

Reef audit sees no threat in dredging

ANDREW FRASER

DREDGING has not been listed as a specific threat to the Great Barrier Reef in a strategic assessment of the health of the reef released yesterday.

Conservationists feel it may open the way for the federal government to approve the dredging of the coal port of Abbot Point in North Queensland.

Environment Minister Greg Hunt is to make a decision within the next month on whether or not Abbot Point will be dredged to allow extra docks at the port, which in turn will support the expansion of the coalmining industry in Queensland.

Mr Hunt has been in North Queensland this week and has visited Bowen, the closest town to Abbot Point, and yesterday he released the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority's strategic assessment of the health of the reef, which has been under way for two years.

It confirms the previous view that the greatest threats to the reef are climate change and the run-off of chemicals used in farming, with one side-effect of the latter being the promotion of the coral-eating Crown of Thorns starfish. But there has been a strong campaign from conservation groups to stop the dredging of 3 million cubic metres of seabed from around Abbot Point, which they claim will put the reef in danger.

The report says only that there are several proposals for the expansion of ports in areas adjacent to the marine park, and "while dredging and sea dumping do not introduce additional loads, these activities redistribute and resuspend sediments and nutrients in inshore areas".

It stops short of any recommendations on how to deal with the impact of wide-scale dredging, saying only "it is clear that a business-as-usual approach to managing these impacts will not be enough."

"Additional management intervention is required to protect matters of national environmental significance."

WWF Australia spokesman Nick Heath said he thought the report should have been stronger on the issue of dredging, but the scientific elements of the report

showed quite clearly that the inner parts of the reef where those areas under the most pressure.

One recommendation of the report was that assessments would not look at individual impacts on the reef in isolation but would look at the cumulative impact of certain actions.

"We understand that the Crown of Thorns, chemical run-off and climate change are bigger impacts than dredging, so while dredging might not be the biggest risk to the reef, at the moment, it's the most avoidable.

"It would take literally hundreds of years to undo the damage caused by chemical run-off, but avoiding the effects of dredging is something that we can do right now," he said. "We're con-

'It would take literally hundreds of years to undo the damage'

WWF AUSTRALIA

cerned that this report will allow dredging at Abbot Point."

He said other industries had shown that there were alternatives to dredging — the sugar industry, for example, had built a jetty 5.8km out into the ocean at Lucinda so that there was no need to dredge.

The report also makes several recommendations for future management of the reef, including a "net benefits" policy, under which priority will be given to actions that will restore the health and resilience of specific ecosystems, particularly those areas close to shore in the southern part of the region.

The report found that the reef was healthiest in its northern sections, especially those north of Cooktown, where there is little farming activity on land and therefore little chance of agricultural chemicals running into rivers that then run into the sea around the reef.

UNESCO officials have twice visited Australia to inspect the World Heritage-listed reef, and on each occasion have declined to put the reef on its "at-risk" list, although they warned that such a condition may be possible unless there were changes to the management of the reef.

Top sceptic accuses activists of 'using' bushfires

EXCLUSIVE

JOHN FERGUSON

AN outspoken academic has accused climate activists of using the NSW bushfires to encourage cuts to carbon that will have no effect on overall temperatures.

Bjorn Lomborg, the author of *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, also accuses activists of ignoring evidence that shows global fire activity has declined 10 per cent

from its global maximum around 1950.

Dr Lomborg says global warming will in the long run lead to more fire but he accuses environmentalists of using the NSW fires as a blunt instrument to campaign for action on climate change.

Writing in *The Weekend Australian* today, he attacks former US vice-president Al Gore and UN climate change chief Christiana Figueres over their commentary on global warming after the devastating NSW fires.

Dr Lomborg says the latest

peer-reviewed study on global fire activity states that more heat and dryness in the atmosphere can lead to either more fire activity or less, depending on the locality.

"This is because with less precipitation the biomass burns more easily, but with less precipitation there is also less growth and hence less biomass to burn," he writes.

For Mediterranean-type ecosystems such as in Australia's south and southwest, "more than half the time" drying would mean less fire.

Dr Lomborg argues that the

latest science shows there is strongly contradictory evidence on the global implications of a warming environment. It is likely global warming in future decades will lead to more fire.

"Some 60 per cent of the planet's surface will by the end of the century see a higher probability of fire, though more than one-fifth will see lower fire probability, including Mexico, most of South America, almost all of Africa below the Sahara, Southeast Asia, all of India and about half of Australia," he writes.

He directly attacks commentary by Mr Gore and Ms Figueres.

Mr Gore said in the wake of the NSW fires: "Bushfires can occur naturally, and do, but the science shows clearly that when the temperature goes up, and when the vegetation and soils dry out, then wildfires become more pervasive and more dangerous."

Ms Figueres told CNN: "The World Meteorological Organisation has not established the direct link between this wildfire and climate change yet but what is absolutely clear is that the science is

telling us there are increasing heatwaves in Asia, Europe and Australia."

Dr Lomborg responds: "The latest peer-reviewed study on global fire, run with a record 16 climate models, tells us that sometimes heat and dryness leads to more fire, but sometimes it leads to less fire."

MORE

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Yellow Sea push a red alert for migrating flocks



VANESSA HUNTER

Researcher Chris Hassell monitors migratory shorebirds at Roebuck Bay, WA, which are threatened by the industrialisation of their Yellow Sea feeding grounds

GRAHAM LLOYD
ENVIRONMENT EDITOR

INDUSTRIAL development on the mud flats of China's Yellow Sea is threatening one of the world's great shorebird migrations, which ends on the tropical shores of Roebuck Bay in Broome.

Huge flocks have started to arrive to feed in Roebuck Bay after spending the northern summer in Arctic Russia.

At its peak, more than half a million birds will squeeze on to a small strip of shoreline of the bay and its surrounds, waiting for the

northern tides to recede and expose a mudflat smorgasbord of worms and shellfish.

Along the annual migration path, the biggest challenge the birds faced was the loss of feeding grounds to human activity.

The most notable change has been the reclamation of mudflats on the Yellow Sea to build factories to produce electrical consumer goods for the West.

Roebuck Bay is an international shorebird hotspot, with the area considered to be the most important region of the East Asian, Australasian flyway.

Chris Hassell, co-ordinator of shorebird research at Global

Flyway Network and Australasian Waders Study Group, is anxiously monitoring the decline in shorebird numbers.

"Of the populations that we have solid data on, 49 per cent are declining and 16 per cent are increasing," Mr Hassell said.

"The ones that are increasing are generally ones that are adapting to agriculture and human habitation."

One example was the New Zealand pied oyster catcher that feeds in gardens and nests on the roofs of houses. The coastal specialists were hardest hit because they needed huge areas of mudflat, which were rare.

"The argument is the birds will just go somewhere else but it is really not that simple," Mr Hassell said.

Thirty species are regularly recorded at Roebuck Bay including Asian dowitchers, sanderlings, broad-billed sandpipers, oriental plovers and sharp-tailed sandpipers.

International bird groups have raised the alarm with governments about the threat posed by development, particularly in China's Yellow Sea.

Mr Hassell said protection given to agricultural land in China did not extend to mudflats.

Forty per cent of mudflats in

the Yellow Sea had disappeared and Mr Hassell said there were plans to develop all that was left.

Full development would mean extinction for some species and catastrophic population decline for others.

Mr Hassell said Chinese authorities were unsympathetic to calls to protect the migratory birds.

"The economic boom is overriding any environmental issues currently," Mr Hassell said.

"Conservation is a luxury of wealthy nations and as China gets more wealthy they will start to want nice places to go and clean air so eventually it will happen."



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