

Great Barrier Reef

Australia



Date of inscription on the World Heritage list: 1981
Criteria: natural phenomena or beauty (vii), major stages of Earth's history (viii), significant ecological and biological processes (ix), significant natural habitat of biodiversity (x)
Size: 34,870,000 ha
Location: off the east coast of the Queensland mainland.
Recognized also as: a WWF Global 200 Eco-region, a WWF/IUCN Centre of Plant Diversity, and contains two Ramsar wetlands.

The Great Barrier Reef is a site of remarkable variety and beauty on the northeast coast of Australia. It contains the world's largest collection of coral reefs which extend for 2,300 km, and thus is the earth's biggest living organism. The site ranges from 1000m below sea level to 915m above sea level. The Barrier Reef is of great scientific interest and includes habitats of several species threatened with extinction, such as the dugong ('sea cow') and the large green turtle.



Go4BioDiv Messenger Anna Lyons, 27

To me, the Great Barrier Reef is home. I have lived in this region for my entire life, and have travelled to many islands and reefs up and down the coast. My connection to the Reef is strong seated in my sense of belonging to the region, the landscape, its people, and cultural past. I've seen the Great Barrier Reef at its absolute best, and my greatest concern for this World Heritage site in the face of climate change is that it will change irrevocably.



Flora and Fauna

- More than 2,900 coral reefs and over 200,000 hectares of mangroves with 54% of the world's mangrove species.
- Habitat to about 1,500 animal species, among them 6 turtles, 15 sea snakes and 80 genera of octocorals.
- Breeding ground to sea cows and diverse species of turtles, whales, dolphins, sharks and rays.
- Seasonally, between 1.4 and 1.7 millions of birds flock in the area.

Cultural Heritage - Local Population - Tourism

- Cultural and natural heritage are closely intertwined at the site. Indigenous Australian inhabitants, the Aborigines, consider the reef a "living cultural landscape" which is embedded in their spiritual, economic and social lifestyle. Different coastal clan groups still have privileged access to marine and terrestrial resources of the reef.
- Tourism is the most important economic activity on the reef, with about 1.9 million tourists and 4.9 million recreational visitors each year.
- Due to infrastructure facilities and internal zoning of the protected area, 90% of the visitors concentrate their activities on 10% of the park.



Climate change and others Threats

- The site is extremely vulnerable to any change in sea level rise, sea temperature increase, storm frequency and intensity, precipitation, drought, land run-off, changing oceanic circulation and ocean acidity.
- Temperature rise, predicted between 2°C and 5°C, will probably lead to mass bleaching of the reef and the death of corals. Severe consequences for other reef organisms that depend on the corals are to be expected.
- Further threats include decreasing water quality, increased fishing, biodiversity loss due to pollution and cyclic outbreaks of crown of thorns seastars, tourism impacts.



Sources

UNESCO: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/154>
 WCMC fact sheet: <http://www.unep-wcmc.org/sites/wh/pdf/Great%20Barrier%20Reef.pdf>
 Case Studies on Climate Change and World Heritage:
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001506/150600e.pdf>

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