



Australian Government

Great Barrier Reef
Marine Park Authority

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Management Status:

Tourism and Recreation

let's keep it great

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TOURISM AND RECREATION

Overview

Tourism is the largest commercial activity in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (GBRMP), generating up to A\$4.2 billion per annum (see Chapter 4 of the [Industries, Land Use and Water Quality in the Great Barrier Reef Catchment Research Report](#) released by the Productivity Commission in February 2003). The marine tourism industry is a major contributor to the local communities along the coast of the GBRMP and the Australian economy. It is estimated that private recreational use on the GBRMP contributes at least an additional \$240 million (Productivity Commission 2003).

Since initial establishment of the GBRMP in 1975, tourism on the Reef has transformed from some small operators in regional centres to a multi-billion dollar industry focussed offshore from Cairns, Port Douglas and in the Whitsundays. The marine tourism industry is very diverse, offering a wide range of products, from day trips, to cruise ships, sail-your-own yachts or kayaking in coastal areas.



There are approximately 730 permitted tourism operators with 1500 vessels and aircraft permitted to operate in the GBRMP.

There are approximately 730 tourism operators with 1500 vessels and aircraft permitted to operate in the GBRMP. The overall number of visitors on commercial

tourism operations has been relatively stable since the mid-1990s, with approximately 1.8 million visitor days in 2001.

Private recreational use of the GBRMP is focussed on recreational fishing. There is limited information on the number of recreational visitors or their patterns of use.

Management of tourism and recreation in the GBRMP is focussed on ensuring ecologically sustainable use of this outstanding natural area. Management by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) is conducted in partnership with the marine tourism industry and relevant governments agencies, especially the [Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service](#) (QPWS). In general, tourism operators demonstrate a strong commitment to protecting the GBRMP, as it is fundamental to their business future.

Current Status

Tourism on the Reef

There is a diverse range of tourism operations in the GBRMP. These include:

- day tours, often to a permanently moored pontoon adjacent to a coral reef
- overnight and extended tours
- diving and fishing charters
- long range roving tours
- aircraft or helicopter tours
- bareboats (self-sail)

- cruise ships
- beach hire
- watersports
- passenger ferries

The tour vessels used by operators range in size from small sailing vessels, which typically take fewer than 20 people, to the large wave-piercing catamarans, which carry up to 400 people. There are also an increasing number of cruise ships visiting the GBRMP, with bookings to cruise ship anchorages increasing from about 200 in 2000, to nearly 600 in 2002.



Diving is a popular activity for tourists visiting the GBRMP.

Around 40 per cent of Great Barrier Reef tourists are serviced by the 10 largest tourism operations. Destinations include coral reefs, continental islands and coral cays. Over 85 per cent of visitors go to the offshore Cairns, Port Douglas and Whitsunday areas that make up less than ten per cent of the GBRMP.

In Cairns and Port Douglas, the tourism industry focuses on day visits to pontoons and moorings and extended diving and fishing charters to offshore reef destinations. There are also aircraft and helicopter overflights. The Whitsunday operations focus largely on visiting resorts and island bays. Australia's largest bareboat yacht fleet operates in the waters around the Whitsunday Islands.

An audit of the use made of tourism permits during the year 2000 demonstrated that a large number of permits were rarely used. Of the approximately 1500 permitted vessels and aircraft in the GBRMP, only 40 per cent were used more than 50 days in that year and 45 per cent were not used at all. This potential, or non-use, of tourism permits is known as 'latency'. The amount of latency was higher in the less popular regions of the GBRMP, although still significant in the Cairns Area and in the Whitsundays.

Visitors to the Reef

International, national and regional visitors are drawn to the Great Barrier Reef and for



For many visitors to the GBRMP the tourism fleet is their primary means of experiencing the Great Barrier Reef.

many of them the tourism fleet is their primary means of experiencing the Great Barrier Reef and learning first hand about its World Heritage values.

For those visitors accessing the Great Barrier Reef on a commercial tourism operation (tourists), their reasons for visiting include wanting to learn more about nature and experience its beauty, looking for relaxation and pursuing exciting activities.

The Cooperative Research Centre for the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area

([CRC Reef](#)) has undertaken comprehensive surveys of reef tourists since 1995 to establish baseline knowledge of the visitors to the Great Barrier Reef and examine changing patterns of reef tourism.

Reef tourists can be grouped in three main categories:

- “First time – potential enthusiasts” who have an active interest in nature. They seek variety in the locations visited and activities undertaken and are concerned about impacts on the environment.
- “Reef enthusiasts” who are seeking different nature-based experiences in their repeat visits and are concerned with the perceived quality of the natural environment.
- “Once in a lifetime” visitors who are Australian families and older couples, less interested in active nature-based pursuits but possibly attracted by the iconic image of the Great Barrier Reef.

