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Planning for the future of the Great Barrier Reef

Since 1975, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) has been the principal adviser to the Australian Government on the planning and management of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. The uniqueness of the Great Barrier Reef was recognised in 1981 when it was inscribed on the World Heritage List.

In April 2005 at the Planning Institute of Australia's National Awards, the GBRMPA received two awards, including the Planning Minister's Award. Both awards were for a major planning program, known locally as the 'Representative Areas Program' (RAP), that involved rezoning the entire Marine Park.

The RAP incorporated one of the most comprehensive processes of community involvement and participatory planning for any environmental issue in Australia's history, including over 31,500 public submissions.

GBRMPA Director Jon Day (right) accepts the Planning Minister's Award on behalf of all staff of the GBRMPA from the Federal Minister for Local Government, Roads and Territories, the Hon Jim Lloyd, at the National Planning Awards ceremony in Melbourne.

Authors' note:

It is important to acknowledge that RAP was an agency-wide effort undertaken by virtually the entire staff of the GBRMPA. The involvement and support of many external experts, many thousands of local people, and the wider public who were concerned about the future of the GBR, must also be acknowledged.

Jon Day

has been closely associated with the Great Barrier Reef for 19 years, having worked initially in the park management and planning sections at GBRMPA, and been a Director of one of the four critical issue groups in the agency since 1998. Jon also spent seven years involved in day-to-day management of the GBR between 1990-97. In his current position as Director, Conservation, Heritage & Indigenous Partnerships in GBRMPA, Jon was responsible for commencing and coordinating the Representative Areas Program. In 2004, Jon was awarded an Australian Public Service Medal for his efforts in the Great Barrier Reef.

Dr Leanne Fernandes

was the Manager of the Representative Areas Program (RAP), and has recently commenced as the Director of the Community Partnerships Group at GBRMPA.

Belinda Jago

was the Senior Planning Officer in the RAP Task Force, and has recently commenced as the Senior Project Manager with the Community Partnerships Group at GBRMPA.

Introduction

Prior to the 'Representative Areas Program' (RAP), there were concerns that the levels of protection in the Great Barrier Reef were inadequate to ensure that the Reef and the surrounding areas remained a healthy, productive and resilient ecosystem into the future.

Between 1999 and 2004, the GBRMPA undertook a complex planning and consultative program to develop a new Zoning Plan for the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (the Marine Park). The primary aim of the program was to better protect the range of biodiversity in the Great Barrier Reef, by increasing the extent of 'no-take' areas, ensuring they included 'representative' examples of all the different habitat types (hence the name, the Representative Areas Program). A further aim was to minimise impacts on the existing users of the Marine Park. A comprehensive program of scientific input, community involvement and innovation achieved these aims.

The new Zoning Plan for the Marine Park became law on 1 July 2004. It increased the proportion of the Marine Park that was highly protected by 'no-take' zones from less than 5% to more than 33%, and now protects representative examples of each of the 70 bioregions (broad habitat types) occurring across the entire area, including the surrounding waters.

An outline of the overall planning process used for the RAP can be found on the web at <www.gbrmpa.gov.au/corp_site/management/zoning/documents/Rap_poster.pdf>

There were a number of factors that contributed to successful implementation of the planning task:

- **Integrated approaches** A combination of expert opinion, stakeholder involvement and analytical approaches were used to identify options for zoning networks. Areas selected to be new no-take zones aimed to maximise the protection of biodiversity while minimising negative social, economic or cultural impacts on Marine Park users and stakeholders. The linking of science, technical support and community participation was an essential three-way dynamic in the planning process.

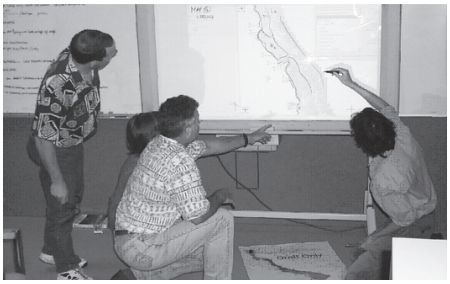
  The analytical approaches comprised marine reserve design software, adapted and expanded for use in the RAP, and a suite of GIS-based spatial analytical tools. The analytical software enabled the GBRMPA to integrate a number of data layers representing biophysical, social and economic values, and enabled a number of options to be generated and assessed.

- **Whole of agency priority and ownership** While there was a Task Force set up within the GBRMPA specifically to coordinate the rezoning program, an agency-wide commitment and ownership of the program was generated and still exists. Genuine pooling of resources, expertise and capabilities was one of the enabling features in delivery of the new Zoning Plan. The overall task did require a high level of agency-wide input but produced a strong collegiate pride in the outcome.

- **Focussing initially on the problem(s)**

to be addressed rather than the solution Communication about the real and potential problems facing the GBR, including information about risks and uncertainty about risks, was not originally identified as an issue. The GBRMPA recognised the need to inform stakeholders that the GBR was 'under pressure' and that the level of protection of the biodiversity was insufficient before stakeholders were willing to accept RAP as part of the solution.

