

Great Barrier Reef: scientists 'exaggerated' coral bleaching

GRAHAM LLOYD THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM JUNE 4, 2016



There is growing scientific conflict over bleaching on the Great Barrier Reef. Picture: Tourism Queensland

Activist scientists and lobby groups have distorted surveys, maps and data to misrepresent the extent and impact of coral bleaching on the Great Barrier Reef, according to the chairman of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, Russell Reichelt.

A full survey of the reef released yesterday by the authority and the Australian Institute of Marine Science said 75 per cent of the reef would escape unscathed.

Dr Reichelt said the vast bulk of bleaching damage was confined to the far northern section off Cape York, which had the best prospect of recovery due to the lack of onshore development and high water quality.

The report emerged as Malcolm Turnbull and Bill Shorten traded political fire on the reef's future this week at the halfway point of the election campaign.

As Labor announced \$500 million towards protecting the reef, the Opposition Leader said: "We will invest in direct environmental management. We will invest in science and research. We will invest in proper reef management."

He said if Australia did not spend the money on the reef, "it is in serious danger of being irreparably damaged. If we do not act, our children will rightly ask us why didn't we."

The Prime Minister said the reef and its health were "a great passion of mine and my government". He cited the chairman of the World Heritage Committee, Maria Bohmer, who said last year Australia's management of the Great Barrier Reef was a world-class example of coral reef management. "So there is no question that we are doing a good job," Mr Turnbull said.

Activist groups last week seized on reports that a UN assessment of the impacts of climate change on iconic Australian World Heritage sites, including the Great Barrier Reef, Kakadu and the Tasmanian Wilderness was censored by Australia. It later emerged that the report the government was accused of censoring was complimentary of the Turnbull government's actions to protect the Great Barrier Reef.

The political debate and the release of the authority's survey results highlights a growing conflict between the lead Barrier

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Dr Reichelt said the authority had withdrawn from a joint announcement on coral bleaching with Professor Hughes this week “because we didn’t think it told the whole story”. The taskforce said mass bleaching had killed 35 per cent of corals on the northern and central Great Barrier Reef.

Dr Reichelt said maps accompanying the research had been misleading, exaggerating the impact. “I don’t know whether it was a deliberate sleight of hand or lack of geographic knowledge but it certainly suits the purpose of the people who sent it out,” he said.

“This is a frightening enough story with the facts, you don’t need to dress them up. We don’t want to be seen as saying there is no problem out there but we do want people to understand there is a lot of the reef that is unscathed.”

Dr Reichelt said there had been widespread misinterpretation of how much of the reef had died.

“We’ve seen headlines stating that 93 per cent of the reef is practically dead,” he said.

“We’ve also seen reports that 35 per cent, or even 50 per cent, of the entire reef is now gone.

“However, based on our combined results so far, the overall mortality rate is 22 per cent — and about 85 per cent of that die-off has occurred in the far north between the tip of Cape York and just north of Lizard Island, 250km north of Cairns. Seventy-five per cent of the reef will come out in a few months time as recovered.”

Former climate change commissioner Tim Flannery described diving on the Great Barrier Reef near Port Douglas recently as “one of the saddest days of my life”.

“This great organism, the size of Germany and arguably the most diverse place on earth, is dying before our eyes,” Dr Flannery wrote for Fairfax Media.

“Having watched my father dying two years ago, I know what the signs of slipping away are. This is death, which ever-rising temperatures will allow no recovery from. Unless we act now.”

Dr Reichelt said Dr Flannery’s language had been “dramatic” and “theatrical” and his prognosis, although of concern, was “speculative”. Dr Reichelt also rejected reports, based on leaked draft documents, that improving water quality would cost \$16 billion.

He said the interim report had been rejected by a board of which he was member and “taken totally out of context” in media reports.

The Australian Marine Conservation Society said the leaked information demonstrated the legacy of years of poor farming practices and government inaction, and highlighted the scale of ambition needed for political leaders to protect the reef.

The society’s reef campaign director, Imogen Zethoven, said Australia’s plans to protect the reef’s water quality were “shockingly underfunded”.

Meanwhile, tourism operators have stepped up a campaign to fight back against the onslaught of negative publicity. “It seems some marine scientists have decided to use the bleaching event to highlight their personal political beliefs and lobby for increased funding in an election year,” said Association of Marine Park Tour Operators executive director Col McKenzie.