Tourism is the Australian industry least prepared for climate change, report says
Beaches, wildlife, the Great Barrier Reef, unspoilt natural wilderness and national parks all considered threatened

By Adam Morton / Wed 7 Feb 2018 / theguardian.com

Tourism is Australia’s most vulnerable and least prepared industry to deal with climate change despite the fact it is already feeling its effects, according to an advocacy group report.

The report by the Climate Council, based on 200 source documents and articles, says while tourism is growing at an extraordinary pace – an 8% jump in visitors last financial year – not enough is being done to prepare for damage to the country’s greatest drawcards.

The five biggest attractions as reported by Tourism Australia – in order: beaches, wildlife, the Great Barrier Reef, unspoilt natural wilderness, national parks including rainforests and other forests – are all considered threatened by climate change.
The report says federal and state governments have mostly underplayed or ignored the risk to tourism. The government’s national Tourism 2020 plan makes no mention of the need to cut greenhouse gas emissions or improve sustainability in the industry.

Last month, the head of Queensland’s Association of Marine Park Tourism Operators, Col McKenzie, called climate scientist Terry Hughes “a dick” and urged the federal government to cut research funding due to his public comments about rising water temperatures harming the reef. McKenzie said it had turned tourists away.

Ecologist and report co-author Prof Lesley Hughes said it should not be controversial to discuss the threat climate change posed to the industry.

Beyond the often cited back-to-back years of bleaching on the reef in 2016 and 2017, she cited as examples beach erosion due to rising sea levels and a projected accelerating growth in extremely hot days in the red centre and the Top End across this century.

“Most government and industry plans on tourism are focused on growth but they don’t also look at the other side of the coin, which is the risks,” she said. “When people come here they might do other things – cultural things such as visiting the Sydney Opera House – but really the overwhelming attractions are natural icons and it’s very clear they are all already being affected.”

Government data cited in the report underlines the extent of the tourism boom. International visitors spent $40.6bn last financial year and were served by a tourism industry that employs 580,200 people, 5% of the country’s total workforce. The government estimates that, for every dollar generated by the tourism industry, a further 90c is spent elsewhere in the economy.

New Zealand provided the most visitors, though Austrade expects it will be overtaken by second-placed China this year. Britain, the United States and Singapore round out the top five. Tourism Australia this week launched a major advertising campaign in the US during the Super Bowl based on the Crocodile Dundee movie franchise. Starring actors Chris Hemsworth and Danny McBride, the campaign emphasises Australia’s natural beauty.

The industry’s growth has made tourism Australia’s second-largest export after iron ore. It is a significantly larger employer than coalmining or oil and gas extraction, which in 2014-15 employed 39,000 and 22,000 people respectively.

Hughes said, despite this, the future of fossil fuel industries and jobs received far more attention in the national conversation. “It’s cognitive dissonance at its most extreme,” she said.

Examples of industries already being affected by global warming include ski tourism, which has seen a trend of increasing reliance on artificial snow as seasons she shortened over the past 25 years.
“That’s a classic illustration that tourism industries will need to adapt and diversify to find other ways to bring people to those regions,” Hughes said.

The report highlights some hotels, resorts, airlines and zoos have taken steps to cut pollution but says a national plan is lacking. Hughes called on more tourism operators to lobby governments to help the industry adapt and diversify.

“I would also like to see operators be part of the lobby for better climate and energy policy,” she said.