

MICHAELMAS CAY LOCALITY SITE PLAN

(Prepared August 2001)

Note 1: On 1 July 2004, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Zoning Plan 2003 came into effect. It changed the zoning and activities allowed in zones for the Marine Park. Michaelmas Cay Locality is now zoned Marine National Park Zone, for more information please refer to the Zoning Plan and maps.

Note 2: Pursuant to paragraph 4.2.1(1)(b) of the Zoning Plan 2003, the following Special Management Area has been designated over Michaelmas Reef:

- Michaelmas Reef No Dorries Detached (Marine National Park Zone) Special Management Area.

1. Background

The Cairns Area Plan of Management was gazetted in 1998 after being prepared in accordance with the *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975*. The Cairns Planning Area comprises many places, biological communities and species of high nature conservation, scientific and cultural value. The Plan aims to protect and conserve these values, while allowing for a range of opportunities.

An important strategy of the Plan is detailed, site-specific management of an identified area. Site planning is required at a number of Locations in the Cairns Area to provide for a balance of recreational and commercial access consistent with the protection of conservation, scientific and cultural values.

Site plans were prepared for the following Locations: Lizard Island Localities 2 and 3; Opal Reef; Tongue Reef; Agincourt Reefs; Hastings Locality 1; Briggs Reef; Norman Reef; Michaelmas Cay Locality; Upolu Cay Reef; Green Island Reef Locality 1; Flynn Reef; Milln Reef; Moore Reef Locality 2; Normanby Island Reef; Russell and Round Island Reefs.

Site planning occurred progressively and draft plans were presented for comment to all the interested parties. Site plans for Lizard Island Localities 2 and 3 were finalised in August 1999, while the remaining draft plans were discussed at site planning meetings held in Cairns and Port Douglas from 11 to 14 December 2000. All comments received were considered in the preparation of the final plans.

2. Site planning objectives

The following summarises the objectives of site planning in the Cairns Area:

- Provide an appropriate balance of private and public access opportunities
- Provide for Reef Anchorages where reasonable access will not be inhibited by moorings.
- Minimise damage to fish spawning aggregation sites and disturbance of fish spawning aggregations when determining the location of Reef Anchorages, moorings and pontoons.
- Minimise the impact on significant dugong habitat when determining the location of Reef Anchorages, moorings and pontoons.
- Minimise disturbance to significant cultural and heritage values when determining the location of Reef Anchorages, moorings and pontoons.
- Ensure that Reef Anchorages, moorings or pontoons are not located within an existing research or monitoring site if the project design would be adversely effected by anchoring.
- Minimise damage to coral from anchoring when determining the location of Reef Anchorages, moorings and pontoons.
- Determine a maximum number of moorings and pontoons for Locations with no limit (refer to Schedules 6 and 7 of the Cairns Area Plan of Management).

Note: Approval for new private moorings and pontoons will remain subject to detailed impact assessment.

3. Site description and map

Michaelmas Cay (16-060) is located approximately 40 kilometres north-east of Cairns (Figure 1). The cay is a significant nesting site for thousands of seabirds, it is the only local rookery supporting breeding populations of sooty terns and common noddies.

Michaelmas Cay Reef is a crescentic type reef with an area of 3,000 ha at latitude 16°35' longitude 146°01'.

The Michaelmas Cay Locality is the reefs and waters within one nautical mile of Michaelmas Cay.

