

Operationalising the Outstanding Universal Value of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area: addressing some challenges raised by the World Heritage Committee

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As the world's most extensive coral reef ecosystem, the Great Barrier Reef is unique in its size. It is also a significant global resource, particularly in terms of its ecosystem services but also due to the fact it generates over AUD\$5 billion for the Australian economy every year. Whilst coral reef, mangrove and seagrass habitats occur elsewhere on the planet, no other World Heritage property contains such biological diversity.

The Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area (GBRWHA) was declared a World Heritage property in 1981, internationally recognised by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee (the Committee) as being of Outstanding Universal Value (OUV). The GBRWHA was listed as it met all four natural World Heritage criteria (criteria) for OUV, which in 1981 were summarised as:

- major stages of earth's evolutionary history
- superlative natural phenomena or exceptional natural beauty
- significant ongoing geological processes, biological evolution and man's interaction with his natural environment
- habitats where populations of rare or endangered species still survive.

Today there are ten criteria used to define whether a property is of Outstanding Universal Value. The wording of the four 'natural' criteria differ from that applied in 1981 and they have also been re-numbered so today they are known as criteria (vii)-(x); the other six criteria are considered to be the 'cultural' criteria. Some properties are considered to be 'mixed' sites being listed for both their natural and cultural values.

Table 1 lists the sixteen World Heritage properties in Australia (as at 2012) that have natural values recognised as being of OUV as part of their listing.



Aerial view of Heron Island and Heron Reef, with the edge of Wistari Reef visible on right.
Photo © Commonwealth of Australia (GBRMPA)

The Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area

While coral reefs initially made the area famous, reefs comprise only about seven per cent of the overall GBRWHA (GBRMPA, 2009). The balance is an extraordinary variety of other marine habitats and communities ranging from shallow inshore areas and non-reef areas, including seagrass beds, to deep oceanic areas over 250 km offshore and deeper than 2000m. The exceptional biodiversity over such a latitudinal range and cross shelf variation makes the GBRWHA one of the richest and most complex natural ecosystems on earth (Australian Government, 2012).

To date the GBRWHA is one of only a handful of the 188 natural and 29 mixed World Heritage properties listed globally (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2012) that have been inscribed on the World Heritage List meeting all four natural criteria (the Tasmanian Wilderness, Wet Tropics and Shark Bay World Heritage Areas are three other examples). North Queensland is also one of only a few places in the world where two properties abut – the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area abuts the GBRWHA and provides an important ‘upstream’ buffer for part of the GBR.

The area of the GBRWHA is 348 000 km², extending from the top of Cape York to just north of Fraser Island. The western boundary of the property follows low water mark on the Queensland coast and extends seaward to the outer boundary of the Marine Park, beyond the edge of the continental shelf. As of mid-2010, the GBRWHA was no longer the world’s largest World Heritage Area (today two others, both marine, are larger); the GBRWHA remains however one of the best known World Heritage properties and arguably one of the most comprehensively managed.

Over 99 per cent of the GBRWHA is within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, which is under Federal jurisdiction. It includes some 1050 islands and their surrounding waters that occur within the outer boundary, but only 70 of these are Commonwealth islands and therefore form part of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (the remaining 980 islands are under State jurisdiction). The GBRWHA also includes all port areas and Queensland internal waters that are seaward of low water mark along the mainland coast, and these areas are also under State jurisdiction.

Management of the Reef is therefore jurisdictionally complex and involves a range of Australian (Federal) and Queensland (State) government agencies, with the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) being the primary adviser to the Australian Government for the care and development of the both Marine Park and the GBRWHA.

Evolution of the criteria for OUV and its significance for the Great Barrier Reef

Table 2 shows how the numbering and the wording of the four ‘natural’ World Heritage criteria have evolved since 1981 and how they differ from the wording and numbering of the criteria which appear in the ‘Operational Guidelines’ today (IUCN, ICOMOS, ICROM and World Heritage Centre, 2010).

Understanding the wording of the criteria at the time of inscription is fundamental for most properties but is of particular significance for the Great Barrier Reef. The specific wording in the approved Retrospective Statement of OUV under criteria (ix) that refers to “Man’s interaction with his natural environment” is of particular significance to Indigenous people who have lived in the area for 40,000 years and have strong connections to what we know today as the Great Barrier Reef.

Despite the fact the retrospective wording for the Statement of OUV has been formally approved, the reference to Indigenous interests in the Great Barrier Reef is often overlooked as it no longer forms part of the current ‘natural’ world heritage criteria and, in other properties more recently inscribed, has evolved into the concept of a “cultural landscape”.

