

TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SPATIO-TEMPORAL
ATLAS OF THE 'HIGH ISLAND' FRINGING REEFS FOR THE
SOUTHERN SECTION OF THE GREAT BARRIER REEF MARINE PARK:

The application of a new technique for the
assessment of fringing reef communities

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ABSTRACT

An **integrated** technique has been developed to provide a possible standard methodology for the assessment of the distribution and abundance of fish and benthic communities on fringing reefs. To date this technique has been applied to four Islands in The Whitsunday region and maps with **colour** overlays have been prepared. The overlays describe the community **location**, the vertical and horizontal distribution of communities, the distribution of substrate types, the distribution and abundances of **fish species** and the distribution of **seagrasses**.

An accompanying description of each "site" has been prepared which **includes**

- a) A stylized 3-dimensional profile.
- b) A pie diagram providing information on the absolute abundance of hard corals, soft **corals**, dead standing corals, macroalgae, turf algae, **sponges** and sand/rubble.
- c) Relative abundance, tables for The Order Scleractinia, Subclass **Alcyonaria**, Phylum Porifera and Macroalgae.

In addition, broad scale patterns of distribution and composition of fish assemblages are **discussed** and anticipated work outlined. Maps of Brampton, Carlisle, Cockermouth and Goldsmith Islands can be obtained from the G.B.R.M.P. An Atlas, form after 31st January, 1987.

INTRODUCTION

Pressure on fringing reef communities from such diverse human activities as fishing, agriculture, industrial development and tourism (resort development) are steadily increasing. An informative data base is necessary to provide adequate information to assess the effects of these activities on the marine environment. Initial research providing a base-line by which to monitor community changes through time is essential for management policies to be applied. This report describes a technique designed to provide a suitable data base to ~~act as a base-line for the continued monitoring and~~ management of the 'High Island' fringing reefs in the southern section of The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

The processes leading to understanding the major factors defining the spatial distribution of coral reef communities will ensue only by expanding the scales and perspectives of observation. Therefore an integrated approach was adopted in this study, surveying both fish and benthic communities simultaneously. This approach firstly allows the examination of the nature of the different fish communities and subsequently a comparison of these communities with various biotic and abiotic factors. Secondly, the technique allows the examination of possible interactions (e.g. herbivory) between the fish and benthic communities by monitoring these communities on a temporal scale. Recent insight into the

organization of coral, **reef** benthic communities, was provided by Glynn, (1976), Connell (1979), Hay (1981a), Sammarco (1982a,b), Wellington (1982), Hixon and Brostoff (1983) and Lewis (1985) indicating **that** physical and biological disturbances may be **major** forcing functions in **shaping** community structure.

TOWARDS A BENTHIC METHODOLOGY

The complexity of the **reefal** system and their **structural** and taxonomic heterogeneity **makes** the task of describing communities to species level particularly difficult and time consuming. Furthermore, **morphological** plasticity of certain coral species are evident when subjected to diverse hydrodynamic, **photic** and sedimentary environments (Veron and Pichon, 1976). Coral community patterns have been demonstrated in quantitative studies of taxonomic groupings above the species level by Done (1982) and Bradbury et al (1985). Their 'visually dominant organisms' and 'life form' attributes were designed in view of these difficulties in taxonomic **identification**.

Considering the 'typically' adverse **water** transparency conditions around the Whitsunday Islands (**pers. obs.**), accurate **benthic** recording by **such** methods as **manta** towing (Done et al., 1982) would be insufficient. After reviewing other methodologies for collecting accurate ecological information it was concluded **that** a new

integrated sampling technique be employed with the aid of aerial photographs to analyse the communities on these fringing reefs. This **technique** is an expansion of the method employed by Veron and Done in 1979 on Lord Howe Island to include the entire benthic community.

Classification to genera and morphological types **were** adopted after reviewing previous community studies on fringing reefs by G. Bull (1982) and T.J. Done (1982). it was observed that the results of these separate studies in similar areas classified communities varying in species composition, however genera frequently corresponded in both classifications for areas with similar **abiotic** parameters.

TOWARDS A METHOD OF RECORDING FISH ASSEMBLAGES

In considering a method to monitor coral reef fish assemblages the following questions need to be addressed.

