# TOURISM REEF ADVISORY COMMITTEE COMMUNIQUE

# Meeting 5, 14 and 15 September 2016 – Whitsundays

*The Tourism Reef Advisory Committee (the committee) was established in 2014 to provide advice to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (the agency) on tourism matters relating to implementation of the Great Barrier Reef Outlook Report 2014, the Great Barrier Reef Region Strategic Assessment and Program Report and the Reef 2050 Long-term Sustainability Plan. The Committee is competency-based with members providing a cross-section of stakeholder expertise and interests in areas relevant to tourism and recreational use of the Great Barrier Reef. The Committee is appointed for a three-year period and Ms Glenys Schuntner is the independent Chair.*

Ms Glenys Schuntner acknowledged the Great Barrier Reef Traditional Owners of the Whitsunday people, the Ngaro people and their Elders, both past and present.

## Great Barrier Reef tourism industry update

**The Committee noted the significant growth and buoyancy of the tourism market over the last 12 months and that this was expected to continue in the coming year.**

Members provided an update on tourism from their perspectives. Tourism is in the spotlight of economic and government analyses as it is seen as the driver for employment and regional growth.

Generally, there has been an increase in both the domestic and international markets, however, the youth adventure market had declined likely due to the doubling of costs associated with the working holiday visa and ‘backpacker tax’.

In the central (Whitsunday) region, there has been significant growth despite the majority of the island resorts being closed. Hamilton Island is regularly reaching capacity with increased visitation from both the domestic and international markets. The bareboat industry has seen a 40 per cent growth and the ‘Go Bareboating’ marketing campaign is increasing awareness of this activity.

In the northern region, tourism operators are experiencing the strongest growth in 10 years. There has been strong international demand despite the coral bleaching event and associated media. The Chinese market remains the biggest and there has been a significant increase in growth of international visitors from Japan, the United States, Europe and the United Kingdom.

Visitation to the southern Great Barrier Reef region has been high with 95 per cent island occupancy for the last six to eight months. There has been positive feedback from visitors with coral recovery, growth in whale numbers and a sighting of the only ‘pink’ manta ray in the world attributing to these positive experiences.

## Tourism Whitsundays

**The Committee noted the reinvigoration of Tourism Whitsundays and complimented the organisation on its current planning and marketing initiatives for the Whitsundays. In the long-term, the focus on visitor dispersal through diversification of product across the region may help to address congestion at iconic locations such as Whitehaven Beach.**

Tourism Whitsundays has undergone a recent structural change by de-amalgamating the economic arm of the organisation. An outcomes-focussed approach is being adopted across the organisation.

Domestic visitation has increased by 30.6 per cent and international visitation has increased by 5.8 per cent despite a decrease in the youth market visitation.

Key strengths for the region include Whitsunday icons, the unspoilt environment and the safe, accessible and diversified attractions within this destination. The current focus is to increase visitor expenditure and length of stay through the development of new experiences and promotion of a ‘local hidden secrets’ campaign.

## Whitsunday Plan of Management and broader management concerns

**The Committee noted:**

* **The environmental management charge visitation data.**
* **That the advice from TRAC 4 has been considered as part of the proposed amendments to the Whitsundays Plan of Management 1998.**

**The Committee workshopped strategies to address congestion and latency concerns and overall, urged action from these discussions and recommended the agency take these ideas, run with them, be brave and bold and move on with the management of this area.**

The environmental management charge visitation data indicated significant increases in visitation to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park particularly in the Cairns and Whitsundays regions. Data indicated increased cruise ship visitation to the Whitsundays Planning Area and a reduction in visitation during the April to June quarter is consistent with anecdotal evidence of the youth adventure market decline.

The amendments to the Whitsunday Plan of Management will be released for public consultation in February 2017.

On the previous day, some members were able to participate in a short cruise around Whitsunday Island, passing Whitehaven Beach, Tongue Point, Hill Inlet and Dumbell Island. The understanding of the values and uses of the area informed the workshop discussion around the following four areas:

* Moorings
* Latency
* Congestion, site planning and industry action
* Multiple visits to a location on a day.

## Responses to Reef health perceptions

## The Committee provided the following advice:

* **Coordinated, positive, timely communication around coral bleaching is paramount.**
* **The agency is encouraged to be more proactive with media interviews and share information early even at the expense of uncertainty.**
* **The Marine Tourism Industry Response Group should meet more frequently and be involved in the next round of messaging.**

The agency has taken various actions to encourage coral reef recovery including ongoing zoning compliance and targeted crown-of-thorns starfish control. The agency also published a poster initially developed by the Cape York Local Marine Advisory Committee which encourages the voluntary no-take of herbivorous fish.

In addition, the agency is preparing to survey the survivorship and recovery rates of coral following the 2016 coral bleaching event.

Committee members provided feedback on their experiences of the coral bleaching event and the agency’s response to the event.

