

A bird's eye view of the Great Barrier Reef (left) which offers a mecca for tourists looking for beautiful underwater scenery (below).



Photos courtesy of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority.



Customs conservation crusade—the Great Barrier Reef

By Catherine McDonald

Australian Customs plays an important part in protecting the planet's largest Marine World Heritage Area.

Customs National Marine Unit and Coastwatch conducts environmental operations along the 2100km Queensland coastline that makes up the Great Barrier Reef, patrolling an area larger than Britain and Ireland combined to help protect one of the world's richest ecosystems.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park is the world's largest marine park covering 339,750 sq km playing host to a diverse range of species, many of which are endangered. The Park is made up of 900 coral islands and cays, almost 3000 coral reefs, and is home to 1500 species of fish and 400 species of coral.

The reef also plays a major part in Australia's economy. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority estimates the value of tourism on the reef at more than \$1 billion a year. Commercial fisheries on the reef are worth approximately \$200 million annually to the Australian economy. The reef also contains major shipping channels.

"Commercial and conservation issues must go hand in hand if the marine park is to continue to prosper both ecologically and economically," Bob Nankivell, Compliance Manager of the Authority said.

"The primary purpose of the Authority was to ensure the conservation of the Great Barrier Reef, while still providing access and development of the park



A wide diversity of marine plants and animal life contribute to the unique nature of the reef.

through wise use and environmental understanding of this national resource.

Customs, responsible for Australia's civil maritime surveillance, patrols the Great Barrier Reef looking for illegal activities by both sea and air, using its National Marine Unit and Coastwatch resources.

In the Park, the balance between ecological and economic sustainability is attained via a management system involving zoning plans, plans of management and a permit system

Education is and remains the Authority's primary method of achieving long-term compliance, but there is, and always will be, a role for enforcement.

"We commenced placing Marine Park Inspectors onboard Customs vessels during their reef patrols in 2000. The cooperation between our agencies is excellent and I am sure we can maximise the potential of

these vessels in the protection of the reef," Mr Nankivell said.

"Taskings for [the Authority] in the past have involved requests for a range of information—from reporting sightings of illegal fishing, details of recent wrecks and marker buoys, to the reporting of pollution at sea," Coastwatch Director-General Rear Admiral Russ Shalders said.

"While servicing all of our clients, each mission is multi-tasked which means that items of interest for [the Authority] are often generated even when the particular sortie is focussed on another client's requirements.

"In February this year, Coastwatch flew 158 sorties in the Queensland operational area extending from the Torres Strait to the NSW border.

"Coastwatch operates up to six flights in the area on each day of the year and each flight can generate up to 50 sightings of interest to client agencies.

"Around Australia, over 130,000 sighting reports are passed to client agencies with around 50,000 such reports being directed to [the Authority]."

Environment Australia, along with many other departments, including the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, request both Customs National Marine Unit and Coastwatch to carry out patrols.

Customs reports specific details of vessels, such as the type and size, name, registration and activity it is performing, that the Authority then uses to assess use of the reef.

The Authority zoning plans regulate the activities that can be undertaken while on the reef such as fishing or trawling in unpermitted zones and camping on non-resort islands. The Authority asks Customs to watch out for activities contrary to the provisions of the plans.

Customs escorts clients on board its vessels during coastal patrols, taking scientists out to remote areas.

"Our marine crews often collect and assess water samples, checking that the quality is suitable for the life of the reef," Athol Gardiner, Director Operations Customs National Marine Unit said.

"We provide support to research and other environmental activities. The crews are very conscious of how important this support work is. The benefits will be around long after we have moved on."

Mr Gardiner said Customs also assists the Authority by monitoring fishing activities in the Marine Park.

Mr Nankivell said "Fishing is one of the main industries within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, but, its impacts need to be carefully managed to protect both a sustainable industry and the ecosystem."

Types of fishing include commercial fishing such as trawling, line, inshore net and crabbing, as well as recreational fishing. The Authority estimates over 24,300 recreational boats annually fish in the marine park.

Mr Nankivell said biological information is extremely important to Marine Park management.

Customs reports sightings of dolphins, locations of certain types of whales, sizes of crocodiles, unusual occurrences of fish, jellyfish, birds and turtles, as well as numbers of dugong.

Simultaneously, Customs gathers information for the Authority, reporting any damage to flora or unauthorised removal of natural materials, sightings of harm to animals or trapping of wildlife, as well as oil slicks and pollution.

Customs provides a myriad of information to its clients. Sightings that are potentially harmful to native wildlife or fish stocks, including unusual marks on a beach, fish drying racks, and vessels discharging ballast water in the marine park, are reported to the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service.

"Cooperation on the reef ensures that commercial efficiency is blended with conservation concerns. This achieves economic benefits and ensures the marine park environment and marine life are protected." Mr Nankivell said.



Coral and other marine life is abundant in the Great Barrier Reef