- **Application of the precautionary principle** The scientific understanding of how such a complex natural system as the GBR actually functions was far from perfect, and there was a call from some sectors to delay further protection in order to 'do more research'. Sufficient information was available, however, to indicate populations of key species in decline, especially those that were directly or indirectly impacted by extractive activities. The application of the precautionary principle, and the decision to 'adaptively manage' in the absence of perfect knowledge, were important factors to the success of the program.
- **Use of independent experts** Independent experts greatly assisted in the development of a number of 'products' that were important to the planning process, and were widely available for discussion early in the planning program, in particular:
  - > **GBR bioregionalisation** - The map of 70 bioregions provided the fundamental foundation for the comprehensive protection of the biodiversity of the GBR that led to the new zoning plan. Independent expert committees, that collectively had hundreds of years of experience in the GBR, helped develop the map. They utilised a wide range of data collated from a variety of institutions and agencies including the Australian Institute of Marine Science, CSIRO, James Cook University and other universities, Queensland departments (QDPI, QPWS), the Cooperative Research Centre for GBRWHA, and museums.



Experts applied their specific knowledge to help develop a map of 70 bioregions; the map of bioregions was a fundamental cornerstone of the RAP for the entire Marine Park

  - > **Operating Principles for developing the new network** - external scientific and social-economic-cultural advisory committees were used to develop 11 biophysical principles and 4 socio-economic principles. This greatly assisted the planning process by clarifying the planning 'rules' up front for all to see and apply before any new zones were proposed.

Community Participation

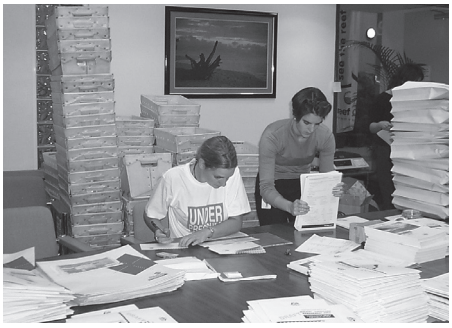
The extensive public consultation program during RAP included some 1,000 formal and informal meetings and information sessions involving face-to-face engagement in over 90 centres along the GBR coast. This included local communities, commercial and recreational fishing organisations, Traditional Owners, tourism operators, conservation groups, etc. Meetings were held with peak organizations such as Sunfish, the Association of Marine Park Tourism Operators (AMPTO), WWF Australia, and all branches of the Queensland Seafood Industry Association (QSIA) in the GBR catchment area.

GBRMPA staff conducted community information sessions in over 90 centres along the coast, enabling interested individuals to get information and ask questions.

As required by the relevant legislation, there were two formal phases of community participation during the RAP. The resulting 31,500 public submissions (over 10,000 in the first formal phase, and 21,300 in the second phase), many of which included maps, were unprecedented compared to previous planning programs in the GBR. It necessitated the development of fast and effective processes for analysing and recording the range of information that was received by the GBRMPA, including specific areas of community concern, aspirations and/or support.

The Draft Zoning Plan was prepared having considered the submissions received in the first formal phase along with relevant information such as the map of bioregions and the operating principles. In the second formal phase, the community was invited to comment on the Draft Zoning Plan, and the GBRMPA undertook an extensive program of public contact including:

- Over 10,000 packages of information, more than 50,000 submission forms, 29,000 explanatory brochures and 76,000 Draft Zoning maps were distributed throughout Australia;



Information packages were mailed to interested locals on three separate occasions during RAP - each mailout was an enormous task.

- A range of materials was developed to communicate the Draft Zoning Plan to users, and all relevant information was available on the GBRMPA website and provided on a compact disc (2,000 CD's distributed).
- Approx. 2,000 calls were made by the public to the free-call 1800 number at the GBRMPA;
- There were over 35,000 'hits' on the GBRMPA website (63% from Australia, the rest from 99 countries); and
- Information for the public included some 1,500 community service announcements on regional television and radio, hundreds of newspaper articles, and some 90 newspaper advertisements about RAP.

The public submissions were managed through a three-stage process:

- Initially, the contact details from each submission were recorded in a database, a unique identification number was assigned, and an acknowledgment card was sent to the person or organisation that made the submission.
- In the second stage, all submissions were individually scanned and the electronic files (in Portable Document Format (PDF)) were saved into a custom-built submissions database.
- The third stage was the most comprehensive; a team of trained GBRMPA staff, read and analysed all the submissions following a coding framework consisting of a range of themes and attributes. The coding framework was developed from content analysis of a stratified random sample of submissions based on place of origin and sector. The team leader routinely checked a sample of the analysed submissions to ensure consistency of analysis across the analytical team.

An Oracle database with a Microsoft Access interface was used to manage the analysis of the submissions. This database linked the scanned image of