

## **“Reef Guardian Councils”: Empowering Local Governments and their Communities**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area (GBRWHA) is a nationally and internationally significant area with outstanding natural, social and economic values. One of the major sources of pollution in the GBRWHA is declining water quality coming from the creeks and rivers that feed into this special marine environment. The decline in river water quality is largely attributable to land-based activities within the Great Barrier Reef catchment. These activities include urban development, intensive and extensive agriculture, aquaculture, mining and mineral processing, and other industrial activities. Management of the downstream effects from these activities is complex and requires a cooperative effort from all levels of Government, as well as participation from industry sectors and the community.

To raise awareness in the community of issues affecting the GBRWHA and encourage behavioural changes to address these issues, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) developed “Reef Guardian Schools”, an action-based school program providing opportunities for students, teachers and parents to participate in a range of school-based environmental initiatives. Following the success of Reef Guardian Schools, the GBRMPA is developing a Reef Guardian Council concept, which is designed to recognise and foster environmental stewardship for the Great Barrier Reef from Local Government and the general community. The objective is to raise awareness and encourage ‘best management practice’ in local government activities, while recognising that effective protection and management of the Great Barrier Reef requires partnerships at all levels of government, industry and the community.

Some of the benefits Local Government will receive from the Reef Guardian Council Programme include greater recognition among the wider community of councils’ commitment to the protection of the Great Barrier Reef; development of a strategic approach to environmental protection; and opportunities for councils to utilise Reef Guardian status to attract external endorsement, promotion and marketing.

A Steering Committee of 17 councils is working with the GBRMPA to develop the Reef Guardian Council Programme, while the framework is being trialled through eight Councils within the Great Barrier Reef catchment. The initial focus for Reef Guardian Councils will be water quality issues arising from urban, industrial and agricultural practices. The impact on water quality is an issue over which local communities and their councils have a degree of control, and its impacts on Reef ecosystems have been well established and publicised.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Great Barrier Reef (GBR) region is the largest coral reef ecosystem in the world, containing a complex system of different marine habitats including coral reefs, sandy cays, continental islands, algal and sponge gardens, mangrove estuaries, seagrass beds, sandy or muddy bottom communities and deep ocean troughs. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) is the principal advisor to the Australian Government, through the Minister for the Environment and Heritage, on the care, development and management of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. The Authority works in partnership with other government agencies, industry, community groups and individuals to help preserve the social, economic and environmental values of the Great Barrier Reef.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (Marine Park), covers approximately 345,400km<sup>2</sup>, and is also the world’s largest World Heritage Area. In 2004-5, tourism, commercial fishing, and cultural and

recreational activities in the Marine Park were estimated to contribute \$5.8 billion to the Australian economy, and accounted for the employment of approximately 63,000 people; with tourism dominating these contributions (Access Economics, 2005).. Under an agreement between the Australian and Queensland Governments, day-to-day management for the Marine Park is conducted in cooperation with other Australian and Queensland Government agencies, particularly the Queensland Environment Protection Agency who are also responsible for the management of Queensland marine and island National Parks.

However, the Marine Park is not an isolated system. Lying adjacent to the Queensland coast, there are approximately 38 major catchments that drain into the Great Barrier Reef lagoon, with a total drainage area of approximately 424,000 km<sup>2</sup> (Schaffelke, Furnas and Waterhouse, 2005). The GBR catchment contains approximately 42 Local Government Areas, and has six Natural Resource Management Regions. Responsibility for management of land in the GBR Catchment lies principally with Local and Queensland State Governments, and individual land-owners.

Over the past 150 years many of these catchment areas adjacent to the Marine Park have undergone extensive modification to accommodate cities, farms, mines and tourist attractions, which have contributed to degrading the water quality entering the Marine Park (Brodie et al 2003; GBRMPA 2001). The GBR is a living system, and is also vulnerable to major stresses from 'natural' disturbances, such as cyclones and floods. Increasing human pressures on the Great Barrier Reef can hinder the GBR's recovery from these events and when individual pressures accumulate they may lead to the long-term decline in the overall health of GBR ecosystems (Wilkinson, C., 2004).