The numbering of the criteria in the approved Statement of OUV refers to the contemporary numbering in use today (to facilitate comparisons with other World Heritage properties) but it is important to recognise the wording in the statement is based on the criteria in place at the time of inscription.

Recent concerns raised by the World Heritage Committee

In 2011 the UNESCO World Heritage Committee considered the GBRWHA following concerns raised by NGOs about developments occurring along the Queensland coast. The Committee’s 2011 decision expressed “extreme concern” about one such area of development (Curtis Island near Gladstone) and included a request that Australia undertake a strategic assessment of developments and invite a joint reactive monitoring mission of IUCN and UNESCO to the GBRWHA (World Heritage Committee, 2011). The mission occurred in March 2012 and investigated first-hand the issues affecting the property.

In July 2012 the Committee considered a further State of Conservation report for the GBRWHA which led to a subsequent decision relating to the property. This 2012 decision comprised eleven parts, many of which were recommendations requiring implementation, including consideration of all the recommendations in the mission report (World Heritage Committee, 2012).

One of the key challenges arising from the 2012 Committee's decision includes the need to establish the OUV of the GBRWHA both as *"a clearly defined and central element within the protection and management system"* ... and as *"the principal reference for all plans and legislation relating to the protection and management of the property"*.

Outlined below is an approach developed by the GBRMPA to 'operationalise' OUV; this approach has now been recognised as being of relevance for other world heritage properties.

Outstanding Universal Value

The term Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) is the fundamental cornerstone for many aspects of World Heritage including nominations, periodic reporting, etc. OUV is defined in paragraph 49 of the 'Operational Guidelines for Implementation of the World Heritage Convention' (the Guidelines) as *"cultural and/or natural significance which is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity"* (UNESCO, 2008).

OUV is used around 90 times in the Guidelines and is central to the credibility of the World Heritage system. To be deemed to be of OUV, *"a property must also meet the conditions of integrity and/or authenticity and must have an adequate protection and management system to ensure its safeguarding"* (s. 78 of the Guidelines, but emphasis added). Terms like 'integrity' are also defined in the Guidelines.

Red-and-Black Anemonefish (*Amphiprion melanopus*) amongst anemone tentacles on Agincourt Reef, Photograph © Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, Commonwealth of Australia (GBRMPA)

Given the centrality of OUV, all World Heritage properties are required to have a Statement of OUV (the Statement). Given the GBRWHA was listed prior to the requirement for such a statement, a Retrospective Statement of OUV for the GBRWHA was developed and approved by the Committee in 2012 (Australian Government, 2012). This Retrospective Statement for the GBRWHA was prepared, in accordance with advice from IUCN and the World Heritage Centre, using the criteria that were in place in 1981 rather than those in place in 2012 (See Table 2).

Today few managers have utilised the Statement for their properties effectively; many managers consider the Statement is somewhat high level and nebulous, or do not understand how it might assist or help to prioritise their planning and management efforts.

To assist in 'operationalising' the Statement in the GBRWHA, the first task was to break the complex Statement of OUV into smaller more understandable components. This involved breaking down the full approved Statement text into smaller 'excerpts' for each of the four natural criteria and integrity; once this had been done, then the approach was to sequentially:

- identify key examples of values or attributes against each Statement excerpt
- identify the factors affecting those values
- prioritise the highest priority threats
- consider what are the priority management needs to address the highest priority threats

An example of applying this format for the GBRWHA is given in Figure 1.



