

Leading Voices in Support of UNESCO's Great Barrier Reef recommendation to the World Heritage Committee, July 2021

The Great Barrier Reef is Australia's natural wonder, a part of our national identity, loved and revered around the world.

Stretching for more than 2,000 kilometres, the World Heritage area is a vast network of coral reefs, mangroves forests, seagrass meadows and many other ecosystems that host iconic species such as whales, dolphins, marine turtles, dugongs and more than 1,600 species of fish.

The Reef's inscription on the World Heritage List forty years ago noted its superlative natural beauty.

Sadly, the Reef is no longer as biodiverse as it was then and in parts its beauty is diminished.

UNESCO has recommended to the World Heritage Committee placing the Great Barrier Reef on the List of World Heritage in Danger. The recommendation is based on the best available science from Australian and Queensland government reports.

In 2019, the Australian Government downgraded the outlook for the Reef to 'very poor'. This was predominantly due to two severe coral bleaching events in 2016 and 2017 fueled by global heating. There was a further severe event in 2020.

Despite some progress to reduce agricultural pollution in some catchments, the overall condition of the inshore environment remains poor. Illegal fishing and the capture of threatened species (such as turtles) remain a high risk.

We acknowledge that the Australian and Queensland Governments have made new investments to tackle local threats and there has been significant progress in strengthening Queensland's laws and regulations.

However, the level of effort is not adequate to match the threats. This is particularly the case with climate change where the Australian Government's lack of leadership has left Australia ranked last on climate action out of UN member countries.¹

We urge the World Heritage Committee to act on the advice of IUCN, which last year downgraded the Reef's outlook to critical.

We urge the Committee to call on Australia to put in place 'corrective measures' addressing climate change and local threats. A national plan compatible with 1.5°C of warming is a critical threshold for the Great Barrier Reef.

We urge the Committee to put science before politics; conservation and protection before national interest; and to uphold the spirit and letter of the Convention.

We look to the World Heritage Committee to endorse UNESCO's draft decision.

Endorsed by:

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Damon Gameau

Film director - '2040', 'That
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David Williamson AO

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Di Morrissey AM

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Reef water quality expert

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¹ Jeffrey D. Sachs, Christian Kroll, Guillaume Lafortune, Grayson Fuller, and Finn Woelm, 2021. Sustainable Development Report 2021, the decade of action for the Sustainable Development Goals. DOI 10.1017/9781009106559