UNESCO says Great Barrier Reef isn't in danger, experts disagree

UNESCO has said that World Heritage Site the Great Barrier Reef isn't in danger, a decision that has sparked concern among climate scientists and environmental campaigners.

By Vaidehi Shah

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Securing the future of the Great Barrier Reef—and corals around the world—requires urgent and rapid action to reduce global warming, experts say. Image: FarbenfrohWunderwelt, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Despite the fact that Australia's iconic Great Barrier Reef has recently undergone some of the worst coral bleaching in history, it remains absent from the United Nations Environmental, Social, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)'s annual 'World Heritage in Danger' list, released on Wednesday.

The decision has drawn mixed reactions from environmentalists and academics. While some have welcomed it as an acknowledgement of recent efforts to protect the marine ecosystem, others have slammed it as a failure to recognise the pressure the reef is under from climate change.

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The list is decided on by the World Heritage Committee, which is made up of representatives from 21 countries that are parties to the World Heritage convention—an international agreement to identify, protect, and preserve sites of natural and cultural importance. This year's list was decided at a committee meeting in Poland.

World Heritage sites that are on the 'In Danger' list include the Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System, which UNESCO says is threatened by overfishing, as well as proposed oil and gas exploration; three rainforest reserves in Sumatra, Indonesia which are being destroyed by illegal logging and poaching; and various ancient cities in Syria, which are being ruined due to the ongoing civil war in the country.

Anna Marsden, managing director of conservation charity Great Barrier Reef Foundation, said in a statement that the Barrier Reef's exclusion from this list "recognises much is being done to reduce pressures on the Great Barrier Reef".

"However, with so much to lose, more needs to be done," she added.

Meanwhile, University of Technology Sydney (UTS) associate professor David Suggett, a coral and climate change expert, said that the decision "entirely detracts from climate change and the impacts it has brought."

"We have lost an unprecedented amount of coral from two years of back-to-back coral bleaching, and this will continue to happen unless we can tackle climate change," said Suggett. "So to say that the reef is no longer "in danger" could easily be misleading."

A hot topic

The Barrier Reef, which consulting firm Deloitte Access Economics recently said was worth A$56 billion in economic value, has become an emotionally and politically charged flashpoint for debates around climate and energy policy in Australia in recent months.

In April this year, scientists from James Cook University said they wept described two consecutive years of bleaching in two-thirds of the reef. The damage was attributed to record-breaking global temperatures, a result of climate change as well as the El Nino weather phenomenon.

Another major threat to the reef is water quality; the increased presence of nutrients, pesticides, and other pollutants in runoff water from surrounding land areas has affected corals as well as other marine life.

The main national effort to protect the reef is the Reef 2050 Long-Term Sustainability Plan (LTSP), jointly launched by the Federal and Queensland government in March 2015.

The plan will see US$1.2 billion spent over the next five years to achieve targets such as reducing the amount of nitrogen, pesticide, and sediment in the water; restricting new port development in the regions surrounding the reef; and improving the reef's resilience to climate change.

Yet, the Queensland government has staunchly supported Indian mining conglomerate Adani's plans to set up its Carmichael coal mine in North Queensland. Experts have said that not only would burning the coal from the mine accelerate climate change, but part of the project involves building a port very close to the reef.

In May this year, experts also said the plan is no longer achievable due to climate change.

However, the UNESCO Committee in its decision praised a December 2016 progress update on the LTSP saying: "The inception of the 20400 LTS has been effective...Via the 2050 LTSP and its supporting initiatives, there has undoubtedly been an unprecedented level of increased effort to reduce pressures affecting the property".

The UNESCO decision urged Australia to step up on efforts to achieving the water quality targets set out in the LTSP. It also expressed "serious concern" over the extent of coral bleaching over the past two years, and concluded: "Climate change remains the most significant overall threat to the future of the property."

> **We have lost an unprecedented amount of coral from two years of back-to-back coral bleaching, and this will continue to happen unless we can tackle climate change.**
> *David Suggett, associate professor, University of Technology Sydney*

Government under fire

Australia's Minister for the Environment and Energy Josh Frydenberg was among those who welcomed the decision, telling national broadcaster ABC Radio it an "an endorsement by the World Heritage Committee of what Australia is doing to protect the reef".

His remarks drew swift criticism from environmental groups. Alix Foster Vander Elst, a campaigner at Greenpeace Australia Pacific, said: "Queensland and Australian government ministers say they are committed to preserving the Reef for future generations, but their actions make it quite clear they do not care enough to do what we need to save it."

Both governments "are pouring billions of dollars of taxpayers' money into fossil fuel subsidies, talking up the construction of more coal-fired power stations and bending over backwards to facilitate the expansion of Australian coal mining in the Galilee basin," she observed.

Given that the government is spending as much as 55 times more on fossil fuel subsidies than on the Reef 2050 plan, "it's quite clear what its priorities really are," she added.

UTS's Suggett added that while enough gains had been made on reef protection to avoid an 'In Danger' classification, "the reef simply cannot take any more impacts".

He said: "Any future developments, such as the Adani mine, will of course entirely undermine this victory."

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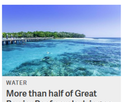

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