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Tourism and the Great Barrier Reef: Healthy Reef, Healthy Industry

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Synopsis and Learning Outcomes

The purpose of this case study is to highlight the key management strategies of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) to manage tourism in Australia's World Heritage Listed Great Barrier Reef (GBR). Recognised as one of the world's best managed coral reef ecosystems, the GBR is potentially better placed to handle the pressures of accumulating risks than many other reef systems. The GBR World Heritage Area extends to a vast 348,000km² and within this domain approximately 400 commercial tourism operators accommodate 1.8 million visitor days and 2.3 million passenger transfers each year. Established in 1975, the GBRMPA works within a strong legislative framework to manage the marine park and employs a range of regulatory tools and management plans to ensure that tourism is sustainably managed.

At the core of the GBRMPA approach is a recognition that tourism and the GBR are inextricably linked – a healthy reef equals a healthy tourism industry and vice versa. Stakeholder management and collaborative partnerships are regarded as central to the achievement of sustainable tourism on the GBR. These partnerships are based on the principle of mutual benefit and involve active engagement in decision making by a range of stakeholders. The stakeholder activities and programs that GBRMPA has employed have focused on capacity building, mutual learning, information generation and open

communication. An Environmental Management Charge (EMC) is collected from visitors by tourism operators on behalf of the GBRMPA and contributes a substantial percentage of the annual budget for management of the Marine Park. However, the longer term outlook for the reef has deteriorated in the face of climate change, declining water quality (through runoff from catchments) and habitat losses associated with coastal developments. These challenges are compounded by increasingly constrained budgets and by the demands associated with managing multiple partnership programs (currently ten). In light of these circumstances, it will be important to maintain active and constructive communication with the tourism industry in order to foster stewardship and partnership.

After completing this case study learners should be able to:

- 1 Define the key collaborative concepts that apply to the management of relationships between tourism and environmental protection.
- 2 Identify the critical factors that contribute to the operation of effective partnerships for tourism in protected areas.
- 3 Outline the progress that has been made by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority since its establishment in balancing the needs of visitors and of the natural environment.
- 4 Explain how various partnership programs with stakeholders generally, and with the tourism sector in particular, can contribute to the maintenance of heritage values within a marine park setting.
- 5 Describe the actions that will be required to ensure a positive future for the Barrier Reef to the year 2050.

■ Background

Australia's Great Barrier Reef (GBR) is one of the most diverse natural ecosystems on Earth and is the world's largest coral reef system. The Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area stretches 2,300 km along the Queensland coast, covers 348,000 km² and includes more than 900 islands. In 1981, it was inscribed on the World Heritage List in recognition of its outstanding natural values. The extraordinary variety of habitats and species in the GBR — many of them threatened — make it one of the world's richest and most complex natural ecosystems. Though similar habitats occur elsewhere, no other World Heritage Area contains such biodiversity. The area is of enormous scientific and intrinsic importance.

In 1975, the Australian Government established a statutory agency, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA), to protect this natural treasure for the benefit of future generations. GBRMPA's authority is legislated through the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975 and it reports to the Australian Government Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities. The GBRMPA's headquarters in Townsville employs approximately 200 full time

staff working from Cape York to Fraser Island and in regional offices in Cairns, Mackay, Rockhampton and Canberra (see Figure 5.1). In managing and developing the Marine Park, GBRMPA’s mission is to provide for long-term protection, for uses that are ecologically sustainable, and to facilitate understanding and enjoyment of the GBR on the part of all Australians and of the wider international community. The GBR is one of the world’s best managed natural wonders attracting more than 1.6 million visitors annually, contributing more than AUD 5 billion to the Australian economy and generating 64,000 jobs. The Marine Park supports a variety of uses, particularly tourism, and is an integral part of the lifestyles and livelihoods of communities along the GBR coast.



Figure 5.1: Great Barrier Reef Region