

SUMMARY

At present, recreation and tourism are major and growing uses of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. Visitors are attracted to the Great Barrier Reef from all over the world to experience the beautiful islands, beaches and coral reefs. The management of this region is the responsibility of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, who are faced with the challenge of preventing unacceptable impacts of tourism while ensuring equitable resource allocations and sustained multiple use. The Authority's goals are achieved through the development of plans of management, the provision of zoning and allocation of individual permits.

The Whitsundays region, and more specifically Whitehaven Beach located on Whitsunday Island, is one of the most popular tourist destinations within the Marine Park. Regarded as one of the top 10 beaches in the world, Whitehaven Beach is accessed daily by a range of craft including large catamarans, charter boats, cruising yachts and aircraft. Concern has been expressed that increased visitation may be compromising some of the aesthetic, natural and social values associated with the Whitehaven Bay area.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority in conjunction with Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service is currently reviewing aspects of the Whitsundays Plan of Management. As a component of these planning revisions specific attention is required for Whitehaven Bay. At present there is no information about how visitors perceive the natural and social environment of Whitehaven Bay. The aim of this investigation was to assess how visitors are using and experiencing the Whitehaven Bay area, whilst evaluating the influence of aircraft and vessel activity upon people's use and amenity.

To obtain this information data were collected in three ways: 1) visitor survey; 2) on-site observations; 3) local interest group survey. Self-administered questionnaires were completed by 583 day-trip visitors onboard tourist boats in March and April 1999. The visitor survey was designed to acquire data of a social nature by measuring visitors' expectations, values, experiences, images and perceptions of the Whitehaven Bay environment. In addition to the visitor surveys, on-site observations recorded details about weather conditions, the setting visited, amount of time spent on the beach by the operator, the number and type of vessels observed in each setting and the activities of aircraft. A small sample of 20 local interest group members completed a mail survey. The purpose of collecting this information was simply to provide a richer understanding of local perceptions of the present conditions and management of Whitehaven Beach.

Results from the investigation include the following key findings.

- A Description of Visitors to Whitehaven Beach

A total of 583 visitor surveys were completed (97% response rate). Of the sample 56% were female and 44% male, with 40% aged between 20–29 years. Fifty per cent were Australian visitors (4% local residents) and 50% were international travellers, mostly from Britain (41%), Europe (21%) and North America (21%). Twenty-two per cent had previously visited the Whitsunday region, and 10% had visited Whitehaven Beach on a prior occasion.

- Values and Images of Whitehaven Beach

Visitors and members of local interest groups felt that Whitehaven Beach was mostly valuable for its natural and ecological processes, conservation, recreation and educational opportunities. The values associated with economic opportunities and spiritual meaning were of least importance to respondents. Used as a management tool these significant values will help to legitimise the meanings that users and visitors assign to Whitehaven Bay.

The images that visitors took away with them from their trip to Whitehaven Beach are a reflection of their core experiences and perceptions of this destination. The three most popular terms that visitors used to describe Whitehaven Beach were beautiful, relaxing and calming, quiet and tranquil. The clean beach, pure white sand, crystal clear water and unspoilt natural environment were also images of Whitehaven Beach reflected in many visitors' responses.

- Visitors' Experiences of Whitehaven Beach

Visitors' three most sought-after experiences related to participating in water-based activities such as swimming and snorkelling, enjoying the beach and water, and relaxing and bathing in the sun. The expectations visitors had of Whitehaven Beach were satisfied, with most participating in passive activities such as swimming, relaxing and sunbathing, taking photos and beach walks.

The natural and scenic qualities of Whitehaven Beach were attributes that visitors received most enjoyment from. Benefits relating to rest, relaxation and escape from routine were rated next as experiences well provided by visiting Whitehaven Beach. Whitehaven Beach was not evaluated highly as a physically or socially active place.

- Visitor Types

Visitors were classified into four groups (clusters), identified to reflect types of people benefiting from similar recreational experiences. *Passivists* received few benefits from their trip, ascribed less value to Whitehaven Beach and received less satisfaction from their visit. *Socially active naturalists* were quite the opposite, receiving a great deal from each benefit domain. This group were more likely to feel that Whitehaven Beach was very valuable and obtained a lot of satisfaction from their visit. *Relaxed sightseers* received most enjoyment from escaping routine, relaxing and viewing the natural beauty of Whitehaven Beach. *Nature escapists* received benefits relating to experiencing nature and escaping routine. This group was most likely to place a high value on the natural and ecological processes of Whitehaven Beach. These different visitor profiles reflect that there is a spectrum of benefits resulting from experiences on Whitehaven Beach.

- On-site Observations

Weather conditions were highly unfavourable during data collection. Only 12% of the sample experienced clear (fine) weather. Most surveying was undertaken on overcast/rainy days with rough sea conditions and strong winds, making travel uncomfortable for many passengers.

Setting 2 (High Use, southern end) was the most frequently visited site along Whitehaven Beach. A daily average of 137 people, two large vessels, three medium boats, two small boats and four yachts were observed in Setting 2 during the surveying period. Observed aircraft overflights ranged from 0 to 4 by seaplanes (\bar{X} 1.3) and 0 to 3 for helicopters (\bar{X} 1.0). An average of one helicopter event and one seaplane event were recorded per trip during data collection.

- Perceived Conditions at Whitehaven Beach

The presence of other people and their activities did not affect visitors social amenity whilst at Whitehaven Beach. Twelve per cent reported that they felt there were too many people on the beach, whilst 85% indicated that the number of other people didn't concern them.

There was no significant influence upon visitors' use and amenity from the activities of aircraft or vessels at Whitehaven Beach. Approximately 90% of the sample indicated that noise, distance and numbers of these craft did not affect their enjoyment of Whitehaven Beach.

- Trip Satisfaction

Eighty-nine per cent rated their Whitehaven Beach visit as highly satisfying, with 69% indicating that they would definitely like to return in the future. Most of visitors indicated that they would like Whitehaven Beach to remain in its present state—natural and undeveloped.

This investigation has highlighted a number of experiential preferences and conditions that may be useful as indicators from which to monitor changes in social amenity at Whitehaven Beach. This baseline information can assist planners in developing an experience-based approach to designating use (types and amounts) and selecting indicators in a Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) process. It is hoped that results from this preliminary investigation will provide information from which effective management and planning decisions can be made to both protect and provide for the existing diversity of opportunities at Whitehaven Beach.