

Barrier Reef Blunderland

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The Great Barrier Reef is the largest contiguous area of coral reefs in the world. . It is also among the most pristine of reefs areas. Distance, weather and a relatively small population mean most of the GBR is rarely even visited . Of the 2900 reefs in the complex only a few dozen are regularly used for tourism and the total annual fish harvest per Km² is less than 1% of what reefs elsewhere commonly sustain.

The Barrier Reef is a beloved national icon but very few persons are truly familiar with it. Most Australians have never seen it and of those who have, the overwhelming majority have only paid a brief visit to the readily accessible tourist destinations. Even among those charged with “managing” the reef, few have actual experience of it amounting to more than a few weeks at a few locations.

Scientific understanding of reefs is also only patchy and highly specialized. Only a literal handful of persons have the scientific background, plus widespread and long term experience necessary to make reasonable judgments of reef conditions. Even then assessment is difficult due to the highly variable nature of reef communities. What is often seen as evidence of human detriment is either a natural condition of reefs in a particular situation or the result of natural events such as storms, floods, and population fluctuations of various organisms that appear unnatural to those of limited experience.

Over the past four decades hardly a year has passed without some dire threat to the GBR being declared. Crown of thorns starfish, overfishing, tourism, anchor damage, pesticides, fertilizer, cattle, cane, oil shale, coastal development, roads, marinas, shipping, global warming and sundry other menaces have been repeatedly declared and “experts” trotted out to support them. None of these things have been dealt with in any effective manner yet the reef remains much as it has always been. Credibility however, never seems wanting for the another threat nor more experts to offer opinions.

Those who regularly use the reef suspect from their own direct experience most of this is b.s. but they have little voice or credibility as experts. Recreational fishermen, commercial fishermen, divers, spearfishermen, and tourist operators each know they do little damage themselves but all have been guilty of pointing a finger at the others. Everyone too likes to talk about the good old days when the water was always crystal clear and fish so thick you could walk on them. Never mind that catch statistics don't show this, it's the good stuff we remember. It's also always good for old timers to have something over newcomers.

The academic community is little better. For a start they need to stay on the good side of the establishment to get grants and permits. Then too grants to study threatening problems are much more likely to receive funding than are investigations of a more esoteric nature. What starts as speculation ends up having to be defended . From there it's easy to begin firmly believing what started as only possibility. Beyond this, science

also has its fads and fashions with ideas becoming widely accepted at one point only to be later revised or discarded. Reef studies are no exception.

Meanwhile GBRMPA has flourished. With a broad mandate to protect a national icon., no real threats to it, and almost universal ignorance of the reef or of any actual results of their management they have had a free hand to imagine threats, create regulations and declare successes. In reality almost all of their generous budget is spent on maintaining and promoting themselves plus covering the deficit of their aquarium and theater complex. Only about 10% of their budget goes to research and surveys to produce the real information necessary to make competent decisions regarding the reef. Even this is contracted out and results ignored if they do not support the established agenda.

In short they have been operating in a climate of ignorance employing hypothetical solutions to problems that exist only in the imagination. In truth if GBRMPA never existed at all the situation on the reef would be little different. The only real world result of all this has been to create an ever increasing morass of regulations, permits and fees. With broad power, little oversight or accountability, a healthy budget, idyllic working conditions and no duty other than a self defined agenda it's a bureaucrats dream..

We need better than this. The GBR is indeed a national treasure. GBRMPA needs to become a hands-on manager focusing on identifying and dealing with real problems. Extensive time on the reef should be part of the job. Research and surveys aimed at providing the basic knowledge necessary to competent management should be a core activity not just an optional add-on. Most importantly the results of such work should be applied wherever it leads not just when it suits what has already been decided.

The current RAP plan should be put on hold. No clearly identified problem is addressed by it. The results of existing green zones have not been properly evaluated, no evidence of overfishing has been offered, no reduction in biodiversity has been observed or is even suspected. The surveys necessary to establish truly representative areas have not been conducted. The results of the large scale effects of fishing survey that has been underway for several years are not yet available. There is no crisis demanding immediate attention. Getting it right is important. Ramming through an ill founded program on a massive scale with no urgent necessity is not the kind of management the GBR needs.

The effect of closed zones needs to be monitored and evaluated on an experimental basis before applying it large scale. The current plan will concentrate fishing pressure by about one-third as much again in the areas left open. It amounts to wholesale environmental meddling for no good reason and with no idea of what the effect will be or even a plan in place to monitor it. Calling this a precautionary measure defies common sense. It is indeed just the opposite.

The ongoing zoning, reviewing and re-zoning of the entire reef has become a major never ending activity of GBRMPA. It is also is a classic example of bureaucracy at work. A zoning department was created to do a job but when the job was done instead of it being

scaled back it began a long term review. Now it's a re-zoning, Next there will be another review.

The entire organization needs a shake up. It should be made to become reef oriented, not just another group of office workers. Competent management requires first hand knowledge and experience of the business at hand. An injection of broad knowledge and experience of reefs into high level management is sorely required. The focus on permits and zoning should be de-emphasized. Surveys, monitoring and research deserve much greater emphasis. Decisions should be based on what is actually happening on the reef not theories, fads and opinions. Intervention and regulation should be applied only where a demonstrated need exists and results should be monitored and evaluated. It is time too that provision was made to seek oversight and advice from reef users and researchers with genuine relevant knowledge and experience.

A major function of the aquarium should be as a research facility. This would not preclude the current public viewing function but that alone can simply not justify its ongoing existence. Not only could it become a valuable tool for research the research could in turn greatly enhance its interest to visitors.

GBRMPA needs restructuring to serve the reef, reef users and the regional economy not just itself. It can become a real asset or it can be just another obstacle to our use and enjoyment of the reef. It's up to us.