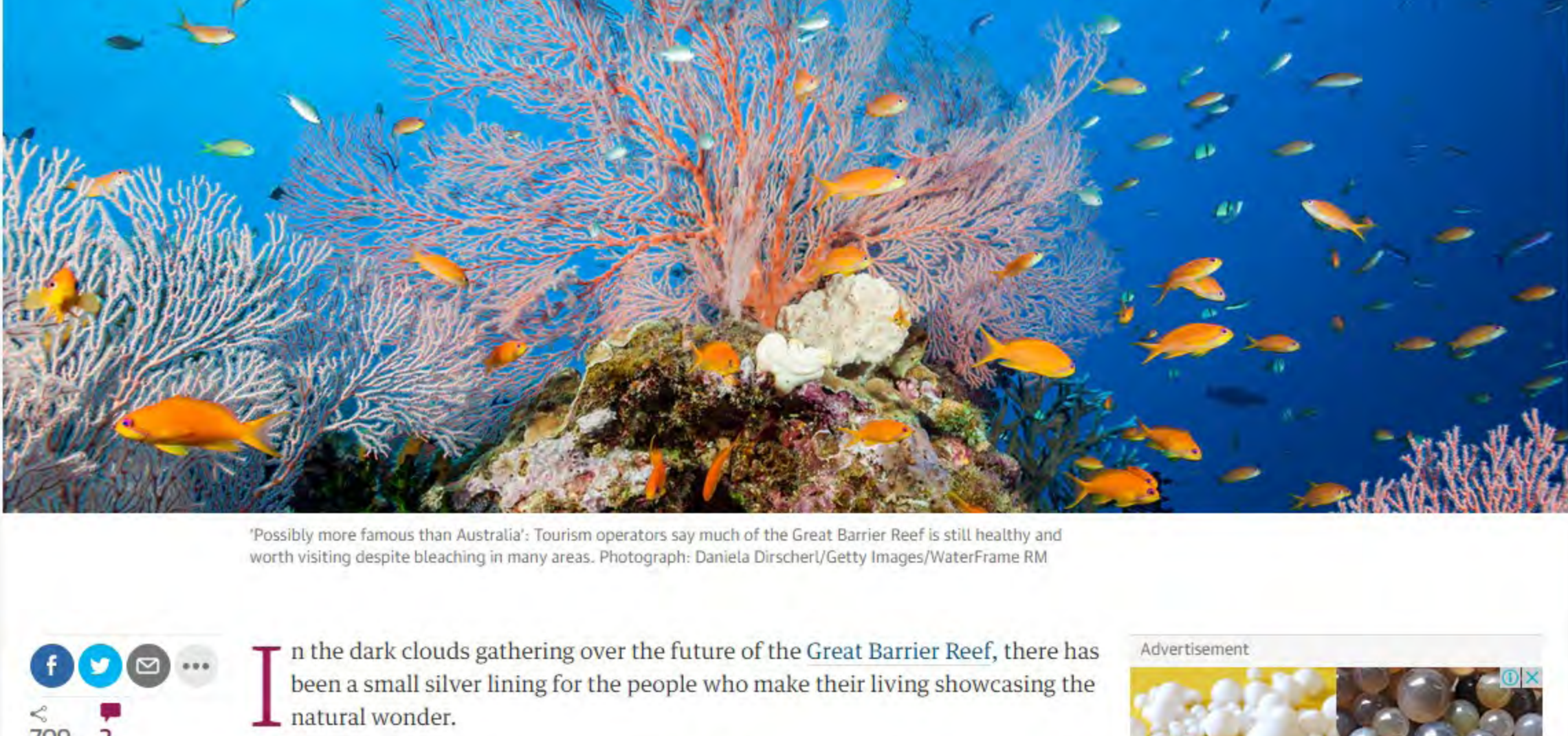


Great Barrier Reef

Great Barrier Reef tourism: caught between commerce and conservation alarm

More people than ever are coming to see the reef and those who make a living showing it off want the world to know it's still a natural wonder. But they worry about its future, and that of their 64,000-strong industry



'Possibly more famous than Australia': Tourism operators say much of the Great Barrier Reef is still healthy and worth visiting despite bleaching in many areas. Photograph: Daniela Dirscher/Getty Images/WaterFrame RM



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“If we get another year of this, we’ll be in an absolute world of hurt”
Col McKenzie

In the dark clouds gathering over the future of the Great Barrier Reef, there has been a small silver lining for the people who make their living showcasing the natural wonder.

