

UNESCO warns Australia over Great Barrier Reef

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A handout photo received from Australian Institute of Marine Science on October 2, 2012 shows bleaching on a coral reef at Halfway Island in Australia's Great Barrier Reef

UN cultural agency UNESCO on Wednesday warned Australia that the Great Barrier Reef could be put on a list of endangered World Heritage Sites if more is not done to protect it.

UNESCO's annual World Heritage Committee gathering, which takes place this year in Doha, called on Australia to submit a report on its actions by February 1, 2015 or face the possibility of the reef being put on the "in danger" list.

The reef, one of the most biodiverse places on the planet that sprawls across an area roughly the size of Japan, is considered to be in poor health.

It is under growing pressure not just from climate change and the destructive coral-eating crown-of-thorns starfish, but agricultural runoff and rampant coastal development linked to mining.

In documents presented at the meeting, UNESCO warned of the "serious decline in the condition" of the reef and said "a business as usual approach to managing the property is not an option".

UNESCO has raised particular concern 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.

UNESCO delegates are meeting for 10 days in Doha to consider the inscription of 40 sites on the World Heritage List, but also to issue warnings over already-listed locations that may be in danger.

Among the sites expected to win the coveted status are Qhapaq Nan—a huge network of roads spanning six countries once used by the Inca Empire—and the Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc Cave in France, which contains some of the earliest known cave paintings.

The committee will also consider a request from Australia for the de-listing of 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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