| 2008 criteria | Excerpt from SoOUV for GBRWHA | Example of values/ attributes in GBR (Most appro. 'indicator' value shown in U/case and bold) | CURRENT STATUS of indicator value | KEY FACTORS AFFECTING VALUE | KEY ACTIONS to address factors | Possible Trigger levels? (note most should be considered in a cumulative manner not as singular issue) |
|--|--|---|---|---|--|--|
| (viii) be outstanding examples representing major stages of earth's history, including the record of life, significant on-going geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features; | (a) globally outstanding example of an ecosystem that has evolved over millennia | REEF BUILDING | Outlook 2009 – GOOD "the rate of reef building may be beginning to slow" | Climate change espec ocean acidification | Build resilience by reducing other key pressures | |
| | (b) area has been exposed and flooded by at least four glacial and interglacial cycles, and over the past 15,000 years reefs have grown on the continental shelf | SEA LEVEL CHANGE | Outlook 2009 – Currently OK but likely to increase "Sea levels have risen and are projected to rise further" "...rising at near the upper end of projections" Significant for shallow habitats that are strongly influenced by sea level | Combination of thermal expansion of ocean and the addition of water volume to the ocean from melting glaciers and ice sheets (Greenland and Antarctica) | Increase stakeholder and community awareness | Increasing beach erosion or inundation in known turtle nesting sites? |
| | (c) today the GBR forms the world's largest coral reef ecosystem... including examples of all stages of reef development... | inshore reefs mid-shelf reefs OUTER REEFS | Outlook 2009 – GOOD "Some inshore habitats (such as coral reefs) have deteriorated... this is likely to have affected species that rely on these habitats" | Climate change espec sea level rise | Build resilience by reducing other key pressures | |
| | (d) processes of geological and geomorphological evolution are well represented, linking continental islands, coral cays and reefs | OCEAN ACIDITY Coral cays | Outlook 2009 – Almost certain to affect different groups/species "...the world's oceans are becoming more acidic affecting the growth of corals" "Acidification of all GBR waters .. is an emerging serious issue which is likely to worsen in the future" | Climate change espec ocean acidification and increasing water temperature stress | Build resilience by reducing other key pressures espec in inshore areas Increase stakeholder/ community awareness | |

Figure 1 – Format developed to operationalise OUV in the GBRWHA as applied to part of the 'criteria (viii)' of the Statement of OUV

Discussions with managers in other World Heritage properties have indicated such a structured approach helps them more readily identify the key values or attributes for their property and prioritise their management actions. Advisory Committee members at three other properties have also supported the approach recognising it helps to directly link the property's values to management operations, clarifies

the research priorities for the property and ensures that the committees themselves are focussing on the World Heritage values of the property when giving advice.

Building on this approach, a draft assessment approach has also been developed in the GBRWHA assessing the current condition and trends for excerpts that collectively comprise the Statement of OUV for the entire property (Day, in prep).

The following statements were used to provide a grade for the current condition of each of the individual excerpts:

- **Very Good** - All elements necessary to maintain the OUV are essentially intact, and their overall condition is stable or improving. Available evidence indicates only minor, if any, disturbance to this component of OUV.
- **Good** - Some loss or alteration of the elements necessary to maintain the OUV has occurred, but their overall condition is not causing persistent or substantial effects on this component of OUV.

- **Poor** - Loss or alteration of many elements necessary to maintain OUV has occurred, which is leading to a significant reduction in this component of the OUV.
- **Very poor** - Loss or alteration of a majority of elements necessary to maintain the OUV has occurred and has caused a major loss of the OUV.

This grading system is based on one initially applied in the 2009 Outlook Report (GBRMPA, 2009) but refined by IUCN to assess natural World Heritage sites (IUCN, 2012) and further adapted by GBRMPA as part of the Strategic Assessment process currently underway.

| Excerpt from Statement of OUV | Summary | Very good | Good | Poor | Very poor |
|---|--|-----------|------|------|-----------|
| <i>One of the richest and most complex natural ecosystems on earth, and one of the most significant for biodiversity conservation</i> | The Great Barrier Reef remains a complex ecosystem, rich in biodiversity. Some key values are under pressure. | | ↓ | | |
| <i>Tens of thousands of marine and terrestrial species, many of which are of global conservation significance.</i> | Populations of most species appear to be intact. Some populations (dugong, sharks, seabirds and marine turtles) are known to have seriously declined | | ↓ | | |
| <i>The world's most complex expanse of coral reefs... Contain some 400 species of corals in 60 genera</i> | There remains over 400 species of hard coral and at least 150 species of soft corals, sea fans and sea pens, living in a complex reef system. There has been a serious decline in coral reef health in the southern inshore area. | | ↓ | | |
| <i>Large ecologically important inter-reefal areas. The shallower marine areas support half the world's diversity of mangroves ...</i> | The Region's mangrove forests remain very diverse with at least 39 mangrove species and hybrids recorded. | | ↔ | | |
| <i>Large ecologically important inter-reefal areas. The shallower marine areas support ... many seagrass species</i> | Seagrass diversity remains; however, there have been recent severe declines in abundance and community composition in southern inshore areas. | | | ↓ | |
| <i>Waters also provide major feeding grounds for one of the world's largest populations of the threatened dugong</i> | The northern population of dugong remains healthy. There has been a substantial decline in dugongs in waters south of Cooktown since the 1960s. | | | ↓ | |
| <i>At least 15 species of whales occur here</i> | Most whale species appear to have intact populations although there is limited monitoring of most species | | ↓↑ | | |
| <i>At least 16 species of dolphins occur here</i> | There is limited information for most dolphin species, but two inshore dolphin species are known to be at risk. | | | ↓ | |
| <i>A significant area for humpback whale calving</i> | The humpback whale population is recovering strongly after being decimated by whaling. | ↑ | | | |
| <i>Six of the world's seven species of marine turtle occur in the Great Barrier Reef.</i> | Populations of five of the six species of marine turtle have declined. Although the populations of some species appear to be no longer declining or are now increasing, there remain serious concerns about declines in other less common species. | | | ↓ | |
| <i>The world's largest green turtle breeding site at Raine Island, the Great Barrier Reef also includes many regionally important marine turtle rookeries</i> | The nesting component of some species is increasing or stable. Nesting may be in decline for the northern green turtle stock and hawksbills. | | | ↔ | |
| <i>Some 242 species of birds have been recorded in the Great Barrier Reef. Twenty-two seabird species breed on cays and some continental islands, and some of these breeding sites are globally significant</i> | Current evidence suggests that for at least some, and possibly the majority, of seabird species, significant Great Barrier Reef breeding colonies are in decline. | | | ↓ | |
| <i>The continental islands support thousands of plant species, while the coral cays also have their own distinct flora and fauna.</i> | Plant diversity is generally well protected with about half the islands within national parks | | ↓ | | |

