



CONSERVATION, HERITAGE AND INDIGENOUS PARTNERSHIPS REEF ADVISORY COMMITTEE (CRAC)

20th Meeting

7 and 8 March 2007 – Townsville

SUMMARY DOCUMENT

The 20th CRAC meeting was held on 7 and 8 March in Townsville. Following is a summary of the main items discussed at the meeting.

INDIGENOUS PARTNERSHIPS ISSUES

The Traditional Owners of the land and sea country where the meeting was being held were acknowledged.

A Traditional Use of Marine Resources Agreement (TUMRA) update was also provided.

- The Ma:Mu TUMRA was almost accredited last year but a technical hitch prevented it being carried to fruition.
- The Woppaburra people were also quite close to agreeing on a TUMRA.

Recent Indigenous Partnerships Liaison Unit (IPLU) developments were also discussed:

- "First Steps in Communicating with Traditional Owners" information is available via the GBRMPA website. This may be found at http://www.tourismoperators.reefhd.com.au/tourism/highstandard/local_communities/first_steps.html
- The Traditional Owner Resource Bibliography (now called Story Place), is publicly available and is constantly being updated and annotated. It is hoped that the bibliography will be available for use via the GBRMPA website in the near future.

HERITAGE ISSUES

The Committee was briefed on both the protection of Indigenous heritage in the Marine Park and in Commonwealth areas (land and marine).

- The different levels of heritage listing (World, National and Commonwealth) were expanded upon.
- Protection of Indigenous heritage in Commonwealth areas is very high under current environmental protection legislation with definitions covering traditional beliefs and practices and historical and archaeological heritage.

MONITORING OF THE ZONING PLAN

1) Overview

Members were provided with an overview on the strategic approach to monitoring of the GBRMP and how monitoring of the new Zoning Plan fits within that approach.

- Community participation is critically important.
- As well as the monitoring strategy (hoped to be released soon), an information system is available online at http://www.gbrmpa.gov.au/corp_site/info_services/science/research_priorities/database

- Understanding cumulative impacts is important though difficult to achieve.

2) Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS) and James Cook University (JCU)

Members were also presented with an update on the progress of Zoning Plan monitoring, the impact of zoning on biodiversity and the effects of zoning on fish populations (with an emphasis on shoals).

Research since rezoning in 2004 by the AIMS Long-Term Monitoring Team and a team from JCU led by Professor Garry Russ has sampled fish populations in green zones at inshore reefs within the Marine Park.

- JCU scientists surveyed fish and coral populations on fringing reefs from three coastal regions (Palm Islands, Whitsunday Islands and Keppel Islands) before the rezoning in 2004 and again in 2006.
- Before the rezoning, abundance of fish, like coral trout and stripey sea perch, was approximately the same on reefs open to fishing as those earmarked to be closed to fishing under the new zoning.
- In 2006, less than two years after the rezoning, both of these fish species targeted by fisheries were almost 60% more abundant on reefs closed than open to fishing at two of the three island groups. At the Keppel Islands, the effect of fishing was obscured by the loss of coral habitat from some, but not all, sites due to bleaching and freshwater runoff.
- In 2006, AIMS surveyed fish and coral populations on 26 mid-shelf reefs closed to fishing by the rezoning and 26 matched reefs that remained open to fishing, representing five geographic regions adjacent to coastal communities between Cairns and Gladstone. These surveys showed that coral trout populations were about 50% more abundant on the reefs that had been closed to fishing for less than two years.
- Although there was no baseline for these reefs prior to the rezoning, the consistency of the response across all five regions increases the statistical likelihood that the result was caused by the change in zoning.

SPECIES CONSERVATION ISSUES

The CRAC was updated regarding a number of species conservation matters.

The Whale and Dolphin Conservation Policy

- Ten submissions were received. These were supportive of the proposed policy, with minor changes.
- The policy will now go to the Board of the Marine Park Authority for approval.

- Over the next few years, regions will be investigated for possible designation as Whale Protection Special Management areas.

The Dugong Conservation Position Statement

At the last CRAC meeting, the policy objective being pursued by the GBRMPA for dugong conservation was raised. In response, the GBRMPA is preparing a position statement on this issue.

Advice was sought from the CRAC regarding:

- a) clarifying the management intent and the types of management actions they see as future priorities for the GBRMPA; b) the level of specificity of an overall management objective; and c) whether the GBRMPA should have a prioritised conservation and use objective in relation to dugongs in the Marine Park.