## GBRMPA brand positioning

**The Committee noted the status of the agency’s brand position project.**

The agency is focusing on a brand strategy to align stakeholder expectations of the agency’s role and vision. The project will provide tools to guide agency behaviours, help prioritise engagement with stakeholders, sharpen the agency’s key messages and help align the

agency’s existing sub-brands. Internal and external consultation to date has indicated the agency maintains a good reputation but may not be considered leading edge.

An online survey targeting more than 1400 stakeholders and the general public will be launched in October 2016.

## Integration of Reef Guardians

**The Committee noted the proposed integration of the existing Reef Guardian Farmers, Graziers, Fishers, Councils and Schools. The Committee supported the proposed tiered structure for the Reef Guardian model, the shift to individual membership and the requirements for membership. However, the Committee recommended that the Program provide for tourism businesses to be recognised and to be more inclusive of recreational fishers.**

**A TRAC working group was formed to assist with identifying and engaging tourism and recreation sectors in the development of the program.**

The agency is working towards integrating the Reef Guardian program into one delivery model incorporating schools, councils, fishers, farmers and graziers. The program will build on its strong legacy, key stewardship outcomes and other program outcomes (e.g. recognised brand value, pride and good news stories). The evolution of the program will shift focus from organisations to individuals whilst recognising the value in retaining schools and councils as organisations.

A transitional plan to the new Reef Guardian model has commenced with a focus on expanding and diversifying membership. Reef Guardians will be kept engaged through quarterly newsletters and forums and the agency will measure the new model through an online survey and other evaluation mechanisms.

## Reef Guides

## The Committee noted the outcomes of the consultant’s report and endorsed the two-tiered approach to deliver the Reef Guides program, providing all tourism industry staff weren’t required to undertake course. A TRAC working group to assist with trialling aspects of the Reef Guides program was established.

The agency, in collaboration with the Association of Marine Park Tourism Operators (AMPTO), engaged a contractor to develop a discussion and options paper for the Reef Guide program. The tourism industry was consulted through an online survey and face to face interviews.

The report highlighted that the brand identity of the Reef Guides is critical as is the need for ongoing engagement and career opportunities. This included a baseline level of training delivered through the Reef Discovery course which would be refreshed and available through an online platform.

Industry feedback indicated strong support for the Report’s recommendation in delivering the Reef Guides program.

## Crown-of-thorns starfish

**The Committee noted the progress on the agency’s approach to managing crown-of-thorns starfish and endorsed the success of the current program to maintain coral cover at priority reefs.**

A crown-of-thorns starfish outbreak is a long term event unlike a coral bleaching event or cyclone.

The current control program focuses on 21 reefs which comprises 74 per cent of the reef area offshore from Cairns and Port Douglas. At these reefs the extent of the hard coral cover has generally been maintained above the target of 25 per cent

The success of the current program has resulted in funding of a second control vessel, for which a tender process is underway.

## Other items

* The Committee agreed to provide feedback out-of-session on the draft Reef 2050 policy and guidelines which will be available for public comment late 2016.

* The Committee noted the recent accreditation of the Gunggandji Traditional Use of Marine Resources Accreditation (TUMRA).
* The Committee noted the second round of public feedback on the review of the agency’s permission system will close 4 November 2016 and agreed to provide a Committee submission out of session.
* The committee noted the update on the Commonwealth Marine Reserve including the ‘Notice of Intent’ public comment period which closes on the 11 October 2016.

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| **Tourism Reef Advisory Committee Membership** | |
| **Member** | **Expertise/Affiliation** |
| Ms Glenys Schuntner | INDEPENDENT CHAIR- Advocacy for regional economic development |
| Mr Tony Baker | Marine tourism operations, including pontoons, in the northern region of the Great Barrier Reef |
| Mr Tony Brown | Sailing and day tourism operations in the central region of the Great Barrier Reef |
| Mr Tony Charters | Ecotourism and tourism in protected areas, *Ecotourism Australia* |
| Mr Mike Drake | International cruise shipping and marketing |
| Mr Peter Gash | Sustainable tourism and aircraft operations in the southern region of the Great Barrier Reef |
| Ms Chrissy Grant | Indigenous affairs |
| Mr Daniel Gschwind | Business acumen and economics, *Queensland Tourism Industry Council* |
| TBA | Tourism resorts |
| Ms Annie Judd | Bareboat operations in the Whitsundays and tourism marketing |
| Mr Geoff Kent | Tourism management in the Great Barrier Reef Coast Marine Park, *National Parks, Recreation, Sports and Racing (Queensland)* |
| Mr Daniel McCarthy | Charter fishing |
| Mr Col McKenzie | Marine tourism industry and diving, *Association of Marine Park Tourism Operators* |
| Mr David Morgans | Regional tourism development, *Tourism and Events Queensland* |
| Ms Bianca Priest | Commonwealth Marine Reserves, *Parks Australia (Australian Government)* |
| Ms Margaret Johnson | General Manager, Policy and Stewardship, *GBRMPA* |
| Dr Roger Beeden | GBRMPA Director, Tourism and Stewardship, *GBRMPA* |