



AUSTRALIA

## BRIEF

GREAT BARRIER REEF • JUNE 2024

©Troy Mayne, June 2010, Sunlight illuminates the coral at the Great Barrier Reef

# AUSTRALIA HAS THE CLIMATE SOLUTIONS TO TURN DOWN THE HEAT ON CORAL REEF DECLINE

The mass global coral bleaching event unfolding globally will have severe negative consequences for coastal communities and ocean health across the world and demonstrates that no reef anywhere is safe from the impacts of climate change.<sup>i</sup>

It has extended to the world's most extensive coral reef system, the Great Barrier Reef. This is the fifth mass coral bleaching event on the Reef in only eight years.<sup>ii</sup> Just like the 2016 mass bleaching event, the coral bleaching event is caused by human induced climate change.<sup>iii</sup>

70 Traditional Owner groups lands and waters extend over the Great Barrier Reef. They continue to protect country, as they have since time immemorial.<sup>iv</sup> In July 2021 Traditional custodians called for healing for their Sea Country:

***“We need to see the real threats posed by climate change and face these challenges head on.***

***All Australians need to come together and show the Reef the respect she deserves. To help her heal and to make us who we are all meant to be.***

***We call on our Saltwater brothers and sisters across the Pacific and throughout the world to join and support us.”<sup>v</sup>***

### Key messages:

1. The mass coral bleaching crisis is a climate crisis. Australia must commit to 1.5 °C aligned climate policies to fulfil our duties under the World Heritage Convention to protect the Outstanding Universal Value of the Great Barrier Reef.
2. Australia must commit to a new Nationally Determined Contribution under the Paris Agreement of at least 90% below 2005 levels by 2035 and net zero before 2040.
3. Australia must replace fossil fuels for energy and export with clean energy and clean exports and support global calls for a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty, or we risk losing the Great Barrier Reef.

# IT'S OUR REEF AND IT'S OUR RESPONSIBILITY

The Australian government has a unique opportunity to turn the tide on coral reef damage by applying multiple policy levers to transform Australia's economy into a regenerative economy.<sup>vi</sup> This will drive economic growth and job creation, protect Australian communities, and protect the Great Barrier Reef. We have the renewable resources for a rapid transition to a zero-carbon economy before 2040. We have strong governance and democratic institutions, a skilled workforce, and high level of appetite from communities across Australia for leaders to harness the economic opportunities of a faster energy transition.

The Paris Agreement 1.5°C temperature limit is a critical threshold for the Great Barrier Reef. Each party to the Paris Agreement must do its part in the next six years to give the Great Barrier Reef and all coral reefs globally, a fighting chance.

**WWF-Australia calls on the Australian Government to commit to six priority Great Barrier Reef protection actions.**

## FIVE PRIORITY CLIMATE ACTIONS THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT MUST TAKE TO PROTECT THE REEF

1. **Drive decarbonisation efforts aligned with 1.5°C to give the Reef a fighting chance<sup>1</sup>:**
  - a. **Commit to science-based emissions reduction targets under the Paris Agreement:**

The Federal government must follow the Queensland Government's leadership with the Clean Economy Jobs Act 2024<sup>vii</sup>, and update the Federal Climate Change Act 2022<sup>viii</sup> to commit to a reviewing Australia's 2030 emissions reduction target, by December 2025. That review must take account of the best available science and update the 2030 target to a minimum of 67% below 2005 levels.<sup>ix</sup> The new 2035 target must be at least 90% below 2005 levels by 2035.<sup>x</sup>
  - b. **Support the Pacific led call for a global treaty to phase out fossil fuels:** This framework for a global commitment to phase out fossil fuels has already been endorsed by 10 Pacific Island Countries and Territories, the European Parliament, Colombia, Antigua and Barbuda, as well as 7 subnational jurisdictions in Australia.<sup>xi</sup> The WWF network supports the proposed treaty regionally<sup>xii</sup> and globally.<sup>xiii</sup>
2. **End deforestation and industrial logging, and expand reforestation:**
  - a. **End deforestation and industrial logging to cut emissions by 10+%:<sup>xiv</sup>** Urgently protect and restore forests nationally to implement climate commitments under the Paris Agreement and COP28 "through enhanced efforts towards halting and reversing deforestation and forest degradation by 2030"<sup>xv</sup> and commitments under the Global Biodiversity Framework to both protect 30% of land and restore 30% of degraded land by 2030.<sup>xvi</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the best available climate science, Australia's legal obligations under the Paris Agreement and World Heritage Convention and opportunities to implement a faster transition to net zero, please see Appendix 1 of this Briefing Paper.

