Climate change threatens Aussie tourism

Rising seas and temperatures putting country's iconic natural wonders at risk

By David Fogarty, Assistant Foreign Editor / straitstimes.com / 8 February 2018

Many of Australia's iconic natural attractions, such as beaches, reefs and national parks, are under growing threat from climate change, putting the nation's tourism industry and species diversity at risk, a study released yesterday says.

Heatwaves, storms, rising sea levels and coastal erosion are increasing risks to the nation's A$40 billion ($41.5 billion) tourism industry - the country's second-largest export earner after iron ore, the report by environmental advocacy group the Climate Council said. The sector employs nearly 600,000 people, or about 5 per cent of the nation's workforce.

The council said Australia's tourism industry is extremely vulnerable, mainly due to its reliance on nature-based attractions that are already feeling the impact of rising sea levels and increasing extreme weather events.

It said the top five attractions for international visitors were beaches, wildlife, the Great Barrier Reef, wilderness areas and national parks and that some destinations could become "no-go" zones during peak season, for example, due to ever increasing temperatures.

Currently the top five nations for international visitors are New Zealand, China, Britain, the United States and Singapore.

The climate impacts would be widespread, especially in the northern half of the country.

For example, the Great Barrier Reef, Australia's most valuable tourist icon, suffered catastrophic coral bleaching caused by record hot ocean temperatures in 2016-17. Large areas of the reef in the north and central sections are now a ghostly white. Extreme coral bleaching could be the "new normal" by the 2030s, the report said, meaning a significant drop in fish abundance and coral diversity.

The reef also faces the risk of damage from more intense cyclones.

The Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park in the Northern Territory and other tourist destinations in inland Australia also face increasing extreme heat and water scarcity. By
2030, the Red Centre could experience more than 100 days above 35 deg C every year (19 days more than the current average), with that number rising over subsequent decades.

"Tourists succumbing to heat is bad for business," said Dr Liz Hanna, of the Fenner School of Environment and Society at the Australian National University in Canberra.

"The extra heat from global warming will further reduce the tourist season and make some enterprises unviable," she said in comments to the Australian Science Media Centre.

Sydney, Melbourne, Hobart, Cairns, Darwin, Fremantle and Adelaide are all projected to have at least a 100-fold increase in the frequency of coastal flooding events with a 0.5m sea level rise.

Higher temperatures and changed rainfall patterns in northern Australia also increase the chances of mosquito-borne diseases spreading. Warmer seas are driving some species further south, such as the deadly irukandji jellyfish, which is already spreading south along the Queensland coast towards the Gold Coast.

Major sporting events could also be affected by hotter summers, while bushfires are also a growing threat. The study pointed to recent climate modelling that shows cities such as Melbourne and Sydney could reach extreme summer temperatures of 50 deg C.

The study pointed to a growing number of eco-tourism projects that were a draw for visitors but said that globally, the world needed to urgently cut greenhouse gas emissions from burning fossil fuels to limit the damage to the environment.

The authors said the federal and state governments had underplayed or ignored climate change risks to tourism and that many jobs were now at risk.