

GREAT BARRIER REEF MARINE PARK AUTHORITY POSITION STATEMENT ON **SUSTAINABLE FISHERIES**

Our position

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority is dedicated to the long-term protection and conservation of the Great Barrier Reef, which includes its species, habitats, and ecosystem processes.

The Reef Authority supports ecologically sustainable fisheries where they are consistent with the long-term protection and conservation of the Reef.

In a World Heritage Area, fisheries in the Great Barrier Reef should exhibit the highest standards for ecological sustainability.

Fishing is a long-established activity in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (the Marine Park) and is a valued part of life for many people. It provides important social, economic, and cultural benefits, and is a way for people to develop connections to the marine environment and build community cohesion.

The Reef Authority protects the entire Great Barrier Reef (the Reef) ecosystem to maintain and conserve the environment, biodiversity, and heritage values of the Marine Park. A healthy ecosystem incorporates the fundamental interconnectivity between Reef habitats, species and people.

The Marine Park is a multiple use area, supporting a variety of activities including tourism, shipping, research, traditional cultural activities, and fishing. Fishing is the largest extractive use of the Marine Park.



© Rhianna Rickard

Some fishing activities and practices can damage habitats and impact species, threatening the values of the Reef. Minimising adverse impacts on the ecosystem is vital, particularly as the climate continues to change.

Climate change is the greatest threat to the world's coral reefs. Most coral reefs, including the Reef, have already declined, and are facing irreversible change. These changes will contribute to biodiversity loss, and impact habitats and marine life – indirectly and directly affecting fish populations and Reef fisheries. Resilience-based management strategies and transparent, evidence-based decision making are instrumental to identifying and responding to these impacts.

In managing for ecologically sustainable use, the Reef Authority works with partners to address the threats to the Reef. This includes threats from fishing activities that are not ecologically sustainable and enforcing compliance with the *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Zoning Plan 2003* (the Zoning Plan). We also work with partners to implement other relevant Commonwealth and Queensland legislation, rules, and strategies.

Ecologically sustainable fisheries consistent with the long-term protection and conservation of the Reef's values have a place in the Marine Park. An 'ecologically sustainable fishery' is one that:

- Ensures biologically sustainable fish populations.
- Minimises impacts on habitats, species, and heritage values.
- Supports a functioning ecosystem.
- Is consistent with the long-term protection and conservation of the environment, biodiversity, and heritage values of the Reef.
- Operates in compliance with all relevant Commonwealth and Queensland legislation, rules, and strategies.

Ecologically sustainable fisheries will provide certainty for the future of fisheries in the Marine Park and the health of the ecosystem.



© Comm-M. Simmons.

Impacts and risks to Reef values

Sustainable fisheries and healthy fish populations are critical to maintaining a healthy ecosystem and a functioning Reef.

Unsustainable fishing activities compromise the long-term protection and conservation of the Reef.

The Reef's natural values include species, habitats, and ecosystem processes. Heritage values include everything that makes the Reef special in terms of World Heritage as well as Indigenous heritage, and culture. First Nations peoples' relationships with the sea and land play an important role in maintaining their identity and distinct cultures. The Reef is of immeasurable value to all members of the community. We all have a role to play in maintaining a healthy Reef ecosystem.

Some fishing activities and practices negatively impact the Reef's natural and heritage values. Successive Great Barrier Reef Outlook reports have identified high and very high risk¹ threats from fishing activities, including incidental catch of protected species, extraction of predators, extraction from spawning aggregations, and discarded catch.

The impacts of these threats are intensified by climate change. For example, overfishing resulting in depleted fish populations or anchor damage can cause greater harm when combined with climate impacts like changes in species distribution or coral bleaching. This exacerbates overall declines in Reef health and resilience.

All fishers – whether recreational, commercial, traditional or charter – rely on a healthy and resilient Reef ecosystem. Ecologically sustainable fishing is in everyone's interest. Visitation and use – including the number of fishers – is expected to increase. This increases the pressure and risks to the health and resilience of fish populations. The health of the Reef has declined, and despite world-leading management and regulation of fishing activities, it remains under pressure.

Reforms to fisheries management

Ongoing fisheries management reform is needed to maintain healthy and sustainable fish populations for future generations, particularly in response to climate change and increasing use.

Fisheries in Queensland are undergoing significant reform to improve ecological sustainability. The Queensland Government's Sustainable Fisheries Strategy 2017-2027 (the SFS) is an ambitious reform for Queensland fisheries. The Queensland Government reports that 29 of the 33 actions in the SFS have been delivered. Actions implemented under the SFS have lowered the risk to the Reef ecosystem and set the foundation for high standard fisheries management. Full and timely implementation of the SFS will help deliver healthier fish stocks and support thousands of jobs. Implementation of harvest strategies and management activities to achieve 60% unfished biomass for target species are key measures to deliver high standard sustainable fisheries on the Reef.



© Comm-T. Mayne

¹ Other risks from fishing identified in Outlook reports include illegal fishing and poaching, and Extraction of particle feeders.

What we are doing to support ecologically sustainable fisheries

The Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area requires the highest standard of ecologically sustainable fisheries.

Under the *Great Barrier Reef Blueprint for Climate Resilience and Adaptation*, the Reef Authority will:

- Work with Australian, Queensland, and local government partners, and recreational and commercial fishers, to maximise the impact of the SFS.
- Use management tools and statutory powers to ensure that fishing activities are sustainable and in keeping with the objects of the *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975* (the Act).

