UNESCO alerted to impact of salmon farming on World Heritage Area

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UNESCO has been urged to request the Australian Government undertake an urgent and comprehensive environmental assessment and report on the impact of salmon farming on the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA).

The Australia Institute, First Nations representatives, and local, national and international conservation organisations have written to the UN body explaining the extinction risk facing the Maugean skate in Macquarie Harbour is threatening a key value for which the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area was inscribed. A World Heritage site can be classified as 'World Heritage In Danger' if the values for which it was inscribed on the World Heritage List are under severe threat.

The appeal to UNESCO comes as a review into the federal government decision that allowed large-scale fish farming in Macquarie Harbour over a decade ago – triggered by the Australia Institute, Bob Brown Foundation, Australian Marine Conservation Society and Humane Society International Australia – is still yet to deliver an outcome two months after consultations closed.

Key points:

- The request urges UNESCO to take measures to protect the Maugean skate and the World Heritage Area of Macquarie Harbour, specifically by seeking a full report from Australia on threats before the next World Heritage Committee meeting in July.
- UNESCO's World Heritage Committee recognises ancient taxa with links to Gondwana, such as the Maugean Skate, as one of the criteria contributing to the Outstanding Universal Values of the TWWHA.
- Skate numbers have almost halved since 2014 and few juveniles are surviving.
- The federal government's Conservation Advice of 6 September 2023 had as its highest priority the elimination or significant reduction in farmed fish biomass in Macquarie Harbour prior to summer 2023. To date this has not occurred.
- The advice also notes there is no known published information on how Tasmanian Aboriginal people relate to Maugean skate and what this may mean for the cultural

significance of the species. Determining the cultural significance of the species is identified as a priority conservation and recovery action.

- The Australia Institute, advised by Equity Generation Lawyers, has also written to Federal Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek and the environment department, notifying them of a potential appeal to the TWWHA to the World Heritage Committee for inclusion on the World Heritage in Danger List.

Eloise Carr, Director of the Australia Institute Tasmania said: "This is an alert to the international community that urgent conservation action is critical to save the skate from extinction. New scientific evidence was presented to the Australian environment minister in June 2023 and showed the need to revoke the decision that allowed large-scale fish farming in Macquarie Harbour. We still don't have an outcome. This is why we are calling on the World Heritage Committee to hold the Australian Government to account."

Andry Sculthorpe, from the Land and Heritage Unit of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre said: "The colonisation of our lands and waters continues, and with it brings more likely extinctions. The salmon industry and the Tasmanian government must be held accountable to their harmful actions and the values of the TWWHA must be upheld by those who should know better. These are our ancestral lands and waters, yet we have no say in their management."

Alistair Allan, Marine Campaigner, Bob Brown Foundation said "It is irrefutable that industrial salmon farming is pushing the Maugean Skate to the edge of extinction in Macquarie Harbour. We hope that UNESCO and the IUCN will ensure that real action will be taken to protect this endangered animal."

Rebecca Howarth, Marine Campaigner, Environment Tasmania said: "The Tasmanian government has failed to intervene adequately to save the endangered Maugean skate, and a federal review into the 2012 decision to expand salmon drags on with no decision in sight. It is high time the international community and World Heritage Committee are informed that there is a significant threat to the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area and that the endangered Maugean skate faces imminent extinction without serious intervention."

Jess Coughlan, Campaigner, Neighbours of Fish Farms said "The World Heritage Committee needs to be made aware that the Federal government is failing its international obligation to prevent the destruction of an animal that has survived since the dinosaurs. The appalling fact is that the profits of the multinational salmon companies are being placed above that of Tasmania's unique heritage."

Nicola Beynon, Head of Campaigns at Humane Society International Australia said: "The Maugean skate is unique to Macquarie Harbour where it is a survivor of an ancient ecology dating back hundreds of millions of years ago. The federal government should be held accountable if it risks a catastrophic extinction in this prized Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area."

Alexia Wellbelove, Fisheries & Threatened Species Campaign Manager at the Australian Marine Conservation Society said: "We are writing to UNESCO today to appeal for its intervention. Salmon farming has been identified as a critical factor impacting the Maugean skate and yet it continues while the skate hurtles towards extinction. The Australian Government needs to take urgent action to meet its international obligations and save the Maugean skate."

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