

Reef use and values: knowledge about visitor experiences in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area

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The presentation will briefly review some of the studies about visitor experiences within the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. These include a detailed study of Lady Musgrave Reef and Island, day visitor experiences at Norman Reef, studies of visitors to the Whitsundays and other previous point-based data. Related work on the quality of experiences within the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area is also reviewed in an attempt to document some of the conditions which have generated conflict amongst visitors and other users. It is noted that a number of current studies will deliver additional point-based data which will improve the broader appreciation of Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area experiences especially those associated with snorkelling and diving.

These visitor experience studies lead to several specific conclusions including:

- little detailed knowledge exists about visitor experiences within the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area except at a few specific locations;
- the interaction between different users or interests has been studied at very few sites;
- nature is the most important element in positive experiences of people visiting the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area;
- where studies have examined large-scale day visits the experiences of visitors has been dominated by excitement and novelty and these have been judged of very high quality by the visitors;
- there are a variety of different experiences sought by visitors to the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area;
- crowding is perceived by a high proportion of visitors of all categories, even when visitation levels are not at the maximum permitted levels;
- different types of users may resent other users and yachting and boating visitors and campers are less tolerant of crowding and of development infrastructure than day-trippers;
- one important knowledge gap is in the absentia benefits of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area (including associated experiences) and the likelihood that such benefits may form the basis for conflict over various proposed and continuing uses within the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area;
- another reef wide issue related to the allocation of specific sites for particular purposes with some users objecting strongly to perceived degradation of 'their' reef due to (especially) resort developments or other forms of intensive tourism, which impact on their favourite places (the Whitsunday Islands is a good example of this).