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'Crunch time for Barrier Reef'

Tony Moore | September 1, 2008 - 5:23PM

There are grave doubts that the Great Barrier Reef can continue to attract tourists worth \$6 billion-a-year to Queensland, a coral specialist told the International Riversymposium in Brisbane this afternoon.

And there are further doubts the Great Barrier Reef will even survive the next 30 years.

Professor Ove Hoegh-Guldberg said there was no time left to delay the impact of climate change on Queensland's premier 2000-kilometre coral reef.

"It's crunch time," Professor Hoegh-Guldberg said.

"Let's say if we delay a further 10 years on having stern action on emissions at a global level we will not have coral reefs in 30 to 50 years," he said.

He said tourism was adaptable, but Australia's best tourist feature was under attack from climate change.

"Tourism industries are remarkably flexible, but one salient feature of our industry is that we have the best example of a large continuous reef system in the world," Professor Hoegh-Guldberg said.

"And that is what is bringing people in," he said.

"If we don't gave that, then we don't have the same drawcard.

"So we might have an industry that is half the size, but it certainly won't have the same (tourist) pull that it has today."

Professor Hoegh- Guldberg, from the Centre for Marine Sciences at the University of Queensland, said the future of the Barrier Reef depended on what happened next.

"We have CO2 levels at 1 to 2 parts per million per year - they are 380 parts per million - and that is significant because they have not been that high for the past 720,000 years," he said.

Until the industrial revolution, atmospheric carbon was around 280 parts per million.

Higher carbon levels means coral colours become less vibrant and more frequent coral bleaching destroys the reefs.

"So if you ask the question will we have coral reefs in 30 years time, then I would say at the current rate of change and what we are doing to them - we won't," he said.

"But it all up to us right now."

He said rising ocean acidity from warmer oceans would also prevent coral reefs being able to form the calcium carbonate they need to form the reefs themselves.

"Ocean acidity, while it doesn't have any really big impacts right upfront now, will become the looming problem of tomorrow," he said.

Coral bleaching has occurred over the past 30 years, but came to public attention in the early 1980s, he said.

"Since then we have had six major episodes of coral bleaching," Professor Hoegh-Guldberg said.

While coral bleaching did happen before the early 1980s, he said reefs had time to recover between incidents.

"If we have them now every four to five years, we are getting to the point where reefs no longer have the time to recover," he said.

"And that is when you start to lose the fish, the million species that lives on coral reefs.

"And that, is what draws tourists to Australia and supports our industries."

He said one major thrust of the International Riversymposium in Brisbane this week was to understand the links between rivers and reefs.

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