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Australia Considers Legal Rights for Great Barrier Reef

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A growing conversation is unfolding in Australia around granting the Great Barrier Reef legal personhood, as concerns mount over the long-term survival of one of the world’s most iconic ecosystems.

Gary Singleton, a Yirrganydji traditional owner and land and sea manager in the Cairns-Port Douglas region, has spent over a decade working to protect the reef. He describes it as more than just coral – to him and other Indigenous Australians, it is a living system deeply intertwined with their culture and identity.

Recent reports show significant drops in live coral coverage, prompting calls for stronger protections. One emerging idea is to legally recognise the reef as a “living entity” with rights, similar to legal measures already adopted in countries like New Zealand and Ecuador.

This approach, known as the rights of nature movement, treats ecosystems as legal entities capable of holding rights that can be defended in court. Dr Michelle Maloney, co-founder of the Australian Earth Laws Alliance, supports this idea and argues that traditional Aboriginal legal views have long acknowledged nature as alive and interconnected.

Maloney says the reef could be represented by guardians including traditional owners who would act in its interest. This could empower communities to challenge environmental damage legally, such as pollution or development that threatens the reef’s health.

Victor Bulma, a Mandingalbay Yidinji man and marine park inspector, also supports the proposal. “It’s a great idea,” he says. “But it would take a lot of work to get there.”

Legal personhood has been implemented in Australia before. In 2017, Victoria passed a law recognising the Yarra River as a living entity, acknowledging its cultural importance to the Wurundjeri people. A similar approach for the Great Barrier Reef could increase protection and raise public awareness about the reef’s vulnerability.

Earlier this year, Singleton and Bulma joined a campaign to nominate the reef for a United Nations lifetime achievement award, marking the first time a non-human entity has been nominated.

In July, however, the UN issued a warning that the reef could be added to the World Heritage “in danger” list due to ongoing environmental pressures. The Australian government has until early 2026 to demonstrate progress in protecting the reef’s future.