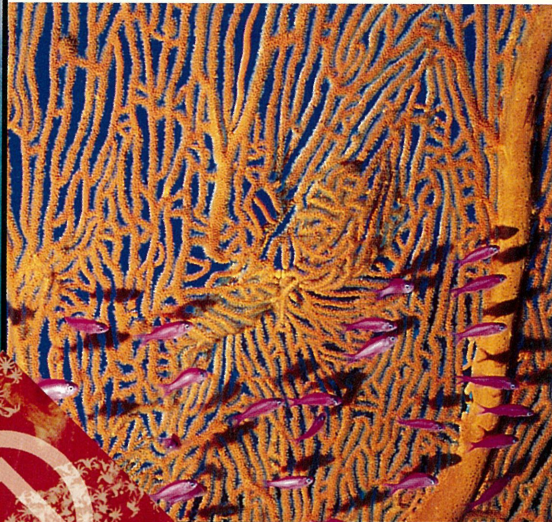


The *Outstanding Universal Value* of the  
**Great Barrier Reef**  
World Heritage Area

*Summary*



P.H.C. Lucas,  
T. Webb,  
P.S. Valentine  
& H. Marsh



*'The Great Barrier Reef is an immense, unique environment of global aesthetic and scientific significance comparable to any of the largest reef structures that have existed in the last 450 million years of the geological past'*

(Hopley & Davis 1986:7)

## Introduction

The Great Barrier Reef is important to all Australians for its natural, cultural, aesthetic and economic values. The inscription of the Great Barrier Reef on the World Heritage List in 1981 gave the Area the highest recognition for its **outstanding universal value**. This unique tropical marine ecosystem, by far the largest World Heritage site, every year attracts large numbers of national and international visitors.

Protecting, conserving, presenting and transmitting the World Heritage value of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area is a complex task which requires the involvement and commitment of many players to ensure that the range of activities taking place in and adjacent to the Area are not compromising its integrity. The *25 year Strategic Plan for the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area* (1992) which was agreed to by all parties gave the vision and set the direction for future management of the Area.

Recent public controversies regarding the appropriateness of development, extractive and scientific activities have

highlighted difficulties in giving due consideration to the World Heritage nature of the region. The original nomination document for the region is brief and is proving today insufficient for guiding management decisions. Consequently, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority in consultation with the Queensland Department of Environment and Environment Australia commissioned a consultancy to clarify the nature of World Heritage as it applies to the Great Barrier Reef, and the resultant management implications.

The consultancy, which was undertaken by P.H.C. (Bing) Lucas, T. Webb, P. Valentine and Professor H. Marsh provides an expansion and clarification of the basis upon which the Great Barrier Reef Region is justified as a natural heritage property for inscription upon the World Heritage List. The findings and recommendations of the consultancy as summarised below will contribute to the development of the Authority's position on World Heritage value and management.



Ian Mc Phail  
Chair  
Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority



# Managing the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area

The review of several other World Heritage sites from around the World, showed that few of them had specifically built World Heritage status into their management and planning regimes. However, more explicit recognition of World Heritage is being introduced to the planning and management regimes of some properties. At several sites, the designation of World Heritage has given extra force to arguments to limit damaging developments. It appears to be universally accepted that public education, understanding and support of World Heritage is of vital importance in achieving effective management.

*'It appears to be universally accepted that public education, understanding and support of World Heritage is of vital importance in achieving effective management.'*

An investigation of World Heritage Cities demonstrated the ability to achieve a balance between protection of the World Heritage and continuing economic activity. In the case of the City of Bath, World Heritage is explicitly incorporated into planning regimes as a 'key material consideration' in planning and decision making.

The lack of appropriate planning regimes over World Heritage properties leaves them open to considerable threats that may devalue the property. Tourism may be particularly threatening to World Heritage Areas. The very status of World Heritage is a powerful attraction to tourists. In the case of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area, terrestrial development has great potential to threaten the basis of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. Terrestrial run-off resulting from unsustainable land use is probably the most serious threat to the integrity of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.

The *25 Year Strategic Plan for the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area* provides a vision for a management approach for the Area that overtly recognises its World Heritage status, and the objectives and strategies to realise this vision. By fulfilling the objectives set out in the Strategic Plan, in particular those relating to education, conservation, legislation and monitoring, Australia will meet its international obligations under the World Heritage Convention.

Furthermore, any reduction in the spatial extent of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area would severely reduce its **outstanding universal value**. In contrast, expanding the area to include the Coral Sea reefs would enhance the World Heritage value through increased habitat and process diversity. Extension to include the Torres Strait reefs would also increase the Area's

**'outstanding universal value'.**

However, while the former expansion option is likely to be widely accepted, the latter is likely to receive opposition from Torres Strait Islanders, and should not be pursued at this time. Any reduction in the size of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area would also be met with considerable public opposition.

## The cultural value of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area

This report does not deal with cultural heritage attributes at a level commensurate to that for natural heritage attributes. While the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area was not listed on the basis of its cultural heritage attributes, there is a general obligation under the World Heritage Convention to protect, conserve, present and transmit the cultural heritage of the Area. The Strategic Plan identifies objectives and strategies that will ensure Australia's general obligation to the cultural heritage of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area is upheld.



