

In danger? What the reef really looks like

If you've read alarmist reports the World Heritage-listed landmark is dead, these photos at Lizard Island, north of Cairns, tell a different story.

By PENNY HUNTER

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When Andy Lewis visited the Great Barrier Reef at Lizard Island, north of Cairns, in 2016, it had been “annihilated”.

“The reef at Lizard was as smashed up as I’d ever seen it in my whole life,” said the marine biologist, who has been studying and scuba diving on the World Heritage-listed natural wonder for 30 years.

Lizard Island was the epicentre of a mass bleaching event that summer, which came on the back of intensely damaging category-four cyclones the previous two years.

Dr Lewis, executive director of the not-for-profit Coral Sea Foundation, has returned every year since, to photograph and document its recovery. His most recent visit was in July, part of a citizen-science mission that contributed to the Citizens of the Great Barrier Reef’s ongoing Great Reef Census.

The good news? The reef is recovering. In fact, he described some coral gardens as “absolutely lush”, particularly where plate and branch coral had rapidly regenerated.

The bad news? The threats to its survival – climate change, warmer ocean temperatures, extreme weather events, agricultural run-off – still exist.

Dr Lewis said alarmist and exaggerated reports and that the entire reef is dead, along with claims by climate denialists that it isn't at risk, were equally counter-productive in the fight to ensure its healthy survival.

He dismissed the [recent furore over UNESCO's move to categorise the reef as "in danger"](#) as pointless political posturing on carbon-emissions targets.

"Of course it's in danger," he said. "Every coral reef in the world is in danger ... the question is how much danger and what are we doing to address the major threats."

Photographer Alice Wesley-Smith, who was a guest of the Coral Sea Foundation at this year's reef monitoring expedition to Lizard Island, said it was "so reassuring" to see how the structure was regenerating.

"Damage, destruction and recovery is a natural part of the ecology of the Great Barrier Reef," she said. "The ecosystem is constantly undergoing change; death and renewal and a shifting and redistribution of species is how the system works."

Dr Lewis was also heartened by what he saw. "It just gave us new impetus to understand that the fight for the reef isn't over yet ... it's worth our strongest efforts to look after it."

However, he tempered his remarks with a warning about the increased frequency of bleaching events.

"Yes there's some joy in seeing the reef recovery ... but all of that could be taken out this summer."

coralseafoundation.net

citizensgbr.org

lizardisland.com.au

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