We will:

- Assess risks to the Marine Park, including fishing, through Outlook reports and other formal assessment mechanisms.
- Provide evidence-based advice on how fisheries management can deliver ecological sustainability, and work with our partners to maximise outcomes and benefits.
- Enforce compliance with relevant fishing rules, and Marine Park zoning and regulations through the Australian and Queensland governments' Reef Joint Field Management Program.
- Protect Reef resilience through resilience-based planning and management, minimising the impacts of fishing using the best available knowledge. This includes the preparation of spatial plans of management and marine park policies to provide for the long-term protection and conservation of the environment, biodiversity, and heritage values of the Reef as the climate continues to change.
- Promote Reef stewardship by industry, recreational fishers, Traditional Owners, local governments, and communities, and educate people about the importance of ecologically sustainable fishing and how they can contribute.
- Uphold the rights of Reef Traditional Owners, including through partnerships where we manage Sea Country together.
- Provide fishers with the information and tools needed to improve compliance and understanding of fishing rules in the Marine Park.

The Reef Authority is committed to working with the Queensland Government, industry, recreational fishers and other partners and stakeholders to support sustainable fisheries.

What needs to be done

Fisheries in the Marine Park should exhibit the highest standards for ecological sustainability:

1. Harvest strategies based on the best available science, including timeframes for management responses, are in place for all fisheries.
2. For depleted species, targeted fishing and harvest does not occur, and other fishing-induced mortality is limited to the greatest extent possible. A depleted species is one where the biomass estimates have dropped below the Limit Reference Point². Where there is clear evidence that biomass is below this level, the fishery must immediately close to allow recovery.
3. In line with the SFS, target fish populations are managed to achieve 60% unfished biomass by 2027 and maintained into the future.
4. The use of gillnets³ in the Marine Park is phased out by 30 June 2027.
5. Interactions between commercial fishing activities and threatened and protected species are:
 - a. Avoided to the greatest extent possible and do not threaten the long-term protection and conservation of the species in question.
 - b. Are fully reported, including as per requirements under relevant legislation.
6. Independent data validation of fishing activities is implemented, including for target, bycatch, and protected species. Large-mesh net and trawl gear are the highest priority.
7. There is a high level of compliance with fishing rules and regulations by fishers across all sectors (i.e. commercial, recreational, charter and traditional).
8. Managers undertake collaborative research and engagement with recreational fishers to gain a better understanding of the impacts from recreational fishing activities (including effort, take, bycatch, and interactions with other species), and use this information to ensure recreational fishing activities are ecologically sustainable.
9. Fisheries are managed in a way that genuinely includes the participation of First Nations peoples and addresses First Nations rights, interests, and obligations.
10. Fisheries management adapts in response to new knowledge, particularly on the impacts of climate change.
11. Data and information is shared between managing agencies to make timely and effective management decisions, especially where this promotes adaptive fisheries management supporting Reef resilience.
12. Direct impacts on Reef habitats, particularly coral, caused by fishing activities are minimised to the greatest extent possible.
13. Ecological Risk Assessments are used to identify and measure all ecological risks from fishing activities, including target and bycatch species and habitats, with the outcomes used to inform management actions.

² As defined in the Queensland harvest strategy policy, a Limit Reference Point (LRP) is "the biomass level which the risk to recruitment of the stock, due to overfishing, is regarded as unacceptably high". For Queensland Government harvest strategies, 20% of unfished biomass is the default LRP. This signals that more drastic management action is immediately required, which could include significantly reducing the level of catch or effort in the fishery or closing the fishery to allow fish stocks to recover.

³ The term 'gillnet' is taken to include all large mesh nets used under N1, N2 and N4 licences formerly issued under the Queensland Fisheries Act 1994 and nets used under the new Nx licences from January 2024.

Fisheries management in the Marine Park

The Commonwealth and Queensland governments have a shared role in fisheries management in the Marine Park⁴.

The Reef Authority administers the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act, which is the primary environmental legislation for the Reef. The primary object of the Act is to provide for the long-term conservation and protection of the environment, biodiversity, and heritage values of the Reef. The second object, subject to the first, is to allow ecologically sustainable use.

The Act provides a framework for regulation, planning and management of the Marine Park, through a suite of instruments including zoning plans, plans of management and a permissions system. One of the most important tools for managing fishing activities in the Marine Park is the Zoning Plan. The Zoning Plan identifies where various activities, including fishing, are permitted, and protects important habitats, breeding grounds and populations. Marine Park regulations include further provisions on fishing.

The Queensland Government is responsible for fisheries management (for the purposes of commercial, recreational, charter and traditional take) through the *Fisheries Act 1994* (Qld) (Fisheries Act) and supporting regulations. Currently, aside from spatial fishing closures and restrictions as described in the Zoning Plan, the Fisheries Act provides the most detailed coverage of various fisheries activities that occur in the Marine Park.



© Reel Destinations / Commonwealth of Australia (Reef Authority)



© Commonwealth of Australia (Reef Authority).



© Commonwealth of Australia (Reef Authority).



© Comm-D. Chaplin, Pine Creek Pictures

⁴ Schedule E of the Great Barrier Reef Intergovernmental Agreement 2015 sets out how the Commonwealth and Queensland governments will collaborate on fisheries management.

