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Climate Change Is Just Murdering Australia's Great Barrier Reef

BY ROBBIE GRAMER | NOVEMBER 28, 2016 - 4:35 PM | ROBBIE GRAMER | @ROBBIEGRAMER



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Australia's great natural wonder this year endured its largest-ever die-off, scientists have confirmed.

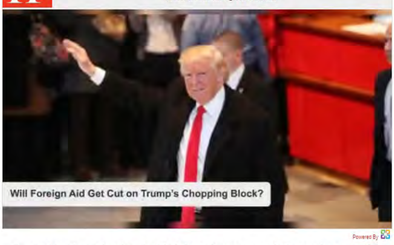
The story began in May 2016, when Australian researchers released a study indicating 35 percent of the northern and central parts of the Great Barrier reef were dying in a process known as "coral bleaching," caused by climate change and an abnormally strong "El Nino" climate disruption in 2015.

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But on Monday, scientists decided those figures weren't depressing enough and released a grim update: They now believe the rate of coral bleaching is significantly higher, with 67 percent of coral dying this year in the worst-affected areas, according to new research. In one of the worst-hit areas, Lizard Island off Queensland, 90 percent of the coral has died.

Coral bleaching isn't just bad for the environment — it's also a blow to the economy. Great Barrier Reef tourism employs over 70,000 people and generates $5 billion in income for Australia each year.

This isn't the first time Australia's natural wonder has been under the gun. It survived mass bleaching events in 1998 and 2002 due to sustained warm ocean temperatures. But the 2016 bleaching event is much worse, according to scientists.

"We had bleaching here in 2002," Anne Hogget, a Lizard Island research station director told the BBC. "We thought this was bad at the time, but this has blown it completely out of the water."

Mounting concerns drove one magazine to publish a high-profile obituary for the Great Barrier Reef. But that obituary may have been premature.

"It's not too late for the Great Barrier Reef, and people who think that have a really profound misconception about what we know ... about coral resilience," Kim Cobb, a professor at Georgia Tech told the *Los Angeles Times* in October. "We know from past research that corals are able to recover from the brink of death."

Scientists expect the northern Great Barrier Reef region will take 10 to 15 years to recover. But if the world can't tackle climate change (and the next U.S. president seems to have other plans), experts worry a fourth massive bleaching event could happen before the reef has recovered.

It's not all doom and gloom, however. The southern portion of the Great Barrier Reef "escaped with minor damage," the researchers noted, while another section in the north "escaped the most severe damage," likely protected by an upwelling of colder waters from the Coral sea.

The Australian government created "The Reef 2050 Plan" to respond to its natural wonder's dire straits. The plan outlines concrete management measures to preserve the reef's long-term health.

But climate change may turn the reef's preservation into an uphill battle in the future. The Great Barrier Reef's three bleaching events "all occurred while global temperatures have risen by just 1 degree C above the pre-industrial period," said Terry Hughes, director of the ARC Center of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies. If global sea temperatures continue to rise, scientists warn of potentially devastating results.

"We're rapidly running out of time to reduce greenhouse gas emissions," Hughes said.

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