Do all fringing reefs have similar assemblages? If not, can these assemblages be objectively **characterised**?

Any suitable sampling technique is governed by certain constraints. These include the speed with which the survey can be conducted, and safe working limits for S.C.U.B.A. divers, **as** well as minimum man power and equipment. As a result a semiquantitative technique has been developed which discriminates the differences in coral reef fish assemblages within and between reefs: Simultaneously the technique provides base-line data to

assess the level of fishing **pressure** on these fringing **reefs** by 'using the commonly fished coral trout (Plectropomus spp.) as an indicator species.

The sampling technique, which use's a 50x20 metre transect, is derived from the standardized rapid visual, **technique** developed at the Workshop on Reef Fish Assessment and Monitoring, convened by G.B.R.M.P.A. in 1978. This technique is 'modified due to the constraints encountered when assessing reefs of a largely **indistinct** nature (**i.e.** reef flat and reef slope are frequently indistinguishable) and the generally poor visibility typically encountered while undertaking surveys on fringing **reefs** in the Whitsunda'y area.

FIELD METHODS

Person 1. Benthos assessment
(transect area = 200m^2)

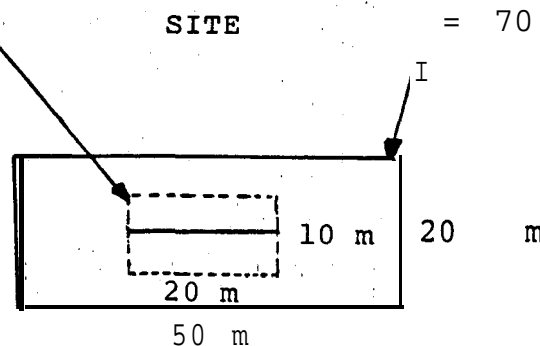
Person 2. Fish assessment
(transect area = 1000m^2)

Average duration for
collection of data,

= 60 minutes

Average duration for
collection of data

= 70 minutes



PERSON 1

SITE, SELECTION AND SAMPLING STRATEGY

- 1) Preliminary observations were made by distinguishing areas where community boundaries may occur using high resolution aerial photographs as tools for defining topographic features. "Sites" were selected on the basis of visible differences in benthic topography and exposure.
- 2) A search in the vicinity of the selected sites was made in order to determine if the selected sites had a relatively homogeneous community and to determine the visible extent of the community. If considerable variance was detected in a neighbouring area an additional site was selected and surveyed accordingly. "Sites" were mapped using standard navigation techniques i.e. determining the angles between three reference points easily distinguished on the Islands, and subsequently plotting the "site" location.
- 3) To determine the abundance of the major benthic components a 20 metre line transect using the intercept method (Loya, 1972) was laid along the reef community at a uniform depth. The cover of macroalgae, hard coral, soft coral, dead standing coral, sand/rubble, **turf algae, sponges and other major benthic components** were recorded (see Appendix 1 for attribute list). A permanent line transect would provide additional insight when monitoring these sites by providing

information on mortality, **recruitment** and, information on **significant** changes in growth, rates.

4) A 5 metre search either **side of** the line transect was undertaken. The relative abundance of coral **genera** within the Order Scleractinia and Subclass **Alcyonaria** were derived by recording every individual **encountered** in the 200m² transect area. Similar recordings were undertaken for the Phylum Porifera and the Order Zoanthidea, which varied in taxonomic resolution in accordance with the authors' capabilities in taxonomy. A special column was set aside for conspicuous macrofauna such as. the giant clams Tridacna, Tunicates and Echinoderms.

All recordings **were** marked on a large Perspex board which had the **Operational, Taxonomic** Units listed (see Appendix II). Data were obtained through visual assessment and size estimates, the **benthic** components were assigned a graded score depending on their maximum diameter.

A broad scale indication of **population structures** were obtained using four size categories. However, **resolution** of population dynamics **is** variable when considering that coral colonies vary in porosity and growth rates.

'Field recording criteria on Perspex board:

1-50cm 50-100cm + 1-3metres >3 metres

5) An in-situ **mapping** technique was employed to determine the relative abundance and **generic** type of macroalgae.