- b. **Commonwealth powers and responsibility to halt forest loss:** The Australian Government has very broad – but rarely used – powers under the EPBC Act to regulate, assess impacts and enforce compliance regarding protection of threatened species habitats from bulldozing and industrial logging, including in Reef catchments. The proposed new Environment Protection Australia agency will provide the Commonwealth with stronger regulatory roles over deforestation, and Environmental Information Australia will provide for more comprehensive and effective use of data to support forests.
- c. **Commonwealth-Queensland bilateral:** Urgently develop a strong bilateral agreement with the Queensland Government for a collaborative approach to ending deforestation and expanding reforestation in Reef catchments, including through agreeing mechanisms to refer land clearing for assessment by the EPA and boosting financial incentives for graziers and farmers to restore degraded forests and riparian zones.
- d. **Protect 30% of land by 2030:** Establish a seven-year, \$5Bn fund to support acquisition of land for new protected areas across Australia, with specific provisions for creating new National Parks, Indigenous Protected Areas, private wildlife sanctuaries and conservation agreements on farms.<sup>xvii</sup> The fund should support creation of protected areas in Reef catchments.

**3. Deliver new national environmental laws that are Reef Safe:**

- a. Deliver the comprehensive package of reforms to protect and regenerate nature that the government promised in its Nature Positive Plan.<sup>xviii</sup>
- b. Ensure the Nature Positive (Environment) Bill properly incorporates a requirement of decision makers to consider the IPCC climate science, and Australia’s remaining emissions budget to do our part to pursue efforts to limit warming to 1.5°C. The Bill should include powers for the Minister to assess fossil fuel projects and fossil fuel infrastructure against Australia’s remaining emissions budget.
- c. Ensure the National Environmental Standards to be established under the Nature Positive (Environment) Bill protect the Outstanding Universal Value of the Reef.

**4. Comply with Australia’s duties under the World Heritage Convention to protect the Outstanding Universal Value of the Great Barrier Reef:** Implement the full suite of recommendations on Great Barrier Reef protection outlined in the WWF-Australia/Australian Marine Conservation Society assessment of the Australian Government’s Great Barrier Reef Progress Report to the UNESCO World Heritage Centre.

**5. All reef solutions, including climate solutions, must support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership in Great Barrier Reef protection:**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have cared for the Reef since time immemorial, protecting their traditional lands and seas, preserving their rights, for generations. WWF-Australia recommends elevating Traditional Owners conservation leadership and management to protect the Great Barrier Reef by:

- Providing more funding for Traditional Owners leadership and representation at all levels of Reef governance and decision-making processes.
- Doubling the area of sea country Indigenous Protected Areas (IPA) across Australia from 5 to 10 million hectares, and further supporting IPA implementation in the Great Barrier Reef.
- Expanding funding for safeguarding and protecting traditional knowledge, cultural heritage, and Traditional Owner intellectual property rights in the Great Barrier Reef seascape.

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# APPENDIX 1: AUSTRALIA IS NOT ON TRACK FOR 1.5°C

The mass coral bleaching crisis is a climate crisis. Australia must commit to 1.5 °C aligned climate policies to fulfil our duties under the World Heritage Convention to protect the Outstanding Universal Value of the Great Barrier Reef.

Australia and the world have only six years left to 2030, to turn the tide on emissions and coral reef decline.<sup>xxix</sup> The 2023 United Nations Environment Programme Emissions Gap Report found that “Failure to bring global GHG emissions in 2030 below the levels implied by current NDCs will make it impossible to limit warming to 1.5°C with no or limited overshoot and strongly increase the challenge of limiting warming to 2°C.”<sup>xx</sup>