About half of the tourists visiting the GBRMP are international visitors.

There is little information available about the characteristics of private recreational visitors to the GBRMP. Research on recreational fishers shows that they are mostly male and rarely younger than 30 years old.

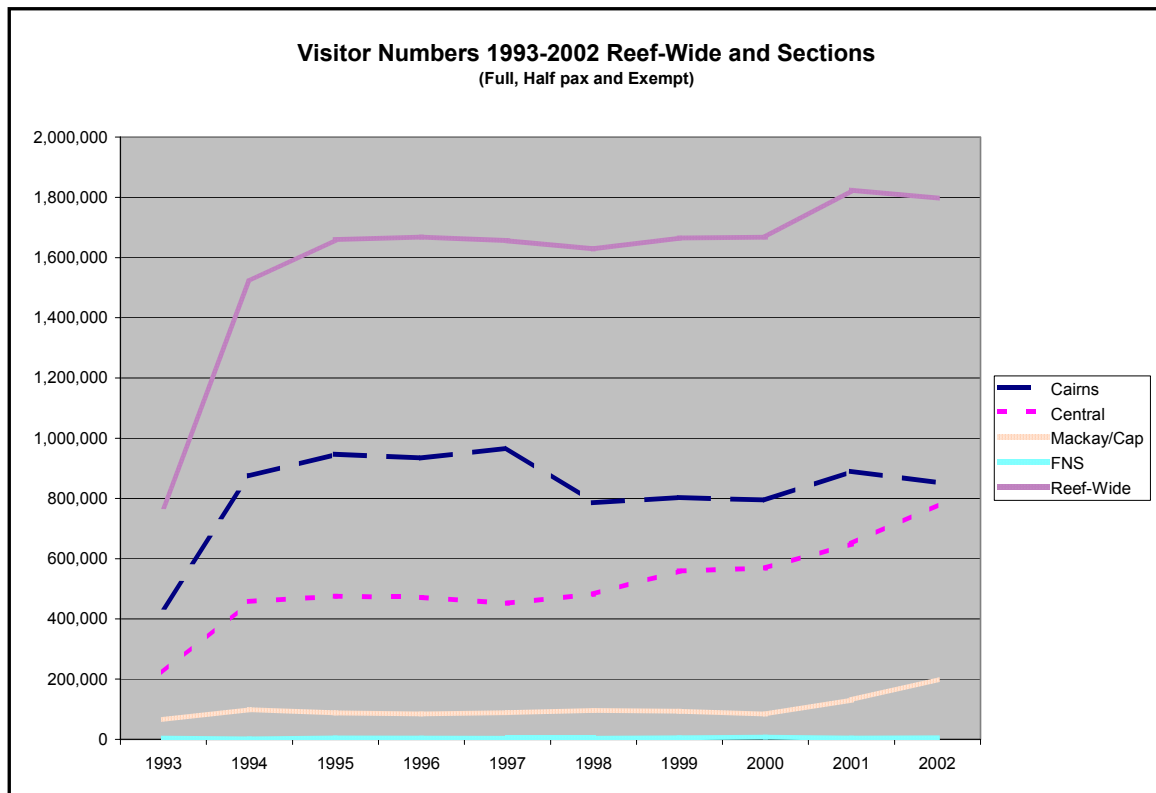
Changes in overall numbers:

The number of visitors carried on commercial tourism operations in the GBRMP is presented in the graph below, along with a breakdown of visitors to the Cairns Area and the Whitsundays. Tourism numbers have been relatively stable since 1994. The minor decline in 1997/98 is attributed to the Asian economic crisis. In 2001, the Cairns area recorded a notable increase, which is attributed to post-Olympic interest in Australia. There has been a 43 per cent increase for the Whitsundays since 1996.



Recreational vessel registration is increasing in communities adjacent to the GBRMP.

Preliminary figures for 2002 indicate that international events such as terrorism have affected international visitor numbers, but may have also contributed to increased domestic tourism. In 2003, outbreaks of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and the conflict in Iraq appear to have caused a decline in international tourist numbers but the extent of this decline and its effects have not yet been assessed.



Since 1995, there has been a fall in visits to the GBRMP by vessels greater than 100 passengers, steady growth in the 51-100 passenger category for Cairns and major growth in the 16-50 passenger category in the Whitsundays.

The extent of private recreational use of the GBRMP cannot be so accurately quantified. However, based on recreational vessel registrations in adjacent coastal communities, it can be assumed that private recreational use of the GBRMP is increasing gradually.

