

WORLD HERITAGE STATUS OF THE GREAT BARRIER REEF:

AVOIDING AN 'IN DANGER' LISTING IN 2020

Australia is uniquely vulnerable to the impact of climate change. We are the 'driest continent' living with long-term changes in rainfall patterns, droughts, degradation of inland waterways, impacts on agriculture, hotter and more frequent bushfires, warming seas, destructive rain 'events', damage to coastal infrastructure, and damage to our world renowned natural wonder: the Great Barrier Reef.

In 2020, the World Heritage Committee will review Australia's management of the Great Barrier Reef. During the last major review in 2015, the Committee expressed concern about major threats to the Reef, including climate change, and looked set to inscribe the Reef on the World Heritage In Danger list. However, it chose not to do so when the Australian and Queensland Governments produced the Reef

2050 Plan, which is intended to ensure the Great Barrier Reef continues to improve on its Outstanding Universal Value every decade between now and 2050 to be a natural wonder for each successive generation to come.

The Plan addresses a range of local threats including poor water quality, coastal development, fisheries and shipping. It does not address Australia's contribution to climate change – the greatest threat to the Great Barrier Reef.

Since 2015:

- The GBR Outlook Report 2019 found the outlook for the Great Barrier Reef's ecosystem had declined from 'poor' in 2014 to 'very poor'.
- The joint Australian/Queensland Government's GBR Water Quality report card 2017-2018 found that the condition of the inshore Reef was 'D' or 'poor'.
- IUCN's World Heritage Outlook report released in 2017 found the outlook for the GBR was of 'Significant Concern'.
- The World Heritage Committee in 2017 called on all State Parties to undertake the most ambitious implementation of the Paris Agreement.

One year into the implementation of the 35-year Plan, the Great Barrier Reef was hit by an extreme marine heatwave, made 175 times more likely by human-induced climate change.

The heatwave caused severe mass coral bleaching and coral death in the northern third of the World Heritage site. Tragically another extreme heatwave hit 12 months later causing extensive damage to the central third. The back-to-back events were unprecedented and resulted in the death of approximately 50 percent of shallow water corals. In addition, in 2017 Cyclone Debbie caused significant coral reef destruction in the Whitsundays region, consistent with climate predictions of more intense cyclones as the oceans and atmosphere warm. The Australian and Queensland Government's own Independent Expert Panel of scientists concluded that coral bleaching since early 2016 had changed the Reef fundamentally.

While the Australian and Queensland Governments revised the Reef 2050 Plan in July 2018 after the two bleaching events to recognise that "the effects of climate change are the most serious and increasing threat to the Reef" (p.3), the Australian Government has consistently downplayed Australia's contribution to climate change and wound back actual efforts to reduce emissions, such as not replacing the Renewable Energy Target which has now been fully contracted and using its surplus Kyoto credits to meet its Paris Agreement target (see further discussion below). Australia's domestic emissions represent approximately 1.4 percent of global emissions in 2017, while Australia's fossil fuel exports amount to 3.6 percent of annual global emissions, taking the total to 5 percent. Australia has just 0.3 percent of the global population.

In 2020, the Committee will once again assess the state of the Great Barrier Reef and will make a decision on what Australia must do to comply with our legal obligations to protect the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of this iconic World Heritage site. It may consider placing the Reef on the In Danger list. There is no getting around the fact that in recent times climate change has put the Reef in grave

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danger. While climate change is a global problem that must be solved if we are to safeguard our common future, it is also a national problem. We must get our house in order. To do so, the Australian Government must show national and global leadership. It is in Australia's interest to play a leading role in getting the world to act, and the only way it can do that is by acting at home whilst urging other countries to follow our example. The good news is that as the world moves to decarbonise, Australia's sunshine, wind and large land area are the envy of the world. This puts us in an excellent position to become a renewable export economy, unlocking new business opportunities and jobs right across the country.

