

The great barrier reef and the environment and social impacts of tourism essay sa...

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The Great Barrier Reef is the world's largest coral reef system, located in the Coral Sea, off the coast of Queensland in northeast Australia. This coral reef system is composed of approximately three thousand individual reefs in addition to nine hundred islands, stretching for 2,600 kilometers and covering an area of approximately 344,400 square kilometers. A huge part of the reef is protected by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, which happens to be the world's largest marine park, established in 1975, and covering an area of 345,000 square kilometres (Great Barrier Reef, 2007; Shipping Safety, 2001).

Sometimes referred to as the largest organism in the world, the Great Barrier Reef could be seen from outer space. It is made up of millions of tiny organisms called coral polyps. In the year 1981, this entire coral reef system was selected as a World Heritage Site. The Great Barrier Reef has also been labeled as one of the seven natural wonders of the world by CNN. And, in Queensland it is referred to as a state icon (Great Barrier).

Undoubtedly, the Great Barrier Reef is a very popular tourist destination for people from within and outside Australia who do not get to see the marvel from outer space. Scuba divers are especially attracted to this tourist destination. Vast biodiversity, warm and clear waters, and the Great Barrier Reef's accessibility from the floating guest facilities known as "live aboards" make it even more appealing. Along the coast of Queensland today, there are many cities that offer boat trips to the great coral reef system on a daily basis. Besides, various continental islands have been turned into resorts to sustain tourism in the area (Great Barrier).

Tourism on the Great Barrier Reef generates around AU\$4 billion or more annually with at least two million visitors coming in year after year. Most of these visits are managed in partnership with the marine tourism industry. There are boat tours on offer, as well as cruises for single day trips or longer ones. Boat sizes could range from dinghies to superyachts. Glass-bottomed boats in addition to underwater observatories are other favored attractions. Helicopter flights, snorkeling and diving are a few of the other wonderful activities for tourists here. The use of pontoons for snorkeling is common too (Great Barrier).

The management of tourism at the Great Barrier Reef is centered on ecological sustainability. There is research being continuously conducted on this great coral reef system. Moreover, there are policies currently in place on cruise ships, bareboat charters, and anchorages that limit the traffic at the Great Barrier Reef (Great Barrier). This is because of the environmental impacts of tourism that tourism managers must deal with in order to generate long term tourism benefits from a given tourist destination. The environmental impacts of tourism usually include: (1) the natural impact, e. g. on wildlife, water, and plants; (2) the physical impact, e. g. the impact of ships on the water quality; (3) social impact, e. g. the impact of tourist resorts on the quality of life of local residents; and (4) the economic impact on the environment, e. g. the impact of development on local taxpayers (Environmental Impact, 2007).

The environmental impacts of tourism at the Great Barrier Reef concern recreational and commercial fishing that removes large predatory species

from the reef ecosystem. Researchers are unsure of the effects of selective removal of such fish. However, it is known that shore-based recreational fishing, competing for species with commercial fishing, may have effects on shore populations of invertebrates that are collected for bait in areas that are intensively visited. What is more, there are innumerable people that scuba dive each year at the Great Barrier Reef using registered, privately owned motor vessels as well as smaller craft. According to the Australia State of the Environment Report 2001 (2004), "Activities associated with the use of this equipment have the potential to affect the environment through pollution of water (boat sillage) and disturbance of species and habitats."

Within the Great Barrier Reef area, infrastructure needs are growing both on the mainland as well as on the nineteen resort islands for both day visitors and the longer stay visitors. Tourists in the area now have access to a bigger range of sites through the use of faster and larger boats. This places more of these sites at risk of irreversible disturbance, also according to the Australia State of the Environment Report 2001. Furthermore, the report claims that there are social and community effects because tourism affects the lifestyle of residents in ways that are perceived as intrusive. Increases in crowding, prices, or crime are negative social impacts of tourism on the Great Barrier Reef. Additionally, "Increasing tourism may also result in increasing conflict between various uses and, within the same uses, between commercial, recreational and indigenous interests" (Australia State, 2004).

Labelled as one of the seven wonders of the world, the Great Barrier Reef truly is a cause of celebration for humanity. Hence, even though there are

obvious environmental and social impacts of tourism in the area, Australia does not explicitly limit the number of tourists at the world's largest coral reef system. After all, the Great Barrier Reef is a World Heritage Site, essentially belonging to the entire human race! Hence, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority has identified several points of concern that tourism management in the area would be working on so as to help the Great Barrier Reef remain a wonder of the world.

