



GREAT BARRIER REEF
MARINE PARK AUTHORITY

REEF BEAT

Townsville
Bulletin
THE NORTH'S OWN PAPER

OUR GREAT BARRIER REEF

Reef Dangers

The Great Barrier Reef is a magical place full of very beautiful and amazing creatures.

While the Reef is magnificent and colourful, it can also be a place of hidden danger. The good news is that these risks can be easily managed.

Many people imagine they'll be set upon by sharks, cone shells and box jellyfish the moment they dive into the sea. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Reef is a great place to enjoy and explore. Hundreds of people visit every day, and the vast majority have a great time.

We've dedicated this Reef Beat to 'dangers' to help explain what they are so you can avoid them. For the same reason you were taught to look both ways for traffic before crossing the street when you were little: running into the street without looking is dangerous, and you need to know how to cross safely.

Out on the Reef there are both dangerous creatures, and some things that endanger the Reef itself.

Because of negative environmental impacts such as pollution, over fishing, and siltation, human beings are considered by far the most dangerous and threatening animals to the Reef.

But a number of other animals can cause harm to people through accidental contact. Some of these include the stonefish, cone shell and the box jellyfish.

These animals should be treated with extreme caution for they have been known to inflict serious pain and sometimes even death.

As its name implies, the stonefish looks just like a stone. If you happen to step on one of its 13 spines, it will inject a toxin into your foot, causing extreme pain. Stonefish are ambush predators, which means they sit still, usually in coral rubble, and wait for their prey to come by before attacking. The pain that these fish can inflict if you stand on one has been likened to having your foot set on fire. The good news is they are not normally fatal.

Many North Queenslanders, who enjoy collecting seashells, are taught from an early age that "if you see a cone leave it alone". The beautiful cone shell is a hunter, using venomous harpoons to kill its prey. Most feed on worms but some species specialise in feeding on other shells and a few on fishes.

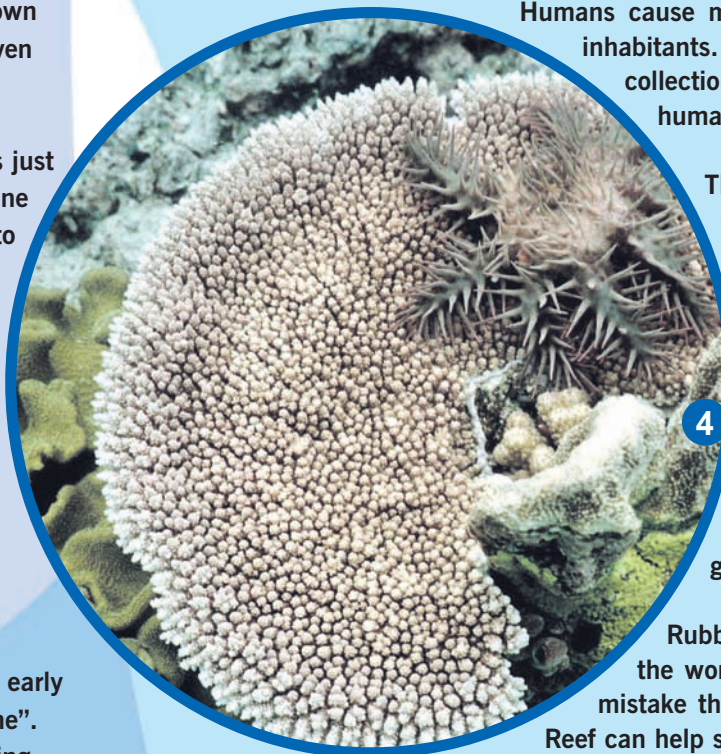
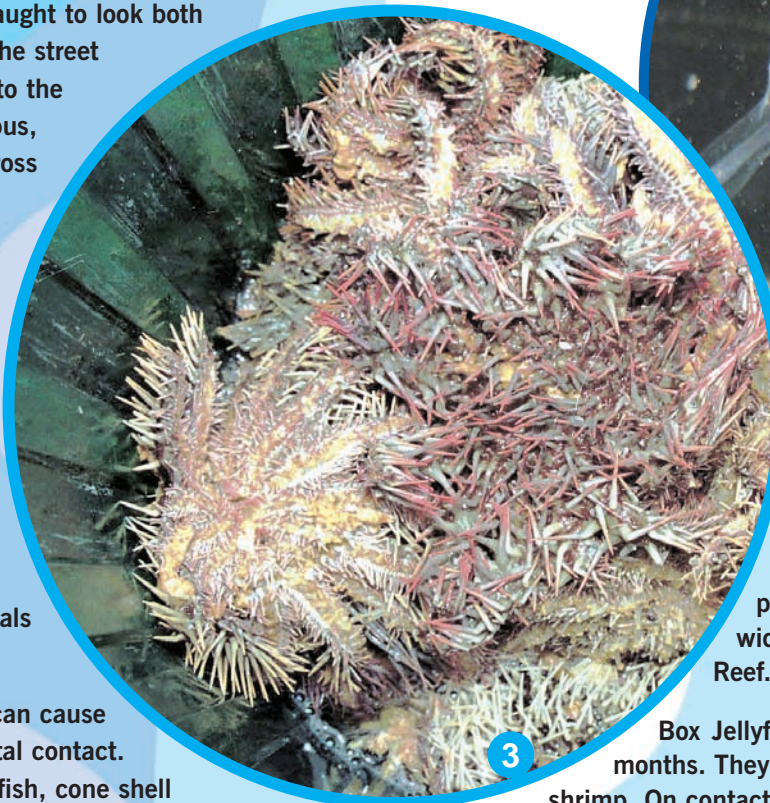
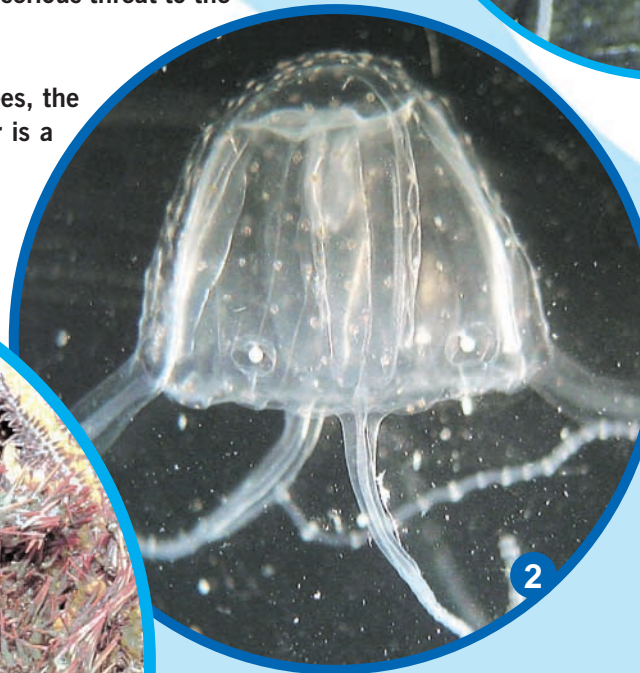
These shells are capable of 'smelling' their prey a great distance away, and keep tasting and sniffing the water until they make contact with their victim.

