

MEDIA RELEASE

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Reef and Rainforest Research Centre (RRRC), Cairns

For immediate release



Training program protects Reef and boosts employment the same time

An Australian Government-funded training program has helped protect the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) and boost youth employment in Cairns simultaneously, with a group of young locals culling the coral-eating Crown of Thorns Starfish (COTS) and also receiving Certificate III's in Tourism and Occupational Diving at the same time.

Eight out of the group of nine trainees received the full qualification at a graduation ceremony at the Woolshed in Cairns today, with the ninth receiving his certificate in Occupational Diving.

The trainees were put through a six-month dive training and COTS Control program run by the Association of Marine Park Tourism Operators (AMPTO), funded by the Reef and Rainforest Research Centre (RRRC) and the Department of Environment and Heritage Protection (DEHP).

While being trained as dive instructors, the trainees culled large numbers of Crown of Thorns Starfish under the RRRC's COTS Control Program.



*COTS Control program graduates proudly display their qualifications at the Woolshed on Friday.
(Photo: RRRC)*

The program has an 85 per cent employment rate for its graduates.

AMPTO CEO Col McKenzie said the training program had been very successful and hoped to see it renewed.

“It’s been a very good return on investment by the Federal Government because not only are we taking Crown of Thorns off the Reef with this program, we are also training up young and Indigenous unemployed people and helping them enter the workforce as long-term members of the tourism industry around Cairns,” he said.

21-year-old program graduate Jesse Shilling, originally from Tweed Heads, said the training had changed his life.

“Before I got into the COTS program I was working on a banana farm, not really going anywhere,” he said.

“Now I’m qualified as a dive instructor and I have work lined up with Cairns Dive Centre, which is great.

“The program was challenging - especially the academic side, but I got through it and I’d definitely recommend it to anyone else out there that was in a situation like mine.”

The DEHP’s Reef Trust provided funding for the program, which was directed to AMPTO by the RRRC in a bid to develop COTS control expertise in the area.

“It was actually the RRRC’s idea to run the COTS control program as a training program and achieve an employment outcome from it, which was a brave idea,” Col said.

RRRC managing director Sheriden Morris said the program was increasing the ability of the Cairns tourism industry to protect the Great Barrier Reef.

“This is about building capability within the industry in the region to deal with COTS in a significant way,” Sheriden said.

“Cairns and the Far North is becoming a centre of tropical expertise on issues like Crown of Thorns and we want to keep increasing that.”

The 2015 program was funded by the Australian government, with Minister for the Environment Greg Hunt praising the program and program and its graduates.

“Crown of Thorns Starfish are one of the greatest risks to the Great Barrier Reef and cause enormous damage,” he said.

“Culling the COTS is a vital part of the work being undertaken every day to protect the reef for future generations.

“I’d like to thank and congratulate the graduates and everyone involved in this important training program. The work you do makes a real difference.”

Col McKenzie said AMPTO and the RRRC were applying to the State Government's Skilling Queenslanders for Work program to train another 30 divers per year, with the support of Member for Cairns Rob Pyne.

Mr Pyne said the program demonstrated it was possible to combine environmental and employment outcomes.

"This project is a great example of the rewards to the individual and the community as a whole when the training dollar is well spent," Mr Pyne said.

The Reef and Rainforest Research Centre is a Cairns-based environmental non-government organisation that manages and directs environmental protection projects in the Great Barrier Reef, Wet Tropics Rainforest, Torres Strait and elsewhere.

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