

Strategic Intervention for a Reef in Grief

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In Australia a significant proportion of the marine environment of Queensland forms the designated World Heritage Area of the Great Barrier Reef. Covering an area of 34.8 million hectares the Great Barrier Reef encompasses a complex and diverse array of tropical marine ecosystems of global significance. The coastal interface stretches over 1,400 miles and is characterised by mangroves, seagrasses and saltmarsh wetlands. These coupled with inshore fringing reefs provide nursery habitat for fisheries species and also support extensive migratory shorebirds, invertebrates and iconic rare species like dugong and inshore dolphins. This area is, however, also subject to significant development pressure. Increasing population numbers demands increased development of coastal lands adjacent delta systems for farming, residential, services and industrial uses. As an isolated nation this also requires that we expand our coastal port facilities to benefit trade and economic growth. Unfortunately, bleaching, damage and die back on the reef from natural events like severe storms and unprecedented sea temperature increases has reduced the Reef's resilience to any further coastal development impacts like nutrient run off or sediment overloading. In recent years this has resulted in significant loss of coral cover and impacts to biodiversity. Today we have a reef in demise.

These risks to the Reef and the declining condition of it have been highlighted in recent World Heritage Committee reports. The international body has drawn attention to serious governance problems associated with Australia's management of the Reef. It has identified that a 'business as usual' approach could lead to the Great Barrier Reef's inclusion on the List of World Heritage in Danger. Losses of biodiversity and the ecosystem services they provide may be irreversible without significant intervention.

Australia utilises a number of nested legislative instruments to support governance of the Reef to protect it from impact. However, ongoing losses suggested these tools were not being effective. To explore this Australia conducted one of the largest and most comprehensive Strategic Assessments ever completed. Data from decades of independent studies was explored to identify current, historical and expected future condition across all of the Reef's biodiversity and socio-economic values. That Assessment demonstrated gaps in legislative protection requiring immediate intervention to halt the decline. A key focus area was restriction on dredging and development of five priority ports that support significant international trade. This included requirement for master planning to be undertaken for each port to manage growth with environmental protection outcomes. The actions that highlighted the risks to the Reef, and the strategic interventions that have occurred to try and halt the decline of the Reef will be discussed. Data presented will be used to consider if the interventions are adequate to avoid the demise of the greatest barrier reef on earth. Or have we done too little too late?