Ten random 1m^2 quadrats were placed in the site area. For permanent transects, quadrats are placed at specified distances along the line. The quadrats were subdivided by wire mesh into sixteen squares for simplified and more accurate data recording. The macroalgae within each quadrat were identified and traced out in the appropriate recording blocks on the large perspex board.

If seagrasses were present in the quadrats, species type were identified and their relative cover per metre square were estimated.

If macroalgae were prolific and underlying benthic components could not be easily observed, all the macroalgae were removed from each quadrat and the underlying corals identified. Each underlying coral colony was assigned a graded score according to size.

| A | B | C | D | E | F | G |
|-------|--------|---------|---------|---------|---------|----------|
| 0-5cm | 5-10cm | 10-20cm | 20-30cm | 30-50cm | 50-75cm | 75-100cm |

- 6) In addition to defining the composition and cover of communities the bottom types were recorded (i.e. mud, sand, rubble, igneous substrate, carbonate substrate). Furthermore, distinct morphological features were noted (e.g. spur and groove systems) as were the local currents. The exact depth of the benthic communities were determined by preparing tidal curves and interpolating the recorded time and depth for each community using L.W.D. as datum. The relief and the slope angles were also sketched for each "site".

7) In order to determine intra-community **variation replicate** "site" surveys were occasionally undertaken'.

Note: In order to determine any major temporal community changes **the survey** technique can be employed by persons with only elementary knowledge in taxonomy **by** "scaling-up" the taxonomic categories and by **diagrammatic** assistance on the prepared underwater board.

PERSON 2

SITE SELECTION - similar as person 1, **steps 1)** and 2) employed.

SAMPLING STRATEGY

A 50 metre tape was placed along the reef'slope at a uniform depth. The observer, to ensure consistency, swam using **S.C.U.B.A.** in a zig zag (sinusoidal) **pattern** 10 metres either side of the tape i.e. Belt' transect = 1000m^2 .

The presence of species and their **abundance** were recorded on a prepared underwater slate as the diver swam along the transect.

Numerically dominant species such, as Pomacentrids and, some **Labrids (Haliocheres spp.)** and Lutjanids (Caesio spp.) were recorded on a log 5 **abundance** scale, whilst 'other,, more solitary, demersal, fish species were **recorded in absolute** numbers.

The log 5 abundance categories **follow Sale and Williams, (1982).**

Category

| | |
|---------------|-------------------|
| 1 fish, = 1 | 26-125 fish = 4 |
| 2-5 fish = 2 | 126-625 fish = 5 |
| 6-25 fish = 3 | 626-3250 fish = 6 |
| | > 3250 fish = 7 |

Rare or exceptional species not on the proforma list are also recorded as well as an aesthetic appeal rating made at each site.

Coral trout (Plectropomus spp.) are recorded under the following size categories when encountered:.

Juvenile < 40cm

Medium sub-adult 40-60cm

Large adult > 60cm.

The information provided by size frequency data is far more **sensitive** in indicating 'stress in a fished population.

RESULTS

These results refer to the fringing reefs of four Islands in the southern section of the Marine **Park**, namely **Brampton**, Carlisle, Goldsmith and Cockermouth Islands. The benthic survey data are stored in the form of maps with plastic **colour** overlays **indicating the** vertical and horizontal distribution of communities, distribution of seagrasses and substrate **types**. **This** graphic representation makes access and interpretation of data relatively easy. Additional descriptions and stylized profiles have been prepared for each "site"..

An agglomerative hierarchical classification (Williams, 1971) using Bray-Curtis similarity, coefficients identified broad scale patterns in the composition of fish assemblages. This analysis was run for 32 "sites" using the Numerical Taxonomy Package (N.T.P.) developed by the C.S.I.R.O. The results indicate that differences in fish assemblages are greater between Islands than within Island "sites". Goldsmith Island was found to be most dissimilar from **Islands** further **off-**shore. "Sites" on the windward slopes were **found to** be more similar than those on the more **sheltered** slopes. Where strong currents were persistent on leeward "sites" the fish assemblages showed similarity to those sites on the windward side of the Islands.

Due to the complex nature of the benthic communities any taxonomic classification has yet to be undertaken. However distinct patterns in **the** benthic communities **are**

apparent by "eyeballing" the data.

