

FRINGING REEFS:
THE TOURIST'S VIEW?
David Colfelt

Fringing reefs, although they may not have the appeal of mid-shelf reefs, can nevertheless be a valuable asset as a tourist attraction.

Many tourists, particularly those from overseas, are frightened to actually get into tropical waters for fear of sharks or other tropical nasties. But they are happy enough to walk on top of a reef or to wade in water up to their knees as the tide starts to recede from a fringing reef.

All tourists have read about coral. Tourist promoters have sung hymns to the beauty of coral and the fact that their tourist facilities abound with 'coral opportunities'. Even the best books about the Barrier Reef - for example, the Reader's Digest book - marvel visually at the variety and beauty of coral, showing **dazzlingly colourful** macrophotographic images that are rarely likely to be seen by the ordinary tourist.

It is human nature to try to put your best foot forward, and we all do it, whether we are courting a lover or applying for a job. How can the salesman be expected to do otherwise? Or the tourist operator? And we all tend to believe our own words after awhile, anyway.

Expectation has a great deal to do with perception. There are **countless examples in life** - 'from the **notorious unreliability** of 'eye witnesses' to crime, who often infer things they have not seen, to the example of the emperor's new clothes, to the story of the lady who had never seen an elephant before, and when one, which had escaped from the circus passing through town, appeared in her rose garden, she telephoned the police and explained that there was a strange creature picking her roses with its tail, "...and you can't imagine what he's doing with them!".

So our expectation **colours** our experience. If expectation is not in line with what actually happens, we often end up dissatisfied even if the experience is not an unpleasant one.

The other point I want to make about fringing reefs is learning how to '**see**'. If we don't know what to look for, we very often see nothing. Looking at a fringing reef for the first time is not unlike looking at a chest x-ray, or a weather map, or a voice print. We are assailed with unfamiliar information in a not immediately prepossessing format, and until we learn the code, we can't get very much satisfaction from what we see.

I've tried to illustrate these points with just a few slides. The message is that fringing reefs can **provide** hours of fascination and diversion if (a) the tourist has no previous misconception about them and (b) if he has been given the code to help unveil the reef's secrets. Operators can do much to help themselves and tourism by providing accurate interpretive information for the tourist.

As the tourist wings his way towards his Barrier Reef destination, his mind is filled with thoughts of 'Bali Hai', a subtle suggestion put there by tourist promotion which has spoken of tropic isles.

:10

He looks out the window of his plane and catches tempting glimpses of coral waters and sand beaches.

:25

The islands present a very pleasing aspect.

:33

He even finds some sand, as promised, in front of the resort, and there's also the odd palm tree transported there.

:50

As he begins to explore his 'tropical island', he finds nothing to complain about. It has rugged beauty, and vibrant, turquoise waters lap at its shores.

:57

But the vegetation isn't exactly as he imagined it,

1:05

and some of the beaches are 'definitely not like those in, the tales of Somerset Maugham.

1:13

On closer inspection: some of the 'sand' he saw from the air turns out to be coral shingle. He is beginning to experience a faint disappointment; that all in paradise is not quite as promised. This afternoon, the tide will be low, and he will have: his first look at coral - on a fringing coral reef.

1:36

But where is all the colour? Everything seems pretty lifeless and grey.

2:10

At this point if the tourist resists the temptation to turn around and go back to the resort bar, and particularly if someone has explained to him that the fringing reef does have a distinct structure and zonation, and if he looks in 'the right places he will find all sorts of life going about its business.

3:00

After a while he will have a whole new series of questions and things to wonder about. It's like sitting down in a forest and just looking silently around. When he stops and looks, the reef begins to reveal some of its secrets...

3:30

... corals that look like Dr Who abandoned them there like spilt cans of slime...

3:45

...a whole array of shapes, textures, colours; creatures that depend on each other for survival... life with its own reason and logic...

4:10

High up near the shore he encounters thousands of little balls of sand. He had made up some explanation to himself about them ...which turned out to be quite inadequate when, walking along a bit further, he encountered the architects in action, marching along in phalanxes, pirouetting into the sand when he approached.

4.28

Hours can pass by quickly on a fringing reef once the code has been broken. New questions are raised to suggest the complexity of this reef - and all reefs. This insight is strangely humbling and gives rise to respect for something quite wonderful.

4:51

And as the tourist watches the sunset from the resort beach, he talks with satisfaction about the day's discoveries, and the new knowledge gained. He may even get out the book on the reef and read with newly opened eyes.

TOURIST OPERATORS DISCUSSION OF USE

David Hoffenstetz, Arcadia Holiday Resort, Magnetic Island

As Activities Officer, takes' clientele reef walking 6-8 times/month and snorkelling about the same amount;

fishing is not popular with guests; there is a local commercial enterprise that is available to take people fishing;

tends to have a passive clientele - uses reefwalking as an introduction to snorkelling;

he is getting together a marine library and slide show, organises and posts a weekly schedule of activities, and puts an activities brochure in each room of the resort.

Rick Steen, Director, Marine Operations, Hayman Island Resort.

resort is now closed while reconstruction taking place, but previously:

had reefwalking, glass bottom boat trip on half tide;

found that having an Activities Officer functioned to help protect the reef;

semi subs were popular with tourists - the resort owns 3

half-day local fishing trip was popular - people enjoy a 20 minute boat trip - there was a full-day trip to the outer reef for keen fishermen;

once a week, on Wednesday night, they would have a marine slide show, and the following morning would be the best turn-out for reef-walking;

a few times they took videos of guests snorkelling etc. on the reef and these turned out to be popular with guests, many asking for their own copy;

recommendations: good marine videos would be useful; staff training session (organised through their staff training officer).

Hike Mandbridge, Divemaster, H₂O Sportz, Hamilton Island.,'

most diving is done on the outer reef

once or twice/week they take a trip around fringing reef

fringing reefs aren't easy to use - to enjoy a fringing reef, people need to be guided, with things being pointed out;

a reefwalking trip needs to be guided;

most **of** their staff stay around a while and are **self-**educated in marine matters;

need literature showing 'interrelationship **of** marine life;

need more information about specific areas.

Comments from Audience.

it seems that different levels of experience need to be communicated:

- i) taxonomic - what is it?
- ii) functioning and interrelationship of marine life (R. Kenchington)

is it practical for tourist resorts to have a biologist at \$20,000/year? (C. Wilkinson)

would it be useful for Activities Officers, etc. to be able to present a certificate indicating completing of a TAFE-type of course? (D. Fish)

is it commercially feasible to buy this type of education? (D. Gartside)

it seems there would be some commercial advantage to tourist operators to **do** "educational" tours, which are popular in the U.S. (?)

providing a workshop in the field would be advantageous for tourist operators (R. Olsen).'