Single issue-based actions or policies by individual organisations are no longer an effective way to protect the Reef (Productivity Commission, 2003). The Reef Water Quality Protection Plan (Reef Plan) developed by the Australian and Queensland Governments, in partnership with a wide range of industry and community groups, provides a framework to address this decline in water quality. The Reef Plan approaches protection of the GBR from a whole of catchment-community perspective. The Reef Plan was launched in December 2003 with a focus on integrated natural resource management actions to address pollutants from a wide range of different sources (Anon., 2005). While local governments have a critical role in implementing many of the Reef Plan actions, they often do not have the capacity or expertise to effectively participate. In recognition of this, the goal of the Reef Guardian Council Programme is to recognise and promote Local Government actions in natural resource management, facilitate information sharing and exchange to improve local government capacity, and ultimately to achieve better environmental outcomes for the GBR.

## **THE REEF GUARDIAN COUNCIL CONCEPT**

The Reef Guardian Council Programme was developed as a vehicle for engendering community change to promote GBR protection through education, information sharing and involvement in on-the-ground actions. Local government has the ability to facilitate and promote GBR protection to the local community:

- Many of the services and facilities that communities use everyday are provided by Local Governments.
- Councils are elected by their local community, and are therefore a reflection of that community's values.

Local governments capacity as the front-line facilitator and promoter of GBR protection to the communities comes from their role and function in natural resource management planning. Areas that can contribute to local governments capacity include:

1. Awareness of local and regional NRM issues
2. Access to appropriate biophysical, social and economic data for NRM decisions
3. Access to certain technical, human resources, project management and planning skills to undertake the implementation of NRM at a local and regional scale
4. Support systems in place to effectively engage and motivate local government to exercise ownership over regional NRM decisions and effectively implement them.

However, most Councils are rated as under-developed or not developed with respect to these activity areas (LGAQ, 2004).

The goal of the Reef Guardian Council Programme is to recognise and promote Local Government actions that improve environmental outcomes for the GBR. To do this, the Reef Guardian Council Programme has five main objectives:

1. Develop partnerships with Local Government, preferably at the Regional Organisations of Council level.
2. Look to ensure that planning requirements are implemented within developed and developing areas within the local government areas.
3. Influences the management of impacts on coastal and marine ecosystems through the application of management plans to maintain biodiversity and ecosystem integrity.
4. Involve the community through on-the-ground actions, education and information to promote and facilitate reef protection.
5. Integrate monitoring of outcomes of actions to address catchment-based pollution sources.

## **BENEFITS OF THE REEF GUARDIAN COUNCIL PROGRAMME**

The Reef Guardian Council Programme is about protecting the GBR, thereby providing a number of benefits to the GBRMPA. However, the programme also provides many benefits for the councils involved. The direct benefits to Local Government include:

- Greater recognition among the wider community of councils commitment to the protection of the GBR;
- A strategic approach to environmental protection; and
- Opportunities for councils to utilise Reef Guardian status to attract external endorsement, promotion, funding and marketing.

The direct benefits to the GBRMPA include:

- Protecting the Great Barrier Reef through improved water quality;
- Raising awareness in community through councils;
- Extending Reef Guardian Schools by providing understanding of impacts from land based activities;
- Better co-ordination and clearer focus for participating councils regarding effective environmental management actions;
- Recognition and understanding across council programmes and activities;
- Provides a regional perspective and forum to promote and strengthen GBRMPA activities;
- Strengthening of partnerships, and the building and fostering of working relationships between councils and the GBRMPA
- A greater understanding of the constraints for councils to achieve environmental outcomes.