Figure 2 – 'Report card' format developed to assess current state and trends of OUV for the GBRWHA – example shown has been applied to excerpts from criterion (ix) within the Statement of OUV

Assessment of current condition and trends of OUV has now been drafted for all components of the Statement of OUV for the GBRWHA. Part of the draft assessment for Criterion (ix) is shown in Figure 2 with the grades shown in the four columns on the right hand side.

The overall trend when comparing the 2012 situation with the baseline of 1981 (date of inscription of GBRWHA on the World Heritage list) is shown in Figure 2 by the direction of the arrows. It is also apparent that only one excerpt in Figure 2 is considered as 'Very good' when its current condition is benchmarked against 1981, six excerpts are 'Good' but an equal number (6) have been graded as 'Poor'.

When the grades are averaged over the entire GBRWHA for each of the components of the Statement (i.e. the four criteria and integrity), the assessment varies for the various components of OUV:

- Only one criterion has been assessed overall as **'Very Good'** i.e. *outstanding examples representing the major stages of the Earth's evolutionary history* [Criterion (viii) today]
- Two criteria as well as Integrity are all considered overall to be **'Good'** i.e.
 - *unique, rare or superlative natural phenomena, formations or features or areas of exceptional natural beauty, such as superlative examples of the most important ecosystems to man* [Criterion (vii) today]; and
 - *outstanding examples representing significant ongoing geological processes, biological evolution and man's interaction with his natural environment* [Criterion (ix) today]
- One criterion is considered to be of **'Poor'** i.e. *habitats where populations of rare or endangered species of plants and animals still survive* [Criterion (x) today].
- Despite the fact that four of the five average gradings that collectively make up the entire OUV have been assessed as 'Very Good' or 'Good', of greater concern in the GBRWHA is the fact that some 54 per cent of the excerpts assessed (i.e. indicative of the five key components of OUV) are showing a deteriorating trend compared to the 1981 baseline (Day, in prep)].

GBRMPA is currently preparing a Strategic Assessment for the GBRWHA and will soon be preparing the next Outlook Report, so it is intended that this approach for OUV will also be applied within those documents. In the Strategic Assessment, further information is provided for each excerpt of the Statement indicating:

- a confidence level regarding the information used to justify the grade (this has been adapted from the 2012 *National State of Environment* reporting with some amendments to the definitions applied); and
- an indication in the level of knowledge today for each element compared to 1981.

Other challenges in the recent World Heritage Committee decisions

Some of the other challenges emerging from the Committee's decisions for the GBRWHA include the need to:

- better address cumulative impacts
- develop and adopt (at Ministerial level) clearly defined and scientifically justified targets
- adopt a strategic approach instead of individual decision-making
- when a development is proposed in or adjacent to a World Heritage property:
 - to consider all elements of OUV in the decision making processes
 - to demonstrate the proposal will lead to net benefits for the property
 - to undertake detailed assessments of alternative options for all proposals, including the environmental, social and economic costs
 - to ensure development is undertaken consistent with highest internationally recognised standards of best practice.