The CRAC considered these questions and provided initial advice for consideration by the GBRMPA. General principles and objectives regarding dugong conservation were also discussed as outlined below.

- Dugongs are important as an iconic species and were identified as part of the justification for the listing of the GBR Region on the World Heritage list.
- The satisfactory management of traditional hunting of dugong with the conservation of the species is inextricably linked to the process of reconciliation between Indigenous and other Australians; traditional hunting is a right under the Native Title Act.
- Objectives should also be set for social, economic and cultural outcomes.

Actions for consideration should include:

- Target poaching, boat strikes, commercial netting and shark control impacts.
- Use best science to understand trends and risks.
- Use TUMRAs as a vehicle for awareness education and management involvement.
- Improve the accuracy of community understanding and awareness of all factors that affect dugong mortality.

Research associated with the QDPI&F’s Queensland Shark Control Program

A representative from the Queensland Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries (QDPI&F) presented members with information regarding research into bycatch reduction in the Queensland Shark Control Program.

- Community attitudes support the existing shark control program and would require considerable education to change.
- Baited drum-lines and nets have different effects on threatening and non-threatening shark species.
- The possibility of different shark control and beach protection strategies is being examined.

Marine Tropical Science Research Facility (MTRSRF) research on pingers and effects on inshore dolphins

The CRAC was also provided with an update on MTRSRF research concerning the effects of acoustic alarms on coastal dolphins. This research is being conducted to see if there are ways of reducing the effects of inshore large mesh net fisheries on inshore dolphin species.

- If pingers are to be used to solve a multi-species problem, it is crucial to establish that they do work for at least one species without adverse effects on other species; understanding behavioural responses.
- It is important to have stakeholders involved early in the process so problems can be addressed and solved early.

- There is currently not a proper description of how the devices work; as an attractant or a repellent.

The Shark Conservation Position Statement

Members were advised of the importance of shark and ray conservation to fisheries, tourism, conservation and Indigenous culture.

- Shark conservation and management strategies are becoming increasingly important around the world because of significant population declines due primarily to fishing pressure.
- Sharks have similar life-history characteristics to other iconic species (long-lived and slow breeding).

The CRAC discussed the different briefings on shark control programmes, protection of dolphins and conservation of sharks and rays. These briefings strongly illustrated the complexity of different conservation, fisheries management and traditional use objectives for sharks and rays within the GBRMP.

Initial advice from CRAC members included:

- Sharks are important keystone species and will be important indicators of ecosystem health in the developing the Outlook Report.
- Recognising the serious decline in the populations of certain shark species and the need for protection as important higher order predators of the GBR ecosystem, the CRAC recommends that protection of the ecosystem should be a priority.
- Community awareness and education about the importance of sharks for the health of the GBR ecosystem needs to be significantly improved.
- Shark fishery management seems to have failed (at least in relation to grey reef sharks and whitetip reef sharks); management of shark populations cannot just be a fishery management issue and must be managed as a key group of species in a conservation regime.
- Poor data on shark take and populations needs to be improved; the use of detailed and precise recording of commercial fishing take is suggested.

The CRAC considered advice sought by the GBRMPA and it is planned to further discuss this issue at CRAC 21.

NEXT MEETING

The next meeting will be held on 11 and 12 July 2007.

CURRENT MEMBERSHIP OF THE COMMITTEE	
Mr Doug Baird	Tourism and Recreation
Ms Kate Davey	Non-Government Organisation, Conservation
Mr Jon Day	GBRMPA
Mrs Christine Doherty	Indigenous
Dr Pat Hutchings	Non-Government Organisation, Ecologist
Mr Bruce Leaver	Dept of the Environment and Heritage
Dr Ghislaine Llewellyn	Non-Government Organisation, Conservation
Mr Justin McCaul	Non-Government Organisation, Conservation
Prof Helene Marsh	Scientific Community
Mr Peter Ogilvie	Qld Environmental Protection Agency
Assoc Prof Stephan Schnierer	Indigenous
Mr Bernie Singleton	Indigenous
Ms Cathy Skippington	Qld Environmental Protection Agency
Dr Andrew Tobin	Commercial Fishing
Assoc Prof Peter Valentine	Conservation, World Heritage, Protected Area Management
Mr Simon Woodley	Independent Chairman