**Barriers to communication – how these critical aspects were addressed during the public participation for the rezoning of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.**

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**Abstract**
The aim was very clear: protect the biodiversity of the Great Barrier Reef whilst minimising adverse impacts on users. The rezoning the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (the Marine Park) was the biggest planning exercise ever undertaken by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) and one of the largest undertaken in the world for marine conservation. It primarily involved engaging people and communities adjacent to the Marine Park, but included comments from all over Australia and the world.

The GBRMPA received over 31 500 submissions, the largest for any environmental planning process in Australia. Over 600 meetings in at least 90 locations were held with thousands of people. Information used by the GBRMPA for the rezoning included written submissions, databases, maps, field notes, and the experience and knowledge of GBRMPA staff, users and other interested individuals.

Despite the careful preparation and planning that accompanied a project of this size, some communication messages became confused, deliberately twisted or failed to get through. Consequently, some communities heard distorted and unclear messages about the project and the process. So, what were the barriers that prevented information from becoming disseminated correctly and accepted? One barrier was some communities' reluctance to accept zoning as the preferred management tool; another was the lack of awareness about the complexity of the problem; many believing that this was only about managing fishing. Other barriers were a lack in understanding of the solution and a lack of trust in government agencies. For each of these barriers, strategies were developed and success was achieved for many issues, more so in some areas.

This article discusses these communication barriers, how we largely overcame them and some lessons learnt from one of the largest environmental public participation programs in Australia's history.

**Key words:** public participation, consultation, marine park, no-take areas, MPA planning, Great Barrier Reef, multiple use, zoning

**Introduction**
The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (the Marine Park) was declared in 1975. Six years later the Marine Park was inscribed on the World Heritage List, meeting all four of the criteria for listing as a natural property (Chadwick and Green, 2000). The Marine Park extends from the tip of Cape York Peninsula south almost to Bundaberg and

extends from the low water mark on the coast of Queensland out past the edge of the continental shelf, in total 2 300km of coastline and an area of 344 400km$^2$.
The Marine Park is the largest marine protected area in the world, and from 1 July 2004, will include the largest network of no-take areas. The entire area includes extraordinary biological diversity, making the Great Barrier Reef and the surrounding areas one of the richest and most complex natural systems on earth. It includes over 2 900 separate coral reefs, thousands of fish, hard and soft coral species, six of seven of the world's species of marine turtle and over 30 species of marine mammals (GBRMPA, 2002). Conserving the biodiversity of the Great Barrier Reef is not only vital for the long term survival of species within the Marine Park, but it is also vital for the communities along the Queensland coast who rely on the Marine Park for economic prosperity and social well-being. As the world's largest coral reef ecosystem and World Heritage Area, it is also a critical global resource.

**Planning and management of the Great Barrier Reef**
To fulfil its goal of "providing for the protection, wise use, understanding and enjoyment of the Great Barrier Reef in perpetuity…", the GBRMPA uses the multiple use model as a basis for management, and specifically tools such as permits, zoning, management plans and public education (Skeat *et al*., 2000). However, since the first Zoning Plan was prepared in 1980, zoning has been the primary mechanism for management of the Marine Park (Day, 2002). Zoning Plans are similar to town planning schemes and essentially spell out who can do what and where. Zoning allows the GBRMPA to separate uses that conflict with each other, such as commercial fishing and tourism, to balance human needs and conservation, to restrict activities to better conserve areas or to even set aside areas as 'no-go', to preserve habitats and to provide reference areas.

Between 1983 and 1985, Zoning Plans were prepared for the four main Sections of the Marine Park. By 2002, Zoning Plans for two of the large Sections had been reviewed, a new coastal Section had been declared and zoned, and 28 new coastal areas were added to the Marine Park, but remained unzoned. However from the late 1990s, it was recognised that the existing zoning did not adequately protect the range of biodiversity now known to exist within the Marine Park. Many biological communities (for example, inshore marine habitats) were poorly represented in no-take areas, which comprised only 4.5% of the Marine Park and were primarily located over coral reefs or in the remote far-north Section. This lack in the representativeness, or lack of protective zoning covering the entire range of habitats and species found within the Marine Park, led the GBRMPA to embark on a reef-wide review of zoning and the development of a single Zoning Plan for the entire Marine Park.