Trip satisfaction:

Tourists who visited the Reef in 2001 and 2002 reported high levels of overall satisfaction with their reef experience. Eighty-five percent of visitors gave their trip a rating of 8 or higher out of 10, with an average visitor satisfaction of about 8.7. Features of the reef trip that were rated highly for satisfaction included staff knowledge and friendliness, tour facilities, water quality, fish, coral, other marine life and information about the tour and about the reef generally.

Management of Tourism and Recreation

The GBRMPA, in conjunction with the QPWS, employs a number of management tools to provide for a range of tourism and recreation opportunities throughout the GBRMP, and to minimise the impacts of tourism and recreation activities on the marine environment.

The legislative basis is provided by the [Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975](#) and its Regulations, and Zoning Plans for each of the major Sections of the GBRMP. More specific management strategies in the key areas of offshore Cairns, Port Douglas and the Whitsundays are contained in [Plans of Management](#). These plans are designed to:

- provide environmental protection, particularly at high-use and sensitive sites;
- separate different uses;
- resolve conflicting use; and
- limit use where necessary.

Tourism and recreation use is also managed on a finer scale through specific management initiatives for popular reefs and bays, with a focus on co-operative strategies developed in close consultation with local users.

Management is supported by a set of policies, addressing key issues such as moorings, cruise shipping and bareboats.

Every tourism operator is required to hold a permit for the operations being conducted in the GBRMP. This permit is jointly issued by the GBRMPA and QPWS and covers activities in the GBRMP and adjacent State Marine Parks. Through these permits, the activities that may be undertaken by each operator are defined and any necessary conditions are described. Each permit application is assessed by the managing agencies. If considered necessary, applicants may be required to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement or to provide public notice of their intentions. This is more likely where the proposal includes the installation and operation of structure within the GBRMP.



Plans of Management are designed to provide environmental protection, particularly at high-use and sensitive sites.

The GBRMPA also works with the marine tourism industry to encourage and facilitate higher standards, through the adoption of [best practices](#). A number of industry associations and recreational groups have adopted their own voluntary codes of conduct. Some training courses are available for tourism industry staff.

An [Environmental Management Charge](#) is levied on commercial tourism operators in the GBRMP. This includes operators conducting tourist programs and those operating facilities. The majority of tourism operators pay the standard tourist program charge equivalent to \$4.50 per visitor per day, subject to concessions and exemptions.

In 2001-02, Environmental Management Charge payments provided over \$6 million that was directed towards GBRMP management and research, including visitor use research conducted by the [CRC Reef](#).

A [Tourism and Recreation Reef Advisory Committee](#) (TRRAC) was established in 2000 to provide the GBRMPA with expert advice on the management of tourism and recreation. The TRRAC consists of 18 expertise-based members and an independent Chair. The TRRAC has played a key role in providing advice on contemporary approaches to management of tourism and recreation in the GBRMP.

Management Issues

The GBRMPA is committed to fostering a sustainable, diverse and world-class tourism industry in the GBRMP and to ensuring a range of tourism and recreation opportunities. Tourism and recreation have been identified as critical issues for the Great Barrier Reef and there is a dedicated Tourism and Recreation Group within the GBRMPA addressing priority policy matters in close cooperation with the tourism industry and other stakeholders.

The GBRMPA recognises that the tourism industry plays an important role in the GBRMP. Marine tourism operators are the principal means by which the Great Barrier Reef and its World Heritage values are presented to national and international visitors. They provide natural history education and are regular and wide ranging users of the GBRMP who can be 'eyes and ears' for Park management. Furthermore, most tourism operators have a strong sense of stewardship for the GBRMP, particularly around their preferred sites of operation.

In managing tourism and recreation use in the GBRMP, particular attention is given to:

- Protecting coral reefs and other habitats, such as seagrass, from anchor damage, poor diving practices, waste disposal, reef walking and collecting (for more information see [Environmental status – corals](#))
- Protecting turtles and sea birds from disturbance, especially during nesting seasons.
- Minimising the environmental impact of facilities and structures.
- Respecting the cultural importance of the GBRMP to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.
- Minimising conflicts in access within this multiple use marine park.
- Informing the community about the Great Barrier Reef and its World Heritage values.
- Encouraging the adoption of [best practices](#) by tourism operations and private recreational users.
- Assisting the marine tourism industry to contribute to management initiatives and monitoring programs.



Particular management focus is given to protecting seabirds from disturbance, especially during nesting seasons.

The Tourism and Recreation Group is undertaking a number of projects to address high priority tourism and recreation issues.