The changes in benthic communities and fish assemblages between Islands appear to follow the broad cross shelf trends identified by Done (1982) and Williams (1982). However fringing reef variability maybe greater than previously thought. The inter-Island variability may mask these cross shelf trends resulting in the need to focus on a smaller scale.

Comparing the benthic communities on the exposed indistinctly developed Goldsmith Island reefs with the well developed reefs on Cockermouth Island, obvious differences in benthic components were observed. **Sar-**

~~gassum assemblages with minimal coral cover of~~ encrusting --- morphologies **dominated** Goldsmith Island in comparison with the Acropora robusta - hyacinthus - palifera variants on Cockermouth Island. Similarly the fish assemblages on Cockermouth, **Brampton** and Carlisle Island have species which are described as being more **midshelf** in distribution than those on Goldsmith (Williams, 1982).

A good example of the fish species distribution patterns is the pomacentrid Abudefduf whitleyi which is absent on Goldsmith Island, moderately common on Brampton and Carlisle, becomes a numerically dominant species on Cockermouth Island. An interesting anomaly is the virtual absence of **Scarids** on Goldsmith Island where macroalgae were most prolific, whilst a few kilometres to the south east an increasing abundance and diversity of these fishes were observed.

DISCUSSION

The work to date has helped **to elucidate** broad scale patterns in distribution and abundance of fish assemblages and benthic communities on fringing reefs on southern 'High Islands'.

Further work will involve numerical clustering of benthic communities by coral **genera**, families and various coral population sizes. Separate clustering on 'macro-algae - coral communities will be divided temporally due to the seasonal nature of macroalgae.

Perhaps the most important **analysis** yet to be undertaken is the correlation of various biotic and **abiotic** factors. This will involve multivariant analysis providing information on the possible associations of these various parameters. Further work will also focus on small scale variability and the examination of detailed differences between assemblages within Island **reefs**.

It is considered by the authors that the communities recorded could represent stages in succession. Therefore fine scale temporal monitoring is of prime importance in determining not only the effect of infrequent large scale perturbations on the communities but also continuous seasonal perturbations. Insight into the extent of coral - algae interactions needs to be gained **and** the possible extent to which they may be mediated by the herbivorous fish guild for any **effective** long-term management of **these** reefs.

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APPENDIX I

List of Attributes and respective Recording Codes employed for
Line Transects

| Attribute | Description | Field Code |
|--|---|------------|
| Scleractinian Corals: | | |
| <u>Acropora</u> | "fine branching" | AFB |
| | "thick open-branching" | A C B |
| | "stout shrub-like" | A S S |
| | "fine shrub-like" | AFS |
| | "tabulate" | ACT |
| | "stout" | A C S |
| | Palifera-type | A C P |
| | "encrusting" | ACE |
| | Astreopora | ACM |
| <u>non-Acropora</u> | identified to genera, with separate -recordings for morphologies | |
| M - Massive, F - Foliose, E - Encrusting, B - Branching, c - Columnar | | |
| Other Fauna: | | |
| Alcyonacea | identified to genera where possible | SC |
| Gorgonacea | | G |
| Zoanthidea | | Z |
| Actinaria, Antipatharia, Hydroids | | A |
| Echinoderms, Mollusc, etc. | | O |
| Millepora | | M |
| Algae: | | |
| Turf Algae | | T A |
| Coralline Algae | | CA. |
| Macroalgae | | MA |
| Abiotic Components: | | |
| Sand | | S |
| Rubble | | R |
| Sand/Rubble Mixture | | S/R |
| Silt | | S i |
| Mud | | Mu |
| Recently dead, standing coral | | D C |
| Water (cracks deeper than 50 cm) | | WA, |

APPENDIX II

(Operational Taxonomic Units, OTU's)