**The Representative Areas Program**
Once it was clearly recognised that all plants, animals and their habitats within the Marine Park played important roles in maintaining the health and resilience of the Great Barrier Reef ecosystem, a systematic program was therefore commenced (the Representative Areas Program or RAP). This was specifically designed to determine the major habitat types of the Great Barrier Reef region, and develop a new Zoning Plan based on protecting 'representative' examples of each habitat type within a

network of no-take areas. The new network also considered key sites such as breeding grounds, nursery areas and special or unique places. The RAP was designed to provide benefits for present and future users by maintaining the health and resilience of the Great Barrier Reef ecosystem. The process began in 1998 and started with the collation and analysis of the available biophysical data and the consequent mapping of the 70 habitat types or 'bioregions' of the Marine Park (Day *et al.*, 2000), which was a fundamental basis for the RAP.

Two independent committees were formed to guide the GBRMPA in decision-making. The Scientific Committee used the best available science to recommend eleven biophysical principles including that a minimum of at least 20% of each bioregion be included in no-take areas, specific levels of protection for important habitat types, and the size, configuration and replication of no-take areas throughout each bioregion (for more information refer to www.gbrmpa.gov.au). The principles developed by the Social, Economic and Cultural Steering Committee concerned the social impacts that the RAP would have on the general community, and specified that as far as possible, the RAP should seek to minimise the impact on existing uses (Day *et al.*, 2000).

**The Zoning Process**

The process for the preparation of a Zoning Plan is set out in the *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975*. The process is very specific and includes two formal (statutory) periods of public consultation. The process and associated timelines for the development of the new Zoning Plan are shown in Figure 1.

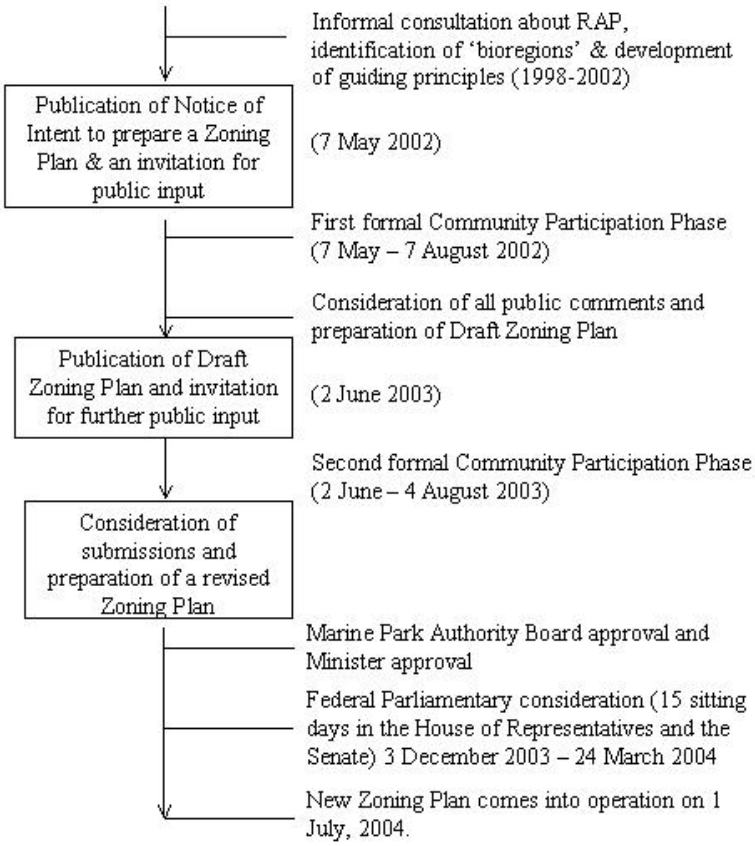


**Figure 1: Zoning process**

**Community participation and engagement**
Although public consultation is a legislated requirement, the GBRMPA has recognised for over 20 years the importance of public involvement in the development of its management tools. The need to positively engage all the people who have an interest in the area has in fact been one of the most significant lessons learnt (Skeat *et al*., 2000). In addition, marine managers across the world rely to a large degree on voluntary compliance, as the ways of avoiding restrictions on the sea are many, and a plan that does not have a modicum of public acceptance or a desire to comply with, is a park that can not be enforced (Kelleher, 2000).

