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UN team examines mining threat to Great Barrier Reef



The Great Barrier Reef off the Queensland coast is home to a wealth of marine life

A UN team has arrived in Australia to investigate possible damage to the Great Barrier Reef by the mining industry.

Fears that coal exports and oil and gas exploration would jeopardise the reef prompted the Unesco delegation's visit.

Environmentalists have urged the government to suspend mining development until a government review is completed.

The reef is home to 400 types of coral and 1,500 species of fish.

The Great Barrier Reef, which holds Unesco World Heritage status, lies off the coast of the state of Queensland, which is the largest producer of coal in the country.

The Unesco team is scheduled to visit the reef for a week before making recommendations to the World Heritage committee. They will also meet members of the government.

Environmentalists are concerned that an increase in coal production and the shipping traffic that would follow could affect the Great Barrier Reef's World Heritage status.

They want the government to suspend all new developments while a state and federal review of the health of the reef is carried out.

Greenpeace Australia Pacific's senior climate and energy campaigner John Hepburn said the mining industry was threatening the reef's future.

"The Great Barrier Reef is in danger from the coal industry and the fossil fuel boom that is happening, but it is a reckless expansion that will have direct impacts both in terms of the dredging as well as the increased shipping, as well as the impact of climate change on the Great Barrier Reef," he said.

The BBC's Phil Mercer says the exploitation of oil and gas is driving industrial expansion

along much of Australia's most famous wilderness area, including plans for the world's biggest coal port near the town of Bowen.

The Australian government has imposed strict guidelines to ensure water quality and protect marine life during development.

But the reef presents a familiar conundrum for resource-rich Australia - the demands of a powerful and lucrative mining industry against the needs of the environment, our correspondent adds.

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Australia's Great Barrier Reef 'at risk from pesticide'

By Nick Bryant BBC News, Sydney



The Great Barrier Reef is a World Heritage-listed natural wonder

Agricultural pesticides are causing significant damage to the Great Barrier Reef, according to a new Australian government report on water quality at the site.

The report says some farmers must be more careful with their chemicals.

It found that nearly one-quarter of horticulture producers and 12% of pastoral farmers were using practices deemed unacceptable by the industry.

The Great Barrier Reef is a World Heritage-listed natural wonder.

Sugar cane criticism

In recent years, it has been coral bleaching caused by climate change that has damaged the Great Barrier Reef, but the first Australian government report on water quality there has found that agricultural pesticides are posing significant risks.

Pesticides have been found up to 60km (38 miles) inside the reef at toxic concentrations known to harm coral.

The heavy flooding and a cyclone that ripped through northern Queensland earlier in the year are thought to have made things worse, by flushing pollutants out to sea.

The report said many horticulture producers were using practices considered unacceptable, and

that the sugar cane industry in the wet tropics of northern Queensland was particularly to blame.

However, the agriculture industry has said the findings are based on old data, and that there has been a significant change.

The government agrees that farmers have been using more environmentally friendly methods, but says those improvements had been undermined by Cyclone Yasi.

There have been calls from conservationists to limit the use of pesticides and to ban certain weed killers.

But sugar cane producers have argued that there are no alternatives to adequately protect their crops.

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Australia plans tough Great Barrier Reef shipping laws

By Phil Mercer
BBC News, Sydney



The hull of the Shen Neng I caused serious damage to the reef

Australia is planning to subject commercial ships passing through all parts of the Great Barrier Reef to greater surveillance.

The tough new measures are intended to protect the region from pollution.

It follows the grounding of the Chinese bulk carrier, the Shen Neng I, which leaked about three tons of oil into the sea after hitting a sandbank.

The Chinese coal carrier ran aground in restricted waters around the reef earlier this month.

'Human error'

Ships sailing through southern parts of the Great Barrier Reef will be tracked by satellite and required to regularly report their movements under the new regulations.

Vessels using the reef's northern expanses are already subject to such strict monitoring.

Moves to extend the system were being drawn up before the Shen Neng 1 hit a sandbank at full speed earlier this month, causing extensive damage.

The environmental scare has added greater urgency to efforts to ensure that freighters can safely negotiate the sensitive waters of the Great Barrier Reef.

Conservationists say that greater surveillance will make a difference.

Richard Leck from WWF Australia also believes that professional navigators can prevent accidents, including the recent grounding of the Chinese bulk carrier.

"The key thing that we see is needed alongside this tracking system is to have pilots onboard every large that traverses the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage area.

"Most of the incidents that occur within the World Heritage area are due to human error.

It seems like this incident occurred due to fatigue and the only way of managing that risk is to make sure there is a pilot onboard every vessel," Mr Leck said.

Australia's plans to increase the monitoring of commercial shipping in the Great Barrier Reef need the agreement of the International Maritime Authority.

Australian police have arrested two men over the grounding of the Shen Neng 1, which was in restricted waters off the Queensland coast when its voyage came to an abrupt end.