

# 'Death By a Thousand Cuts': Coal Boom Could Destroy Great Barrier Reef

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**Australia's Great Barrier Reef is rapidly losing its coral, to the point that UNESCO may soon place the natural wonder on its "in danger" list. Climate change is one culprit, but so is the country's booming extraction industry. Environmentalists warn that time is running out for the reef.**

The 2,300-kilometer (1,430-mile) Great Barrier Reef, off the coast of Queensland in northeastern Australia, is a natural wonder. It is home to a quarter of all species that exist in the world's oceans. In 1981, it became the first ocean region to be declared a UNESCO World Heritage site. But now UNESCO is threatening to add the Great Barrier Reef to its list of protected sites that are "in danger." The authors of a report presented to the World Heritage Committee in June are "extremely concerned" about the condition of the reef. UNESCO wants the Australian government to demonstrate that it is serious about saving the reef, or else it will be officially classified in 2014.

## 'Five Minutes to Midnight'

"When a place is recognized as a World Heritage site," says Fanny Douvère, the lead author of the report, "it is both a recognition and a responsibility." UNESCO, she adds, is essentially saying to Australia: "Look, it's five minutes to midnight."

She is far from the only one concerned. Australian scientists have calculated that the Great Barrier Reef, the earth's largest living organism, has lost half of its coral in the last 27 years, and coral death is only accelerating.

One reason is that Australia feels the effects of climate change earlier and more strongly than elsewhere. Not only do rising water temperatures lead to coral bleaching in the summer, but increased levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere also raise ocean acidity, which damages the coral.

But storms and floods also flush mud, pesticides and fertilizers from farmland into the ocean, creating conditions under which a type of starfish that eats coral can thrive. And without healthy coral, fish, crabs, mollusks, sea turtles, manatees, dolphins, skates and sharks also disappear.

Man is also threatening the reef in a very direct way. Australia has the world's largest reserves of uranium, zinc and lead. It also has rich deposits of bauxite, iron ore, copper, gold, manganese and nickel, and no other country in the world has exported as much coal in recent years.

Mining companies have dug enormous open-pit mines in the country's interior, creating moonscapes covering a total of hundreds of square kilometers. Analysts also expect that in a few years Australia will produce more natural gas than Qatar, currently the world's largest exporter. Much of Australia's coal and natural gas reserves are in Queensland.

Coal from Australia, most of which is burned in Asia, is fueling climate change, which in turn is detrimental to the reefs. International energy companies are investing many billions of dollars in new mega-mines and infrastructure projects.

To double its coal exports, Australia is deepening and expanding ports, or building new ones, even in previously untouched protected areas. The silt from excavation is dumped into the ocean, polluting the reef.

### **'We Are in the Coal Business'**

If all goes according to plan, twice as many freighters could soon be passing through the World Heritage site than do so today. And with increased traffic comes an increased risk of accidents such as the one three years ago which saw a Chinese freighter crash into the reef.

UNESCO is particularly alarmed about the plans of mine operators, which have also sparked growing resistance among scientists and environmentalists. The environment organization Greenpeace is collecting signatures to support a campaign of "civil disobedience to stop coal exports from Australia." In April, activists occupied a ship loaded with coal bound for South Korea.

"We are in the coal business," Queensland Prime Minister Campbell Newman said in response to UNESCO criticism. "If you want decent hospitals, schools and police on the beat, we all need to understand that." But if current trends continue, the unthinkable could happen: the Great Barrier Reef could die..."We wouldn't be Queensland without the Great Barrier Reef at our doorstep." The reef generates close to €5 billion (\$6.5 billion) a year for the local tourism industry..."Our government was voted into office with the mandate to stimulate the economy," says the environment minister. "That's why we support the mining industry, construction and agriculture, as well as tourism."

And the reef?

### **Role Model Australia?**

In keeping with UNESCO's wishes, Queensland is currently working on a strategy to develop its coastline in an environmentally sustainable way, says Powell. The national government in Canberra, he adds, is also developing plans for a marine park off the coast. The government expects to complete the overall concept to save the reef and present it to UNESCO

by 2015, Powell explains.

Canberra will invest \$200 million in the next five years to reduce pollution from agriculture and fight the coral-eating starfish. Queensland is contributing \$35 million a year to the effort.

"I believe that we are doing everything we can to satisfy UNESCO's expectations," says Powell, leaning back in his chair. "Look, if Australia doesn't manage to have a healthy economy and simultaneously protect something as special as the Great Barrier Reef, who will?"

In this respect, Powell is right. Most tropical coral reefs are off the coasts of developing nations, whereas Australia is a prosperous country. In addition, climate change is not some abstract idea; the country has been suffering from the painful effects of global warming for some time. In other words, the Australians are in an ideal position to serve as role models.

"It would be a total embarrassment for us if the reef were placed on the list of World Heritage sites in danger," says Larissa Waters, 36. She isn't buying the environment minister's arguments. In her opinion, the government is being coopted by the extractive industry and isn't taking UNESCO's warnings seriously.

Waters is also a politician, though in a somewhat lonely position. She is the first and only member of the Green Party to be voted into the traditionally conservative Queensland Legislative Assembly. In office since 2010, she says that she hardly has any time left these days for issues other than the reef.

"UNESCO has concrete concerns that are simply being ignored," says Waters. "First, no ports in untouched regions; second, no port expansions that could impair the universal value of the reef; and third, a moratorium on port projects until 2015."

Her goal is to convince the state parliament to write UNESCO's recommendations into law. It's a futile struggle, and yet Waters remains optimistic. "I refuse to accept the idea that we will lose the reef," she says. "Australians have enough imagination and courage to prevent that from happening."