To facilitate and encourage community participation, the GBRMPA embarked on a public awareness campaign that went above and beyond that required by legislation (Jago *et al.,* 2004). Given the importance of the Marine Park at the local, national and international scale, the consultation program was designed and conducted to reach all interest groups. Through both phases of community consultation, staff visited every major town adjacent to the Great Barrier Reef. During the formal periods of community consultation, the GBRMPA conducted over 600 meetings in at least 90 locations and with thousands of people. At the completion of the formal consultation periods, the GBRMPA had distributed over 90 000 submission brochures, received 73 000 hits on the website, 6 000 phone calls to the free call number, and had generated over 2 000 media items through television, radio and print (Jago *et al.,* 2004).

The GBRMPA knew that the rezoning of the Marine Park would generate public interest, however the level of interest far exceeded expectations. In total, over 31 500 submissions were received by the GBRMPA during the two formal phases of public consultation, the largest for any environmental planning process in Australia.

**Barriers to communication**
Although the level of public interest in the rezoning process was greater than expected, it was always recognised that engaging the public would be difficult. However, despite the careful preparation and planning that accompanied a project of this size, some communication messages became confused, deliberately twisted or failed to get through. Some communities heard distorted and unclear messages about the project and the process. So, what were the barriers that prevented information from becoming disseminated correctly and accepted?

**1. Problems understanding the problem**
The RAP and the rezoning are part of the solution to a complex problem. Protection of all biodiversity, i.e. habitats, species and ecosystem processes, was the overall aim, however the general community didn't understand what exactly the problem was. Furthermore a large proportion of the public believed that the Great Barrier Reef was still largely a pristine environment, particularly as the GBRMPA had for many years promoted the Marine Park, but did not communicate the variety of threats to its future. There was therefore a public reluctance to accept the need for a solution (i.e. a new zoning network) when many people did not understand there was a problem.

Although the public are generally supportive of measures to protect the charismatic megafauna, many people don't realise the importance of non-reef habitats, particularly those between the coast and the mid-shelf coral reefs – those habitats that aren't 'pretty' or do not generate tourism dollars (Halse, 2002). *"Why is there a need for a 'no-take' area between the reef and the coast, when there isn't anything there"* and *"The reef is 40nm east, not adjacent to the coast"* were comments often made during the consultation process. This misunderstanding was not helped by the GBRMPA's previous focus of no-take zoning around coral reefs.

To assist in promoting public understanding of the importance of all habitats, publications such as the 'Crossing the Blue Highway', a colour poster explaining the importance of different habitats and the connectivity between them, were used (Australian Coral Reef Society, 2000). Despite this however, many people still had difficulty understanding the importance of the cross-shelf linkages that occur in the Marine Park, linkages that underpin the ecological integrity of the whole system (Halse, 2002; Simmons, in prep).

Secondly, many people didn't know what the term 'biodiversity' meant or how it was important for the future of the Great Barrier Reef and all that depended upon it. The GBRMPA used a simpler definition[1] in layman's terms, however many people, usually fishers, translated it to just mean 'fish stocks', not comprehending that it encompassed so much more. The thought that fishing, particularly recreational fishing, may have an impact on the marine environment was not a readily accepted view. Where impacts to the marine environment were identified, many stakeholder groups often identified other groups as those responsible (Simmons, in prep).

**2. Lack of trust and the 'Chinese Whispers' problem**

Despite the GBRMPA's extensive media and public awareness campaign, some stakeholders were receiving mixed and often wrong messages (the problem, often referred to as 'Chinese Whispers', can arise when the message changes slightly every time it is retold, so those who hear it last are getting a very different message from what was initially disseminated).

Misinformation and the consequent fear and uncertainty about the GBRMPA's agenda were responsible for some of the largest public meetings held during the first community participation period. For example, local media broadcasts about a fictional GBRMPA 'proposal' to remove fishing from the foreshores of Townsville (the largest regional city adjoining the Marine Park). Although the area is not actually within the Marine Park, this resulted in one of the largest protest meetings of the consultation process (Simmons, in prep). Similar instances of this occurred in other towns, with the resulting public meeting generating large audiences of distressed individuals.

