

Great Barrier Reef row piles pressure on Australia for climate action

By [Michael Taylor](#)

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Australia needs to respond to a UN warning on the threat to its iconic Great Barrier Reef with bolder climate policies that cut planet-heating emissions further and create a greener economy, environmentalists and researchers said on Wednesday.



Peter Gash, owner and manager of the Lady Elliot Island Eco Resort, snorkels with Oliver Lanyon and Lewis Marshall, Senior Rangers in the Great Barrier Reef region for the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service, during an inspection of the reef's condition in an area called the 'Coral Gardens' located at Lady Elliot Island located north-east from the town of Bundaberg in Queensland, Australia, June 10, 2015. Source: Reuters/David Gray/File photo

The world's most extensive and spectacular coral reef ecosystem - off Australia's northeastern coast – should be added to a list of World Heritage sites that are "in danger", a UN panel said this week, drawing an angry response from Australia. The final decision is expected to be made by the World Heritage Committee in July.

"I hope the most important outcome of the recommendation is that it triggers much more positive and vigorous action from the Australian government in reducing our own greenhouse gas emissions, rapidly and deeply," said Will Steffen, a climate scientist and professor at the Australian National University.

"The pressure on them is increasing and hopefully it will strengthen to the point that they have to take meaningful action on climate change," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

The reef, which was listed as a World Heritage site in 1981 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco), has lost more than half its coral in the last 30 years.

It came close to being placed on the UN "in danger" list in 2015, but that was averted due to high-profile lobbying by the Australian government, which fears that losing its heritage status would lead to fewer tourists visiting the attraction. Since then, coral-bleaching events in 2016, 2017 and 2020 – caused by severe marine heatwaves – have further damaged its health and affected its animal, bird and marine populations, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature.



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The Unesco committee said action was needed to counter the effects of climate change as the prospects of the reef retaining its cherished world heritage status had deteriorated.

Australian Minister for the Environment Sussan Ley said Canberra would challenge the recommendation, adding it was based on a "flawed approach ... without adequate consultation". "I agree that global climate change is the single biggest threat to the world's reefs but it is wrong, in our view, to single out the best-managed reef in the world for an 'in danger' listing," she added in a statement.

Joe Fontaine, a lecturer in environmental science at Murdoch University, said the Unesco decision was "a crucial moment" because of the external pressure it put on Australia's politicians who are more used to in-fighting. "The real hope is for concerted change in federal climate policy and coordinated federal-Queensland cooperation on water quality issues," he said.

Climate laggard

The Unesco warning adds to growing international appeals for Australia to strengthen its climate policies, seen by critics as weak and lacking a firm net-zero emissions goal, said Richard Leck, head of oceans at WWF-Australia.

"The recommendation ... is consistent with a broader global trend that is starting to call Australia out for being a laggard on climate change," he added, citing comments made by the U.S. and UK governments and last week's meeting of G7 leaders.

Once the shock of the Unesco recommendation subsides, the Australian government will hopefully realise the move is based on science and take the need for action seriously, said Leck.

Green groups and researchers urged Australia to set a carbon-neutral goal and introduce policies in line with the 2015 Paris Agreement to limit global warming. "Australia needs to do its fair share to limit global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius – a critical threshold for coral reefs," said Imogen Zethoven, a consultant for the Australian Marine Conservation Society.

"Linking climate policy to the long-term survivability of the Great Barrier Reef is critical."



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Reef responsibility

Australia's reliance on coal-fired power makes it one of the world's largest carbon emitters per capita. Its current climate policies are "insufficient", according to analysis by research coalition Climate Action Tracker.

Lesley Hughes, a scientist at the Climate Council and biology professor at Macquarie University, said the Australian government has stewardship of "one of the world's most precious and iconic ecosystems".

"But its continued support for fossil fuels and its lack of effective climate policy means it's utterly failing to live up to that responsibility," she added. "Australia is standing still while the world moves on, and the international community is quickly losing patience."

Conservationists said, however, it was unlikely Australia would act quickly after the Unesco recommendation, because of domestic political risks, but a shift could be expected in the medium to long term.

They urged the government to ban new fossil fuel development, abandon its gas-fired Covid-19 recovery plan, and invest in and promote renewable energy and electric vehicles. "It is inevitable that Australia will embrace a renewable future - a future where we take climate change much more seriously," said WWF's Leck.

Source: Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of Thomson Reuters

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