Below we present a list of actions the World Heritage Committee should expect the Australian Government to undertake to ensure compliance with its obligations under the World Heritage Convention and so avoid an In Danger listing:

CLIMATE CHANGE

Under the World Heritage Convention, Australia has a legal responsibility to protect and conserve the OUV of the Great Barrier Reef, and our other World Heritage properties, and to pass them on to future generations intact. This responsibility requires State Parties to address and resolve all threats to properties. Climate change may be a global problem, but it does not absolve Australia from addressing and resolving our contribution to the problem. The Australian Government must act urgently to ensure we do our fair share of global emissions reduction by committing to the following

1. Urgently develop a national Energy Transition Plan that is 1.5C compatible, ensuring we undertake our fair share of emissions reduction to hold global average temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.
2. The 1.5°C Transition Plan should set science-based emission reduction targets that are fully consistent with Australia's obligations within the World Heritage Convention to protect the OUV of the Great Barrier Reef and Australia's other World Heritage properties.
3. The Transition Plan should include commitments and strategies to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, including where

necessary through their inclusion in legislation. The Plan should be developed in partnership with affected communities and industries.

4. Targets and strategies in the Transition Plan should be rolled over to the Reef 2050 Plan to ensure integration of climate, energy and Great Barrier Reef policies, strategies, actions and investments.
5. The Reef 2050 Plan should (i) include references to the 1.5°C compatible national Energy Transition Plan; (ii) commit to undertaking Australia's fair share of emissions reduction to hold global average temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and (iii) commit to achieving net zero emissions by 2050.
6. Both the revised draft Reef 2050 Plan and the draft national Energy Transition Plan should be submitted to the World Heritage Committee for consideration at its 44th meeting in China next year.
7. The Australian and Queensland Governments should not approve or support any projects that would directly, indirectly, or cumulatively harm the Reef.

SUPPORTING SCIENCE, POLICY AND ASSESSMENTS

- **UNESCO** - UNESCO's First Global Scientific Assessment of the Impacts of Climate Change on World Heritage Coral Reefs found that "drastic reductions in CO2 emissions are essential – and the only real solution – to giving coral reefs on the World Heritage List a chance to survive climate change".
- **World Heritage Committee** - In 2017, 41COM, the World Heritage Committee reiterated "the importance of State Parties undertaking the most ambitious implementation of the Paris Agreement". The WHC also strongly invited all State Parties to "undertake actions to address Climate Change under the Paris Agreement consistent with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, in the light of different national circumstances that are fully consistent with their obligations within the World Heritage Convention to protect the OUV of all World Heritage properties".
- **Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)** - The IPCC SR1.5 report (2018) found that coral reefs are projected to decline by a further 70–90% at 1.5°C (high confidence) with larger losses (>99%) at 2°C (very high confidence).

- **Pacific Island Forum** - Australia signed the Communique of the 2019 Pacific Islands Forum, including the Kainaki II Declaration for Urgent Climate Change Action Now. By signing this Declaration, Australia agreed to the following statement: "All Parties to the Paris Agreement to formulate and communicate mid-century long-term low greenhouse gas emissions development strategies by 2020. This may include commitments and strategies to achieve net zero carbon by 2050, taking into account the urgency highlighted by the IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C, and establish the necessary policy, financing and governance mechanisms required to achieve this"(19.(ii)).
- **The Australian Government Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA)** – The GBRMPA Position Statement on Climate Change states 'Climate change is the greatest threat to the Great Barrier Reef. Only the strongest and fastest possible actions to decrease global greenhouse gas emissions will reduce the risks and limit the impacts of climate change on the Reef.' The statement makes clear that for coral reefs **'limiting the increase in global average temperature to 1.5°C and ideally less, is critical to minimise significant environmental and societal costs from the loss of reef habitats'**.

CURRENT SITUATION

- The Australian Government's own data demonstrates that it will not achieve its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) under the Paris Agreement. The G20 Brown to Green Report 2019 by the global partnership Climate Transparency found that Australia, Canada and South Korea are the G20 countries furthest off track to implement their NDCs.
- Australia's emissions from fossil fuels and industry continue to rise, and are now 7 percent above 2005 levels. With current policies, they are headed for an increase of 8 percent above 2005 levels by 2030.
- Australia's NDC target of 26-28 percent reduction of emissions by 2030 based on 2005 levels is well below the 45-65 percent its own Climate Change Authority recommended as Australia's fair share to limit global warming below 2 degrees.

