

Great Barrier Reef stays on UN watch list

May 29 2015



An aerial view of the Great Barrier Reef off the coast of the Whitsunday Islands, along the central coast of Queensland, on November 20, 2014

The Great Barrier Reef will remain under surveillance but not be listed as endangered, according to a draft recommendation to the UN's World Heritage Committee, published on Friday.

Australia has been worried that the world's greatest coral reef, which has had World Heritage Site status since 1981, could be formally listed as "in danger" when the panel meets next month.

A draft recommendation published on the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) website on Friday said the committee notes "with concern" the state of the reef today.

But it also said it "welcomes" Australia's 35-year plan to protect the reef.

It called on Australia "to rigorously implement all of its commitments" under the so-called Reef 2050 Long-term Sustainability Plan, and submit a progress report by December 2016.

"The overall outlook (for the reef) is poor," the document said bluntly.

"Climate change, poor water quality and impacts from coastal development are major threats to (its) health," it said.

"Key habitats, species and ecosystem processes in the central and southern inshore areas have continued to deteriorate from the cumulative effects of these impacts."

The Australian scheme seeks to reduce pollution runoff into the waters around the reef by 80 percent by 2025, limit port development and ban the dumping of dredged sediment.

The Great Barrier Reef is a biodiversity treasure, a national icon and a major generator of tourism revenue, helped by its UN status.



Fish swim through the coral in Australia's Great Barrier Reef on September 22, 2014

It covers 348,000 square kilometres (131,000 square miles) off Australia's east coast, with 2,500 individual reefs that are the home to unique corals, 1,500 species of fish and thousands of types of molluscs.

In 2011, UNESCO voiced "extreme concern" at the approval of liquefied natural gas processing and port facilities within the site and subsequently warned the reef could be classified "in danger".

Earlier Friday, Australian Environment Minister Greg Hunt said his government was making "once-in-a-century changes to ensure that a century from now, the reef won't just be as it is, but will be better and stronger than it has been since European settlement."

In a statement, green group World Wildlife Fund said Australia had been put "on probation."

"UNESCO has made the right decision," Dermot O'Gorman, head of its Australian branch, said.



An aerial view of the Great Barrier Reef off the coast of the Whitsunday Islands, along the central coast of Queensland, on November 20, 2014

"The future World Heritage status of the [reef](#) should rightly be determined based on the actual condition of its precious corals and marine life—as assessed by scientists."

UNESCO's World Heritage Committee determines whether natural, cultural and historical sites should be included in its list and monitors

their state of conservation.

The panel, gathering 21 UN members, meets once a year. The draft recommendation will be put to its next session, running in Bonn, the former West German capital, from June 28 to July 8.

Other natural sites that will be scrutinised at this meeting include Lake Turkana National Parks in Kenya, Russia's Lake Baikal and the Chitwan National Park in Nepal.

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