

# “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 developed the 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 Programme seeks 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 16 councils worked with the GBRMPA to develop the Reef Guardian Council Programme. The first four approved Reef Guardian Councils are Livingstone Shire Council, Hinchinbrook Shire Council, Townsville City Council and Burdekin Shire Council. 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 (The Reef) 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 Water Resources, on the care, development and management of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. The Reef works in partnership with other government agencies, industry, community groups and individuals to help preserve the social, economic and environmental values of the Reef.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (the 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 Reef lagoon, with a total drainage area of approximately 424,000 km<sup>2</sup> (Schaffelke, Furnas and Waterhouse, 2005). The Reef catchment contains approximately 42 Local Government Areas, and has six Natural Resource Management Regions. Responsibility for management of land in the Reef 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 Reef is a living system, and is also vulnerable to major stresses from 'natural' disturbances, such as cyclones and floods. Increasing human pressures on the Reef can hinder it's recovery from these events and when individual pressures accumulate they may lead to the long-term decline in the overall health of Reef 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 Reef 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 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 Reef.

#### The Reef Guardian Council Concept

The Reef Guardian Council Programme was developed as a vehicle for engendering community change to promote Reef protection through education, information sharing and involvement in on-the-ground actions. Local government has a strong capacity to facilitate and promote Reef 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 Reef protection to the communities comes from their role and function in natural resource management (NRM) planning. Areas that 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; and
4. Support systems in place to effectively engage and motivate local government to exercise ownership over regional NRM decisions and effectively implement them.

However, in the same review by the Coastal CRC, most Councils were rated as under-developed or not developed with respect to these activity areas (Mackenzie, R., Robinson, J., Dent, J. and Scheltinga, D.M., 2003).

The Reef Guardian Council Programme seeks to recognise and promote the important role that local government can play in protecting the Reef and targets five areas to influence local government actions:

1. To develop a mutually beneficial partnership between the GBRMPA and local government bodies;
2. To recognise and foster environmental stewardship for the Great Barrier Reef from local government and the general community;
3. 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 and the community;
4. Promote and advocate local government actions in natural resource management; and
5. Facilitate information sharing and exchange to improve local government capacity.

## Development of the Reef Guardian Council Programme

The Reef Guardian Council concept was developed based on the Local Agenda 21 guideline for sustainable cities, and an assessment process that promotes Reef protection and Council commitment to the process. The resulting Reef Guardian Council framework guides the GBRMPA and Council in activities, actions and engagement that will need to be undertaken for Councils to become Reef Guardian Councils.

To be effective, the Programme needed to be developed for councils by councils. To achieve this goal and to ensure that the concept was useful and relevant to councils, a number of councils have been involved in the development of the framework. The framework is based on existing local government policies and activities, that show how on-ground actions are already in place in many council work programmes. The framework also provides a strategy for councils to use when prioritising actions, and provides information that is targeted and tailored to local government.

Sixteen Councils within the Reef catchment agreed to participate in the Reef Guardian Council Steering Committee, and discussed and approved the development of the Reef Guardian Council framework. In collaboration with the GBRMPA, eight Councils from the Steering Committee formed a working group collaborating to deliver the final framework document. The Steering Committee endorsed a framework for Reef Guardian Councils in August 2006, which included developing action plans, approved by the participating councils, and the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the GBRMPA.

The MoU defines the roles and responsibilities of the Council and the GBRMPA under the Programme. Its main component is the list of reef-safe actions the Council commits to achieving on an annual basis. The final MoU formalises the partnership agreement between the GBRMPA and each Council.

## Engaging Local Government

During the development of the framework, the working group have evaluated their current activities, and compiled a table of actions that meet Reef Guardian Council objectives. The working group also examined an assessment structure for the Programme and identified the need for a system that will be equitable across different Councils. 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 Reef 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 was 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.

Throughout the engagement process, geographic distance was the biggest inhibitor for working group members to meet. Individual meetings with Councils in the working group were also conducted to ensure each member had an opportunity to comment on the framework development. A newsletter has been developed to improve this informal information exchange.

#### Benefits of the Reef Guardian Council Programme

The Reef Guardian Council Programme is about protecting the Reef, thereby providing a number of benefits to the Reef. 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 Reef;
- A strategic approach to environmental protection; and
- Opportunities for councils to utilise Reef Guardian status to attract external endorsement, promotion, funding and marketing.

The benefits to the Reef include:

- Protecting the Reef through improved water quality;
- Raising awareness in community through councils (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; and
- 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.

#### How to become a Reef Guardian Council

Initially, new Reef Guardian Councils will be chosen for endorsement from the participants in the 16 councils on the Steering Committee.

To be eligible for selection as a Reef Guardian Council, a council must meet the following criteria:

- One of 16 local government councils currently on the Steering Committee
- Located within the Reef catchment;
- Have developed an Action Plan approved by council and endorsed by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority that meets a minimum standard of environment performance;
- Have signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Council and the GBRMPA; and

The participating Council must prepare an action plan, annually to address the four focus areas of water, waste, land and community engagement in collaboration with the GBRMPA. Action plans are then submitted to GBRMPA for sign-off. To ensure equity amongst councils the GBRMPA together with local government officers, developed a process where small and large councils can be compared equally under the Programme.

The first four Reef Guardian Councils are Livingstone Shire Council, Hinchinbrook Shire Council, Townsville City Council and Burdekin Shire Council. These councils have successfully completed requirements to become recognised as Reef Guardians including the development of approved table of actions and agreed Council motions in support of the Programme. The councils formalised the MoU documentation. At least two, however, Townsville and Livingstone will be affected by local government amalgamations and the implications for the Reef Guardian Council Programme is unknown.

Accessing Reef Guardian Council resources and funding opportunities

The GBRMPA provides funding and in-kind support for conducting bi-annual community workshops and provides in-kind support and advice for the completion of action plans. The Reef Guardian Council Programme assists councils in sourcing funding through down-loadable grant processes for projects identified within the action plans. This should improve the likelihood of gaining funding for council-driven programmes.

The Reef Guardian Council Programme offers opportunities to access on-ground resources and funding supported by the Programme through major project initiatives. Currently the RCG Programme has \$335,500 funding for two major projects that will benefit Reef Guardian Councils.

The first of the projects entitled:

'Identifying and promoting Local Government actions to implement the Reef Plan' aims to benchmark local government activities. The project will assess local government activities to identify the current best standards of local government practice in natural resource and water quality management. The project will also scope potential statutory, land planning and management opportunities for improved water quality outcomes.

The second Reef Guardian Council project is known as 'Opportunities for better Oil and Hydrocarbon Waste Management and Recycling within the Great Barrier Reef catchment.'

This project will provide a better understanding of waste oil streams in the region and support new oil collection and recycling units to enhance oil recycling opportunities.

#### 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 continue to be developed and maintained. Local government will also need to be confident that there are tangible benefits for Councils to be part of the programme.

The effectiveness of the Reef Guardian Council programme clearly centres around it being action focused, to show the communities what they can do and what their Council is doing to help protect the Reef. Messages need to be targeted and tailored to ensure they are relevant and salient to each different stakeholder group and their information needs. 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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