

MPA NEWS



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World Heritage Committee welcomes progress but keeps Great Barrier Reef on watchlist

At its annual meeting, which is ongoing as this issue of MPA News goes to press, UNESCO's World Heritage Committee has unanimously voted to keep the Great Barrier Reef on its watchlist due to an array of challenges facing the protected area, including poor water quality from runoff, habitat loss, impacts from coastal development, and climate change.

However, the committee welcomed Australia's 2050 long-term sustainability plan for the reef, which includes an 80% cut in water pollution by 2025 and an extra AU \$200m to accelerate that progress in the next five years (<http://bit.ly/GBR2050plan>). The committee also greeted Australia's moves to limit new port development and ban the dumping of capital dredge spoil from those port developments in reef water.

Fanny Douvère, director of the Marine World Heritage Programme, called the meeting a milestone for the reef's protection. "The committee recognized and welcomed the 2050 Reef Plan that will now guide the future management of the reef," said Douvère. "But it also stressed that a plan is just a plan. It is now key to concentrate on implementation." Australia and the state of Queensland must report back to the Committee in 18 months with an update on progress.

No "in danger" status

The committee did not apply "in danger" status to the Great Barrier Reef. The committee uses its World Heritage in Danger list to draw attention and resources to threatened World Heritage sites, and has voiced openness since 2012 to adding the Great Barrier Reef to the list if necessary ([MPA News 15.6](#)).

The 2014 *Great Barrier Reef Outlook Report*, produced by the Australian and Queensland governments, acknowledges that the ecosystem is not in good condition. The Great Barrier Reef has lost half of its coral cover in the past 30 years, and populations of dugongs, breeding seabirds, and other wildlife are in decline. Meanwhile, plans to expand port infrastructure adjacent to the reef - allowing for greater export of coal - create an increased risk of ship accidents and will ultimately result in carbon emissions from that coal's combustion.

Responses

The decision by the World Heritage Committee followed a draft decision that was released in late May, developed by the World Heritage Marine Programme and IUCN (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/soc/3234>). Upon release of that draft decision, Australian Environment Minister Greg Hunt thanked the World Heritage Centre and World Heritage Committee for their oversight, which he said had been valuable to Australia and Queensland. "They have allowed us to do things on our respective watches that we may never have been able to do," Hunt said. It would have been difficult, he said, to ban capital dredge spoil dumping in the marine park without the focus of the international community. (Note: dumping of *maintenance* dredge spoil - from port maintenance as opposed to port development - will still be allowed in the park.)

WWF-Australia CEO Dermot O'Gorman said of the committee, "WWF welcomes this strong decision. Australia is on probation and the real work to turn around the decline of the reef starts now."

Tim Badman, director of IUCN's World Heritage Programme, agreed. "The [2050 reef sustainability] plan now needs to translate into action, backed by adequate finance and rigorous science," he said.

Jon Day of James Cook University - who previously served as director of conservation, heritage and indigenous partnerships for the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority - has questioned whether the Australian Government's financial commitments will be enough to stem the reef's decline (<http://bit.ly/GBRblogJonDay>). "The real test of the strength of the World Heritage Convention will come if the 2016 report [from Australia and Queensland] does not show the necessary progress," he told MPA News.

Great Barrier Reef as a catalyst for other WH sites

As perhaps the highest-profile marine World Heritage site, the Great Barrier Reef serves as a catalyst for other World Heritage properties, says Douvère. "Doing a good job of supporting the Great Barrier Reef sets a precedent for our work on other sites," she says.

The 2015 meeting of the World Heritage Committee has also examined the state of conservation of 10 other marine World Heritage properties facing challenges. Some of the sites, including the Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System, are already on UNESCO's "in danger" list. The World Heritage Marine Programme and the Belizean government have worked together in the past year to address the challenges that put the site on the list, including the sale of public lands for development within the World Heritage area and the issuing of new offshore oil leases within and adjacent to the reef system.

For more information on the World Heritage Marine Programme, which comprises 47 sites in 35 countries, go to <http://whc.unesco.org/en/marine-programme>

BOX: UNESCO releases best practice guide for proactive MPA management

A new publication from the UNESCO World Heritage Marine Programme guides MPA managers on taking a proactive, future-oriented approach to managing their sites. *Managing effectively the world's most iconic Marine Protected Areas: A best practice guide* leads readers through the steps of defining a clear vision of what their sites should look like in 10-20 years' time, then achieving that vision.

The guide is written in particular for World Heritage site managers but should be useful for all MPA managers, says Fanny Douvère, director of the World Heritage Marine Programme. "Everyone in the MPA field is struggling with balancing the conservation of a site's irreplaceable values with development and use, particularly in the context of climate change," she says. "Because World Heritage sites are so visible, they are well-positioned to serve as an example for other sites in addressing that challenge."

The 122-page guide outlines how using area-based tools, such as marine spatial planning, can help to plan for and achieve environmental, social, and economic objectives that lead to sustainable use and effective management over time. The guide is available at <http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/1300>

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