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MEDIA RELEASE

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REEF ASSESSMENT – ‘BUSINESS AS USUAL’?

The Strategic Assessment of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area released today, tells a sad story of an inshore marine environment that is struggling to survive. The scientific evidence is overwhelming; things are very grim indeed for our Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.

Yet, despite that, the Assessment, which was undertaken for UNESCO and looks at how well government processes have met the goal of protecting the Reef, appears to effectively come down in favour of a 'business as usual' approach, according to North Queensland Conservation Council Coordinator Wendy Tubman.

"Politicians have rushed to point out that, according to the Assessment research, the northernmost third of the Reef is relatively healthy. What they forget to mention is that there is no big development or intensive agriculture up that way. The main problems occur further south and are undeniably associated with human activity."

The Assessment relies heavily on compulsory cumulative impact assessments (CIAs), in order to avoid 'death by a thousand cuts'. "But" says Wendy Tubman, "CIAs have been a feature of environmental impact assessments for some time now. Generally, they have been of abysmal quality, and obviously, they have not done much to protect the Reef, nor to identify the cut-off point for development."

"Time after time, we are told that some new coastal development will be undertaken in such an environmentally friendly way, that it will have no significant impact on the GBRWHA, and that the Reef can 'take it'. Yet the health of the reef gets steadily worse and worse. There is a complete rift between the rhetoric and the reality, and this has to change" Ms Tubman said.

The Assessment also points the finger at current outbreaks of Crown-of Thorn Starfish (COTS), nutrient-laden runoff and cyclones as the greatest causes of damage, and lists poor water quality, climate change and cyclones as other big causes of poor Reef health.

"The Assessment refers to the impact of ports and shipping as less significant – but, of course, that impact is about to explode if the massive port developments now being considered go ahead" said Ms Tubman.

"Back in 2009, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority noted that, with the poor state of health and low resilience of the Reef, it was essential that it be protected from additional stress. This does not seem to have gained sufficient traction in political circles."

"We have to wake our leaders up from their comfy bed of denialism. We are reaching a dangerous point. The pressures on our environment, including the Reef, are huge and growing. Yet, we see a relentless weakening of existing protections and a head-in-the-sand approach when it comes to policy. Our leaders need a reality check.

"We know how dear the Reef is to Australians. Any government who stands by and allows, or, worse, contributes to, its continued decline will, I suggest, be treated harshly. The people will fight back – indeed they already are."

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