Australian Government
Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority
Reef Authority
Great Barrier Reef
Outlook Report 2024

PORTS

Summary

Twelve ports are located within the Great Barrier Reef Region.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected trade throughput at the Region's ports.

The average annual total dredge material disposed in the World Heritage Area was approximately 1.2 million cubic metres per year between 2019 and 2023, compared to 1.5 million cubic metres for the period between 2013 and 2016.

Independent reviewers found management effectiveness for ports in the Region was *effective to mostly effective*.

What the Outlook Report 2024 says about ports

Since 2019, there were three key capital dredging campaigns as part of expansion projects at the ports of Cairns, Townsville and Gladstone. A total of 4.99 million cubic metres of capital dredge material was removed from the World Heritage Area, and all this material was disposed of on land. Since 2019, approximately 30 hectares of new land was created at the Port of Townsville.

There was an approximate 1.5-fold increase in the total reported amount of maintenance dredge material removed from the World Heritage Area compared to the preceding 5 years. Local port characteristics drive maintenance dredging requirements.

Benefits of ports

Ports form an integral part of the supply chain supporting industries, trade, defence, and local communities.

The combined trade throughput at the priority ports has varied between 2016–17 and 2021–22 financial years with an overall loss during the COVID-19 period. In the same period, the Port of Townsville saw the highest growth of about 12 per cent, peaking just before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Region's ports continue to conduct long-term environmental monitoring programs and be innovative in data capture approaches and ways to minimise harm.

Impacts of ports

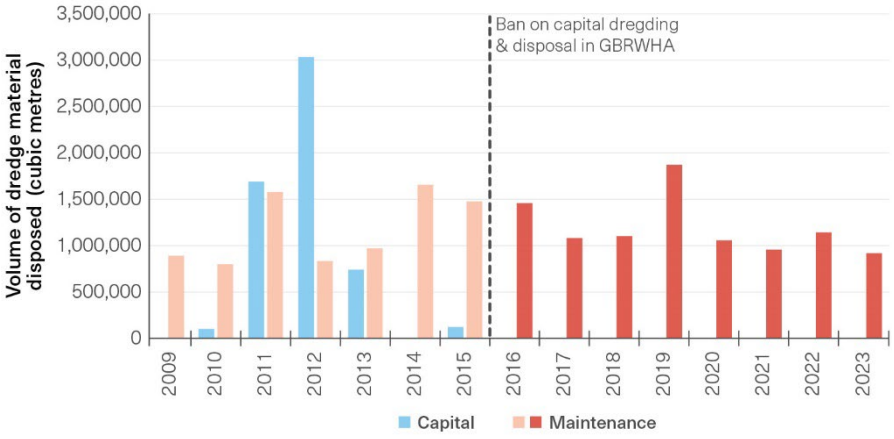
Some impacts associated with the operations at the Region's ports have been reduced since 2019, while others persist. In the Region, the major port dredging campaigns are generally restricted to the major trading ports.

The impacts from port activities range from direct removal of habitat (for example, by dredging of the seafloor) through to indirect environmental impacts (for example, intermittent noise pollution, dust, spills and light pollution from port infrastructure).

New technologies and research are improving understanding of the impacts from port-related activities. Monitoring at the Port of Cairns showed a continued increase in seagrass biomass and stabilisation of meadow area since 2019 against a historical low in the period from 2009 to 2011.

Management of ports

Since 2019, management and planning frameworks for dredging, at sea placement and port development are now mostly being implemented as standard practice and align with international best practice. Master plans are in place for all four priority ports and some minor ports. Port overlays have been adopted for the ports of Townsville and Gladstone. The port-led long-term monitoring programs are more systematic and the data are publicly available.



Dredge material disposal (capital and maintenance) in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area, 2009 to 2023. Since late 2015, the disposal of capital dredge material in the World Heritage Area has been prohibited (for volumes greater than 15,000 cubic metres) and capital dredging is limited to priority ports and the port of Cairns. Further detail in caption of Figure 5.17 in the 2024 Outlook Report Sources: Far North Queensland Ports Corporation Limited (trading as Ports North), Port of Townsville Limited, Gladstone Port Corporation Limited and North Queensland Bulk Port Corporation Limited 2023 1 and Australian Department of Environment and Energy 2018