

Great Barrier Reef issues

WWF Report

Worldwide Fund for Nature has produced a report on water quality in the Great Barrier Reef, and it makes pretty dismal reading.

Our area, which covers the Johnstone, Tully, Murray and Herbert Rivers, is scored as poor. 220,000 tonnes of silt, 1,540 tonnes of nitrogen and 200 tonnes of phosphorus are flushed out the Johnstone every year. The Tully-Murray is about the same, and the Herbert, with its big grazing areas inland, produces an astounding 1.3 million tonnes of silt per year.

Fish kills on the beach

Long-time residents of Mission Beach talk of the dense seagrass beds that used to lie just off our beaches, and how dugongs used to be a common sight. Sadly, nowadays the seagrasses that dugongs and turtles feed on have been killed off by intensive prawn trawling, and dugongs are rare visitors just passing through.

I can remember seeing a video that was shown at a C4 meeting a couple of years ago, taken by an underwater camera fitted to the corner of a trawl net as it was being dragged across the sea bed. The best way to describe its effect is to say it was like a road grader taking a light skim off the road. Obviously seagrasses cannot survive much treatment like this.

The other negative impact of trawling is the by-catch – the non-target fish that are caught and killed, only to be thrown overboard again as waste. It has been estimated that for every tonne of prawns caught, another 6 to 10 tonnes of by-catch are killed.

Sometimes the wind and tides conspire to wash the by-catch onto the beach, and this has been a serious problem here from time to time.

So when the State Government was negotiating the East Coast Trawl Management Plan with commercial fishermen and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA), it was agreed that the trawlers would stay at least 500 metres off the beach in our area. Unfortunately this has not worked as the dead fish on the beach on May 25th can attest, and GBRMPA is now looking at more strict regulations for trawling.



The issue came up at the Mission Beach Marine Advisory Committee's last meeting, when GBRMPA hinted that trawlers might be moved out to beyond Dunk Island. They then asked the committee for their opinions on what to do.

A majority voted to move the trawlers outside of the line shown on the map, which runs from 5 kilometres off Double Point (between Mourilyan and Kurrimine), to 5 kilometres offshore from Mission Beach, to the Brooks Islands, to Cape Sandwich on Hinchinbrook Island.

A minority, including the commercial fishermen on the Committee, did not support this idea and will be putting alternative proposals forward..

Interestingly, none of those voting against the idea live at Mission Beach.

Recreational Fishing Zone

This particular line was chosen because it was already on a map being proposed for a Recreational Fishing Zone for the Mission Beach/Hinchinbrook area. The idea of this zone is to remove commercial fishing from the area in order to let it recover from over-exploitation, and to become an asset for the local community and for visitors.

Recreational fishing, suitably controlled by means of sustainable bag limits, has little impact on fish

stocks or seagrasses or dugongs, and if we could earn a reputation as *the* place to go for fishing and dugong watching, we would be the envy of the rest of Queensland.

Seagrass Watch

Another positive opportunity to do with trawling has presented itself, and that is to study the recovery of seagrasses following the cessation of trawling just off the beach.

The Seagrass Watch program is coordinated by the Northern Fisheries Research Centre in Cairns, and they show local communities how to go about monitoring their seagrasses in a way that allows the results to be integrated with scientific and other community efforts.

I am hoping to get a Seagrass Watch project going here at Mission Beach, so if you are interested in taking part, give me a ring on 40688694.

Experienced divers with their own gear will be particularly welcome. Does anybody have an underwater video camera?

The only serious study of seagrasses done in our area was in 1996, and it found seagrass beds in the lee of Dunk Island, and at the southern end of Luggier Bay, in the shelter of Tam O'Shanter. This means a lot has been lost and recovery will probably be slow, maybe taking as much as ten years to fully recover. There has been no long-term study done on such a heavily damaged area, so the results will be particularly interesting.

Coastcare project

In another positive move, a new group has been set up called Mission Beach Coastcare Group. Their first project will be to revegetate the foreshore along Kennedy Esplanade near Douglas Street. The intention is to remove weeds and exotics, replant with suitable native shrubs and grasses, and then move the sand-line out as far as possible. This will be an example of what can be done.

An application for funding under the Coastcare program has been made, with the active support of Cardwell Shire Council. Contact John Syme on 40688008 for more details.

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