

Bringing the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park zoning into the 21st century: an overview of the Representative Areas Program

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Abstract

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (GBRMP) is a multiple use park, which allows for a variety of levels of extractive and non-extractive use including commercial fishing, tourism, research and recreational activities. Only 4.5% of the GBRMP is protected from extractive practices such as fishing and collecting under current management arrangements. The vast weight of scientific evidence indicates this is not sufficient. The Representative Areas Program (RAP) aims to protect 'representative' examples of the entire range of habitats, plants and animals in the GBRMP while minimising impacts on existing users. This program is being implemented by revising existing Zoning Plans. The preparation of the new Zoning Plan has included one of the most extensive and comprehensive formal community consultations in Australia's history, extending over two years, with over 31,000 formal submissions from individuals, community groups and industry bodies.

The new Zoning Plan was tabled in Parliament in December 2003 and will increase protection of the GBRMP to 33.3%, offering a comprehensive network of no-take zones to provide greater protection for the Great Barrier Reef's unique biodiversity, while continuing to provide opportunities for the use of, and access to, the GBRMP. The new Zoning Plan provides the largest network of no-take protected marine areas in the world and is the largest marine protection plan developed in the history of the Great Barrier Reef.

This paper looks at one of the most complex jobs faced by the managers of the GBRMP - the process of deciding just what may be done, where in an area five times the size of Tasmania and the consultation process involved.

Key words: marine park, multiple use, zoning, representative, community consultation

Introduction

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (GBRMP) was declared in 1975 and covers an area of 345 000 km², from Baffle Creek near Bundaberg, to the tip of Cape York Peninsula in Queensland. In 1981, the GBRMP was listed as a World Heritage Area, after meeting all four World Heritage criteria¹. The Great Barrier Reef is not one long continuous reef, but a complex of about 2900 coral reefs, 900 islands and other associated and interconnected marine habitats including sandy cays, continental islands, algal and sponge gardens, mangrove estuaries, seagrass beds, sandy and muddy seabed communities. Species diversity is high and includes approximately 1500 species of fish, 350 species of hard corals, over one-third of the world's soft coral and sea-pen species, thousands of mollusc species, six of the world's seven species of marine turtles and more than 30 species of marine mammals. The GBRMP represents an important area for the conservation of many rare or threatened species and provides important habitat and breeding areas for marine turtles, dugong, seabirds, humpbacks and other whales.

There is nothing unusual about the fundamental process of planning for the GBRMP². Although protected by legislation, the Great Barrier Reef remains a fully functioning component of the Australian economy – multiple use is legislated and reasonable use is a statutory right³. One of the primary tools for managing use and protecting the marine habitats and species within the GBRMP, as specified by the *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975*, is zoning. Zoning Plans are the product of conciliation and compromise to arrive at the best environmental outcomes that provide for ecologically sustainable use². Marine Park zoning is not dissimilar to planning schemes prepared for local government areas. Zoning separates activities that may conflict with each other, such as commercial fishing and tourism. Zoning also allows

areas that need permanent high-level protection by being generally placed ‘off limits’ to users to minimise exposure to potentially threatening processes. Each ‘zone’ specifies which activities can or cannot be undertaken and whether or not permission is required to undertake those activities (refer Figure 1). Accordingly, Zoning Plans apply to all users of the GBRMP.

The GBRMP is made up of 33 Sections declared between 1975 and 2001. This includes 28 new coastal Sections that were declared as part of the GBRMP between August 2000 and July 2001 - these will be zoned for the first time under a new Zoning Plan. There are currently five Zoning Plans in place within the GBRMP:

- Central Section (in operation since October 1987);
- Mackay/Capricorn Section (in operation since August 1988);
- Cairns Section (in operation since April 1992);
- Far Northern Section (in operation since April 2002); and
- Gumoo Woojabuddee Section (in operation since December 2002).

Despite two of these Zoning Plans having been previously reviewed, combined, the current Zoning Plans result in only 4.5% of the GBMRP being declared in no-take areas (locally known as ‘green zones’). While all Zoning Plans are developed with the best available information at the time, it is acknowledged that the existing zoning does not adequately protect the full range of biodiversity found in the GBRMP. Therefore, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (the GBRMPA) embarked on a program - the Representative Areas Program (RAP) - that would see not only the increase of protection for habitats and species, but also the rezoning of the entire GBRMP at one time – resulting in one of the largest planning and consultation processes for marine management in Australia and the world.

