to thousands protesting last weekend outside Tasmania's state parliament in Hobart.

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Citation: Australia says UNESCO reef deferral 'a win for logic' (2014, June 19) retrieved 26

April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-06-australia-unesco-reef-deferral-logic.html>

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