Management of tourism permits, including allocation, latency and tenure

The GBRMPA is seeking to improve the management of tourism permits and is developing policies that will provide a more business-focussed approach that encourages [best practice](#). Important components of this program include:

- an equitable system to allocate permits, particularly where there is a capacity limit;

- measures to reduce the number of latent permits, especially where there is hoarding and speculation affecting entry into the sector and expansion of existing operations; and
- rewards to recognise high standard operators and incentives to encourage other operators to achieve higher standards.

Cruise shipping

The increasing number and diversity of [cruise ships](#) visiting the GBRMP has prompted the GBRMPA to work closely with the cruise ship industry to improve management of this tourism sector and facilitate their access to the GBRMP. A series of [cruise ship anchorages](#) have been designated along the length of the GBRMP to assist in accessing safe and interesting reef and island locations.

Management of Moorings

Many tourism operators install and operate [moorings](#) when they visit the GBRMP. In addition, a series of public moorings at high use sites throughout the GBRMP help Reef users, both commercial and recreational, to minimise their impact on fragile coral communities. The GBRMPA has developed a [policy](#) on moorings in the GBRMP and is implementing improvements to moorings management.

Health and Presentation Value of the Reef

The overall health of the Great Barrier Reef is crucial to the future of marine tourism as it affects the presentation qualities of the Reef for visitors. Issues of major concern include global warming and the consequent bleaching of coral, the quality of water flowing from coastal regions into the GBRMP, and the pressures placed on the reef ecology by fishing. The GBRMPA has a number of major programs underway to address these issues (see [Environmental Status – Corals](#) and [Environmental Status – Water Quality](#)).

There are also localised issues that can affect the value of the GBRMP for tourism: Events such as cyclones and crown-of-thorns starfish infestations can devastate a reef or a region, placing pressure on local operators. The Commonwealth and Queensland Governments have provided substantial support to the tourism industry to help control crown-of-thorns starfish numbers at key tourism sites.

Future Directions

The GBRMPA, with advice from the [TRRAC](#), the tourism industry and other stakeholders, has been exploring new ways to deliver ecologically sustainable, cost-effective, responsive and equitable management of tourism and recreation use within the GBRMP.

The TRRAC has focussed its attention on developing a '[Cooperative Framework for Sustainable Use and Management of Tourism and Recreation](#)', which it has provided as advice to the GBRMPA. The GBRMPA is using this advice as a basis for improving tourism and recreation management.

The primary components of the TRRAC Framework advice are:

- Reef-wide legislation and policy that underpin the other components;
- an entry system where all users are informed and educated about appropriate use and requirements;

- a set of standards for tourism and recreation use;
- a broad spectrum of opportunities for tourism and recreation activities, including capacity limits on some opportunities where necessary;
- an open and transparent mechanism to allocate limited tourism opportunities;
- a cost recovery and resourcing system for Park management;
- a range of initiatives to foster best practice, based primarily on industry co-operative management;
- performance monitoring and censure arrangements; and
- environmental and social monitoring and research.

Fundamental to improved management is a strong partnership with the marine tourism industry. In fostering a sustainable and world-class tourism industry, the GBRMPA will be working with the industry to ensure there are opportunities for improvement and innovation. We will also be exploring ways to further engage tourism operators and recreational users in programs to keep the GBRMP a healthy and well-protected resource.

Further reading

About tourism in the Great Barrier Reef

- http://www.gbrmpa.gov.au/corp_site/key_issues/tourism/index.html
- http://www.gbrmpa.gov.au/corp_site/key_issues/tourism/publications.html
- <http://www.reef.crc.org.au/publications/brochures/index.html>
- <http://www.reef.crc.org.au/aboutreef/people/index.html>

Best environmental practices

- http://www.gbrmpa.gov.au/corp_site/key_issues/tourism/best_environmental_practice.html

Reef infrastructure pontoon guidelines

- <http://www.reef.crc.org.au/research/engineer/reefpontoon.html>

Interactions with cetaceans

- http://www.gbrmpa.gov.au/corp_site/info_services/publications/whale_dolphin/index.html
- <http://www.reef.crc.org.au/aboutreef/wildlife/minkewhale.html>

Visiting seabird breeding sites

- http://www.gbrmpa.gov.au/corp_site/info_services/publications/seabirds/index.html

Turtle watching

- <http://www.epa.qld.gov.au/cgi-bin/w3-mysql/environment/plant/animals/resultframe.html?id=10>

Research publications about the Great Barrier Reef and tourism are also available at:

- http://www.gbrmpa.gov.au/corp_site/info_services/publications/index.html
- <http://www.reef.crc.org.au/publications/techreport/index.html>

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