

Save our reef, save our heritage

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Protecting the Great Barrier Reef from the impacts of climate change, natural disasters and rising human pressures will be a key test of Australia's ability to keep our natural environment healthy and resilient.

That's the message from Professor Malcolm McCulloch of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies (CoECRS) to this week's gathering of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), in Cairns.

"If Australia can't save the GBR, then no-one anywhere in the world can save their coral reefs," Professor McCulloch warns.

"We know the threats posed by coral bleaching, ocean acidification, rapid sea level rise and increased coastal erosion. It's about what we can do in the way we manage the reef and look after it that will mitigate those threats.

"We have to make our corals as healthy and resilient as possible so they can withstand these stresses."

Preserving Australian and World Heritage sites from dangers posed by climate change, natural disasters and conflict will be the focus of discussion at the ICOMOS conference being held at James Cook University campus in Cairns, North Queensland, this week (July 19-21).

"People often don't realise how important heritage is to them. We reference ourselves against it and from it we develop the values that define us," says conference convenor, Dr Susan McIntyre-Tamwoy of CoECRS.

"These sites should be appreciated, researched and documented while we have them - after they are gone it will be too late."

The global impacts of natural disasters, climate change, globalisation and conflict are recognised as real risks by governments worldwide. However,

their impact on the world's natural and cultural heritage sites has not been well considered.

"We haven't come to grips with the risks of climate change and the things that might be damaged or lost with an increase in sea levels," says Dr McIntyre-Tamwoy. "We have to ask ourselves how those changes will affect our way of life."

Another speaker, Dr John Hurd, director of conservation for the Global Heritage Fund, will explore how climate change is affecting the human heritage in the deserts: "Deserts are normally great places for preserving things, but recent heavy floods have totally destroyed ancient archaeological sites." The deserts are changing – and are especially vulnerable to the increased rainfall expected in some areas under climate change, he says.

The ICOMOS conference will focus on developing strategies and awareness for the management and mitigation of the risks facing heritage sites.

The conference includes speakers and representatives from the heritage profession, industry, government and research institutes from Australia, Europe, USA, Asia and the Pacific Islands.

A public forum on heritage and climate change will be held during the conference to allow members of the public to engage in the debate over heritage conservation in the face of climate change.

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