These concerns of tourism management include the protection of coral reefs and other habitats such as seagrass from anchor damage, poor diving practices, waste disposal, reef walking and collecting; protection of nestling turtles and sea birds from disturbance; protection of whales, dugongs and turtles from interference and vessel collisions; prevention of littering because some animals may mistake litter for nutrients and others may get trapped in the litter such as ring pulls from soft drink cans, or discarded fishing line; respect of the cultural importance of the Great Barrier Reef to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders; and minimization of conflict in access within the multiple use Marine Park. The crown of thorns starfish outbreaks have been identified as another cause of concern in the area. These outbreaks may have been caused by human use of the coastal zone increasing nutrient loads, or the removal of predators. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority also recognizes that these outbreaks may simply be a natural phenomenon, and therefore nothing to hold tourists responsible for (Frequently Asked Questions).

Tourism on the Great Barrier Reef employs around 47, 000 people. Yet, Australian residents in a survey ranked the impacts of reef tourism as a high threat to the great coral reef system. On the other hand, those who are professionally experienced in reef environmental issues ranked reef tourism as a much smaller threat as compared to other widespread impacts such as coral bleaching, agricultural runoff, and fishing. Therefore, the environmental threat of tourism on the Great Barrier Reef is largely an exaggeration. Nevertheless, it is essential for tourism managers to protect the great coral reef system from damage as much as they can. Vicki J. Harriott (2004) writes that “ Industry and management agencies have included education of reef visitors and tourism staff as part of a planned framework for sustainable tourism and recreation, and this education program should include promotion of a greater understanding of reef environmental issues.” After all, mismanaged places cannot remain as wonders of the world for too long.

Besides, visitors who are educated in reef environmental issues will also make the communities in the region less unhappy. In point of fact, tourists will also be affected by poor conditions on the Great Barrier Reef. As an example, the CRC Reef Research Center Ltd. is studying the effects of crowding on tourism on the Great Barrier Reef. Apparently, tourists desire wonderful conditions around the reef system just as much as the local community. And so, tourism operators participate in the “ Eyes and Ears” incident reporting program to reduce the negative social and environmental impacts of tourism on the Great Barrier Reef. Reported incidents include

littering, moving too close to a whale, and fishing in a zone where the activity is not permitted (Hassall et al.).

According to the Queensland Premier, Peter Beattie, the Great Barrier Reef is not under an environmental threat caused by tourism alone. Rather, marine species that rely on coastal freshwater wetlands and estuaries as breeding and nursery areas have had their habitat damaged since the time of European settlement because of development on the land. Hence, local governments, communities, and groups such as land holders, agricultural industries and tourism must all join forces to protect the ecology of the great reef system seeing that the development on the land increases pollutant loads in the rivers.

According to a memorandum of understanding between the Commonwealth Government and the Government of the State of Queensland on cooperation to protect the Great Barrier Reef from land-sourced pollutants, the mining industry too is counted among those responsible for damaging the ecological system of the world's largest coral reef system (Commonwealth and Queensland Join Forces to Protect Great Barrier Reef, 2002). Hence, the tourists in the area who continue to take pride in the World Heritage Site and wonder of the world, the Great Barrier Reef, can breathe a sigh of relief because they are not chiefly responsible for damage to this coral reef system. Rather, it may be assumed that the minimal wear and tear caused because of tourism will experience repair. This idea, of course, tallies with the belief of the reef environmentalists who do not think that tourism is causing much damage anyhow to the world's largest coral reef system.

In addition, the impacts of tourism activities are being managed rather well through monitoring of pontoons and marinas, apart from other regulatory means. Education for tourists also acts as an important management tool to ensure responsible tourism. Tourism operators, too, are required to have permits which set out the conditions of use of the marine park on the Great Barrier Reef. Another noteworthy fact is that all visitors must pay a small amount of fees as environmental management charge whenever they are carried by commercial tour operators. Besides funding research on the Great Barrier Reef, this fees contributes to the management of the marine park, which in turn includes the reduction of enviromental and social impacts of tourism (Australia's report to the UNCSD on the implementation of Agenda 21 - 1996, 1996).

Lastly, researchers have considered the impact of climate change on the Great Barrier Reef. Changes in water quality have also been studied. For climate change, once again, tourism is not solely held responsible even if we believe that climate change is caused by human mistakes. For changes in water quality, marine and land activities such as agriculture in catchment areas, coastal developoment, wetland and mangrove clearing, sewage and stormwater discharges from marine outfalls, and waste and ballast water discharges from ships have been held responsible (7 Pressures on the Marine Park). While tourism is partly responsible for coastal development and waste and ballast water discharges from their cruise ships, there are many other factors contributing to the environmental and social issues facing the Great Barrier Reef. Therefore, there is no talk of limiting the number of tourists at one of the seven wonders of the world. Neither do we expect such a

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discussion to ensue in future. The Great Barrier Reef remains as a World Heritage Site, very well managed by the tourism industry, and generally respected by all who visit it from around the world.

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