



WWF International Corals Initiative

Great Barrier Reef

Geographic location: Northeast coast of Australia

Biodiversity features

The Great Barrier Reef is the largest barrier reef system in the world, extending 2,000 kilometers along the coast of Queensland in Northeastern Australia. It is the largest marine reservation areas in the world, covering 347,800 km². Comprised of the most diverse reef types, habitats, and environmental regimes, this is an area of enormous scientific, economic and cultural importance.

Not until 1975, however, did the Australian government define and protect the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. In 1981 this reef was added to the World Heritage Areas list, reaffirming its protected status.

The Great Barrier Reef contains at least 1500 species of fish, 350 types of hard coral and 5000 varieties of mollusc (e.g. shells). Six of the world's seven species of marine turtle live there and the marine park is home to the world's most important, but threatened, dugong populations. Fifty four percent of the world's species of mangroves are found in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area, which also provides a home for over one third of the world's soft coral and sea pen species.

Population

The province of Queensland, along which the Great Barrier Reef runs, has a population of about 3,600,000. The population is growing at an approximate rate of 1.9%, mainly due to national migration. The economic climate is generally stable, relying primarily on tourism to the reef. About 1.6 million tourists visit each year (although numbers have been consistently on the rise); some 31,000 people work in the tourism industry to support this annual influx.

Secondary economic activity includes agriculture like sugar cane, grain, fruit and cotton (much of which can threaten the reef with run-off of pollutants - see below) and fishing.

Species

Found within this ecosystem are unique habitats and breeding sites for the world's largest populations of dugong and saltwater crocodile. Additionally, the region contains nesting grounds of global significance for green and flatback turtles. Other turtles, such as the hawksbill, leatherback and Olive Ridley turtles also rely on this habitat at some point in their life cycle.

A number of cetacean species also rely on the Great Barrier Reef, including humpback whales, minke whales, killer whales, and dolphins such as the bottlenose, the spinner, the Indo-Pacific humpback and the Irrawaddy river dolphin.

The Great Barrier Reef lies on a major flyway for migratory water birds who rely on these rich waters on their annual route between north eastern Asia and the Antipodes.

General threats

Many think of the Great Barrier Reef as a fully-protected marine wonderland but this is far from the truth. The whole ecosystem of the area is under enormous threat from human activities in ways we have barely begun to understand. Less than 5% of the World Heritage Area receives full protection. Urgent action is needed to protect the whole reef system.



Unsustainable fishing is one of those activities. Trawling is especially destructive, damaging up to ten times more creatures than are actually harvested. Endangered marine turtles are among the hapless by-catch victims also dying unnecessarily in the nets.

Pollution is another big issue. Millions of tons of sediment and chemicals from agriculture and insensitive land development pour into the reef lagoon every year, disrupting essential parts of the reef's ecosystems. Increased industry and shipping could also become a threat as the risk of large scale accidents increases with accelerated activity.

Global warming also has its effect on the coral reefs. In 1998 El Nino destroyed about 3% of the Great Barrier Reef. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has predicted with a 'medium to high degree of certainty' that the Great Barrier Reef will be completely destroyed by climate change in the next 20 to 50 years if current trends don't change.

What WWF is doing

WWF's goal is to prevent any further damage to the Great Barrier Reef. A fundamental aim is to achieve a network of marine sanctuaries throughout the entire Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. Inshore areas, sea grass meadows and inter-reef gardens need the same level of protection as the Barrier Reef itself so that the whole inter-connecting ecosystem is being preserved.

The WWF Great Barrier Reef campaign has developed effective conservation solutions to the long-term threats facing this World Heritage Area. Ecologically sustainable fishing is one of the solutions that WWF is pushing for. This can be done by replacing destructive fishing practices with environmentally benign ones.

We also strive to raise public awareness of the threats of land-based pollution to the Great Barrier Reef and thereby promoting legislative and economic solutions to reduce this pollution. Pushing for greater coastal planning and lobbying for an immediate end to land clearing in the Great Barrier Reef catchment are also high on our agenda. And finally, WWF engages in worldwide campaigns at all levels and in cooperation with many parties to help control global warming.

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