



# REEF BEAT

Townsville  
**Bulletin**  
THE NORTH'S OWN PAPER

## OUR GREAT BARRIER REEF

### WE REALLY NEED TO KEEP IT GREAT

Those of us lucky enough to live close to the Great Barrier Reef we often take it for granted. We know that it's the world's largest natural feature and that it can be seen from outer space.

We also know that right now it's under pressure from a wide variety of human and natural impacts. In this series of articles we hope to bring you useful information about the Great Barrier Reef, its geography, history and biodiversity. The Great Barrier Reef belongs to all of us and therefore, it's up to us to keep it great.

The Great Barrier Reef covers more than 348,000 square kilometres – that's larger than England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales combined and slightly smaller than Germany and Japan. The Reef is more than 2000 km long and comprises more than 2900 reefs and about 940 islands.

It's not just the luscious coral and colourful fish that make up the Great Barrier Reef. Other areas or "bioregions" also play an important role.

These areas can include; mangroves, estuaries, sandy and coral cays, continental islands, seagrass beds, algal and sponge gardens, sandy or muddy seabed communities, continental slopes and deep ocean trenches.

All of these areas are important in the life of the plants and animals on the Reef. They are all interdependent and of equal importance in the circle of life surrounding many plants and animals.

Speaking of plants and animals, did you know that the Reef is home to thousands of life forms?

There are; 1500 types of fish, 360 types of hard corals, 4000 types of molluscs (eg shells), 1500 types of sponge, 800 types of echinoderms (sea stars, sea urchins etc), 500 types of seaweed, over 30 types of marine mammals and six types of marine turtles.

Because the Reef is such a special place, in 1975 the Australian Federal Government decided to create the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority to look after it.

They even created the *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act (1975)*, which provides rules and regulations designed to help protect the Reef.



The creation of the *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act (1975)* has helped protect the Reef but more help is needed. Right now, the Reef is under more pressure than ever before. It's up to all of us to work together to preserve it for the future.

Most of the pressure on the Reef comes from people. We all contribute to polluting the Marine Park. Since Europeans started to settle the northeastern coast of Australia, about 150 years ago, pollution levels have increased and show no signs of decreasing.

There are fewer fish in a number of areas, and between 70 and 80 per cent of coastal wetlands have been lost in most of the major river catchments adjacent to the Great Barrier Reef and nutrients such as phosphate and nitrogen have increased by 200 to 1500 per cent in river discharges.

Coastal development, fishing and farming have all contributed to the increase in pollution. This has also led to worrying trends, which have also threatened the animals and plants on the Great Barrier Reef.

The Queensland population of loggerhead turtles is on a fast track to extinction with a 90 per cent decline in the annual number of nesting females since the 1970s.

The main causes of the decline were fox predation on nests laid on the mainland coast, and incidental capture in trawl nets. In 2001, the Australian and Queensland governments recently required the compulsory use of turtle excluder devices (TEDs) for trawlers. It is hoped that this will reduce the number of marine turtles that get caught in trawl nets each year.

Dugongs are also in trouble with a 90 per cent decline in dugong numbers south of Cooktown since the 1960s.

Dangerous organo-chlorine pesticide residues have been found in dugongs. In response to the decline in dugong numbers, a world's first system of Dugong Protection Areas was established in 1998.

Although the pressure on the habitats and on animals and plants of the Reef has increased, we can all help to reduce it. Everyone can do a bit to help the Reef and you should encourage everyone in your home to help keep it great.

To improve the quality of water reaching the Reef; do not put chemicals down the drain, keep drains and gutters clear of rubbish, limit your use of pesticides and fertilisers, take care not to spill petrol or oil when fuelling boats or changing the oil. Use biodegradable toilet paper and phosphate-free cleaning products.

When fishing ensure that you take only as many fish as you need, return unwanted or undersized fish to the water as quickly as possible, and take old fishing line, plastics and other rubbish home with you.

Remember everything that we wash off at home goes into the sewer and out into the Great Barrier Reef.

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)

