



## Tour Industry's "Sigh of Relief" at Latest Coral Recovery Findings

Queensland's marine tourism industry is breathing a sigh of relief at the [latest scientific assessment](#) of coral recovery from the Great Barrier Reef's worst ever bleaching event.

"We're bloody relieved, frankly," said Col McKenzie, CEO of the Association of Marine Park Tourism Operators (AMPTO).

"The science shows that nearly all the reefs that tourists like to visit have weathered this year's bleaching storm relatively well."

The scientific summary, released yesterday from James Cook University's ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies and made by combining data from a number of scientific and management agencies, showed that the central and southern parts of the Reef – where ~97% of the \$6 billion per year tourism industry operates – had limited amounts of bleaching and have recovered relatively well.

"So, the Great Barrier Reef is well and truly open for business," said Col.

"We're continuing to provide our customers with the world-class experience they have come to expect."

The report also showed that the northernmost sections of the Great Barrier Reef, which are rarely visited, have experienced unprecedented levels of coral bleaching and subsequent mortality.

While the ultimate cause of coral bleaching events (increasing global temperatures due to climate change) is beyond the scope of regional leaders to manage, the knowledge that all is not lost is catalysing industry, managers, researchers and the community to work together to actively defend and sustain reef health in the region.

"We've survived this time around, but this is no time for complacency for our industry," said Col. "This report shows that marine tourism operators are good stewards of the Reef. We are out there every day, we are noticing when things change and we are actively involved in research, management and interventions that are all important in helping the Reef recover and be resilient."

“We take our stewardship responsibilities very, very seriously and we will continue to do so.”

Sheriden Morris, Managing Director of the Cairns-based Reef and Rainforest Research Centre, welcomed Col’s assessment.

“In these situations it can seem easier to shoot the messenger rather than actually get to grips with the problem,” Sheriden said.

“But that’s not going to help the future of the Reef or the marine tourism industry.

“Climate change is a global problem and will need a global solution.

“But there are things we can do here in northern Queensland to reduce other threats to the Great Barrier Reef and build its resilience, with tour operators, scientists, farmers, and communities all working together.”

Sheriden added that a large number of collaborative research and implementation projects were currently underway in the region that are already delivering improvements in the Reef’s future prospects, including the Crown-of-thorns starfish (COTS) Targeted Control Program, the 43 applied research projects funded through the Australian Government’s National Environmental Science Programme’s Tropical Water Quality Hub, engaging cane growers as citizen scientists to monitor fertilizer runoff from their own properties, and working with mining companies to apply mine site rehabilitation principles to the erosion gullies that deliver 47% of sediments to the Great Barrier Reef lagoon. (More details of these projects can be found below.)

- Of the major threats facing the Great Barrier Reef, outbreaks of coral-eating crown-of-thorns starfish (COTS, estimated to have been responsible for nearly half of all coral cover loss from 1985-2012<sup>1</sup>) are arguably the most directly and immediately amenable to management intervention. Since 2015 the **marine tourism industry-led COTS Targeted Control Program** has removed ~423,000 COTS from reefs in the region. Left to their own devices these starfish could have collectively consumed an area of live coral greater than the Sydney Cricket Ground each summer’s day of their ~3-year lifespan. RRRC is working with the COTS Targeted Control Program to increase the effectiveness and efficiency with which ecologically and/or economically important reefs can be identified, prioritised and defended. Uptake of the early recommendations from a scientific research project<sup>2</sup> applying Integrated Pest Management principles to COTS has already increased the efficiency of control efforts by at least 35%. In addition, 80% of the local young people receiving training through the COTS Targeted Control Program have gone on to find jobs in the marine tourism industry, a great outcome in this region of Queensland which as you may know suffers from chronic youth unemployment. In the coming year RRRC will be working to ensure that the control program’s methods continue to evolve towards even greater efficiency. The success of this program has recently been recognised with the provision of more Australian Government funding for expansion and inclusion of Indigenous trainees.
- **Agricultural runoff reduces water quality** in the GBR lagoon, impairs corals’ capacity to recover from stress and disturbances (such as cyclones or bleaching) and is likely to

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<sup>1</sup> [De’Ath et al. 2012: The 27-year decline of coral cover on the Great Barrier Reef and its causes. PNAS 109\(44\): 17995–17999](#)

<sup>2</sup> [This CSIRO-led project](#) is funded through the Australian Government’s NESP [Tropical Water Quality Hub](#), which is administered by RRRC.

contribute to COTS outbreaks. RRRC's administration of the Australian Government's NESP [Tropical Water Quality Hub](#) helps ensure that the 43 applied research projects conducted through the Hub deliver real-world, on-ground solutions that will actually help improve water quality and hence the health of the Reef.

- **Rebuilding trust in water quality science** by engaging cane growers in a citizen-science water quality monitoring program conjoined with a robust scientific monitoring program, administered by RRRC. The use of real-time sensor and telemetry technologies enables growers to directly monitor fertiliser concentrations in runoff from their properties. In the coming year these growers will investigate how practice changes affect runoff water quality, secure in the knowledge that because of their participation in the project, their risk of any resultant production losses is underwritten by government.
- **Engineering solutions for gully repair in the Burdekin River:** ~47% of the total suspended sediment load arriving in the GBR lagoon is estimated to be delivered by the Burdekin River, and much of this sediment is eroded from alluvial gullies on grazing properties in the catchment. The development of effective methods to rehabilitate these gullies is thus arguably the GBR's single highest-priority sediment management task. In an innovative approach administered by RRRC, researchers are working with some of the largest mining companies in Queensland to adapt and apply mine rehabilitation techniques to gully repair on grazing properties.

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