

Counterpoint: The Great Barrier Reef Must Be Protected and Preserved

Thesis

Australia's Great Barrier Reef, the largest coral reef in the world, is home to a diverse array of organisms, the majority of which require significant protection against human impact and interference if they are to continue to survive.

Talking Points

- The Great Barrier Reef is a vital biodiversity hotspot, and is also of significant scientific and economic value to humans.
- Growing evidence has demonstrated that the Great Barrier Reef is threatened by many human activities, both direct and indirect.
- Within Australia, management of marine ecosystems has been plagued with an apathetic public, lack of political will, ineffective marine conservation policies, inconsistent use and enforcement of legislation and the inability of stakeholders to reach common ground.
- Specific and stronger measures must be created to protect the Great Barrier Reef from human destruction, including tougher restrictions, legislation and penalties.

Summary

The identity of the Australian people is significantly intertwined with the surrounding ocean, and the Great Barrier Reef is considered by many to be the crowning jewel of the country's natural features. Yet although Australians tend to have a fascination and respect for the ocean, their very presence causes significant damage to its ecosystems. In the early twenty-first century, more than 80 per cent of Australia's population lived in coastal areas. Agricultural activity also tends to be concentrated on the more fertile coastal regions. This density of human activity creates significant environmental pressure, including various forms of pollution reaching the surrounding ocean.

Although the bulk of the Great Barrier Reef itself has been designated as a protected area for decades, many conservation organisations believe that the established preservation measures are insufficient. Although banning all human access to the reef is a theoretically simple and impactful approach, it is politically unpopular and economically detrimental, particular to those who rely on tourism revenues it generates. Many environmental activists do call for tighter restrictions on access, especially for tourism and fishing. However, most argue that it is ultimately more important to control sources of water pollution, notably including

industrial runoff and ocean dumping. These factors have a strong negative impact on water quality, which in turn harms the complex Great Barrier Reef ecosystem in many ways. For example, higher nutrient levels in the seawater can make corals more susceptible to disease and also possibly contribute to outbreaks of the crown-of-thorns starfish, which prey on coral and can devastate entire reefs when their populations boom. Critics have argued that the Australian government has been too lax about pollutants that originate beyond the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park itself, especially when linked to lucrative industries such as mining and agriculture.

Environmentalists also recognise the broad phenomenon of climate change as a key threat to the Great Barrier Reef. Indeed, some estimates in the early twenty-first century have indicated that if global warming continues unabated, the reef could be entirely dead within a few decades. One particular area of concern is increasing ocean acidification, which can harm the ability of coral polyps to build the stony exoskeletons that create the very structure of coral reefs. Another crucial problem is escalating ocean temperatures, considered the leading cause of mass coral bleaching events and coral die-offs in the Great Barrier Reef. Major coral bleaching events continued well after the Australian government released the Reef 2050 Plan in 2015, leading to growing criticism that the plan did not do nearly enough to address the issue of climate change. Groups such as the Independent Expert Panel on the Great Barrier Reef and the Australian Marine Conservation Society argued that Australia needed to make drastic reductions in greenhouse gas emissions to truly protect the reef.

Experts often stress that climate change can ultimately only be mitigated by intensive international cooperation. Nevertheless, activists argue that Australia can do more to lead the way while also addressing specific threats to the Great Barrier Reef that are exacerbated by or otherwise connected to climate change. For example, while the Australian government's 2020 drafted update of the Reef 2050 Long-Term Sustainability Plan included more consideration of climate change impacts in strengthening reef protection effort, critics noted that it remained to be seen how those provisions would be enacted and enforced.

Ponder This

- The author has presented the fundamental positions for this perspective in the debate. Outline the strengths and weaknesses of each perspective.
- If asked to begin forming an argument for this position, what sources would you need to build your case? What fundamental information do you need? What opinion leaders in this debate would you look to in solidifying your argument?
- What are the weakest aspects of the position outlined by the author? How might those weaker arguments help you prepare a counter argument?
- What additional Talking Points could you add to support this position?

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About the Author

Christine Watts obtained her Bachelor of Science degree and Honours in Environmental Science in 1996 and 2002 respectively. She worked in environmental restoration for the National Trust in Sydney and also worked for one of the largest media companies in Australia. Dr. Watts earned her PhD in Behavioural Ecology from the University of Sydney in 2008, and has worked as a conservation communications officer in China as part of the Australian Government's international development program. Currently, she divides her time between China and Australia working as a freelance writer, editor and environmental consultant.

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