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## Efforts doubled in fight against coral-eating foe

Marine managers, scientists and the tourism industry will boost efforts to protect the health of the Great Barrier Reef by culling coral eating crown-of-thorns starfish over the next three years.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority awarded the Reef and Rainforest Research Centre and the Association of Marine Park Tourism Operators a \$5.6 million tender to operate a second control vessel earlier in December.

Taking to the water off Cairns in January, the vessel, *MV Venus II*, will support the efforts already being undertaken by the *MV Hero*, which supports ten divers trained to cull the starfish in the Cairns region and elsewhere as crown-of-thorns starfish continue to spread.

There is evidence the outbreak is beginning to move southwards to reefs between Innisfail and Townsville, consistent with the pattern seen in previous outbreaks.

Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority Chairman Russell Reichelt welcomed on-ground work to protect coral cover at key tourism sites.

“We’re delighted to see increased efforts to address crown-of-thorns starfish,” he said.

“The future of the Great Barrier Reef relies on a concerted effort to build its resilience.

“This work is part of a wider suite of measures taking place Reef-wide, regionally and locally to help the Reef bounce back from its worst bleaching on record.

“Every adult coral colony we can protect produces larvae to repopulate other reefs downstream, thereby helping the Reef to regenerate.”

RRRC managing director Sheridan Morris said new divers were being trained in culling techniques so they could commence work immediately the vessel hits the water in the new year.

“This is important work — outbreaks of crown-of-thorns starfish are responsible for up to 25 per cent of total coral cover loss on the Reef,” she said.

“The extra vessel also allows increased research capacity into more efficient ways to control crown-of-thorns populations.”

Since its introduction, the control program has culled more than 400,000 crown-of-thorns starfish on 21 key reefs which are either used by the tourism industry or amplify outbreaks because of prevailing currents.

These sites span 75 per cent, or 940 square kilometres, of the reef habitat offshore of Cairns.

Follow-up surveys show the culling has successfully protected coral cover and kept the adult crown-of-thorns starfish population to below outbreak levels in the Cairns region.

The new control vessel will begin operations in January and is being funded through the Australian Government’s \$140 million Reef Trust.