



## Crown of Thorns control vessel helps repair Whitsunday reefs after Cyclone Debbie

A crack team of Cairns tourism-industry divers will be helping put the Whitsunday Islands' coral reefs back together again in the wake of Tropical Cyclone Debbie.

*MV Venus* is one of two vessels assigned to the Crown of Thorns Starfish control program managed by the Association of Marine Park Tour Operators (AMPTO) and the Reef and Rainforest Research Centre (RRRC) and funded through the Australian Government's Reef 2050 program.

The vessel hosts ten divers trained to control populations of the coral-eating Crown of Thorns Starfish, and arrived in the Whitsundays yesterday after a gruelling 48-hour journey down the coast against a south-westerly wind.

*MV Venus's* divers are also trained in physical coral reef repair and stabilization, and will be carrying out this work for 10 days at Blue Pearl Bay, Manta Ray Bay, Luncheon Bay and Black Island.

AMPTO CEO Col McKenzie said physical stabilization would make the difference between life and death for coral that had been knocked over by wave action during the storm.

"Like plants, corals need sunlight to survive – if they are tipped over during a cyclone and their surfaces aren't facing a source of light they will eventually die," he said.

"Our divers are going down to the coral and re-stabilizing them by essentially digging them back into the sand or substrate beneath them."

RRRC managing director Sheriden Morris said the move was a step by the Australian government to directly improve coral health.

"What this represents is an active remediation effort to repair damaged coral," she said.

“While the primary threat to the Great Barrier Reef is still global climate change, it’s also vital that we take steps to actively and directly improve Reef health, especially after damaging events such as cyclones.”

Mr McKenzie said the program’s previous successes in controlling Crown of Thorns Starfish around Cairns meant there was an opportunity to put *MV Venus* to work for another immediate benefit elsewhere.

“Right now our control efforts in the waters off Cairns are in basically ‘maintenance mode’ – these warmer temperatures mean that Crown of Thorns activity is pretty low at the moment and we will be back in time for when cooler waters mean they start to become a bit more active and pose a more immediate threat to the reefs up there.”

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**Media contact:**

Boyd Robertson: (07) 4050 7400 / 04 5814 4909 / [boyd.robertson@rrrc.org.au](mailto:boyd.robertson@rrrc.org.au)