The Representative Areas Program (RAP) and Zoning

The RAP is a program that seeks to protect ‘representative’ examples of all habitat types found within the GBRMP. In addition to protecting ‘representative’ examples of the entire range of habitats, the Zoning Plan also proposes protection for other areas of high conservation value by assigning protective zoning to other important habitats, breeding and spawning areas as well as other special or unique sites. The process included a number of stages, starting in late 1998 with the collation of biophysical data to help map the 70 ‘bioregions’, or habitat types, found within the GBRMP and the development of a suite of biophysical and socio-economic principles to guide decision-making. An independent Scientific Steering Committee, informed by a number of expert panels, made up of national and international experts on the Great Barrier Reef ecosystem, recommended a suite of principles including that at least 20% of all habitat types should be protected in no-take areas. This information was then used to engage key stakeholders, communities adjacent to the GBRMP and the general public to develop a new Zoning Plan to improve the protection of the GBRMP while minimising the impact on existing users. During a rezoning process, all components of a Zoning Plan are open for comment and alteration. Given that the current Zoning Plans were progressively developed over the last 17 years, some of the terms, management provisions and zone names differed slightly between various Sections. The rezoning process would see the development of a single Zoning Plan for the GBRMP that will remove inconsistencies between Sections. Following consultation, managers revised the Zoning Plan provisions, including what activities can be undertaken in each zone. Figure 1 summarises the revised Zoning Plan provisions.

Activity	General Use	Marine Protected Area	Crown Marine Reserve	Public Zone	National Park	Marine Park	Reserve
Aquaculture	Permit	Permit	Permit ¹	X	X	X	X
Boat mooring	✓	✓	✓	X	X	X	X
Boating, diving, photography	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Crabbing	✓	✓	✓ ³	X	X	X	X
Harvest fishing for aquarium fish, coral and beachcomber	Permit	Permit	Permit ¹	X	X	X	X
Harvest fishing for sea cucumber, trochus, tropical rock lobster	Permit	Permit	X	X	X	X	X
Limited collecting	✓ ⁴	✓ ⁴	✓ ⁴	X	X	X	X
Limited impact research	✓	✓	✓ ⁵	✓	✓	✓	Permit
Limited spearfishing (snorkel only)	✓	✓	✓ ¹	X	X	X	X
Line fishing	✓ ⁶	✓ ⁶	✓ ⁷	X	X	X	X
Netting (other than bait netting)	✓	✓	X	X	X	X	X
Research (other than limited impact)	Permit	Permit	Permit	Permit	Permit	Permit	Permit
Shipping (other than in a designated shipping area)	✓	Permit	Permit	Permit	Permit	Permit	X
Tourism program	Permit	Permit	Permit	Permit	Permit	Permit	X
Traditional use of marine resources	✓ ⁸	✓ ⁸	✓ ⁸	✓ ⁸	✓ ⁸	✓ ⁸	X ⁸
Trawling	✓	X	X	X	X	X	X
Trolling	✓ ⁶	✓ ⁶	✓ ⁶	✓ ^{6,9}	X	X	X

Figure 1. Activities guide

Zoning Plan Stages

The principle objectives of and the process for developing Zoning Plans are set out in Sections 32 and 33 of the *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975*. Figure 2 sets out the process and associated timelines for the development of the new Zoning Plan.

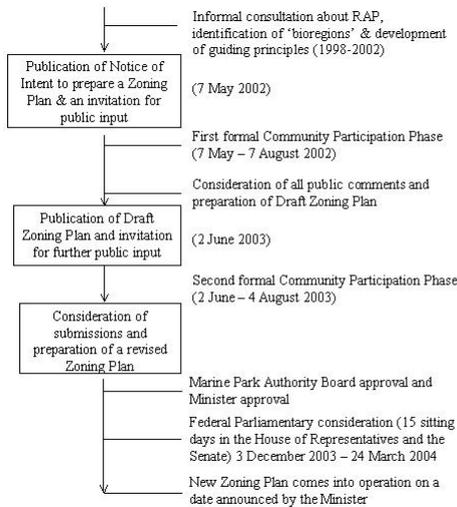


Figure 2. Zoning Plan process

Public Participation and Community Involvement

A Plan that relies heavily on voluntary compliance can only be successful if it is accepted, even if reluctantly, by the users of the area. The GBRMPA recognises that the management of use and impacts on the GBRMP must involve the people whose use and activities relate to the Great Barrier Reef. Managers must accept the need for detailed and meaningful engagement with all interested parties and the associated costs in time and resources. The *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975* requires public participation in the development of all Zoning Plans and, from the start, the GBRMPA adopted a practice of community participation that went well beyond the basic requirements of the legislation.

