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Great Barrier Reef conservation tied to tourism

Conservation projects on the Great Barrier Reef are becoming more visible to the public as tourism operators showcase the important role they play in caring for the world's largest and most diverse reef.

Tourism Tropical North Queensland Chief Executive Officer Mark Olsen said the region's marine tourism industry had been a key partner in the protection and management of the Great Barrier Reef for decades.

"The Tropical North Queensland reef fleet invests in the future of the World Heritage area by undertaking research and providing the infrastructure to assist scientists to access the reef, helping to make the Great Barrier reef the best managed reef on earth and the gold standard for global reef management," he said.

"Travellers are increasingly wanting to understand what is being done to help the Great Barrier Reef as ecosystems around the world face the challenges of climate change.

"New tours are helping visitors to understand the innovative and dedicated actions of the tourism industry on the Great Barrier Reef with opportunities to assist with collecting data, remove the coral-eating *Drupella* snail and caring for injured turtles among the available activities.

"Data collection is critical in determining if the reef environment is changing and our tourism operators have been the eyes and ears that monitor the reef for more than three decades alerting scientists to any threats it may face and undertaking stewardship activities such as reef restoration and removal of predators when necessary.

"Quicksilver's Reef Biosearch is the largest employer of marine biologists outside government agencies and their 30-year logbook database on the Great Barrier Reef was the precursor to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority's Eye on the Reef program.

"Importantly, tourism operators showcase the World Heritage area to the public and educate visitors that everyone can play in helping to conserve the Great Barrier Reef and other environments they care about."

Living coral biobank

Great Barrier Reef Legacy has created the world's first living coral ark to preserve the Great Barrier Reef's 400 species of hard coral at the [Cairns Aquarium](#). The project will safeguard corals so there are specimens available for reef research and restoration efforts should they be required to restore coral biodiversity on the reef. The Great Barrier Reef Legacy team has collected almost 200 hard corals from the Great Barrier Reef representing half of the World Heritage Area's hard coral species for a [living coral biobank](#) as part of the Forever Reef Project.

See it: The Cairns Aquarium operates 30-minute guided [living coral biobank tours](#) throughout the day for people to see the collection and learn about the impact of climate change on the world's reefs.

Coral Nurture Program

A unique partnership between researchers and tour operators, the [Coral Nurture Program](#) allows operators to collect broken corals to propagate in underwater nurseries and then plant on high-value sections of the Great Barrier Reef. The owners of [Wavelength Cruises](#) at Port Douglas, John and Jenny Edmondson, pioneered the use of a coral clip to attach the corals and along with [Sailaway](#), [Passions of Paradise](#), [Ocean Freedom](#) and [Quicksilver Cruises](#) built nurseries and have been successfully planting coral near the sites where they operate in Cairns and Port Douglas. The University of Technology Sydney has expanded the program along the length Great Barrier Reef following its success in Tropical North Queensland and it has just celebrated the planting of 100,000 corals.

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See it: Join the Passions of Paradise research team on a [citizen science tour](#) supporting the work of local conservationists by completing Sightings Network submissions and Rapid Monitoring Surveys for the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority as part of the Eye on the Reef network. Divers can observe marine biologists working on the Coral Nurture Program as well as assisting with reef monitoring.

Reef Restoration Foundation

The not-for-profit [Reef Restoration Foundation](#) was the first organisation to be allowed by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority to grow coral on the world's largest reef. They established the Great Barrier Reef's first offshore nursery at Fitzroy Island in December 2017 and from that pilot project have expanded to two outer reef sites, including Moore Reef near the [Sunlover Reef Cruises](#) platform. Volunteers take cuttings of coral and attach them to frames suspended underwater where they grow much faster and can be planted on degraded sections of the reef to boost coral cover and create a complex habitat for marine life. The outplantings from the first coral nursery at Fitzroy Island were observed spawning in November 2022 marking a critical milestone for the project to build reef resilience at high-value sites in partnership with the operators that work there.

