

# Australian Coral Reef Society Inc.

A society promoting scientific study of Australian Coral Reefs

Professor Michael Kingsford,  
President, ACRS,  
School of Marine Biology and Aquaculture,  
James Cook University,  
Townsville QLD 4811  
Tel: (07) 47814345. Fax: (07) 47815511  
Email: [michael.kingsford@jcu.edu.au](mailto:michael.kingsford@jcu.edu.au)  
[www.australiancoralreefsociety.org](http://www.australiancoralreefsociety.org)

27<sup>th</sup> September 2005

Dr Dianna Wright  
Executive Policy Advisor,  
Department of the Environment and Heritage,  
GPO Box 787  
CANBERRA ACT 2601

## **Re: Review of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act**

Dear Dr Wright,

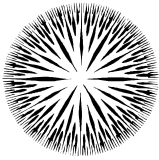
Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on the review.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) has gained world-wide recognition for the development and implementation of policy relevant to the sustainable management of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (GBRMP). The present governance structure has fulfilled roles that include; conducting and facilitating research as well as providing educational, advisory and information services.

The distinction between templates of best practice for statutory authorities is critical in the 'reassessment of the GBRMPA, ie 'board template' that develops policy and a 'management template' for authorities that implement policy (source Uhrig review). The present governance structure of GBRMPA, (based on the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975) is a board template. The GBRMPA has demonstrated that expertise, structure and connectedness with stakeholders has lead to carefully thought-out policy, some of which is now recognized as a bench mark for international authorities involved in managing tropical and temperate environments. We suggest that an updated role of GBRMPA would be a combination of board and management templates. This should reflect the complex issues facing the management of the GBRMP which involves, Federal, State and local governments, in order to ensure that integrated coastal zone management occurs. To install another layer of Federal Government management in Canberra will make it more cumbersome and unable to rapidly respond to issues and of necessity the response will become slower and more conservative. Currently GBRMPA always refers to DEH when major issues arise but many of the issues confronting the Authority require detailed local knowledge and these are best dealt with by the Authority in Townsville. The GBRMPA has always kept the Minister, federal department of environment and local communities informed of proposed management actions.

- The recent legislation on rezoning the GBRMP (Representative Areas Program; RAP) was a direct result of careful planning over more than 5 years. There was broad consultation with scientists (both in-house and external) and other stake holders. Early drafts of the plan had wide circulation to stakeholders. Public meetings were held along the coast and presentations, by GBRMPA staff, were made at international and national conferences to seek expert opinion. The protection of 33% of the park and representation of 70 bioregions was the final result. Submissions from 22,000 stakeholders were received and considered. This constitutes one of the greatest exercises of stakeholder consultation in Australia.
- This rezoning which is best on the best available science has been recognized both in Australia and overseas as representing best practice and a suite of prestigious awards have been given to GBRMPA. These include the 2004 *Banksia Environmental Award*, 2004 Australian Government Regional Heads Forum Excellence Awards, 2004 *Planning Institute of Australia, Queensland Division*, November 2004, Award for Environmental Planning/Conservation, Award for Community Based Planning, Overall Winner

Hon Secretary: : Ms Anke Kluter; Tel: (07) 47534362; Fax: (07) 4772 5852; Email: [a.kluter@aims.gov.au](mailto:a.kluter@aims.gov.au)  
Hon Treasurer: Ms María del Carmen Gómez; Tel: (07) 3365 1475; Fax: (07) 3365 4755; Email: [klegomez@uq.edu.au](mailto:klegomez@uq.edu.au)



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for Excellence in Planning, 2004 *Eureka Prize* for Biodiversity Research, 2004 *US Coral Reef Task Force Award* for Outstanding Management. In Bangkok IUCN (the World Conservation Union) members at the World Conservation Congress 17-25 Nov. 2004, in resolution 40, congratulated the Australian government on its recent achievement of significantly increasing protection for the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and World Heritage Area and commends it for its global leadership in the protection of this outstanding site of universal value. These awards acknowledge the job which GBRMPA has undertaken in to provide integrated coastal zone management on a scale which is not being undertaken anywhere else in the world.