Australia’s must overshoot the current 2030 target of 43% below 2005 levels by 2030. It is well below Australia doing its part to pursue efforts to limit warming to 1.5°C and aligned with 2°C of warming, which would mean we lose the Great Barrier Reef.<sup>xxi</sup> At COP28 in December the Australian Government specifically endorsed global goals for 1.5°C that require Australia to have a 2030 target of 53% below 2005 levels by 2030, so have acknowledged the existing 43% 2030 target is not 1.5°C aligned. The global goals are the lowest possible standard and Australia’s 2030 target does not even meet that standard. Advanced economies like Australia have committed and are required under the Paris Agreement to set targets that are much higher than the global goals.<sup>xxii</sup> The Australian government must commit to new climate solutions policies over the next year via the sectoral decarbonisation pathways, and then update the 2030 emissions reduction target by mid-2025. Further, Australia must also set a 2035 NDC of at least 90% below 2005 levels and net zero before 2040.

We acknowledge that increasing Australia’s decarbonisation action to align with 1.5°C is a challenge, however, there are multiple opportunities to improve the speed and scale of emissions reductions across Australia this decade. These opportunities can capture the additional economic, community and conservation benefits of faster action to decarbonise the economy.<sup>xxiii</sup> We note, for example, the Climateworks Centre released detailed decarbonisation scenario modelling in 2023 showing Australia can reduce emissions by 85% below 2005 levels by 2035 and net zero by 2039.<sup>xxiv</sup>

## RENEWABLE SUPERPOWER PLANS MUST INCLUDE FOSSIL FUEL PHASE OUT

Continued and expanded fossil fuel development is inconsistent with Australia’s obligations under the Paris Agreement to pursue efforts to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.<sup>xxv</sup> The Australian and Queensland Governments have continued to approve new fossil fuel developments, and subsidise and facilitate the continued expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure.<sup>xxvi</sup> For example, the Queensland Government recently approved a new coal mine that will contribute 583m tonnes of greenhouse gas pollution – more than Australia’s national annual greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Australia has a once in a generation opportunity to replace the export of polluting goods with renewable energy exports, making Australia a renewable energy superpower.<sup>xxviii</sup> Doing so will drive down Australia’s in-country emissions and lead to further opportunities for increasing the 2030 and 2035 emissions reduction targets by avoiding the significant Scope 1 and Scope 2 emissions of new fossil fuel projects. New research from consulting group Accenture developed in a partnership with business and union leaders alongside environmental NGOs notes that with the right investment Australia can reach a globally leading position in clean exports.<sup>xxix</sup> Five priority clean exports in Australia could provide AU\$314 billion p.a. in revenue by 2040. Australia’s highest possible ambition<sup>xxx</sup> on emissions reduction targets and on doing all that it can, to the utmost of its resources,<sup>xxxi</sup> to protect the OUV of the Great Barrier Reef is significantly higher than current government commitments. Australia must replace fossil fuels for energy and export with clean energy and clean exports and support global calls for a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty, or we risk losing the Great Barrier Reef.



