

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Great Barrier Reef extends 2000 km along the north-eastern coast of Queensland, from Cape York at the northern tip to just north of Frazer Island in the south. Covering an area of 347 800 km², the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area constitutes the world's largest continuous complex of coral reefs (Wachenfeld et al. 1998). Its outstanding natural features and ecological integrity secured the Great Barrier Reef's inscription on the World Heritage list in 1981 (Fenton et al. 1998). Proclaimed and zoned as a Marine Park in 1975, the Great Barrier Reef is presently the largest marine park in the world (see figure 1). The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) is the principle advisor to the Commonwealth Government on the care and development of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (GBRMP). As managers, the Marine Park Authority's goal is to provide for the protection, wise use, understanding and enjoyment of the Great Barrier Reef (Craik 1992). A feature of Marine Park management is its multiple-use philosophy which seeks to ensure equitable access to all users whilst protecting the region's natural and cultural values.

Today the GBRMP supports a variety of uses and activities ranging from shipping, commercial fishing, traditional hunting, recreation and tourism (Kenchington 1990; Craik 1992). Economically, tourism is the largest industry in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area, earning over \$650 million per annum (Driml 1999). Tourism also attracts the greatest number of users to reef and island areas. For the period from July 1994 to June 1995, it was estimated that 2.2 million people had visited the GBRMP (Valentine et al. 1997). Growth in commercial tourism use is expected to continue well into the next millennium (Driml 1994; Williams 1996).

As a reaction to the increase of human use in Marine Park environments, concerns have been raised about the ability of some reef and island areas to sustain desired levels of social and biophysical quality. Recently managers, residents and tourists have begun to call for limits on certain types of activities within the GBRMP (Carey 1993; McPhail 1995; Alder 1996). Documented evidence of the past 100 years has reflected the impacts of anthropogenic activities on reef environments (Rasmussen et al. 1992), however existing information about the effects of human use on social values and amenity in GBRMP areas is scarce. Managers recognise that natural and social systems relating to the Great Barrier Reef environment are interdependent. Research agencies such as GBRMPA and the Cooperative Research Centre for the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area are now placing a greater emphasis on the social-psychological issues associated with use and experience of reef and island environments in order to better manage visitor use, experience and potential environmental impacts (Fenton et al. 1998).

Tourism and other usage of the GBRMP is primarily managed by GBRMPA and the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS) (Scherl et al. 1997). The overall management of the GBRMP is accomplished through the development of plans of management, the establishment of zoning provisions, education and information programs and individual permit operations (Wachenfeld et al. 1998). Zoning plans set out the objectives for each zone, the uses that are suitable (some requiring a permit) and those activities that are prohibited. Any current or proposed use of the Park is assessed by GBRMPA in terms of the impacts on the proposed and existing future amenity of users of the area and adjacent areas (Wachenfeld et al. 1998). Marine Park planners strive to implement strategies that provide for a range of uses and experiences in ways that are ecologically sustainable.

1.1 Background to the Investigation

Tourism and recreation are major uses of the Whitsundays region with over half a million people visiting this area of the GBRMP each year. Visitors are attracted to the region by the spectacular scenery of the many islands, fringing reefs and beautiful beaches. Whitehaven Beach, regarded as one of the top 10 beaches in the world, is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the Whitsunday Group. Accessed by a range of craft including 'big cats', cruising yachts and aircraft, more than 80 000 visitors were taken to Whitehaven Beach during the 94/95 financial year (based on EMC data from commercial operators) (Wachenfeld et al.

1998). It is likely that Whitehaven Beach will continue to follow the current trends of increased visitation. Under such circumstances it is felt that some of the aesthetic, natural and social values associated with Whitehaven Beach may be compromised by increased human use.

Day-to-day management of the Whitsundays region is conducted through joint arrangements between GBRMPA and QPWS. The Whitsundays Plan of Management has been developed to protect and conserve the values of the Whitsundays area while allowing for a range of use opportunities. At present the Marine Park Authority is committed (MPA 160/5) to review this Plan of Management, and as a component of these planning revisions specific attention is required for the Whitehaven Bay area.

(Note: For the purpose of this investigation Whitehaven Bay includes the areas of Whitehaven Beach, Hill Inlet and Tongue Point.)

At present there is no information about how visitors perceive the natural and social environment of Whitehaven Beach. Of specific interest to GBRMPA planners are how people are using and experiencing the Whitehaven Bay area, and what the values are that users ascribe to this particular location. Additionally this assessment was required to examine the influence of aircraft and vessel activity upon visitors' use, experiences and amenity. The amenity issue associated with seeing and hearing aircraft, particularly by non-aircraft visitors, is one that has been of particular concern due to increasing use. Information on aircraft will be used by the Authority to develop site plans for the area of Whitehaven Bay and assess and amend (where necessary) the Whitsundays Plan of Management.

1.2 Significance to Management

The Whitsundays is a region where increased visitation requires careful consideration by management. For popular Whitsunday sites such as Whitehaven Bay, it is imperative that managers have a clear understanding of the values, perceptions and experiences of those that use and come to visit the area. In this context, it is useful for innovative planning to be able to forecast the factors that are likely to influence people's experiences and perceptions of Whitehaven Beach. For management, an understanding of environmental imagery and the meaning of place opens many new avenues in planning for a balance between tourism use/development and the marine environment.