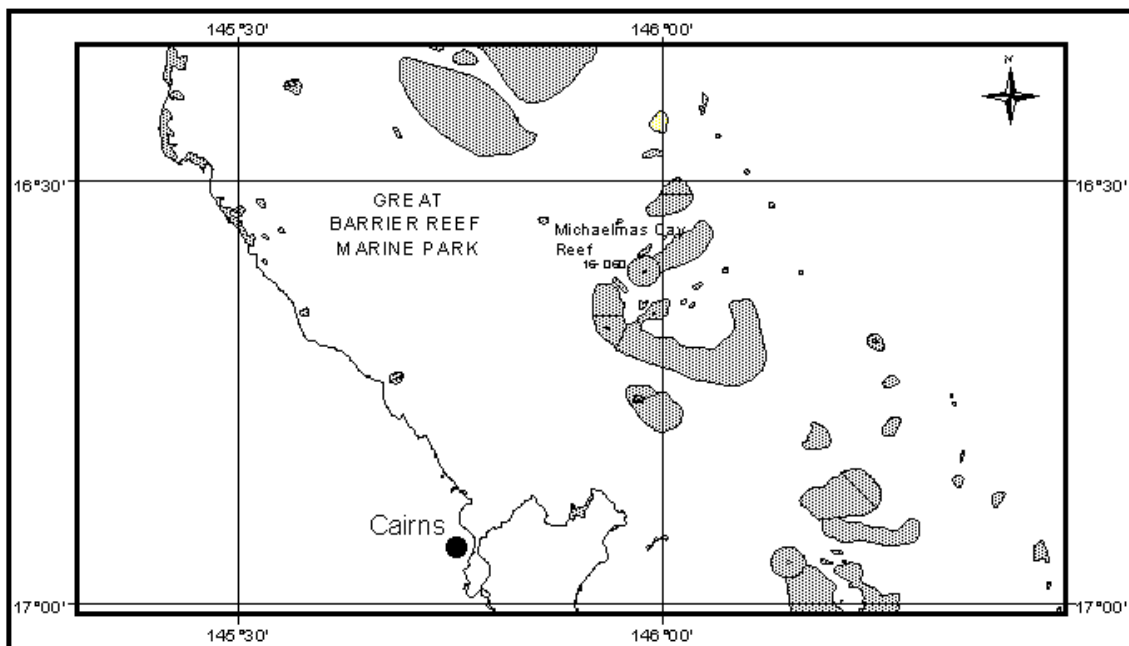


Figure 1: Location of Michaelmas Cay Reef in the Offshore Cairns Sector

4. Values

4.1 Coral

Michaelmas Cay Reef has been surveyed annually by the Australian Institute of Marine Science as part of their Long-term Monitoring Program since 1986. The coral cover shows an apparent decline from moderate to low levels in the initial years of survey and has remained generally low since this time.

Crown of thorn starfish populations observed on this reef have generally been observed on the south western corner of the reef. Anecdotal evidence from tourism operators suggests that some sites have been severely affected by COTS with little live hard coral cover remaining. There are isolated records of coral bleaching on this reef.

4.2 Seagrass

There have been no official seagrass surveys conducted at Michaelmas Reef. No seagrass was found during QPWS site surveys.

4.3 Fish spawning

Fish spawning aggregation sites have been identified at Michaelmas Cay Locality. Further research and monitoring will be undertaken to establish the significance of these sites.

4.4 Commercial

All fishing and collecting of shells, coral or other marine species is prohibited on Michaelmas Cay and the reefs and waters surrounding it.

4.5 Recreation

Michaelmas Cay is a popular destination for local yachts, with a high number of visits occurring each year.

4.6 Tourism

Michaelmas Cay and Reef experience high levels of commercial tourism use. The waters adjacent to the Cay provides good anchorage. Seven tourism operators hold permits to visit on a daily basis, two operators hold roving permits and 113 permits are held by the Cairns Professional Game Fishing Association.

There are 19 permitted mooring systems in the Michaelmas Cay Locality. During the 1998/99 year, the cay and reef was visited by 59,986 tourists.

4.7 Cultural

Michaelmas Cay and reefs are part of the traditional sea country of the Yirrandji, Mandingabay Yidinji and Gungandji people.

4.8 Research and monitoring

Michaelmas Cay Reef is surveyed annually as part of the Australian Institute of Marine Science Long-term Monitoring Program..

There is one research permit for Michaelmas Cay Reef (G99/281)

5. Summary of submissions received – Cairns Area Plan of Management

The draft Cairns Area Plan of Management was released for public comment in August 1997. A total of 160 submissions were received on the Plan. Of the 160 submissions received 2 referred to Normanby Island Reef, and 10 referred to the Frankland Islands in general.

Examples of comments received:

“...reducing commercial usage of significant sites such as Michaelmas Cayis strongly supported” (submission 1059).

“Current operations are far in excess of the restrictions contemplated by the Plan” (submission 1141).

“...most concerned that the proposed management plan designates Michaelmas as low Use area. These are the primary reefs we will use for viewing in the offshore Cairns area” (submission 1113).

“...recommend that schedule 5 be amended to remove any access to the Michaelmas Cay locality by booking” (submission 1146).

6. Issues

6.1 Appropriate balance of use (mooring and anchoring)

There are currently a total of 15 permitted moorings within the heavily used north side of Michaelmas Cay Locality. Access to the cay by recreational users is currently difficult due to the dense clustering of moorings around the entrance channel to the cay.