When the reef was rocked by an unprecedented second mass bleaching event in the space of a year, the coral hardest-hit by heat stress lay mostly in the tourist-heavy latitudes between Cairns and Townsville.

But despite last year's damage compounded by new cases dotted across 800 reefs in a 1,500km stretch, not a single reef tourism operator has been forced to seek out new ground to take visitors.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, which licenses operators to visit designated reef sites, confirmed it has received one request to change a permit. And that was not because of bleaching but Cyclone Debbie further south, which damaged that other hub of reef tourism, the Whitsundays after it escaped the bleaching.

By an accident of geography, the tourist operators say, the most wondrous sites for public viewing, which tend to fall on the edge of the continental shelf near cooler, deeper waters, are the ones also spared the worst damage from bleaching.

For now at least.

“Look, if we get another year of this, we’ll be in an absolute world of hurt and I know that,” Col McKenzie, chief executive of the Association of Marine Park Tourism Operators says.

Just 7% of the reef is set aside for tourism. But McKenzie says he is frustrated that “the story being put out there that there’s been severe bleaching throughout the whole area: it’s just not true”.

Aerial surveys released by scientists on 10 April showed back-to-back bleaching had occurred in a range along two-thirds of the world's largest living structure. It indicated bleaching levels of more than 60% of coral this time were concentrated in reefs between Port Douglas and Townsville. It was the fourth mass bleaching to hit the reef in recorded history - all since 1998 - and coral scientists are alarmed the increasing regularity of these events gives stressed coral precious little chance to recover.

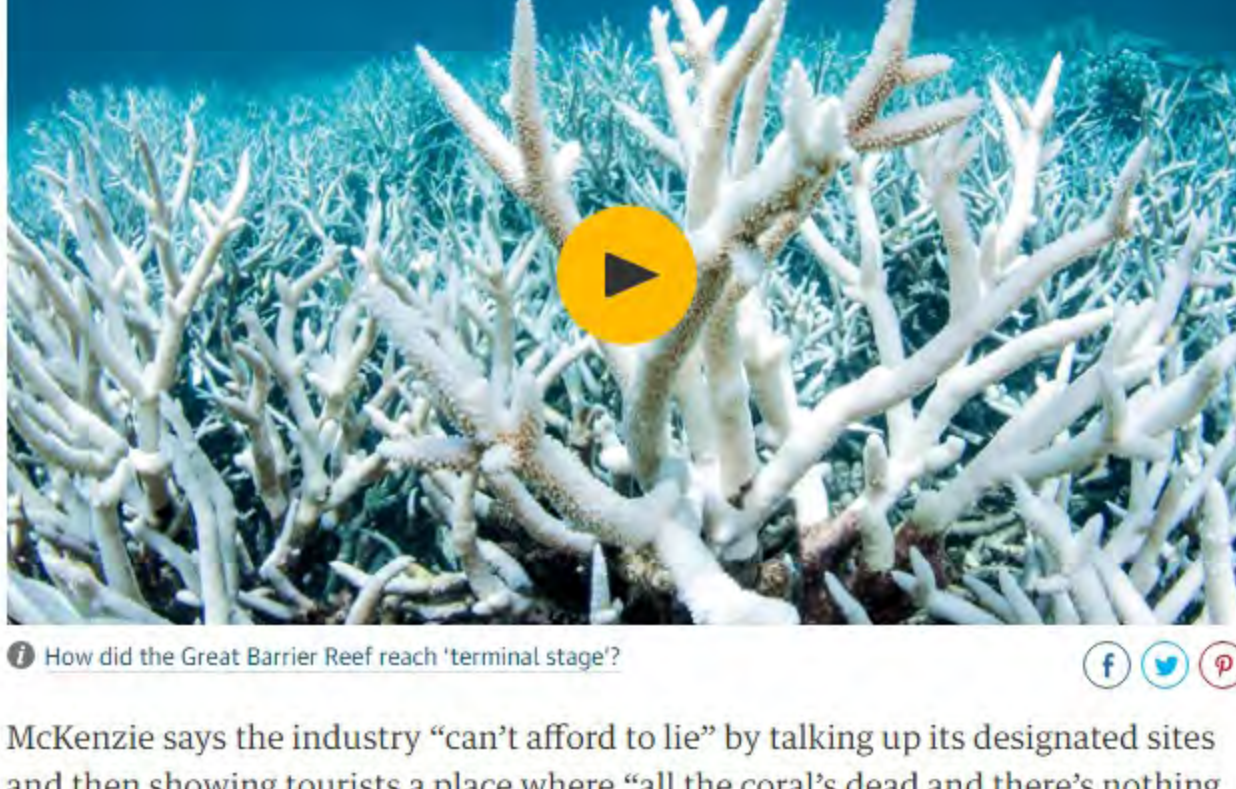
After last year's bleaching, which killed off 22% of coral mainly in the isolated northern section of the reef, [US magazine Outside went so far as to run an obituary on the reef: “25 million BC - 2016”](#).

