Reef values

The Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 focuses on protecting and managing matters of national environmental significance — Australia’s most prized environmental assets. Seven are relevant to the Great Barrier Reef Region and were considered in the strategic assessment:

- World heritage properties
- Great Barrier Reef Marine Park
- National heritage places
- Commonwealth marine areas
- Listed migratory species
- Listed threatened species and ecological communities
- Wetlands of international importance.

These values are found throughout the Region and are interconnected and overlap.

Assessing management effectiveness

An independent expert assessment found that while the Authority’s management of activities within the Region is generally effective, more is required to halt and reverse declines in Reef health, especially in addressing impacts arising outside the Region.

It found management effectiveness challenges for the Authority were evident for those issues which are broad in scale and complex socially, biophysically and jurisdictionally — such as port activities, shipping, climate change and extreme weather, coastal development, water quality protection, commercial and recreational fishing and Indigenous heritage.

Findings

The strategic assessment and Outlook Report found:

- The Great Barrier Reef as a whole retains the qualities contributing to its outstanding universal value
- Recovery in humpback whale and loggerhead turtle populations
- Reductions in the nutrient, sediment and pesticide loads from the catchment entering the Region
The Reef remains one of the most resilient tropical marine ecosystems in the world. However, the accumulation of impacts through time and over an ever-increasing area is diminishing the Reef’s resilience and its health in the southern two-thirds is declining.

Key marine habitats such as coral reefs and seagrass meadows, particularly in inshore areas in the southern two-thirds of the Region, are in decline. Populations of some iconic and highly vulnerable animals are on a downward trend. This includes southern dugong populations, some species of marine turtle, and some offshore and pelagic-foraging seabirds.

At the same time, a number of natural processes vital to the healthy functioning of the marine environment, such as sedimentation, nutrient cycling and connectivity, are also in decline. Again this is particularly evident in central and southern inshore areas.

A decade of extreme weather, including severe cyclones and floods, has contributed to the decline, and reduced the capacity of the ecosystem to recover from these and other disturbances.

Terrestrial habitats, such as wetlands and connecting water bodies, along the Great Barrier Reef coast have been substantially modified, particularly south of about Port Douglas. This has reduced their ability to support the healthy functioning of the Reef.

The success of recent initiatives to improve the quality of catchment runoff entering the Region means impacts related to nutrient and sediment loads are likely to be reduced in the future.

Traditional Owners with connections to the Region maintain their cultural practices and customs. However, because Indigenous heritage values are closely tied to land and sea country, many have deteriorated as changes in the environment reverberate through their culture.

Heritage values are being maintained or restored at some lightstations but most places of historic significance are poorly recorded or their condition is not well understood.

The Great Barrier Reef retains the amazing natural beauty for which it is famous. However, its underwater aesthetic value has been reduced in some inshore areas — largely as a result of coral declines.

Community benefits are dependent on the condition of the biophysical values of the Great Barrier Reef. Economic benefits and employment remain relatively stable; however, impacts such as extreme weather, poor water quality and crown-of-thorns starfish have affected values such as access to reef resources and enjoyment.

The Reef’s future

The Great Barrier Reef Region remains one of the most resilient tropical marine ecosystems in the world; however, there is increasing evidence that its resilience is being seriously eroded. The loss cannot be attributed to any single cause, but is almost certainly the consequence of impacts from the different activities and direct drivers, and their accumulation through time.

The health of the Great Barrier Reef is likely to continue to decline, particularly inshore in central and southern areas, and management is not keeping pace with the impacts that are acting on the system. Without additional management intervention, there is a risk of further declines in the condition of biodiversity and heritage values and the community benefits they support.

Our future management

The findings and recommendations of the Strategic Assessment Report have informed a 25-year management program for the Authority. This program to protect the Reef and provide for ecologically sustainable use is set out in the Program Report.

Building on a strong foundation

The Authority’s management program builds on the strong management arrangements already in place. It is structured around three foundational management areas:

- Environmental regulation — the Authority uses planning and management tools such as regulations, the Great Barrier Reef Zoning Plan, plans of management, permits, compliance and statutory reporting.
- Engagement — working with partner agencies, Traditional Owners, communities, industry and local government to find pragmatic solutions to secure the Reef’s future.
- Knowledge, integration and innovation — management based on the best available science as well as drawing on traditional ecological knowledge and information from the wider community.

Strengthening management

Based on the recommendations of the strategic assessment report, many of the existing management arrangements will be strengthened.

Addressing the challenges of managing cumulative impacts is a key driver behind many of the measures to strengthen management.

Five new initiatives will be progressively developed and implemented to strengthen management:

- Management framework based on outcomes and targets to guide decision making and the actions required to maintain and restore the condition of values.
- Cumulative impact assessment guidelines to support a transparent, consistent and systematic approach to assessing cumulative impacts from activities within and adjacent to the Region.
- Net benefit policy to guide actions required to restore ecosystem health, improve the condition of values and guide financial contributions to that recovery.
- Reef recovery program to cooperatively restore sites of high environmental value.
- Reef-wide integrated monitoring and reporting program which directly links to the outcomes-based management framework and underpins the Authority’s adaptive management.

These initiatives will drive the actions required to build a healthy and resilient Great Barrier Reef and enhance protection of matters of national environmental significance. The immediate focus will be on outcomes and targets to guide decision making, cumulative impact assessment guidelines, and a net benefit policy.

Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority
2-68 Flinders Street East (PO Box 1379) Townsville Qld 4810
Phone +617 4750 0700 | info@gbrmpa.gov.au
www.gbrmpa.gov.au