It was understood that rezoning the entire GBMRP at one time would create interest from a variety of users, however the level of interest from all sectors was astonishing. The local, national and global significance of the Great Barrier Reef is well recognised, and as such, management and consultation was planned and conducted so that all stakeholders had an opportunity to be involved, including the coastal communities of Queensland as essential participants in the management of the Great Barrier Reef ecosystem could be meaningfully involved. During both formal phases of Community Participation, running 3 and 2 months respectively, the GBRMPA undertook intensive community information programs. In addition to visiting every major settlement along the Great Barrier Reef coast, including Cape York and Torres Strait, conducting more than 600 meetings, there was widespread publicity through a number of mediums, including:

- 1,500 Community Service Announcements on regional television;
- the distribution of 90 000 submission brochures;
- 73 000 hits received on the GBRMPA website;
- 6 000 phone calls made to the free-call number; and
- over 600 media reports and about 160 newspaper advertisements.

The level of interest from all stakeholders particularly coastal communities adjacent to the GBMRP, was demonstrated through the high number of submissions during both phases of formal consultation. Over 10 000 submissions were received by the GBMRPA during the first formal community participation phase and over double that during the second phase. In all, over 31 000 submissions were received during the consultation phases of the rezoning process, approximately 33 times the number ever received for any other GBMRP rezoning process. Of the 31 000 submissions received, over 20 000, or 65%, came from communities adjacent to the GBMRP. A survey of Australians in March 2003 found that 93.6% of respondents (including over 90% of coastal Queenslanders) wanted greater protection for the GBMRP.

This figure is up from 2002 when more than 86% of Queensland respondents called for greater protection for the GBRMP⁴.

One of the main outcomes of the consultation program centered around determining who uses what areas for what purpose. This information was needed in order to achieve the twin goals of the RAP, protection of biodiversity and minimal impact on users but also to understand the affects of zoning changes. Consultation was tailored to facilitate input from each stakeholder group - from the commercial user to the occasional visitor. For example, Local, State and Federal government officers and Members of Parliament were met individually, whereas commercial fishers were met with in formal meetings through the local branch of their representative bodies, and recreational fishers were encouraged to attend Community Information Sessions, held in their local town, to talk to GBRMPA staff individually or in small groups. Consultation was also tailored for Indigenous groups. In addition to face-to-face consultations, GBRMPA staff were available to provide information and answer questions by phone, fax, email and via the web. This approach allowed the GBRMPA to ensure the level and type of information provided was appropriate to each user group.

One hurdle the GBRMPA needed to overcome through the consultation process was the hesitation of communities adjacent to areas of the GBRMP to engage where the zoning had not been reviewed for over 15 years. In these areas especially, consultation was imperative, as it was the first time these communities would see protective inshore zoning in their local area. Consultation between the GBRMPA and stakeholders was aided by, as far as possible, ensuring all interactions were carried out by the 'same face' or staff member (assuming the staff member and stakeholder had a positive interaction). These relationships provided staff and communities alike access to information in a direct, effective and personal manner.

The level of detail contained in the submissions was remarkable, with many people submitting maps and supplementary information. All stakeholder groups were encouraged to provide as much information as possible to be fed into the rezoning process, but it was made clear that all stakeholders could not expect to see their suggestions and changes in entirety, implemented in the final Zoning Plan.

While most submissions came from individuals, some communities or groups worked together for a consolidated or unified approach to what they would like to see 'on the water' in terms of zoning. This partnership approach was encouraged by the GBRMPA and while there were more submissions received in total during the second phase of formal Community Participation, there were more group or community submissions received by comparison. One such example is the Capricorn Coast Local Marine Advisory Committee (CC LMAC) submission received during the second phase of community participation. This submission encompassed the views of a range of stakeholders from the Rockhampton/Yeppoon coast region, including conflicting user groups. The CC LMAC, and similar groups along the Great Barrier Reef coast, prepared detailed options for the GBRMPA's consideration about their area, taking into account those who use the area and the need for further protection. It resulted in not only assisting the community and managers find a balance, but also helped dispel a few long-term mistrust issues regarding previous actions of the Government.