# References

- <sup>i</sup> WWF International media release, "[Coral crisis is a climate crisis](#)", 17 April 2024.
- <sup>ii</sup> WWF-Australia media release, "[Devastating GBR coral bleaching map must prompt strong climate action from the Australian Government.](#)" 17 April 2024.
- <sup>iii</sup> The Conversation, King, Karoly et al, 29 April 2016, "[Great Barrier Reef bleaching would be almost impossible without climate change.](#)".
- <sup>iv</sup> Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, Reef Knowledge System, "[Land and Sea Country](#)".
- <sup>v</sup> The Reef 2050 Traditional Owner Steering Group, [Traditional Owner Reef Implementation Plan 2022](#) notes that "The [Heart of the Reef, A Call for Healing] Statement was prepared by a group of Great Barrier Reef Traditional Owners... We commend this statement to readers." (p 5); Great Barrier Reef Traditional Custodians, July 2021, Healing Country Statement, "[Heart of the Reef, A Call for Healing.](#)"
- <sup>vi</sup> Dermot O’Gorman, WWF-Australia Chief Executive Officer, [The industrial revolutions built our cities — now we need a regenerative revolution](#), 7 September 2022.
- <sup>vii</sup> See Queensland’s Clean Economy Jobs Act 2024, Part 8A, <https://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/view/html/asmade/act-2024-016>
- <sup>viii</sup> See the Climate Change Act 2022, <https://www.legislation.gov.au/C2022A00037/latest/text>. Section 10(1)(a) sets Australia’s 2030 emissions reduction target as 43% below 2005 levels by 2030. Section 10 (4) (b) confirms this does not prevent or limit the exercise of the executive power of the Cth to adjust Australia’s 2030 NDC in accordance with para 11, Art 4 of the Paris Agreement.
- <sup>ix</sup> Meinshausen, M. and Nicholls, Z. (2023). Updated assessment of Australia’s emission reduction targets and 1.5°C pathways. Independent expert report commissioned by WWF-Australia, [https://www.climate-resource.com/reports/wwf/20230612\\_WWF-Aus-Targets.pdf](https://www.climate-resource.com/reports/wwf/20230612_WWF-Aus-Targets.pdf)
- <sup>x</sup> Meinshausen, M. and Nicholls, Z. (2023), as above.
- <sup>xi</sup> The proposed Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty is a science-based international law initiative that arose out of the leadership on climate of Pacific Island Countries and Territories. The proposed Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty is aimed at meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement by explicitly tackling the largest driver of the climate crisis. For more information see the [Fossil Fuel Treaty - Briefing for Policy Makers](#), May 2023; Current endorsements are available here: [Fossil Fuel Treaty Endorsements](#)
- <sup>xii</sup> Joint statement from the WWF offices in Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Aotearoa New Zealand, Fiji, and Australia, 18 September 2023, "[WWF supports Port Vila Call for a Just Transition to a Fossil Fuel Free Pacific](#)".
- <sup>xiii</sup> WWF-International, 21 September 2023, media release, "[WWF announces support for Fossil Fuel Non-proliferation Treaty](#)".
- <sup>xiv</sup> WWF estimates deforestation and industrial native forest logging creates (gross) losses of c.50MtCO<sub>2</sub>-e, which equates to 11.5% of Australia’s national emissions of 432.6 MtCO<sub>2</sub>-e in 2021/22, see [National Inventory Report 2022, Vol 2, Australian Government \(2024\)](#), *Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water*, see p3. Based on FullCAM projections, modelled losses of carbon from forests and woodlands due to forest conversion (i.e., deforestation) in 2021-22 was 14.5MtCO<sub>2</sub>-e, see [National Inventory Report 2022 Vol 2](#), Table A5.6.12.6 UNFCCC Forest conversions – National annual areas and related GHG emissions on p341), however this estimate is derived from an estimated forest conversions (primary + secondary) of 186,100 hectares. By comparison, the Queensland SLATS program reported 349,399 ha of woody vegetation loss in 2020-21 in that state alone (the most recent reporting period), or approximately double the figure reported in NIR 2022. Hence, WWF considers the NIR estimate of emissions from land clearing to be substantial under-estimates of actual losses from deforestation. Regarding native forest logging (which is separate to deforestation), the NIR does not report disaggregated losses and gains from forest logging operations. Only net emissions are reported. Regarding native forest logging, estimates produced by researchers for WWF in 2022 of the mitigation benefit (i.e., potential gain + avoided loss) of ending native forest logging are 30MtCO<sub>2</sub>-e p.a. This figure would be much lower following the exit of logging in Victoria and WA.
- <sup>xv</sup> UN FCCC COP28 (2023), *Outcome of the first global stocktake*, <https://unfccc.int/event/cma-5?item=4>, see para 33.
- <sup>xvi</sup> UN CBD COP15 (2022), *Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework*, <https://www.cbd.int/gbf>, see Targets 2 and 3.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Fitzsimons J, Picone A, Partridge T, Cornish M, (2023). *Protecting Australia’s Nature: Pathways to protecting 30 per cent of land by 2030*. The Nature Conservancy, WWF-Australia, the Australian Land Conservation Alliance and the Pew Charitable Trusts. Available at <https://30by30.org.au/>
- <sup>xviii</sup> WWF-Australia, 16 April 2024, media release, "[Australian EPA is a potential game changer but comprehensive package of reforms is needed to prevent extinctions](#)".
- <sup>xix</sup> United Nations Environment Programme (2023). . [Emissions Gap Report 2023: Broken Record](#): Broken Record – Temperatures hit new highs, yet world fails to cut emissions (again). Nairobi. <https://doi.org/10.59117/20.500.11822/43922>, page XVI.
- <sup>xx</sup> United Nations Environment Programme (2023) [Emissions Gap Report 2023: Broken Record](#): Broken Record – Temperatures hit new highs, yet world fails to cut emissions (again). Nairobi. <https://doi.org/10.59117/20.500.11822/43922>, page XVI.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Meinshausen, M. and Nicholls, Z. (2023). Updated assessment of Australia’s emission reduction targets and 1.5°C pathways. Independent expert report commissioned by WWF-Australia, [https://www.climate-resource.com/reports/wwf/20230612\\_WWF-Aus-Targets.pdf](https://www.climate-resource.com/reports/wwf/20230612_WWF-Aus-Targets.pdf)
- <sup>xxii</sup> See the [COP 28 outcomes](#) on targets – see Para 27. "...recognizes that limiting global warming to 1.5 °C with no or limited overshoot requires deep, rapid and sustained reductions in global greenhouse gas emissions of 43 per cent by 2030 and 60 per cent by 2035 relative to the 2019 level and reaching net zero carbon dioxide emissions by 2050;" (our emphasis). Australia supported the COP28 outcome and endorsed the global -43% and -60% numbers, both in our national capacity and as chair of the Umbrella Group. Australia’s current commitments apply a 2005 base year, not the 2019 base that the COP28 call refers to. The global cuts Australia endorsed correspond to 53% below 2005 levels by 2030 and 67% off by 2035, if converted to a 2005 baseline for Australia. This global target is below the minimum Australia must commit to, to comply with Paris Agreement requirement that for NDCs set out in Article 2(2) and Article 4(3)..
- <sup>xxiii</sup> See for example WWF-Australia’s energy transformation policy recommendations in our Renewable Superpower Scorecard #3 available online at <https://www.wwf.org.au/what-we-do/climate/renewables/resources/renewable-superpower-scorecard-dec-2022>. See also the [report from Beyond Zero Emissions which](#) demonstrates that an 81% emissions reduction is achievable by 2030 with an ambitious rollout of cleantech over the next five years [https://bze.org.au/research\\_release/deploy/](https://bze.org.au/research_release/deploy/).
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Climateworks Centre (2023) *Climateworks Centre decarbonisation scenarios 2023*, <https://www.climateworkscentre.org/scenarios2023>
- <sup>xxv</sup> Trout et al, May 2022, Environmental Research Letter "Existing fossil fuel extraction would warm the world beyond 1.5°C", <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/ac6228/meta>; and Welsby et al, 2021, Nature "Unextractable fossil fuels in a 1.5°C world" available online at <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-021-03821-8>.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> The Australia Institute’s "Coal Mine Tracker", based on Australian Government data, tracks current and ongoing coal mine approvals <https://australianinstitute.org.au/initiative/coal-mine-tracker/>.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Gillespie, Eden, The Guardian, 7 February 2024, [Federal government approval the final hurdle for mega Queensland coalmine](#).

