



# Whitsundays Plan of Management Update



**The Whitsundays is one of the most spectacular areas in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, attracting the greatest concentration of visitors. To continue to protect this high-use area, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority has updated the Whitsundays Plan of Management, which provides additional protection to the Reef-wide zoning plan.**

## **What are the key points of the updated plan?**

The existing strong protections within the plan remain, including:

- maximum vessel lengths and group sizes
- 1500 feet minimum flight heights over significant bird sites
- the ability to enforce no-anchoring areas to protect coral reefs – these apply to both recreational and tourism users
- the capacity for new public moorings and no-anchoring areas to be installed at any time.

There are no changes to the zoning plan.

The Whitsundays Plan of Management now includes provisions for:

- increased access for superyachts wishing to visit an approved location (these anchorages were established at carefully-selected sites that do not have coral or other sensitive habitats)
- increased water sport opportunities at already established locations
- greater recognition of the importance of the area to Traditional Owners
- increased flexibility for the area to accommodate low or no impact activities
- simplified boundaries for users to understand what activities are allowed where.

This plan and its associated safeguards are even more relevant following tropical cyclone Debbie in March 2017 with the iconic area facing increased pressures.

## **How does the plan support environmentally-sustainable use?**

The Whitsundays Plan of Management is area-specific to protect the special values of the Whitsundays, including nature (for instance, whales, fringing reefs and seabirds), culture and heritage (Traditional Owner sacred sites, historic shipwrecks, social and scenic beauty) and community values (employment and income for Reef-dependent industries).

By protecting these values and supporting a healthy ecosystem, we can sustain a vibrant tourism industry for this outstanding Reef destination.

## **The steps taken since cyclone Debbie**

Existing protections through the plan are even more important following cyclone Debbie's impact on the area — it's vital we protect the values that attract visitors to this iconic destination.

After the cyclone, the Authority extended the timeframe for public consultation by three weeks to give industry and the community time to comment on the proposed changes. Both individuals and businesses were concerned about the impacts from the cyclone on the region.



After carefully considering each proposed amendment and its potential impact, including doing site surveys at key locations, we determined the amendments would place no further pressure on the areas impacted from the cyclone. The changes support existing protections already in place for the Whitsundays.

Immediate actions taken in partnership with Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS), industry and community following tropical cyclone Debbie included:

- approval for the tourism industry to assist with flipping corals and allowing QPWS to return large displaced coral bommies back to the water
- mapping and consolidating information sources to understand the extent of damage and identify surviving coral areas
- training volunteers to complete rapid monitoring surveys with the in-kind assistance of industry
- activation of the Marine Tourism Contingency Plan to allow tourism operators to apply to temporarily relocate their activities
- continued participation as members of the local Tourism Recovery Working Group to ensure the industry's views about priority actions are heard.

### Tourism in the Whitsunday Islands area

Tourism and recreation are the major uses of the Whitsundays. The tourism industry provides a broad range of experiences, with most visitors travelling on crewed vessels on day or overnight trips. Tourism operators generally visit a number of locations during a single trip to provide a range of both above and below-water experiences.

The Authority recognises that there are a number of use issues in the Whitsundays, which have become more relevant since tropical cyclone Debbie. Other matters raised include latency of permits, water quality, congestion, and arrangements for using the reduced number of locations available following the cyclone.

There are several very popular locations – for example, Tongue Point to view Hill Inlet and Whitehaven Beach – that are the focus of tourism marketing and support daily visits by a significant number of commercial tourism operators. These sites continue to experience congestion at certain times of the day, which can impact on the experience provided.

### This plan is not the end – work is still underway

There were a number of matters identified during the development of the Whitsundays Plan of Management that were outside the scope of this review. The Authority acknowledges that there is still more work to be done in the Whitsundays. Our key actions are:

1. Implement the Whitsundays Plan of Management, which will include:
  - a. site planning at priority locations – this will initially focus on Peter Bay (Whitsunday Island) and Butterfly Bay (Hook Island) to address concerns about coral protection and congestion
  - b. expression of interest processes for new tourism opportunities, such as the daily scenic flights for fixed wing aircraft
2. Strengthen communications about responsible Reef practices, working closely with QPWS and the tourism industry
3. Investigate management options with QPWS for the Tongue Point area (for example, all tide access)
4. Work with industry and community to accelerate recovery through local scale interventions. This could include algae removal to create improved conditions for coral recruitment.

As well as local changes, there will also be a review of one of the Authority's Reef-wide policies — *Managing tourism permissions to operate in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park* (including allocation, latency and tenure). This will include public consultation.

The Australian Government's Department of the Environment and Energy, together with the CSIRO and the Australian Institute of Marine Science, have co-funded a \$500,000 project focused on understanding water quality decline issues around the Whitsunday Islands. Concerns around water quality are also being addressed through the Reef 2050 Plan.

To further safeguard the area, the Authority also encourages responsible Reef practices and cooperative working arrangements, which can be found on our website.

### Further information

If you would like further information or clarification, please contact the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority on **(07) 4750 0700** or **info@gbrmpa.gov.au**; or visit **www.gbrmpa.gov.au** where you can view the plan and associated materials.