# World Heritage Convention

The World Heritage Convention was concluded at the General Conference of the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation in November 1972. The central tenet of the Convention is that there are places that are of such **outstanding universal value** that their disappearance constitutes a harmful impoverishment of the heritage of all humanity. To this end, the Convention establishes mechanisms for the conservation and protection of the World's heritage. States parties to the Convention are obligated to ensure the identification, protection, conservation, presentation and transmission to future generations of this World Heritage.

Central to these efforts is the World Heritage List, a list of the World's properties of '**outstanding universal value**'. Assessment for inclusion upon the World Heritage List is carried out by the World Heritage Committee with reference to two sets of criteria: one for cultural heritage and one for natural heritage. These criteria have been amended several times over the life of the Convention. Currently the natural heritage criteria focus upon:

- geological phenomena;
- ecological and biological processes;
- aesthetics and natural beauty; and
- biological diversity, including threatened species.

In the 25 years since the Convention's inception, there have been changes in its operational emphasis. In particular, there is a growing emphasis upon monitoring the state of conservation of the properties upon the list complimenting the identification of new properties. Additionally, the processes of evaluating site nominations for the list have become increasingly rigorous. This project is timely within this context.

## The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area

The idea that the Great Barrier Reef should become a marine park was mooted as early as 1963 by the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland. Concerns over the level of foreign fishing within reef waters, the effects of crown-of-thorns starfish, and growing fishing and tourism industries highlighted the lack of protection for the Great Barrier Reef in the 1960s. The prospects of oil drilling and limestone mining upon the reef were pivotal in initiating a campaign that culminated in the *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975 (Cwth)*, the legislative basis for the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. This Act also established the statutory authority to coordinate the management of the Park, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority.

The Great Barrier Reef was accepted for inclusion upon the World Heritage List in 1981, meeting all four of the natural heritage criteria. Prior to inscription, the nomination had been reviewed by the World Conservation Union (IUCN), who supported the inscription. During this review, concerns were raised regarding the adequacy of the management regime envisioned for the region.

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The management of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area is complicated by several factors:

- The World Heritage Area is different from the area proclaimed as the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.
- The complex jurisdictional mix of state and federal responsibilities means that no single body has primary responsibility for the World Heritage aspects of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.

Recently, a Memorandum of Understanding among Federal agencies gives the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority lead agency status. However, mechanisms for ensuring that World Heritage values are protected by managers of activities under Queensland control (e.g. fishing, use of islands) have not been resolved.

The massive size of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area, by far the largest World Heritage Area ever established, creates specific problems. In particular, it is difficult to determine:

1. the level of activity that should be allowed to occur in the World Heritage Area; and
2. how local-scale impacts affect the World Heritage value of the entire site.



# The outstanding universal value of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area

In documenting the basis upon which the Great Barrier Reef is included upon the World Heritage List, a total of 60 people with expertise covering a total of 29 natural heritage attributes were consulted. These attributes covered a range of phenomena from individual species, groups of species, habitats, geological features, aesthetic considerations and ecological and biological processes. Twenty nine summary papers were written based upon interviews with the identified experts.

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No expert interviewed questioned the inscription of the Great Barrier Reef on the World Heritage List. Based on the papers, we found that the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area is justifiable upon all four current natural heritage criteria. Furthermore, the changes in criteria between 1981 and 1996 do not necessitate any changes in the justification for World Heritage inscription.

Several individual phenomena are world class; for example, the Great Barrier Reef is the largest coral reef system that has ever existed. However, there are two factors that were primary in the expert summaries. Thus the '**outstanding universal value**' or the World Heritage value, of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area, and its integrity rests upon:

- the scale of the Area; and
- effective conservation management.

These two factors do not, in themselves, justify the listing of the Great Barrier Reef on the World Heritage List. However, they are fundamental and pivotal factors in enabling the expression of those aspects of the region that justify its inscription.

The size of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area, from the low water mark on the mainland coast to past the edge of the continental shelf, and from the tip of Cape York Peninsula to just north of Fraser Island, ensures that a highly diverse suite of habitats and environmental regimes at a range of spatial scales are represented in the one World Heritage Area. This habitat diversity gives rise to a vast number of species and ecological processes. Acknowledging that the size of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area underlies its '**outstanding universal value**', there is considerable danger in attempting to reduce the significance to specific site locations. The World Heritage value of the Great Barrier Reef is a consequence of many attributes combining to produce a whole which cannot be reduced, without loss, to disconnected components.

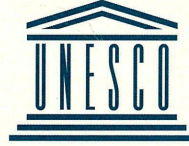
Australia is fortunate in being able to afford the resources to ensure the protection and conservation of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. The relatively pristine state of the region compared with other tropical coral reef ecosystems, can be maintained. Most other systems in the Indo-West Pacific region are under considerably more pressure. The future of tropical reef ecosystems of this region and the species they support may well depend upon

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the conservation of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.

Despite the extent of research that has taken place in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area, there remain considerable gaps in our knowledge. In particular, the level of knowledge regarding aesthetic attributes of the Area is poor. The lack of methodologies and the limited understanding of what constitutes aesthetic value have hampered the documentation of these qualities.





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Copies of the full report are available on display at selected locations or can be purchased from the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority. The Authority is also seeking comments on the report. For further information, contact:

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