- At an Australian Senate hearing on 21 October 2019, a Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade official confirmed that she was unaware of any country other than Australia intending to carryover surplus Kyoto credits to meet its Paris target. Such a move would almost halve Australia's NDC target.
- If all other countries followed Australia's current emissions trajectory, global warming could reach over 3°C and up to 4°C.

POOR WATER QUALITY

8. Noting that current Australian and Queensland investments and Queensland regulatory action is insufficient to meet the 2025 Reef water quality targets, both governments should identify in the revised Reef 2050 Plan how the shortfall will be addressed by further actions and investments.
9. The Australian and Queensland Governments should pursue efforts to make the GBR catchment a globally significant carbon bank to reduce Reef pollution and deliver other environmental, social and economic benefits. The reforestation program should focus on key habitats like riverbanks, wetlands and degradable landscapes.
10. The Queensland and Australian Governments should commit to fully funding the implementation of the new regulations to improve Reef water quality. This should include additional funding for compliance and enforcement, farm extension and education and community outreach.

RATIONALE

- The 2018 water quality targets in the original Reef 2050 Plan have not been met.
- The joint Australian/Queensland Government's Great Barrier Reef Water Quality report card 2017-2018 found that the condition of the inshore Reef was 'D' or 'poor' (as noted above).
- AMCS and WWF-Australia warmly welcomed the recent Queensland regulatory reforms to improve Reef water quality, however, even with this reform, as well as the Australian Government's water quality investment of AU\$201 million over six years through the Reef Trust Partnership,

and the Queensland Government's water quality investment of AU\$261 million over five years, modelled progress towards Dissolved Inorganic Nitrogen and Fine Suspended Sediment targets shows major shortfalls in key catchments.

- The GBR Outlook Report 2019 found that the property remains vulnerable to the effects of legacy, current and future coastal development, as well as cumulative impacts. The primary pressure from coastal development is from agricultural land use.

FISHING

11. The Queensland Government, with Australian Government support, should significantly reduce targeted shark fishing effort in the East Coast Inshore Fishery in the GBR World Heritage property.
12. Both governments should increase protections for populations of at-risk species, such as inshore dolphins, dugongs and endangered sharks (particularly scalloped hammerhead sharks) by amongst other actions, creating an 85,000 km²