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[1] *"Biodiversity means all plants and animals, together with the places they live and the natural processes that keep them alive".*

At these meetings the GBRMPA attempted to turn this opportunity to their advantage, by not only correcting the facts, but also by disseminating key messages about the RAP. However, to further counter the problem, the GBRMPA produced a 'Correcting Misinformation' fact sheet, explaining the true situation about some key fears of the community. This fact sheet was invaluable as the GBRMPA could update it as required; despite this however, some of the misconceptions persists today.

Another issue was the lack of links to the community, particularly in the southern parts of the Marine Park. Although the GBRMPA have ten Local Marine Advisory Committees (LMACs) along the Queensland coast that advise and help engage the GBRMPA with the community, some stakeholders had not had regular, continued contact with GBRMPA staff since the completion of the last Zoning Plan for that area – possibly up to 16 years previously.

It is human nature to be suspicious of proposals by others, particularly ones unfamiliar and put forward by government (Kelleher, 2000). At the same time, some conservation groups were running high–profile media campaigns calling for at least 50% of the Marine Park to be included in no-take areas. This large proposed change, combined with the misinformation that the GBRMPA (considered by some to be a faceless bureaucracy), was reputedly proposing to ban fishing, (an intrinsic part of the Australian lifestyle), made many communities angry and uncertain.

The result of this lack of trust was that much of the information submitted to the GBRMPA during the first community participation phase was less than accurate. A proportion of the community were afraid that if they told the GBRMPA areas they wanted to remain open for fishing, that these areas would automatically have no-take areas over them. Consequently, when the Draft Zoning Plan (DZP) was released, many important recreational fishing areas, as they were not identified in submissions, were inadvertently included in no-take areas.

The benefit of building and maintaining the relationships with the communities built during the first community consultation phase was soon apparent once the DZP was released. Through continued contact with communities, generally by the same staff members, stakeholders began to realise that the GBRMPA was earnest about wanting genuine community involvement. Although some sectors were unhappy with the DZP, the GBRMPA began to see a more community-based approach to submissions. Many communities or sectors began to organise their own public meetings to discuss and develop options for the GBRMPA to consider. One such group was the Capricorn Coast LMAC who developed community-derived options for the Rockhampton/Yeppoon region. Not only did this assist many sectors to recognise other, sometimes differing interests within their local area, but it greatly assisted the GBRMPA to find a more acceptable compromise between use and conservation, and also helped to dispel some of the long-term distrust issues (Jago *et al.,* 2004).

**3. Differing cultural and sectoral views of the marine environment**

Despite the fact that sustainable use of resources and responsible management of the environment are key issues in today's society, many people have trouble relating

easily to marine ecosystems and the scales of space or time underlying them (Kenchington, 2003). In particular, many people often have difficulty in relating to the finite limits of the resource, and the consequent human threats to these habitats.

For example, many people had difficulty accepting that recreational fishing could have an impact on fish stocks; despite that in 2001-2002, 4.5 million days a year were spent recreationally fishing in Queensland (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, 2003). During the consultation program, Queensland fisheries were often mistakenly compared to fisheries in other countries – if the total catch in other countries is four times that of Queensland, then surely the Queensland fisheries is under utilised, or at least not in need of such stringent restrictions?

The marine environment is often viewed as a limitless common property, much more so than terrestrial national parks, and as common property, utilisation of it should remain (Halse, 2002; Kenchington, 2003). Although the majority agree with the need to protect the Great Barrier Reef, some people viewed restricting fishing from a considerable proportion of the Marine Park as an attack on their constitutional right.

In recognition that different stakeholder groups clearly have differing interests and views about the marine environment, communication messages in RAP were tailored appropriately. For example, elected representatives, the media and Indigenous communities were all targeted with information specifically written and formatted for their needs. A mix of technical, scientific and layman's information was produced throughout the RAP and made widely available (refer to Appendix 1).

**4. Lack of 100% scientific certainty**

The use of science to guide management is a widely accepted and important part of the management of any environmental system. However, there are a few problems in using science as a guide to management. Many of these have to do with the scale that research is conducted – small scale, long-term and answering a highly specific question, whereas managers often need answers in a short time-frame and to large scale issues (Lawrence, Kenchington and Woodley, 2002).