6.2 Protection of conservation values

Anchoring or inappropriate mooring placement and design can damage fragile coral communities. The designation of reef anchorages and pre-selection of potential mooring sites required an assessment of the bio-physical characteristics of identified areas to ensure that conservation values are upheld. Broad surveys of all potential sites were conducted and their suitability as mooring sites or reef anchorages was assessed.

Fish spawning aggregation sites (FSASs) have been identified at the Locality. There is potential for disturbance of spawning activity by tourism activity during spawning events. FSASs will be considered in the selection of new mooring or reef anchorage sites.

7. Current management strategies

7.1 Cairns Section Zoning Plan (Zoning Map: BRA Q156)

The reefs and waters surrounding Michealmas Cay are within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and are zoned as National Park under the Zoning Plan. Activities allowed include diving, boating, anchoring and photography. Activities which are prohibited in this zone include line fishing, trolling, bait gathering and netting, commercial fishing, spearfishing and collection of coral or shells. The reefs and waters surrounding Michaelmas Cay are also within the no structures sub zone.

7.2 Cairns Area Plan of Management

The Cairns Area Plan of Management was released by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority in June 1998 to provide new strategies for protecting values of the offshore areas from Cairns and Port Douglas, the Ribbon Reefs, Lizard Island and the Frankland Islands. The following is a summary of the major strategies in the Cairns Area Plan relevant to Michaelmas Cay Reef

- Michaelmas Cay Reef has been identified as a low use location due to its high natural, scientific and cultural values. Group sizes are limited to 15 people.
- Because of its special values, Michaelmas Cay Reef has been defined as a Sensitive Location. Tourism operators without eligibility must book to access Michaelmas Cay and there is a limit of 1 vessel per day. Tourism operators may not book to visit a Sensitive Location on more than 50 days per year. No aircraft operations are permitted in a Sensitive Location.
- 19 permitted moorings are in place at Michaelmas Cay Reef. Anchoring is not allowed within 50 metres of moorings or within 200 metres of pontoons.
- Three Reef Anchorages have been identified at Michaelmas Cay Reef. Reef Anchorages are preferred anchoring sites where the Authority will not permit the installation of any new private moorings or pontoons. The purpose of designated Reef Anchorages is to encourage the use of places that are least likely to cause damage to coral and to provide some places where access will not be restricted by the presence of moorings.
- Vessels or aircraft are subject to a 6 knot speed limit

7.3 Michaelmas Cay National Park Management Plan

Michaelmas Cay National Park is dedicated under the Queensland *Nature Conservation Act 1992*. The primary purpose of management of the cay is to preserve the highly significant natural values of the cay, and in particular the breeding seabird populations and their habitat, while allowing for reasonable use. The management plan sets out the considerations, outcomes and strategies that are proposed to form the basis on which day-to-day management decisions are made. The policy in relation to recreation and tourism states that “*no increase in permitted use level*” is to take place at the cay.

8. Site planning strategies (refer to figure 2)

8.1 Reef Anchorage

Much of the sandy substrate at the back reef area surveyed would be suitable for a Reef Anchorage, although some bommies exist in this area. Protection of coral from anchor damage is provided in the CAPOM. A Reef Anchorage will be designated as marked in figure 2. Schedule 8 of the CAPOM will be amended to reflect the change.

8.2 Public moorings

The dense clustering of existing private moorings makes it difficult for recreational users and QPWS patrol vessels to access the Locality close to the cay, especially during high use periods. To facilitate public and departmental access to the cay, the installation of a public mooring at or near the site shown in figure 2 will be investigated.

8.3 Private moorings

The Locality is in high demand by tourism operators due to its close proximity to Cairns, access to a sand cay, natural attractions and sheltered conditions in the lee of the cay. However, the cay is also recognised as a significant sea bird breeding and roosting site and existing use levels are already high at this Sensitive Location. New private moorings will not be permitted at the Locality. Schedule 6 in the CAPOM will be amended to reflect the existing permitted numbers of moorings (ie.19).

9. References

- Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service, 1998. *Michaelmas and Upolu Cays National Park Management Plan*.
- Sweatman, H. Bass, D, Cheal, A, Coleman, G, Miller, I, Ninio, R, Osborne, K, Oxley, W, Ryan, D, Thompson, A, and Tomkins P. 1998, *Long-term Monitoring of the Great Barrier Reef - Status Report Number 3*. Australian Institute of Marine Science. Townsville
- Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority 1998, *Cairns Area Plan of Management*, Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority. Townsville
- Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority 1997, *Submissions to the Cairns Area Plan of Management*, Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, Townsville (unpublished).



Figure 2: Michaelmas Cay Locality Site Map