“Australia's politicians have betrayed the Great Barrier Reef and only the people can save it”
David Ritter

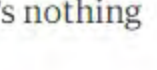
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The latest findings prompted further grim forecasts for the reef, which water quality expert Jon Brodie said was now in a “terminal stage”.

While acknowledging significant bleaching in their region of the reef, tourism operators want this to be reported with more precision. For example, McKenzie says, there could be more emphasis on the fact bleached coral is not necessarily dead, and bleaching across two-thirds of the reef does not equate to two-thirds of the reef being entirely bleached.



How did the Great Barrier Reef reach 'terminal stage'?



McKenzie says the industry “can’t afford to lie” by talking up its designated sites and then showing tourists a place where “all the coral’s dead and there’s nothing but algae”.

“You will not have a business in 12 months. Social media will kill you. We have to tell people what’s there.”

The “smart operators” are highlighting the moderate cases of bleaching for tourists and talking about it, McKenzie says.

“But most of the tourists come back and they’ve seen this fluorescent coral and they’re really excited with how bright and vibrant it is. They don’t realise that that fluorescent coral is in the process of being very, very sick.” At least the fluorescent coral, as opposed to the more-stressed stark white coral, has a better chance of bouncing back, he says.

McKenzie’s concerns about the portrayal of a dying reef are shared by Claire Zwick, a former GBRMPA boat skipper and now co-owner of Coral Sea Dreaming in Cairns.

Coral Sea Dreaming has 28 permitted sites, the largest number of any Cairns operator, “a pretty cool thing to be able to boast”, Zwick says.

Zwick, who did coral bleaching surveys in the past with GBRMPA, says some of those sites last year had 90% bleaching in stages 1 to 3, with “the hardest hit being our middle reef sites” closer to shore from the continental shelf.

She estimates her staff saw 1-3% of corals averaged across their sites die last year, with similar levels of bleaching this year.

But she wants the world to know that “the reef is still alive and beautiful”.

From her company’s prized mooring at Michaelmus Cay, for example, she says she can see “100% coral cover - magic”.

“That was even after the bleaching event of last year, as far as my eye can see, coral.”

Zwick is a self-described conservationist who is very concerned about the climate impact of Adani’s proposed north Queensland coalmine and hopes it does not go ahead.

She was among more than 170 businesses and individuals who signed an open letter to the prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, calling for the scrapping of the mine and urgent climate change action after last year’s bleaching.

Zwick wants climate change action not just on coal exports but in energy use in Australian households.

Her grave concern is that while some corals prove resilient to warmer seas, the “butterfly effect” of others dying off will trigger “a huge reduction in richness of species on the reef”.

“While everyone can sit here and say, ‘The reef’s fine, it can withstand it’ - well, yeah, it can, but they’re not looking at the big picture.”

But Zwick says reef tourism operators have a “pretty weak voice” politically. This is in part because the industry is largely made up of small to medium businesses where “everybody’s working seven days a week and it’s really hard to fit in a political agenda”, she says.

Tony Fontes, a Whitsundays reef tour operator who also signed the open letter to Turnbull, says the industry can only wish it had the influence of the mining lobby when it comes to decisions that affect the reef.

But with \$5.2bn in income and 64,000 jobs attributed to the reef, the tourism industry could gain a large amount of sway “if they could get their act together and jump and down as a unit”, Fontes says.



This mortal coral: new bleaching at the Great Barrier Reef - in pictures

View gallery

“It’s just a matter of getting them to operate together, that’s like herding bunch of cats,” he says.

