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MEDIA ALERT

World leading Australian research to save the Great Barrier Reef from climate change

The Great Barrier Reef is under threat from climate change, but there is hope: scientists and managers are working together to try to keep the Reef healthy. That was the clear message delivered this morning by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and the Minister for Climate Change and Water, Senator Penny Wong, in Port Douglas, far north Queensland.

The Prime Minister and Climate Change Minister were guided by Ms Sheriden Morris, CEO of the Reef and Rainforest Research Centre, as they inspected some healthy and unhealthy reefs at the Low Isles, just offshore from Port Douglas.

“Climate change is already affecting the Reef,” Ms Morris said. “While it is easy to be overwhelmed by the array of environmental and economic problems that are being caused by climate change, it’s important to remember that there are things we can do to mitigate or avoid these risks.”

“Right now we’re developing an innovative tool that is going to be critical in our fight to save the Great Barrier Reef - the Reef Atlas,” she said.

The Prime Minister and Climate Change Minister were shown a trial version of the Reef Atlas which is funded from the Australian Government’s \$40 million Marine and Tropical Sciences Research Facility (MTRSF) program. The MTRSF is working collaboratively with scientists from the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS) and the Reef and Rainforest Research Centre (RRRC) on the development of the Reef Atlas.

According to AIMS CEO Dr Ian Poiner, the Reef Atlas will be a one-stop shop on the web for data, information and analyses on contemporary environmental issues facing the Great Barrier Reef and its catchments.

“As threats from climate change, poor water quality and intensifying human use increase, the Reef Atlas will help assess their likely impacts and ways to mitigate them, ensuring that managing and conserving this invaluable natural asset is knowledge-based,” Dr Poiner said.

Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority Chairman Dr Russell Reichelt has welcomed the initiative as a useful tool for reef managers. “The Reef Atlas will ensure the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority is well placed to target management decisions to ensure the future health of the Reef,” he said.

The Reef Atlas brings together decades of research on the Great Barrier Reef on reef and seafloor biodiversity, the abundance of corals, algae, fish and seagrasses, and water quality and sea temperature. As well as showing how reefs change over time, the Reef Atlas will also allow researchers to model likely future scenarios.



Australian Government

Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts

It will assess how quickly reefs recover from disturbances such as coral bleaching and outbreaks of crown-of-thorns starfish, and what factors contribute to recovery.

Most importantly from a management viewpoint, the Reef Atlas will predict which areas are the most resilient or vulnerable, and determine the main drivers of change. The Atlas will continually evolve and its contents will be regularly updated as new information and improved tools become available.

When the Atlas goes live late in 2008, it will be able to answer questions such as:

- Where are the hotspots of coral biodiversity?
- What is the water quality in specific coastal regions?
- How is the reef being monitored and how is it changing?
- What are the main forms of use in the management zones of the Reef?

As Australia's leading tropical marine research agency, AIMS has supplied a large part of the science that backs up the new Atlas. A number of AIMS scientists have been involved in its development, including Dr Katharina Fabricius, Dr Glenn De'ath, Dr Eric Lawrey and Mr Stuart Kininmonth, working with Dr David Souter from RRRRC and Dr Bill Venables from CSIRO.

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