Due to the unanticipated number of submissions received, steps were put in place to ensure the information held in the submissions could be easily used and called upon to best refine the Zoning Plan. These steps included using new approaches to capture information, including digitally scanning, recording, mapping and search components. These tools were invaluable considering the number of submissions and level of detail each contained. However, while these tools made some components of the task easier, it was still essential for all submissions to be read by staff.

Analysis of the 31 000 submissions highlighted a number of issues to be considered in the development and subsequent revision of the Zoning Plan. These included calls to increase protection of natural, cultural, indigenous and tourism values, maintain recreational and commercial fishing access and highlighted the spectrum of ideas of what 'reasonable use' (of the GBRMP) is. For example, one opinion is that trawling is not an appropriate activity to be undertaken in a World Heritage Area while another suggests it is. These issues highlight the difference in values and ideals held in the community as they relate to the GBRMP. These issues also indicate the balancing act required by managers to conclude the

zoning process with a Plan that provides not only the necessary protection, minimises impacts, but is also supported by users of the GBRMP and interest groups.

Preparation of the Draft and new Zoning Plan

The Draft Zoning Plan was developed after consideration of available natural resource, social, economic and cultural information, management issues and community input. As discussed above, known uses of the GBRMP and the submissions were important in guiding the placement of zones. Fisheries data, and data on tourism and recreational use were essential in placing the zones to also help minimise the impact on known users.

The GBRMPA was able to make many modifications to the Draft Zoning Plan due to detailed information, but in some locations there were limited options available to modify proposed no-take areas, particularly in inshore coastal areas. The new Zoning Plan provides protection for 33.3% of the GBRMP in no-take zones, provides zoning for the 28 new coastal Sections and builds on the framework established by previous Zoning Plans for the Far Northern, Cairns, Central, Mackay/Capricorn and Gumoo Woolabuddee Sections. It provides a single consistent Zoning Plan for the entire GBRMP. It is believed that in addition to the conservation benefits, these changes will provide for a simpler and more consistent basis for the management of activities within the GBRMP.

The Zoning Plan was presented to and accepted by the Marine Park Authority Board on 26 November 2003. In accordance with the *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975*, the Zoning Plan was then submitted to the Minister for Environment and Heritage for consideration. The Minister approved the Zoning Plan and tabled it in both Houses of Federal Parliament on 3 December 2003. The Zoning Plan, as a statutory instrument, must sit in the House of Representatives and the Senate for 15 sitting days. If no motion for disallowance is brought by either House during that time, the Minister chooses a date for the Zoning Plan to commence.

Conclusion

In 2000, Skeat *et al* stated the following 'Planning has been underway as a dynamic process in the GBRMP for over 20 years. So what lessons have we learned? Clearly the most significant lesson has been the need to plan and manage this huge area through positive engagement of all people who have an interest in the area²'. This statement is still true and the planned consultation program discussed above assisted the GBRMPA to access the detailed information required to successfully complete a program as large and significant as the RAP.

Managers must acknowledge that the success of consultation relies partly on continuity. Largely, when discussing similar issues, stakeholders respond more effectively if they interact with the same staff member(s). In this situation, staff are also able to easily call upon stakeholders. This relationship does not make the issue any less complex or difficult for either party, but does go some way to helping in the exchange of information. It can be said that no matter how extensive and far reaching an Agency's consultation program, in the eyes of many stakeholders, there is always more that could be done.

The rezoning process included one of the most extensive and comprehensive formal community consultations in Australia's history of environmental management, extending over two years, with over 31,000 submissions from individuals, community groups and industry bodies. This positive engagement supported the development of a new Zoning Plan that will increase protection of the GBRMP to 33.3%, that offers a comprehensive network of no-take zones to provide greater protection for the Great Barrier Reef's unique biodiversity and continues to provide opportunities for the use of, and access to, the GBRMP by current and future generations.

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Key points

1. Planning for consultation is a critical for successful engagement.