Meanwhile, Fontes, like many others in the Whitsundays, is busy “mopping up my house” as the Easter tourism season sinks into oblivion with visitors staying away in droves in the cyclone’s wake.

“It’s going to be hard to catch up,” he says.

Despite the bleaching, and dire forecasts of the reef’s survival, visitors keep coming in record numbers.

The past year saw those escorted into the marine park by a commercial operator - as recorded in the number of people paying their \$6.50 environmental management levy - again top 2 million, according to the Queensland Tourism Industry Council.

The council’s chief executive, Daniel Gschwind, says the reef is now “possibly more famous than Australia”.

“Everybody has heard of it, most people want to come and visit some time, many people report fond memories of it,” he says.

“I can’t readily think of many more iconic landscapes, or seascapes, than the reef.”

Gschwind says it is not “an excuse or a defence” for not grappling with the conservation imperative to point out that “some reefs being visited are to an extent affected by bleaching but not to the point where you wouldn’t take visitors anymore”.

“In fact, we’re not shy about showing visitors what it can look like.

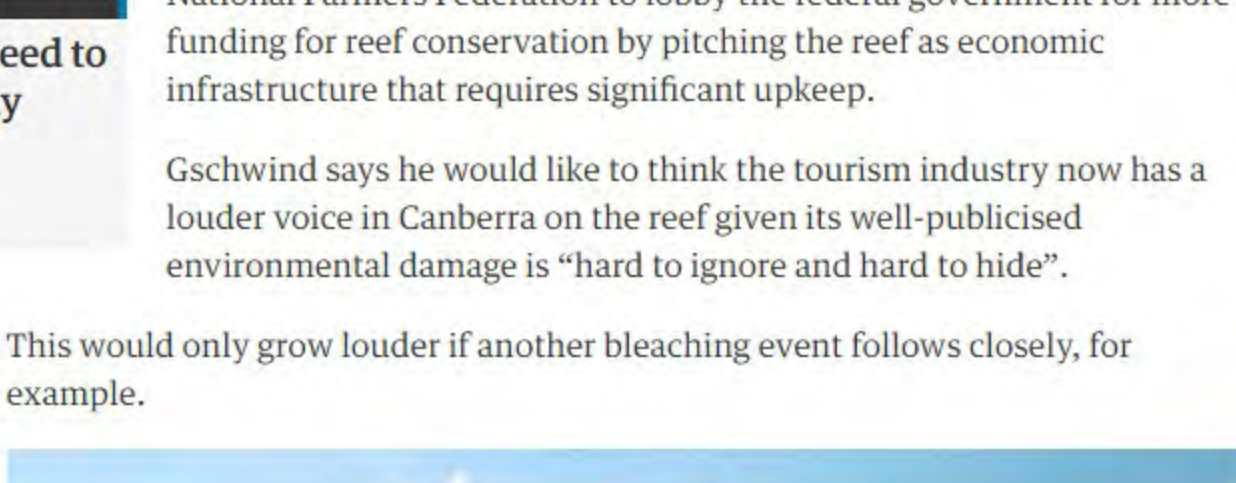
“We are very committed to the conservation of the reef but we clearly also want to make sure that the information and the description of the bleaching is accurate and not deterring visitors from continuing to visit.

“And also, by the way, not discourage people from continuing to put the effort into conservation and reach the conclusion that all is lost, we might as well give up.”

The QTIC has joined forces with environmental groups and the National Farmers Federation to lobby the federal government for more funding for reef conservation by pitching the reef as economic infrastructure that requires significant upkeep.

Gschwind says he would like to think the tourism industry now has a louder voice in Canberra on the reef given its well-publicised environmental damage is “hard to ignore and hard to hide”.

This would only grow louder if another bleaching event follows closely, for example.



Devastation of world's coral reefs could cost \$1tn



“We should have a political voice on behalf of the community because what we defend is a public asset,” he says.

Gschwind acknowledges the future for tourism industry also points towards advocacy on global climate goals.

“The reef is often referred to as the canary in the mine shaft and I think we have an opportunity, if not an obligation, to encourage the global community to do the right thing not just to keep the reef alive but to allow us all to continue living on this planet, because the reef is only an indicator of what’s in store for all of us if we don’t get it right.”

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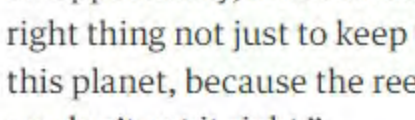
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