One of the major problems is that the burden of definitive scientific proof is often very limiting to managers. The use of the precautionary principle has been well established in management, however communities, particularly those likely to be impacted by a proposal, are much more critical about its use. The lack of 100% scientific certainty is compounded in the marine environment by the nature of the system itself – it is much harder to establish cause and effect, or to even accurately estimate population sizes. The RAP was no different and those likely to be impacted wanted 100%, solid scientific proof that no-take areas were justified. Research results showing benefits of no-take areas from elsewhere were readily dismissed as "not relevant to the Great Barrier Reef". Furthermore some stakeholders selectively quoted any research or claim that suited their concerns whilst ignoring or refuting any evidence that opposed their position.

**5. Creating a conducive environment for effective communication**

Wherever the GBRMPA had a choice, Community Information Sessions, rather than public meetings, were held in regional and local centres. These were information 'displays' set up and manned for 3-4 hours to enable any interested person to obtain information, make their comments or hear what the GBRMPA was proposing in an informative and inclusive environment. While these sessions required a high degree of organisation and a large commitment in terms of resources and staff, the response and results indicated it was well worth the effort. The format was non-threatening for the public, and more informal and effective than public meetings. It was successful in meeting its objectives of information exchange and promoting understanding of the RAP program and its objectives (Day, Fernandes, Lewis and Innes, 2003).

**6. Having a good knowledge and understanding of all sectors**

Another critical aspect that greatly assisted effective communication with the various sectors and stakeholders was the level of understanding that GBRMPA staff had for each of the differing sectoral perspectives. This was only possible as various staff within GBRMPA had previously worked either within, or closely with, these sectors. There is no doubt that having this wide range of specialist expertise, including all aspects as fisheries management, tourism operations, Indigenous issues, research institutions and other management agencies was a major advantage in communicating and subsequently negotiating with these sectors. Furthermore having senior staff with an excellent understanding of the political processes and key political proponents was also invaluable.

**7. Complex management arrangements**

Although the primary responsibility for the management of the Marine Park rests with the Commonwealth Government, the management of Queensland's fisheries is the responsibility of the Queensland Government. It would appear, however by conserving biodiversity you are, by default, becoming involved in the conservation of fish stocks. Although part of this issue stems from the lack in understanding about the importance of maintaining ecosystem processes, jurisdictional responsibilities, and the role that fish play in the ecosystem, it doesn't solve the problem.

The problem is confounded because the GBRMPA seems to becoming involved in fisheries management, and thus overstepping their role, and secondly many people would prefer only one agency be responsible to simplify the rules and regulations they need to abide by. Although cooperation occurs between the various agencies responsible, many stakeholders remain dissatisfied with the arrangement.

This is exacerbated by the jurisdictional reality that the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park extends only to the low water mark. The State therefore has jurisdictional responsibility for tidal lands/waters, areas deemed to be 'internal waters of the State of Queensland', and a number of small areas (primarily port waters), which are not part of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. Wherever possible, complementary zoning under State Marine Park legislation has been applied in the past to address this complexity and provide the public with a single set of rules to abide by. When the RAP planning process commenced, both the State and Commonwealth

management agencies were involved; however after the first public participation phase, the State withdrew from the RAP process leaving people guessing as to what zoning might subsequently be introduced in State waters.

**The lessons learnt**

Recognition of those factors likely to prevent accurate dissemination of information will greatly assist any public consultation process. One of the communication barriers was that the RAP was presented as the solution to a problem, however many people were unaware either of the problem or its severity. Although the GBRMPA did have an extensive communication strategy, which included the development of range of information products, understanding of the problem was not as widely known or disseminated as thought. Thus, at the launch of the first community participation period, people almost solely focused on what the solution might mean (i.e. the reduction in available fishing area) rather than the problem it was trying to solve.

The involvement of, and meaningful engagement with, the people concerned is fundamentally important, for lack of participation is the most common cause of failure (Kelleher, 2000). By encouraging public involvement in the planning process, effective communication channels between managers and communities were established. This not only helped to dispel the distrust in government agencies but also provided managers with a source of accurate and useful information about areas and issues. This information was invaluable to managers, as local communities often had workable solutions to complex problems. The importance of relationships between staff and communities and building upon previous consultation with familiar faces, has been one of the key lessons learnt from this process.

Some issues however could not be resolved in the short term. For example, the complexity associated with jurisdictions and management, the lack of 100% scientific certainty, or society beliefs and views about an issue. However, identification of these issues and determining how they will affect the consultation process helped the GBRMPA to tailor the key messages and ensure that the community consultation and engagement process was an overall success.