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<sup>xxviii</sup> Joint statement from WWF-Australia, ACF, BCA and ACTU, 7 September 2022, "[Act now to create a renewable export industry](#)" and Mazengarb, Michal, 13 October 2021, "[Renewable exports worth more than coal and gas, will create more jobs](#)".

<sup>xxix</sup> Accenture, September 2023, Report: "[Sunshot - Achieving Global Leadership in Clean Exports](#)"; and WWF-Australia policy proposals to accelerate Australia to become a renewable superpower available online here: [WWF-Australia Climate Renewables Australia](#)

<sup>xxx</sup> This is a requirement of the [Paris Agreement](#), Article 4(3) "*Each Party's successive nationally determined contribution will represent a progression beyond the Party's then current nationally determined contribution and reflect its highest possible ambition, reflecting its common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, in the light of different national circumstances.*" (our emphasis) [Paris Agreement](#).

<sup>xxxi</sup> This is a requirement of the [UNESCO World Heritage Convention](#), Article 4 "*Each State Party to this Convention recognizes that the duty of ensuring the identification, protection, conservation, presentation and transmission to future generations of the cultural and natural heritage referred to in Articles 1 and 2 and situated on its territory, belongs primarily to that State. It will do all it can to this end, to the utmost of its own resources and, where appropriate, with any international assistance and co-operation, in particular, financial, artistic, scientific and technical, which it may be able to obtain.*" (our emphasis).