

Former Great Barrier Reef marine park head calls for ban on new coal mines

By Michael Slezak, The Guardian on 11.30.16

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A school of fish hovers over staghorn coral on the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. Photo: Rick Loomis/Los Angeles Times/TNS

The former head of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority has called for a ban on all new coal mines in Australia, saying the move is needed to protect the Great Barrier Reef from climate change.

"I love the reef and I have worked to preserve it since 1979; I will oppose anything that threatens to destroy it," said Graeme Kelleher, who was the first chief executive of GBRMPA, a position he held for 16 years. "The Great Barrier Reef is one of the seven wonders of the world."

Kelleher, who is also a member of the Ocean Elders – a group of global leaders concerned about ocean conservation including Richard Branson, James Cameron, Jane Goodall and EO Wilson – said: "Australia cannot have a healthy Great Barrier Reef and a continuing coal industry."

Kelleher put his name to a petition started by Greenpeace Australia Pacific, calling on the prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, to put an immediate ban on all new coal mines.

The Australian government's deadline for reporting to Unesco's world heritage committee on its handling of the reef is approaching.

After Australia submits the report, Unesco will decide whether or not to again consider listing the Great Barrier Reef on its "list of world heritage in danger."

The government will need to report on how it has funded and implemented its Reef 2050 long-term sustainability plan, as well as how the recent bleaching event has affected the reef.

Since it last considered including the Great Barrier Reef on its list, the reef has undergone the worst bleaching event in recorded history. According to government agencies, 22% of the reef was killed in one hit, as unusually warm waters bleached and killed the coral.

And that comes at the end of a long-term decline of the reef, Kelleher said.

"Over the last 30 years, the reef has lost 50% of its coral cover and one of the major causes of this is climate change," Kelleher said.

Kelleher said the continued health of the reef demanded action on climate change and a halt to all new or expanded coal mines.

He said the Adani's huge Carmichael coal mine must not go ahead and that the high court ought to find in favour of the Australian Conservation Foundation and overturn the federal environmental approval of the mine.

The ACF will argue, on appeal to the high court, that emissions from the burning of coal dug up from the mine will exacerbate climate change and harm the Great Barrier Reef. The government has argued, successfully so far, that there is no link between the mine's coal and climate change.

"A proper court that, shall I say, was scientifically attuned, would recognise this," Kelleher said. "Although the coal will not be burned in Australia, it will still be burned in India and that will affect the Great Barrier Reef."

Greenpeace Australia Pacific reef campaigner Shani Tager said: "Graeme is a giant when it comes to the Great Barrier Reef and has a wealth of experience and knowledge about the threats it faces. His comments are a stark reminder of our need to take serious action to save the reef."

Quiz

- 1 Which of the following statements accurately represents the relationship between the article's CENTRAL ideas?
 - (A) The Great Barrier reef has lost over half of its coral in the last 30 years. Accordingly, coal companies like the Adani Group have agreed to stop building new coal mines in Australia.
 - (B) The Great Barrier Reef is a landform that is well-protected by the Australian government and various conservation groups. As a result, new coal mines cannot be built in Australia.
 - (C) The Great Barrier Reef is the largest life form on Earth, spanning over 1,200 miles and housing much sea life. Because of its fame, many conservation groups work to protect it from climate change.
 - (D) The Great Barrier Reef is an important natural landform that has recently displayed alarming signs of erosion and death. As a result, conservation groups are working to prevent the construction of new coal mines in Australia.

- 2 Read the last four paragraphs in the article.
 Select the paragraph that BEST reflects the CENTRAL idea that the coal mine directly affects the reef.

- 3 According to the article, each of the following has contributed to the destruction of the Great Barrier Reef, EXCEPT:
 - (A) overpopulation of sea life
 - (B) pollution from coal mining
 - (C) rising sea temperatures
 - (D) bleaching of coral in the reef

- 4 The author develops the idea that the Great Barrier Reef is at risk in each of the following ways EXCEPT:
 - (A) by presenting scientific findings that show how parts of the coral reef have died
 - (B) by presenting the pros and cons of building coal mines in Australia
 - (C) by explaining how the actions of the Australian government are affecting the reef
 - (D) by describing a legal fight between a coal company and a conservation group

Answer Key

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 - (C) The Great Barrier Reef is the largest life form on Earth, spanning over 1,200 miles and housing much sea life. Because of its fame, many conservation groups work to protect it from climate change.
 - (D) **The Great Barrier Reef is an important natural landform that has recently displayed alarming signs of erosion and death. As a result, conservation groups are working to prevent the construction of new coal mines in Australia.**

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