

Community engagement and the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area

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The World Heritage Convention (Article 5a) specifically asks Convention states “to adopt a general policy which aims to give the cultural and natural heritage a function in the life of the community and to integrate the protection of that heritage into comprehensive planning programmes” (UNESCO, 2013)

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (the Authority) recognises this obligation and that community based collaboration is a crucial element in conserving the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area (GBRWHA), as well as securing a healthier future for the Reef.

Getting local communities and traditional owners involved in both protection and management has been one of the success stories in the GBRWHA. Individuals and organisations who use and enjoy the Reef for their cultural, lifestyle or livelihood activities are demonstrating their commitment and voluntarily taking practical steps every day to help safeguard its future.

The Great Barrier Reef, an amazing place – but facing some challenges

The Great Barrier Reef (the Reef) is a special place; World Heritage listed and home to thousands of species of plants and animals. The GBRWHA covers over 348,000 sq kms and extends 2,300 kms along the Queensland coastline from the tip of Cape York down to just north of Bundaberg. It is recognised as one of the richest and most diverse areas on Earth and is also a vital economic hub. This multi-use marine park plays an important role in the lifestyles and livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of Australians. It contributes \$5 billion annually to the Australian economy (Access Economics, 2008). It is central to a range of activities including tourism, commercial fishing, recreational fishing and boating, shipping, diving, aquaculture and research. Most of these activities require a vibrant and healthy ecosystem to be viable.

While the Reef is recognised as one of the healthiest coral reef ecosystems in the world, it is facing some challenges: the impacts of a changing climate; continuing declining water quality from catchment



Human engagement with the reef brings a commitment to its long term health.
Photo © Commonwealth of Australia (GBRMPA)

runoff; loss of coastal habitats from increasing coastal development; illegal fishing and poaching; and a few remaining impacts from fishing, are priority issues which are reducing the resilience of the Reef (GBRMPA, 2009).

Many of these issues are outside the legislative or regulatory influence of the Authority.

Considering the options

So what were the Authority's options? Do nothing and wait for the Reef to slowly deteriorate, or alternatively choose to guide and influence stakeholder decisions and everyday actions that would help to ensure the long-term health and resilience of the Reef.

Consequently the Authority has set about forging relationships with a range of stakeholders through a variety of avenues. Relationships with communities have been developed through 12 Local Marine Advisory Committees; with Traditional Owners through our Traditional Use Marine Resource Agreements and with schools, councils and industry groups through the highly effective Reef Guardians Program.

The Reef Guardian Journey

The Reef Guardian stewardship concept was originally created in 2003 as the vehicle for community level involvement and to give positive environmental behaviours a reef related cause.

It comes with no funding for participants – it is stewardship in the purest sense of the word, people choosing to take care of something that they value, but don't personally 'own'.

It is a voluntary program that aims to showcase the environmental actions already being undertaken within coastal communities and industries both in the Reef catchment and in the Marine Park. It is an important vehicle for behavioural change and the uptake of practices that can ultimately improve the resilience of the Great Barrier Reef.

While the schools program continued to flourish, Local Government amalgamation shortly after the concept was launched in 2007 slowed progress of the Councils' program.



A renewed focus and a new challenge

In May 2010, the Australian Government allocated short term project funding over two years to *Improving the Outlook of the Great Barrier Reef*. Part of this funding was to expand the Reef Guardian stewardship program under the *Enhancing Reef Guardians Project*. The objectives of the project were to strengthen the existing Reef Guardian Schools' and Reef Guardian Councils' stewardship programs to ensure their longer term sustainability, and to develop opportunities for farmers and fishers to contribute to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (Marine Park), while exploring opportunities for tourism operators as well.

The Authority had a challenging relationship with farmers due to long standing issues of water quality and with fishermen because of the rezoning of the Marine Park in 2004, which removed commercial fishing from a much larger area. Hence developing any kind of stewardship program with them was going to be a challenge.

The Authority is working with cane farmers towards healthier catchments for a healthier reef. Photo © Commonwealth of Australia (GBRMPA)

Our Approach

For the new elements of the stewardship program to be successful the Authority needed to:

- recognise the commercial complexities of the industries involved;
- address the challenges associated with providing equitable opportunities for the thousands of farming and fishing businesses in these industry sectors to be involved in the program; and
- acknowledge the short two year timeframe of the funding and the resource limitations of just one person per program area.

The Authority used the proven methodology of developing the program 'with industry-for industry' which included establishment of industry-based steering committees comprised of representatives from peak bodies, relevant government agencies, conservation groups and program participants (i.e. farmers or fishers). Working groups which comprised the actual program participants provided technical expertise. The Authority also used industry knowledge to develop





Queensland schools are Reef Guardian Schools teaching children the importance of a healthy reef and how they can help. Photo © Commonwealth of Australia (GBRMPA)

an appropriate framework and to ground-truth the viability of the delivery options across the industries involved.