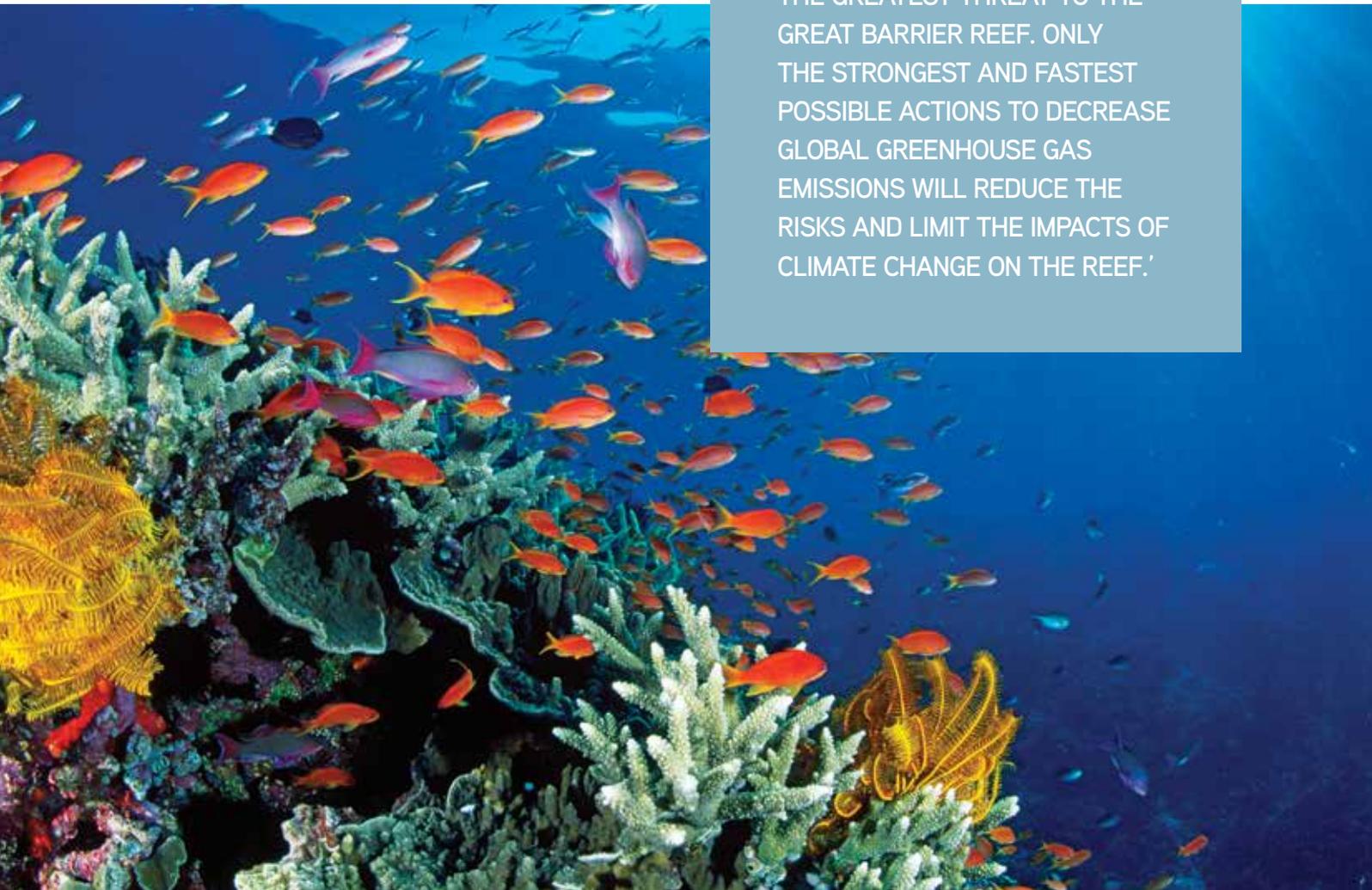
'Net Free North' zone north of Cooktown free from commercial net fishing. This would generate new job opportunities for Traditional Owners and potentially develop new tourism ventures.

13. The Queensland Government should ensure 100% monitoring of high-risk (large mesh gillnets and trawl) commercial fishing in the GBR World Heritage property.

RATIONALE

- As top predators, healthy populations of shark are vital to supporting the resilience of the Reef in the face of warming waters.
- The GBR Outlook Report 2019 found that at least 46 shark species are caught in the East Coast Inshore Fishery, with 17 species considered to be highly vulnerable to exploitation. The outlook for sharks and rays is assessed as 'Poor'.

THE GBRMPA POSITION STATEMENT ON CLIMATE CHANGE STATES 'CLIMATE CHANGE IS THE GREATEST THREAT TO THE GREAT BARRIER REEF. ONLY THE STRONGEST AND FASTEST POSSIBLE ACTIONS TO DECREASE GLOBAL GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSIONS WILL REDUCE THE RISKS AND LIMIT THE IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON THE REEF.'



- Within the Marine Park, fishers discard (most likely dead) half of the endangered scalloped hammerhead sharks caught. Continued fishing for endangered species of shark is out of step with international efforts to conserve at risk shark species.
- The incidental capture of endangered Reef wildlife is a significant threat to Reef biodiversity. Deaths of inshore dolphins, sawfish and dugongs are significantly under-reported in fishery log books due to lack of independent monitoring in the Reef.

THE CASE FOR HOPE

Australians and people across the globe care deeply about the future of the Great Barrier Reef. It is one of the seven natural wonders of the world, a spectacular ecosystem teeming with a great diversity of plants and animals from darting reef fish to breaching whales. Yet many feel deep anxiety that in our lifetime we may lose this global treasure because of government inaction on climate change. Soon it could be too late to safeguard the future of the Reef but right now, it is not. The Australian people want the Federal Government to protect the Reef. Australians know that if the Government takes climate change seriously and pursues change in other countries vigorously, we can do that. The time to do so is now.

MORE INFORMATION

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