
1. INTRODUCTION

As one of the natural wonders of the world, the Great Barrier Reef has been written about, photographed and filmed so it is familiar to Australians and to many other people around the world. Some of these people have visited the Great Barrier Reef, coming from overseas and within Australia, and others are fortunate to live adjacent to the reef, having it as their recreational "backyard". Others plan to visit in the future.

This report discusses all recreational use of the Great Barrier Reef, recreation by a variety of users undertaking a range of activities. The report examines visitor numbers, modes of access, activities, trends in use and also economic characteristics of uses. This information is basic to the understanding of human use of the Great Barrier Reef and to the task of planning, managing and monitoring the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

Under the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975, an area known as the Great Barrier Reef Region has been designated, and 98.5 percent of this Region has been declared a Marine Park. The Marine Park is a multiple use area and all allowed uses are being incorporated within zoning plans. The only activities which are specifically prohibited throughout the Marine Park are oil exploration, mining (other than for approved research purposes), littering, spearfishing with SCUBA and the taking of large specimens of certain species of fish.

The objectives of the zoning plans, as specified under the Act, can be summarized as "conservation with reasonable use". In the planning and management of the Marine Park therefore, both human use demands and natural environment constraints must be balanced.

Recreation is the "activity" that brings most people into the Marine Park. The only other economically important use of the Great Barrier Reef, and one which brings a reasonable number of people into the region, is commercial fishing. Recreational use of the reef ranges from extractive recreational fishing to "look don't take" activities like coral viewing. All human activities have the potential to impact the environment.

Before turning to the body of this report, some definitions are warranted. The term "recreation" is used interchangeably with "tourism" in this report in order to emphasise that both people who live adjacent to the Great Barrier Reef and those who travel some distance are considered. Actually, all recreational users of the Great Barrier Reef come under the Bureau of Industry Economics' definition of a "tourist" as:

"A person who undertakes travel, for any reason, involving a stay away from his or her usual place of residence for at least one night; or

A person who undertakes a pleasure trip involving a stay away from home for a least four hours during daylight, and involving a round trip distance of at least 50 km; however for trips to national parks, state and forest reserves, museums, historical parks, animal parks, and other man-made attractions, the distance limitation does not apply." (Bureau of Industry Economics, 1984)

According to this definition, all overnight and day visitors to the Reef Region are "tourists", though some people, including local recreational fishermen who have been visiting the reef all their lives, may object to that term.

It is important early on to define the area on which this report is focused. The Great Barrier Reef Region was defined by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975 and includes an area of approximately 350 000 sq km. The Region (shown as Figure 1) commences at low water mark on the Queensland coast and around the majority of islands. A small number of islands which are under Commonwealth tenure are included in the Great Barrier Reef Region.

An area described as "within the outer boundaries of the Great Barrier Reef Region" incorporates the marine area and all islands and cays regardless of jurisdiction. This area may be considered an entity with respect to recreational use. It is this area on which this report concentrates. For the purposes of this report, the area "within the outer boundaries of the Great Barrier Reef Region", specifically including islands and cays, will be termed the "Reef Region".

Closely associated with the Reef Region are the Queensland coastal towns and cities. These locations accommodate permanent residents who may visit the Reef Region, and also have a considerable amount of tourism infrastructure. The extent to which tourism to coastal Queensland is dependant on the Great Barrier Reef is unknown. Surveys of tourists staying in coastal Queensland destinations have found that attractions to the area included: "sunny weather" and "scenery" as well as "the Great Barrier Reef" (Cameron McNamara, 1983).

It would be exaggerating to claim that tourism in coastal Queensland was all due to the presence of the Great Barrier Reef. By concentrating on the "Reef Region" area, those people travelling from permanent or tourist accommodation on the mainland coast to the Great Barrier Reef will be emphasised in this report.

Tourism on the mainland is only discussed briefly in this report. This report presents new data which have been collected specifically on recreation in the Reef Region and thus a description of recreational use of the Great Barrier Reef proper can be presented for the first time.

The people who undertake recreation in the Reef Region do so via a variety of modes of access and undertake a variety of activities once within the Reef Region. In order to describe use of the Reef Region, several approaches are taken. Firstly, all recreational users are considered according to origin - international or domestic - in the discussion in section 2. This presentation includes data on tourism in Australia and Queensland, to allow Reef Region tourism to be placed in context. A summary of Reef Region tourism appears in section 3.

Detailed descriptions of tourist activities in the Reef Region are given in sections 4 to 6. The division of these descriptions is largely along the lines of access. The commercial passenger services described in section 4 provide the largest number of visitor days to the Reef Region. Day trips and trips overnight or longer are offered and a range of marine-based recreational activities are enjoyed by passengers.

Accommodation at island resorts is investigated in section 5. The people staying on islands participate in many marine activities and so are important in any consideration of recreation in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. Access to the Reef Region by private boats constitutes the third major division of reef recreational use and is discussed in section 6.

Most of this report has a bias towards describing tourists in terms of statistics and tourism in terms of industries and economic impact. This is a function of the type of research undertaken thus far into tourism; very little has been done yet on tourists' attitudes, wants and experiences. This aspect of Great Barrier Reef tourism is the subject of current research and so consideration of this important dimension of tourism is left for a future volume.

Figure 1. Map