Some lessons learned

- OUV should be considered as being distributed throughout the whole of the property, rather than being found at discrete locations unevenly distributed throughout the property (as Lucas *et al.* point out, this concept means that "losing a single blade of seagrass does not result in the OUV of the property being significantly impacted"! (Lucas, Webb, Valentine and Marsh, 1997).
- Using a four-point grading system is best for an assessment of OUV; it stops 'fence-sitting' in the middle forcing a grade on either side of the mid-point.
- To provide the most effective assessment of the elements of the Statement, the grade should relate to the entire element rather than just the indicative value that has been chosen.
- Given that the World Heritage values of a property are assessed in sum total, protection and management which truly implements the intention of the World Heritage Convention should focus upon the property as a whole - as distinct from focusing just on one specific or particular value in only one location.



The Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area is a vital stronghold of marine turtles with six of the seven species of marine turtles found in its waters. Photo © Commonwealth of Australia (GBRMFA)

| Date Inscribed | Area/property | Criteria for OUV | | | | | | | | | |
|----------------|---|------------------|----|-----|----|---|----|-----|------|----|---|
| | | i | ii | iii | iv | v | vi | vii | viii | ix | x |
| 1981 | Great Barrier Reef | | | | | | | | | | |
| | Kakadu National Park (ext 1987, 1992) | | | | | | | | | | |
| | Willandra Lakes Region | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1982 | Tasmanian Wilderness (ext 1989) | | | | | | | | | | |
| | Lord Howe Island Group | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1986 | Gondwana Rainforests of Australia (ext 1994) | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1987 | Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park (ext 1994) | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1988 | Wet Tropics of Queensland | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1991 | Shark Bay, Western Australia | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1992 | Fraser Island | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1994 | Australian Fossil Mammal Sites (Riversleigh / Naracoorte) | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1997 | Heard and McDonald Islands | | | | | | | | | | |
| | Macquarie Island | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2000 | Greater Blue Mountains Area | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2003 | Purnululu National Park | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2011 | Ningaloo Coast | | | | | | | | | | |

Table 1 – Australia's natural World Heritage properties and the criteria for which they were listed

| 1981 criteria and numbering (wording applicable to GBRWHA) | Equivalent 2008 criteria and numbering (wording to be applied to a new WH property today) |
|---|--|
| (i) - be outstanding examples representing the major stages of the earth's evolutionary history | (viii) be outstanding examples representing major stages of earth's history, including the record of life, significant on-going geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features; |
| (ii) - be outstanding examples representing significant ongoing geological processes, biological evolution and man's interaction with his natural environment | (ix) be outstanding examples representing significant ongoing ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals; |
| (iii) - contain unique, rare or superlative natural phenomena, formations or features or areas of exceptional natural beauty, such as superlative examples of the most important ecosystems to man | (vii) contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance; |
| (iv) - be habitats where populations of rare or endangered species of plants and animals still survive | (x) contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation. |

Table 2 - Comparison of how the criteria for OUV have changed since the GBRWHA was inscribed in 1981 (from ICOMOS, ICROM and World Heritage Centre, 2010)

- OUV is singular, so it is not appropriate to refer to 'Outstanding Universal Values'. It is, however, appropriate to refer to the 'heritage values' or the 'natural values' for which a property has been inscribed.

Conclusions

The interest shown by the World Heritage Committee in the GBRWHA in recent times has increased the focus on many aspects of management applying to all Australian World Heritage properties, not the least being the application of OUV, what it actually means and how it might be more effectively applied.

The request from the Committee for OUV to be "... a clearly defined and central element within the protection and management system" has led to the development of several new and innovative approaches in the GBRWHA. These approaches are helping to contextualise the OUV and focus the efforts of the managers and advisory committee members on the priority issues facing the property.

Discussions with managers from World Heritage properties elsewhere in Australia and internationally, indicate these approaches, even though they are still evolving, are assisting them to better understand the role OUV plays in their properties.

There is a continuing need to consider OUV in a holistic way for each property (rather than a narrow focus on, say, just corals for the GBRWHA) and the grading statement approach, building on that developed for the 2009 Outlook Report, provides such a broader contextualisation while also allowing a quick visualisation or 'report card' of the current condition and trends of a property.

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Biography

Jon Day is currently Director for Planning, Heritage and Sustainable Funding within GBRMPA. Since 1986, Jon has undertaken a variety of planning and management roles in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. Jon has long been associated with world heritage having also worked for four years in Kakadu WHA, helped develop the current Periodic Reporting process used in all WH properties, and represented Australia on the World Heritage Committee

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