| Organism's maximum diameter: | | a | b | c | d | greater than 300 cm | | | | | |
|------------------------------|--|---------|-----------|------------|-----|---------------------|--------------------------|-------|-----|-----|-----|
| | | 1-50 cm | 50-100 cm | 100-300 cm | | | | | | | |
| 200 | Family Faviidae | a | b | c | d | 600 | Family Merulinidae | a | b | c | d |
| | Cauliastrea | 201 | 202 | 203 | 204 | | Merulina | 601 | 602 | | 604 |
| | Favia | 210 | 211 | 212 | 213 | | Clavarina | 606 | 607 | 608 | 609 |
| | Favites | 216 | 217 | 218 | 219 | | Scapophyllia | 610 | 611 | 612 | 613 |
| | Goniastrea | 220 | 221 | 222 | 223 | 620 | Family Mussidae | | | | |
| | Platygyra | 226 | 227 | 228 | 229 | | Blastomussa | 621 | 622 | 623 | |
| | Leptoria | 230 | 231 | 232 | 233 | | Cynaria | 624 | 625 | | |
| | Oulophyllia | 236 | 237 | 238 | 239 | | Scolymia | 626 | 627 | | |
| | Hydrophora | 240 | 241 | 242 | 243 | | Acanthastrea | 628 | 629 | 630 | 631 |
| | Montastrea | 250 | 251 | 252 | 253 | | Lobophyllia | 632 | 633 | 634 | 635 |
| | Plesiastrea | 260 | 261 | 262 | 263 | | Symphyllia | 636 | 637 | 638 | 639 |
| | Diploastrea | 266 | 267 | 268 | 269 | 640 | Family Pectiniidae | | | | |
| | Leptastrea | 270 | 271 | 272 | 273 | | Echinophyllia | 641 | 642 | 643 | 644 |
| | Cyphastrea | 276 | 277 | 278 | 279 | | Oxypora | 646 | 647 | 648 | 649 |
| | Echinopora | 280 | 281 | 282 | 283 | | Mycedium | 650 | 651 | 652 | 653 |
| | Uoseleya | 290 | 291 | 292 | 293 | | Pectinia | 656 | 657 | 658 | 659 |
| 300 | Family Acroporidae | | | | | 660 | Family Carophylliidae | | | | |
| | "Fine branching" | 301 | 302 | 303 | 304 | | Euphyllia | 661 | 662 | 663 | |
| | "Thick open-branching" | 306 | 307 | 308 | 309 | | Catalaphyllia | 666 | 667 | 668 | |
| | "Stout shrub-like" | 310 | 311 | 312 | 313 | | Plerogyra | 670 | 671 | 672 | |
| | "Pine shrub-like" | 316 | 317 | 318 | 319 | 680 | Family Dendrophylliidae | | | | |
| | "Tabulate" | 320 | 321 | 322 | 323 | | Turbinaria "Foliose" | 681 | 682 | 683 | 684 |
| | "Stout" (gemmifera type) | 330 | 331 | 332 | 333 | | "Encrusting free-lip" | 685 | 686 | 687 | 688 |
| | "Palifera-type" | 336 | 337 | 338 | 339 | | "Encrusting no free-lip" | 689 | 690 | 691 | 692 |
| | "Encrusting", | 340 | 341 | 342 | 343 | | Duncanopsammia | 693 | 694 | 695 | |
| | Astreopora | 350 | 351 | 352 | 353 | | Heteropsammia | 696 | 697 | | |
| 360 | Montipora "foliose" | 361 | 362 | 363 | 364 | 700 | Family Fungia | | | | |
| | "Encrusting free-lip" | 366 | 367 | 368 | 369 | | Cycloseris | 701 | 702 | 703 | |
| | "Encrusting no free-lip" | 370 | 371 | 372 | 373 | | Diaseris | 706 | 707 | 708 | |
| | "Encrusting with vertical projections" | 376 | 377 | 378 | 379 | | Heliogorgia | 710 | 711 | 712 | |
| | "Submassive" | 380 | 381 | 382 | 383 | | Fungia | 716 | 717 | 718 | |
| | Anacropora | 390 | 391 | 392 | 393 | | Herpolitha | 720 | 721 | 722 | |
| 400 | Family Poritidae | | | | | | Herpetoglossa | 726 | 727 | 728 | |
| | Porites "Massive" | 401 | 402 | 403 | 404 | | Polyphyllia | 730 | 731 | 732 | |