The focus for all Reef Guardian Programs is to influence actions and activities that will help to address the key risks to the Reef, including promoting activities in the areas of:

- land management (including biodiversity);
- water management;
- waste management;
- climate change; and
- community education and knowledge sharing

Our journey to date with the new programs of Farmers/Graziers and Fishers

The Reef Guardian Farmers/Graziers and Fishers programs take a comprehensive approach and recognise the value of economic, social and environmental sustainability of fishing and farming business. These programs aim to work with farmers and graziers to achieve real outcomes with a focus on continuing improvement through action plans. They are based around a set of desirable assessment standards covering environmental, social and economic outcomes and they are underpinned by the sharing of knowledge, recognising activities which are over and above what is legally required and involving everyone associated with the farming, grazing or fishing business.

Farmers

Desirable assessment standards have been cooperatively developed covering a range of aspects of farming practices including water resources for clean healthy catchments, efficient energy systems, healthy

soils through wise mineral and nutrient management, sustaining the functions of natural areas, wetlands and forests on properties and running a business that is resilient to natural and economic variability. Eight cane pilot sites have been identified between Mackay and Cairns, with four pilot sites identified in the Tully/Innisfail area within the banana industry and four grazing pilot sites are participating between Gladstone and Charters Towers. The pilot sites aim to practically test the concepts and assessment standards.

Fishers

A Reef Line pilot working group has been established and six reef line operators are participating in a range of voluntary activities including: utilising a carbon emissions calculator to minimise energy use within their fishing operations; trialling electronic data collection devices on dories and the mother ships; participating in a Coral Trout research project by assisting with the tagging program associated with the trial; and contributing information and trialling monitoring forms for the Authority, collectively called the *Integrated Eye on the Reef* monitoring program.

The Marine Aquarium Fish and Coral collection fishery has also joined the Reef Guardian Pilot program, showcasing their efforts towards environmental stewardship through their stewardship action plan. The Provision Reef Stewardship Action Plan outlines the actions and activities that this commercial fishing sector will undertake to ensure their fishing and collection practices are environmentally sustainable.

Additionally, as part of the program we are currently trialling electronic data collection devices in the inshore gill net fishery.

Our journey to date with the existing programs of Schools and Councils

There are currently 13 councils along the Great Barrier Reef coastline officially signed up to the program which covers all coastal councils from Bundaberg to Cooktown and equates to 317,271 km² and a combined population of greater than 890,000.

The Authority has agreements with Councils via Memorandums of Understanding for the duration of their term. Each Council develops annual action plans which are reflective of the Council's annual operations plan and is endorsed by Council. A total of 923 projects are currently identified in these action plans covering the areas of land management, water management, waste management, climate change and community education and capacity building.

Currently in its tenth year the Reef Guardian Schools program involves more than 111,000 students and teachers in 285 schools across the Reef catchment. This equates to around 10% of the entire population of the catchment. The participating schools are currently undertaking over 1600 projects relating to waste management, water management, biodiversity/land management and climate change.

The key objective of the Reef Guardian Schools program is to utilise a whole of school approach to create awareness, understanding and appreciation for the Reef and connected ecosystems. Curriculum units and teaching resources have been developed around key risks to the Reef. Annual actions plans and reports are developed by schools reflecting their activities throughout the year. The Reef Guardian Schools Annual Awards are presented in term four each year. They are selected across ten categories and recognise the high standards of achievement made by these schools throughout the year. In addition, the Reef Guardian Schools '*Ripples of Change*' sponsorship consists of twenty \$500 donations, providing an opportunity for schools to undertake small environmental projects within their schools which have been identified as part of their annual action plan.

Conclusion

Community-based Reef Guardian stewardship programs are essential. They play a critical role in ensuring that the values of the Great Barrier Reef are appreciated and that community actions are focussed on supporting management of the Marine Park so that it is well placed to meet the challenges ahead. They also honour and help implement the obligation of Australia's World Heritage Areas to give "function in the life of the community".

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Links

<http://www.gbrmpa.gov.au/>.

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Biography

Karen Vohland is the Director, Stakeholder Engagement and Stewardship within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority. Karen has a long history as communications professional with more than 25 years' experience in media, public relations and stakeholder engagement. In her current role Karen directs the agency's Stakeholder Engagement activities including its Local Marine Advisory Committees, regional offices and the Reef Guardian Stewardship Program. Prior to this, she was the Communications and Education Director for the Authority for seven years. She has also held senior communication roles in the public health sector, emergency services and the television media, and has operated her own successful marketing company.