Local Government can also provide benefits for Reef protection through its access to a variety of communication and information sources that will help to share information on Reef protection.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF THE REEF GUARDIAN COUNCIL PROGRAMME**

The Reef Guardian Council concept is being developed based on an assessment process that promotes GBR protection and Council commitment. The resulting Reef Guardian Council framework will guide the GBRMPA and Council in activities, actions and engagement that will need to be undertaken for Councils to become Reef Guardian Councils. To ensure that the concept was useful and relevant to councils, seventeen Councils within the Great Barrier Reef catchment have agreed to participate in the Reef Guardian Council Steering Committee, and have already met to discuss and provide advice on the development of the Reef Guardian Council concept. In collaboration with the GBRMPA, eight Councils from the Steering Committee have formed a working group to assist in developing the assessment framework for the programme.

The framework is based on existing local government programmes, policies and activities, to show how on-ground actions that can help to protect the GBR are already in place in many councils. The framework also provides a strategy for councils to use to prioritise these actions which are already targeted and tailored to local government operations.

In developing the framework the Councils in the working group have evaluated their current activities, and compiled a table of actions that potentially meet Reef Guardian Council objectives. The working

group also examined an assessment structure for the programme, identifying the need for a system that will be equitable across different Council types. Councils are extremely diverse, in terms of capacity, constituents, rate-base and landscapes, so it is essential that the Reef Guardian Council programme is accessible to all councils who commit to participating. However, while the working group agreed that the Reef Guardian symbol must be something that councils can achieve, they also considered that recognition needed to be independently provided only once the goal and objectives of the programme were being met. This would mean that only councils that were committed to improving protection of the GBR would be acknowledged.

The working group also identified adaptive management and continuous improvement as important cornerstones to the programme. This includes a robust monitoring, evaluation and reporting system. The GBRMPA has access to a number of regional reporting tools for environmental, social and economic factors that it would be included in the programme.

Finally, the working group noted the importance of the Reef Guardian Councils programme as a tool for local government business. To be successful the programme cannot be an added burden to the activities of local governments. The Reef Guardian Councils programme needs to add value to existing councils operations.

## **ENGAGING LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

The GBRMPA already has established networks with the Great Barrier Reef catchment communities, industry and government agencies. Through these networks the GBRMPA approached the members of each local government within the GBR catchment to discuss the concept of Reef Guardian Councils, and establish a Steering Committee to provide a Council decision-making body on the development of the Reef Guardian Programme.

One Steering Committee meeting has been convened to date. Recognising the financial and physical resource constraints of Councils, the Steering Committee meeting was held in conjunction with other local government meetings to ensure that the Steering Committee members had the best opportunity to attend the meeting. To maintain the Steering Committee network, members are kept up to date with the progress of the working group in developing the framework through regular correspondence. A newsletter has recently been developed to improve this informal exchange.

Throughout the engagement process, geographic distance was the biggest inhibitor for working group members to meet. The GBRMPA have worked with the working group to develop Council action tables, individually at both the GBRMPA offices and at each Council office. As the action tables have developed, the GBRMPA and working group members have met irregularly to decide on the framework structure and its elements, usually in conjunction with other Local Government meetings to ensure that the Council members had the best opportunity to attend. Individual meetings with Councils in the working group were also conducted to ensure each member had an opportunity to comment on the framework development. Contact with the working group has been maintained through telephone and email.

## **Conclusion**

Local Government support and the willingness to promote the programme are vital to the success of the Reef Guardian Council Programme. To assist in achieving this support, effective networks of local government partnerships will need to be developed and maintained. Local government will also need to be shown that there are tangible benefits for Councils to be part of the programme.

In developing the Reef Guardian Council framework, its effectiveness will depend on it being action focused, to show the communities what they can do and what their Council is doing to help protect the GBR. Information sharing will need to be targeted and tailored so it is relevant to each different stakeholder group and their information needs. The assessment framework will also need to recognise that for Councils to achieve the programmes goals, and integrate the programme into Council business will take time.

Most importantly, maintaining the focus and vision of the Reef Guardian Council concept will require a concerted effort across all the stakeholders in the Programme.

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