| | "Encrusting" | 410 | 411 | 412 | 413 | | Halomitra | 736 | 737 | 738 | |
| | "Branching" | 420 | 421 | 422 | 423 | | Sandolitha | 740 | 741 | 742 | |
| | "Lichen-type" | 430 | 431 | 432 | 433 | | Lithophyllon | 746 | 747 | 748 | |
| | Goniopora | 440 | 441 | 442 | 443 | | Podabacia | 750 | 751 | 752 | |
| | Alveopora | 450 | 451 | 452 | 453 | 800 | Subclass Alcyonaria | | | | |
| 460 | Family Pocilloporidae | | | | | | Tubipora | 801 | 802 | 803 | |
| | Pocillopora | 461 | 462 | 463 | 464 | | Clavularia | 804 | 805 | 806 | |
| | Seriatopora | 466 | 467 | 468 | 469 | | Pachyclavularia | 810 | 811 | 812 | 813 |
| | Stylophora | 470 | 471 | 472 | 473 | | Lobophytum | 816 | 817 | 818 | 819 |
| | Palauastrea | 480 | 481 | 482 | 483 | | Alcyonium | 820 | 821 | 822 | 823 |
| | Madracis | 484 | 485 | 486 | 487 | | Briareum | 826 | 827 | 828 | 829 |
| 500 | Family Agariciidae | | | | | | Cladiella | 830 | 831 | 832 | 833 |
| | Pavona "Foliose" | 501 | 502 | 503 | 504 | | Asterospicularia | 835 | 836 | | |
| | "Massive" | 506 | 507 | 508 | 509 | | Sarcophyton | 837 | 838 | 839 | |
| | "Stout" | 510 | 511 | 512 | 513 | | Capnella | 840 | 841 | 842 | |
| | Leptoseris | 520 | 521 | 522 | 523 | | Sinularia | 846 | 847 | 848 | 849 |
| | Gardineroseris | 530 | 531 | 532 | 533 | | Parenythropodium | 850 | 851 | 852 | 853 |
| | Coeloseris | 536 | 537 | 538 | 539 | | Stereonephthya | 856 | 857 | 858 | |
| 550 | Pachyseris rugosa | 551 | 552 | 553 | 554 | | Nephtea | 860 | 861 | 862 | |
| | speciosa | 556 | 557 | 558 | 559 | | Dendronephthya | 870 | 871 | 872 | |
| 560 | Family Siderastreidae | | | | | | Paralemnalia | 873 | 874 | 875 | |
| | Pseudosiderastrea | 561 | 562 | 563 | 564 | | Cespitulalia | 876 | 877 | | |
| | Coscinaraea | 566 | 567 | 568 | 569 | | Anthelia | 878 | 879 | | |
| 570 | Family Oculinidae | | | | | | Xenia | 880 | 881 | 882 | |
| | Galaxea | 571 | 572 | 573 | 574 | | Efflatournaria | 883 | 884 | 885 | 886 |
| | Archelia | 576 | 577 | 578 | 579 | | Lemnalia | 887 | 888 | 889 | |
| 580 | Family Trachyphylliidae | | | | | 890 | Order Gorgonacea | | | | |
| | Trachyphyllia | 581 | 582 | 583 | | | Rumphella | 8 9 1 | | | |
| 590 | Family Thamnasteriidae | | | | | | Fdn | 892 | | | |
| | Psammocora | 591 | 592 | 593 | 594 | | Whip | 893 | | | |
| 595 | Family Astrocoeniidae | | | | | | comb | 894 | | | |
| | Stylocoeniella | 596 | 597 | 598 | 599 | | Order Pennatulacea | 8 9 5 | | | |

APPENDIX II! (cont/d.)

| | | | |
|-----------------------------|-----|-----|---------|
| 900 Other: Order Zoanthidea | 9 | 0 | 1 |
| 910 Order Actinaria | 911 | | |
| 920 Phylum Mollusca | | | |
| Class Bivalvia | | | |
| Tridacnidae | 921 | 922 | 923 |
| Hippopus | 926 | 927 | |
| 930 Phylum Porifera | | | |
| "Foliose" | 931 | | |
| "Vase " | 932 | | |
| "Cup" | 933 | | |
| "Encrusting" | 934 | | |
| "Submassive" | 935 | | |
| "Cliona-type" | 936 | 937 | 938 939 |
| 980 Phylum Cnidaria | | | |
| Class Hydrozoa | | | |
| Millepora | | | |
| "Branching" | 981 | 982 | 983 984 |
| "Massive" | 990 | 991 | 992 993 |
| "Encrusting" | 994 | 995 | 996 997 |