See it: Snorkel over the Reef Restoration Foundation outplantings at Fitzroy Island on the Fitzroy Island Resort [Marine Conservation Program](#) where you learn to identify coral-eating Drupella snails and help remove them from the reef. The program also includes helping to care for injured turtles at the Cairns Turtle Rehabilitation Centre, identifying turtles on a snorkelling tour, and undertaking an Eye on the Reef survey for the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority.

Coral Rubble Stabilisation

[GBR Biology](#) has been using the Mars Assisted Reef Restoration System (MARRS) to stabilise coral rubble created after a large cyclone damaged corals on a section of Moore Reef. Marine biologists work with Gunggandji and Yirrganydji Land and Sea Country Rangers at the Reef Magic Cruises platform to attach broken coral fragments to the [Reef Stars](#) and place them on the rubble allowing new corals to grow and stabilise the reef bed. The program started in June 2020 with 50 Reef Stars and is now complete with 439 stars installed across 500 square metres. It took two to three years for those first Reef Stars to disappear from sight and has resulted in a 50% increase in coral cover. This process used 60 species of coral to transform the initial site from rubble to a living coral garden, a process which, if left to nature, would take a decade for just one species to recover and many more decades for such a diverse reef to emerge.

See it: join the marine biologists in the [Reef Magic](#) pontoon laboratory to learn more about the reef restoration process and see the restored site on a Reef Magic glass bottom boat tour. Dreamtime Dive & Snorkel has launched a series of [Reef Recovery Days](#) where travellers can participate in assisting marine biologists and cultural guides in making and attaching the MARRS Reef Stars at Hastings Reef.

Great Barrier Reef Census

With the assistance of more than 100 tourism operators the [Great Reef Census](#), coordinated by [Citizens of the Great Barrier Reef](#), has surveyed 510 reefs and collected 75,000 images over the past three years. This means that 15 per cent of the reefs within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park have data captured to enable changes to be tracked, compared to just 5 per cent that were surveyed regularly prior to the Census. The data can be used in conservation projects such as helping to direct Crown-of-Thorns Starfish control vessels.

See it: Travel with a [Tropical North Queensland operator](#) to see the reefs that their staff and passengers have helped to survey. Donate 5 minutes of your daily screen time to verify and categorise corals in the [Great Reef Census survey](#).

Crown-of-Thorns Starfish

Programs to control the Crown-of-Thorns Starfish have evolved through the early work of the [Association of Marine Park Tourism Operators](#) which received funding to control the coral-eating starfish and trained operators to remove the predators from their reef sites. Many operators have their own research programs, such as [GBR](#)

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[Biology](#) whose marine biologists have been filling vital knowledge gaps on the ecology of juvenile starfish and working with the Australian Institute of Marine Science to use environmental DNA to detect outbreaks of the starfish.

See it: Thanks to the stewardship of tourism operators like [Calypso Reef Cruises](#), you are unlikely to see a Crown-of-Thorns Starfish when you visit the Great Barrier Reef. However, you will learn about these predators and other threats to the reef during the marine biologist presentation on your trip.

Reef Restoration Research Project

[Quicksilver](#) was the first Great Barrier Reef operator to employ marine biologists to guide snorkellers and provide a deeper understanding of the environment they were seeing. In 2018 they gained Great Barrier Reef Marine Park authority approval to undertake a [reef restoration project](#) to speed up coral growth on a patch of coral rubble left behind after a cyclone at Agincourt Reef. Working with Reef Ecologic, Quicksilver used mesh frames to stabilise the rubble as another tool in the kit to help the reef recover from natural events. Small recruit colonies of coral were attached to the mesh and today the coral cover is so extensive, the mesh can no longer be seen.

See it: Snorkel alongside Quicksilver's Agincourt Reef platform to see the impressive staghorn corals that are now five years old. Join a [guided marine biologist snorkel](#) tour to gain a deeper understanding of the Great Barrier Reef ecosystem.

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