

a great survivor



Diver Paul Crocombe remains optimistic about the Great Barrier Reef's future, writes Ian Frazer

THE Great Barrier Reef is a great survivor, Paul Crocombe believes after 40 years of diving.

"The main thing is that the reef is dynamic," the veteran Townsville dive-tour operator said this week.

"It does not happen overnight, but coral reefs can recover from the impact of cyclones, bleaching and Crown of Thorns starfish."

Mr Crocombe, 56, owner of Adrenaline Snorkel and Dive, grew up in Mackay and snorkeled off Slade Point as a child.

He began diving on the outer reef off Cairns in 1972, aged 16.

Since then, he concedes he has explored only a fraction of the estimated 2900 individual reefs stretching 2300km along the Queensland coast.

His favourites are Wheeler and Lodestone reefs, both north-east of Townsville, which he has visited regularly since the 1980s.

"Wheeler Reef is a stand-out," he said.

"Big seas from Cyclone Yasi last year damaged it on the north side, but some of the more fragile corals are already starting to recover."

Adrenaline Dive, the longest-established of four dive companies serving Townsville and Magnetic Island, offers expeditions to both reefs, entailing a three-hour voyage from Townsville.

But the wreck of the *SS Yongala*, east of Townsville off Cape Bowling Green, remains its most popular site.

Mr Crocombe describes Wheeler Reef as a small, circular reef, visible above the surface at low tide, with good coral to a depth of 30m.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority has banned fishing around this reef, reputedly one of the park's best dive sites.

"It's very dynamic," he said.

"Give it five to 10 years and it will have recovered from Yasi."

Nearby Lodestone Reef is more sheltered than Wheeler and regarded as good for snorkelers and novice divers because of gentler ocean currents.

"I first dived it 25 years ago and over the



POSITIVE: Adrenaline Snorkel and Dive owner Paul Crocombe

years it has certainly changed a lot," he said.

"It was damaged by Crown of Thorns starfish 10 to 15 years ago and has recovered really well."

Lodestone has great fish life including large stingrays, big schools of trevally and a myriad colourful reef fish, according to the Adrenaline website.

Mr Crocombe argues the marine park authority's fishing bans should be extended to make safe corridors for migration of fish.

"There used to be small shoals between the outer reef and the coast but a lot of them have been trawled out, literally clear-felled," he said.

"I think there could be some increase in



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zoning. "There should be zones from the coast to the outer reef – all the way out to form a corridor for the migration of fish.

"Many are protected but lack any safe corridor."

He accepts scientists' warnings about declining water quality, having seen flood plumes from the Burdekin River reach the outer reef in recent wet seasons.

"These floods carry pesticides and nutrients from the shore which could have an impact on the reef," he said.

"Off Townsville we are fortunate that the reef is a bit further off the coast."

But he sees a likely massive increase in shipping as the biggest threat from expanded coal and LNG exports.

Mr Crocombe is philosophical about the relatively small number of locals on his expeditions.

"A lot of people says they will do it one day," he said.

"I get people wanting to go before they leave Townsville.

"Beyond that, the cost is a big touch for families."

Business has been slow so far this season, which he attributes to the high Australian dollar.

Numbers of international visitors are down about 20 per cent.

"Backpackers used to come to Australia to learn to dive, but now it's cheaper in Thailand," he said.

UNESCO's dire warning

PROPOSED coastal development could jeopardise long-term conservation of the Great Barrier Reef, international observers fear.

Last week the UNESCO World Heritage Centre restated its concern at the rapid increase in development proposals, especially those associated with coal and liquefied natural gas exports.

A total of 108 projects had been mooted in the past 10 years, 67 of them since 2008, the UNESCO centre reported, in a joint statement with the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

The report outlines findings of the latest "state of conservation report" on the reef, based on a monitoring mission in March.

It warns developments such as construction of an LNG plant on Curtis Island, off Gladstone, threaten the "outstanding universal value" of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.

Poor water quality posed a major threat to the reef's outstanding universal values, despite efforts to minimise nitrogen run-off from farms.

Later this month the World

Heritage Council will consider the option of listing the Great Barrier Reef as an endangered area.

The UNESCO report recommends this step if what it describes as the most-threatening developments proceed. The World Heritage Council meeting will be held in St Petersburg, from June 24 to July 6.

Apart from plans for three or four LNG plants around Gladstone and Curtis Island, other coastal projects of concern include expansion of port facilities and dredging, tourist ventures, aquaculture and agriculture developments, mining and extractive industries, transport infrastructure, water treatment facilities and residential developments.

The \$6.4 billion Alpha Coal project envisages export of up to 30 million tonnes of Galilee Basin coal through Abbot Point, north of Bowen.

Subject to federal Government approval, Indian company GVK plans to quadruple the size of the present Abbot Point terminal, adding a new two-berth wharf.

The mine site is 130km south-west of Clermont and 360km south-west of Mackay.

The company plans to build a 495km railway line to Abbot Point.

Last week Federal Environment Minister Tony Burke suspended the project, describing the state government's approval process as shambolic and disastrous for the reef.

Mr Burke has called for a detailed study of likely impact on the reef, which he says could take 18 months.

This will be part of a recently announced assessment of the reef, covering the 344,400 sq km federally-controlled marine park and the 2300km-long state-controlled coastal boundary with the park.

Mr Burke said there were no surprises in the UNESCO report.

The Gillard government was aware of the challenges of climate change and coastal development.

"While these issues are complex, we are committed to addressing them through a range of approaches both on land and in the marine environment," he said.



Clean-up at Rows Bay by Reef Check Australia and Tangaroa Blue

Photo: Reef Check Australia