The administration of strategic planning exercises and collection of information to identify and monitor conditions on visitors' use and amenity is important to Marine Park management for a number of reasons:

- to ensure that tourist expectations and experiences are met by providing, where possible, relevant opportunities;
- to address the effects of various uses and activities before acceptable levels of impact are exceeded;
- to assist with the revision of zoning permits and licenses in order to clarify appropriate levels and distribution of use;
- to provide and improve baseline information from which management and planning decisions can be made and monitored, e.g. effectively consider and assess permit applications; and
- to help understand and predict how people will react to increased use of the area.

1.3 Aims and Objectives

The aim of this investigation was to assess visitors' use, experiences and perceptions of Whitehaven Bay (including Whitehaven Beach and Tongue Point), whilst evaluating the influence of aircraft and vessel activity upon people's use and amenity. Information will be used as a reference by GBRMPA and QPWS to develop site plans and amend, where necessary, aspects of the current Whitsundays Plan of Management related to Whitehaven Bay.

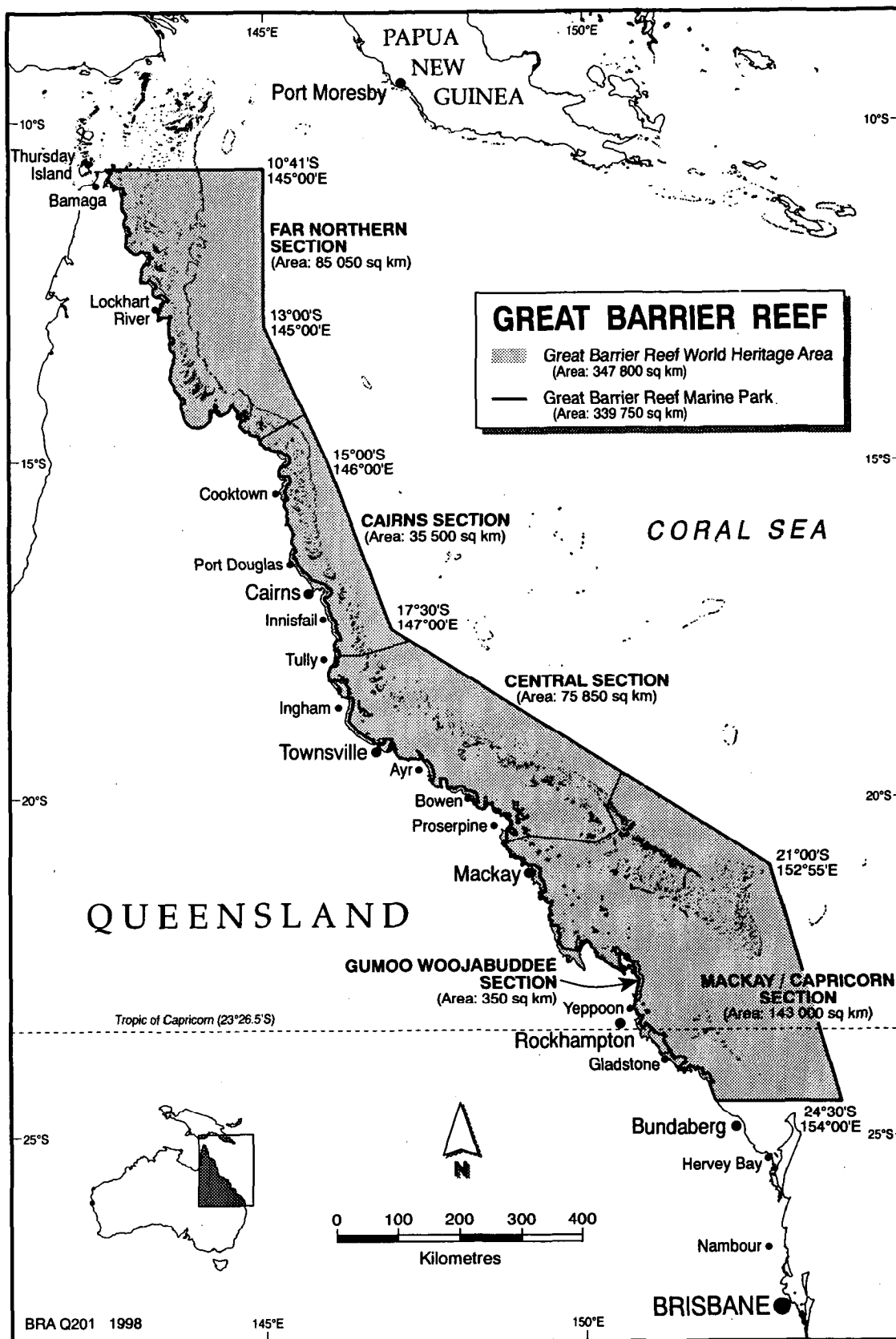


Figure 1. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, Australia. Source: GBRMPA 1998

In an effort to gain information for Marine Park Planners, the objectives of this study were to:

- obtain a profile (socio-demographic and experiential) of visitor types to Whitehaven Beach;
- describe the extent of use and nature of activities undertaken at various settings along Whitehaven Beach by visitors;
- identify the values ascribed to Whitehaven Bay by visitors;
- gain an insight into the types and range of experiences had by visitors to Whitehaven and the conditions that influenced such benefits;
- assess perceptions of aircraft use in the Whitehaven Bay area and the associated effects on visitors' use and amenity; and
- evaluate whether the presence of vessels and their size had an impact upon visitors' perceptions and experiences whilst at Whitehaven Beach.