The rasp-like tongue found in most snails has been modified in cone shells into a hollow harpoon filled with venom.

The venom is extremely potent, killing its prey almost instantly. Unfortunately, this can include people who mistakenly disturb these harmless looking creatures.

The Crown of Thorns sea star is not only dangerous to humans but poses serious threat to the Reef.

Like koalas and gum trees, the Crown of Thorns sea star is a native of the Reef.



Photos:

1. The potentially fatal box jellyfish
2. Irukandji jellyfish - another dangerous stinger
3. A plague of Crown of Thorns sea stars
4. Crown of Thorns sea star feeding on plate coral

But whereas koalas are strictly vegetarian, the Crown of Thorns destroy the Reef by eating the coral polyps - the animals that build a coral reef. The population of Crown of Thorns sea stars varies greatly from one year to another. Some years they achieve plague proportions while in other years few are seen. The reason for these wide variations remains one of the many scientific mysteries of the Reef.

Box Jellyfish are found in coastal waters north of Gladstone in the summer months. They use their numerous two-metre tentacles to feed upon small fish and shrimp. On contact with their prey, the tentacles quickly contract to only a few centimetres, and bring the food to the mouth. Box jellyfish are capable of inflicting serious and even fatal stings to humans.

Humans cause more damage to the Great Barrier Reef than any of its animal inhabitants. Humans contribute to pollution, over fishing, oil spills, coral collection, run off and silting of the Reef. All these negative effects of human activity pose a very real threat to the survival of the Reef.

The Great Barrier Reef is a World Heritage Area, this means that it has been recognised internationally as one of the great natural wonders of the world. Our right to use and enjoy the Reef carries an equal responsibility to protect it for the future.

What we do on land affects the health of the Reef. Simple things we can do at home can help ensure the Reef will be healthy into the future. By reducing, recycling, or carefully disposing of wastes such as plastic bags, for example, we are taking a very important step towards preserving the Reef. Another way we can help is by collecting rubbish every time we go the beach.

Rubbish such as cigarette butts and pieces of plastic can kill some of the wonderful wildlife of the Reef, such as turtles and dugongs, which mistake these items for food. Removing just one piece of plastic from the Reef can help save the life of a turtle, dugong, or even a dolphin.

To learn more about what you can do to help keep it great visit www.gbrmpa.gov.au and www.reefED.edu.au