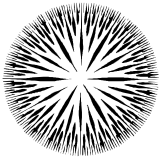
To further ensure that rezoning is effective GBRMPA has embarked, with Queensland Agencies, on the implementation of the Reef Water Quality Protection Plan, which relies upon all levels of government including local councils and land owners to improve the quality of water flowing down the rivers out into the Great Barrier Reef lagoon. Initiatives of this type are strongly supported by ACRS and we will be following their implementation carefully in order to ensure that all the goals and milestones are achieved.

The Australian Coral Reef Society is the oldest coral reef society in the world and has a membership of over 250 scientists from a wide range of Australian and overseas institutions. Members were heavily involved in commenting on the various stages of the recent rezoning of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and have commented on all previous zoning plans as well as making submissions on the Reef Water Quality Protection Plan. Our members have regular contact with the Authority and often requests meetings with them to resolve issues, the Authority has always responded to such requests.

The GBR is one of the most complex ecosystems on earth and it is critical that Australia maintain strong focus on its management and ultimately sustainability for public good. Dilution of GBRMPA's ability to deliver and implement policy and would ultimately result in a reduced capacity to effectively protect and utilize the 0.36 million square kilometres of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage area.

The location of GBRMPA's main office in Townsville, is critical to ensure that GBRMPA staff have access to the range of institutions involved in the reef, including the newly formed MTSRF taking over many of the responsibilities of CRC Reef, James Cook University, Museum of Tropical Queensland, DPI etc which ensures close interactions between the scientists and the managers. It is critical that GBRMPA continues to be located in Townsville which is recognised worldwide as a major hub for coral reef research and management. This close proximity ensures that the best possible expertise is available as management issues arise. Canberra-based decision-making would weaken, the willingness of communities and scientists to engage with any remaining local GBRMPA staff. It will be seen as pointless because they have no direct link to decision-making

Over 3 years ago GBRMPA developed a series of Advisory committees addressing each of the major issues facing the GBR, several of our members are involved in these, and they provide a very useful conduit between the Authority and the various stakeholders. These committees facilitate communication in both ways between the authority and their stakeholders and visa versa. Together with RAP process it is obvious that Queenslanders especially feel a sense of stewardship and ownership of the reef and relations between GBRMPA staff and their stakeholders have never been closer. To contemplate the incorporation of GBRMPA within DEH in Canberra would certainly destroy this sense of ownership. Effective management and policing of the GBRMP can only occur when the stakeholders feel that they are responsible for the reef. While regular patrolling is important and a deterrent, such a large area must largely depend on people doing the "right thing".



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Compatibility of the GBRMPA 1975 and the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBCA) is sensible, but this should not result in impotence to deliver sensible policy and management to the GBRMP. Integration and streamlining of GBRMPA 1975 and the EPBCA is required, combined with strengthened links with DEH. We believe it is critical that the GBRMPA be given accreditation, to develop and implement policy, within the new Act (ie 1999).

The close relationship of the GBRMPA and Queensland Government is critical as many of the problems facing the reef are land based, hence the initiation of the Reef Water Quality Protection Plan. The Queensland Government has demonstrated solidarity by providing funding for research and day-to-day management services of the GBRMP. We suggest that the GBRMPA Board should be composed of members from the State and Federal Governments. Input of the Queensland Government is critical for the development of policy and implementing policy.

The concept of – 'if it works don't break it' - is meaningful with respect to this review. For example, in USA's largest coral reef environment, the Florida Keys, cross-jurisdictional warfare gets managers of the Florida Keys nowhere and this prevents anything like an ecosystem approach to management – despite external consensus that this is what is necessary.

Such major issues such as global warming and with it increasing incidence of bleaching and increased frequency of storms require that the reef is managed by the best possible team and we strongly believe that this is the GBRMPA with the Chairman reporting directly to the Minister and additional layers of bureaucracy will only hinder the management.

In conclusion, the GBRMPA is constantly improving consultation with stakeholders and they are under-resourced to deliver some outputs that would be beneficial to sustainable management practices on the GBRMP. The present governance structure works and responds to change. ACRS considers it critical that GBRMPA maintains the tasks of policy development and implementation. Furthermore, the location of GBRMPA in Townsville is clearly strategic - given that most stakeholders can be contacted relatively easily and issues addressed locally.

ACRS as the representative of coral reef scientists requests that we are able to present our views to the review Panel when they travel along the Queensland coast in October.

Yours sincerely

cc David Borthwick