



GREAT BARRIER REEF  
MARINE PARK AUTHORITY

# REEF BEAT

**Bulletin**  
THE NORTH'S OWN PAPER

## OUR GREAT BARRIER REEF

### THE GREAT BARRIER REEF YESTERDAY

The Great Barrier Reef has seen many changes in its history. No one really knows exactly how old the Reef is but in its present form scientists estimate that it's about 6000 years old. Today it is under more pressure than ever. To understand the Reef and protect it for the future we need to understand its past.

It's hard to imagine but there was once a time when the Great Barrier Reef existed without any people impacting on it at all.

Can you imagine walking around your neighbourhood and finding no houses or roads, no traffic lights or stop signs? That's how it was on land and on the sea until recently.

The first people to interact with the Great Barrier Reef were the Aborigines who lived along Australia's north east coast. To the Aborigines the Reef was an excellent source of food. We know that they caught turtle, dugong, shellfish and reef fish for their meals.

We also know that Torres Strait Islanders travelled up and down the Great Barrier Reef and traded goods with coastal communities and the people of what is now Papua New Guinea.

The coastal people bartered with their northern neighbours for 20 metre canoes.

Some of them who lived further south built their own smaller boats and used them for fishing and hunting expeditions.

There were 40 tribal groups living along the coast of the Great Barrier Reef in the 1700s.

Their impact on the Reef was very minimal with plenty of fish and wildlife to sustain the people on the coast and the ecosystem of the Reef itself.

When Europeans first came to Australia and began to settle at the end of the 1700s and the beginning of the 1800s the Reef was seen as an obstacle to shipping.

It was difficult to navigate through the maze of reefs and many ships ran aground or sank in the dangerous waters.

Europeans took an interest in the vast amount of oyster shells to be found along the coast. Sometimes the shells would contain pearls but what they were really after were the outer shells used to make mother of pearl buttons.

Europeans and Indigenous communities would often trade with one another and lived peacefully together but that wasn't always the case.

Indigenous people along the coast were often forced into labour for the pearl shell industry. There were differences in culture and misunderstandings that sometimes lead to violent confrontations.

As Australia grew into a modern nation with large cities along its coast pressure on the environment increased.

Today the Reef faces threats from coastal runoff, overfishing and coral bleaching. All of these pressures come from the huge advancements in technology that came with European settlement over the past 214 years.

European settlement not only impacted on the coastal Indigenous communities it also impacted on the health of the Reef itself. As cities and farms grew along the coast more pollutants discharged into the waters in what is now recognised as a World Heritage Area.

The offshore pollutants grew in proportion as the coastal population expanded. Another impact on the Reef was over fishing. The rich resources of the Reef began to be exploited by new forms of fishing.

Sometimes the fishing boats would catch dolphins, dugongs and turtles in their massive nets.

Other fish that weren't considered good for eating were just thrown back into the water dead.

The slaughtered fish were, and still are, referred to as trash fish.

ABOVE: Colonies of bleached coral at the Great Barrier Reef. The bleaching occurs because of higher than normal temperatures and damage by light.

LEFT: Indigenous people using traditional techniques of fishing in protected hunting grounds.

Today many fishers do their best to reduce the amount of 'trash fish' and threatened species their nets catch but there remains a negative impact on the life in the marine park from fishing.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority is working with communities and users of the Reef to reduce the negative impacts. We all need to learn more about the marine life and ecosystems to make sure the Great Barrier Reef remains great for tomorrow.

To learn more about what you can do to help keep it great visit

[www.gbrmpa.gov.au](http://www.gbrmpa.gov.au) and [www.reefED.edu.au](http://www.reefED.edu.au)



ABOVE AND BELOW:  
Traditional indigenous seafood, dugong and turtle.