The successful completion of the rezoning was dependent on a number of factors, with one of the most important being the level of public involvement and the application of submissions and other information to refine the DZP.

While the RAP should not be considered a typical planning program in terms of its size or its complexity, the experience gained in the Marine Park over 25 years of adaptive management and planning is considered to have relevance to many other planning processes.

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## Appendix 1

## Summary of materials used in the formal Community Participation phases of the Representative Areas Program (RAP)

**Bioregions Map** – Colour map showing reef and non-reef bioregions of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. Used extensively for all public contact work. Updated in March 2001 based on community feedback –available on the web http://www.gbrmpa.gov.au/corp_site/key_issues/conservation/rep_areas/documents/bioregions_2001_06.pdf

**'Pie-chart' maps -** colour maps showing the percentage of existing 'no-take' areas within reef and non-reef bioregions. Available on the web at http://www.gbrmpa.gov.au/corp_site/key_issues/conservation/rep_areas/documents/reef.jpg http://www.gbrmpa.gov.au/corp_site/key_issues/conservation/rep_areas/documents/nonreef.jpg

**Introductory brochure** – mailed out to stakeholders with a letter from the GBRMPA Chairperson at the start of the formal phase advising that the GBRMPA was reviewing the zoning of the Marine Park and how to get a Submissions Brochure.

**Submissions Brochure** – sent out upon request and also available on the RAP website; included a questionnaire and information about how to obtain more detailed maps to help gather information for decision-making.

**Detailed maps** – 18 detailed maps covering the full extent of the GBR coastline designed to get detailed spatial information from submittees as to where new 'no-take' areas (or Green Zones) should, or should not, be located.

**Zoning maps** – 18 detailed maps and 4 introductory maps covering the full extent of the GBR coastline and showing the Draft Zoning proposed http://www.reefed.edu.au/rap/index2.html

**Leaders Guide** – developed to introduce representatives of peak bodies and politicians at local State and Federal level to the RAP.

**Website** – the website included virtually all the publicly available information and was highlighted on the GBRMPA homepage. http://www.reefed.edu.au/rap/

**Technical Information sheets** – ' stand-alone' information sheets covering a wide range of topics, but also available on the web at http://www.gbrmpa.gov.au/corp_site/key_issues/conservation/rep_areas/info_sheets.html,:

**RAP Information sheets** – ' stand-alone' information sheets, discussing how the Draft Zoning Plan affected a variety of activities or issues http://www.reefed.edu.au/rap/overview/techinfoshts.html

**Update brochures** – periodically released (Number 6 prepared in March 2003) to keep stakeholders informed of progress; also available on the RAP website http://www.gbrmpa.gov.au/corp_site/key_issues/conservation/rep_areas/updates.html

**'Crossing the Blue Highway' Poster** – This poster provided a unique visual representation of the 'connectivity' concept, which underpins the RAP, and was extremely useful as an educational tool for a wide range of stakeholders. Also available on the web http://abc.net.au/science/bluehighway/

**Television commercials** – raised awareness among the broader community of the Marine Park and biodiversity and to increase the perception of risk to the Marine Park. This went to air two weeks prior to commencement of the formal phase, regionally as a paid advertisement and nationally as a Community Service Announcement.

**Advertisements in regional newspapers** – advised the general public that the GBRMPA was reviewing the zoning of the Marine Park and how to contact the GBRMPA.

**Radio spots in regional centres** – advised the general public about the stage of the RAP process, including that the GBRMPA was reviewing the zoning of the Marine Park, the release of a Draft Zoning Plan and how to contact the GBRMPA.

**Frequently Asked Questions** (FAQs) - based of feedback from the informal consultation answers to the most commonly asked questions from stakeholders were developed. These FAQs were made available at meetings and presentations and on the web site http://www.reefed.edu.au/rap/overview/intro/faqs.html

**Draft Zoning Plan** – a draft of the legal document including coordinates for boundaries of zones http://www.reefed.edu.au/rap/downloads/FINAL_DZP.pdf

**Draft Basis for Zoning document** – describes the main bases for decisions made during the zoning process http://www.reefed.edu.au/rap/downloads/BFZ_16_MAY_2003_FINAL_2.pdf