

# RESILIENCE BASED MANAGEMENT CASE STUDY

## Master Reef Guides Program

 GREAT BARRIER REEF, AUSTRALIA

**An education program on the Great Barrier Reef, combining the interests of tourism and management to work towards greater reef resilience.**

### The Issue

The Great Barrier Reef, like many coral reef ecosystems worldwide, is exposed to multiple anthropogenic threats that have contributed to significant degradation in recent decades. To enable the ongoing health of this iconic ecosystem, a combination of behavioural change, policy and management intervention will be required. It is known that individuals typically safeguard what they are familiar with, and their understanding often stems from direct experiences. Consequently, coral reef tourism provides a crucial pathway for individuals to become acquainted with coral reef ecosystems, fostering a desire to actively contribute to their protection.

Coral reef tourism contributes \$36 billion to the global tourism industry annually. The Great Barrier Reef tourism staff are in a unique position to share the wonders of this World Heritage Area, interpret its complexity and educate a captivated audience about the pressures the Reef faces. The Master Reef Guide program provides an opportunity to support and enhance responsible and informed reef tourism that contributes to coral reef protection, while using industry peer pressure to reduce the potential for irresponsible reef tourism that negatively impacts on coral health.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (Reef Authority) has worked with the tourism industry for decades, with a focus on a healthy reef being equal to a healthy industry. With tourism the largest employer in North Queensland, providing 65,000 full-time jobs, it is in everyone's best interests to maintain the health of the Great Barrier Reef. The tourism operators represent not only the avenue for millions of people to experience the Great Barrier Reef, but also the eyes and ears, the custodians and the interpreters of the Reef.

### How the Program Addresses Resilience Based Management?



Figure 1: The Master Reef Guides program contributes to the community components of resilience based management.

The Master Reef Guides program enhances reef resilience through partnerships, collaboration, and education. By providing high quality information to Guides who then educate tourism participants, the program helps enable behavioural change to reduce human impacts on coral reefs. The more people that meet the Great Barrier Reef, the greater the social, financial, and political support for its ongoing protection. The program supports local industries to be reef stewards. Tourism operators are on the water almost every day, and given the appropriate training, they can be the eyes and the ears of other managing authorities, assisting with compliance, monitoring and education.

The Reef Authority encourages tourism operators to strive for the highest standards in protection, presentation and partnership with the goal of facilitating reef resilience and tourism sustainability. Becoming a recognised High Standard Tourism Operator (an eco-accredited operator) comes with strong incentives, including longer-term operating permits (up to 20 years), and the good publicity that a partnership with the Reef Authority enables. Despite the eco-accredited status, a 2015 audit of High Standard Tourism Operators exposed inconsistency and inaccuracy in some information delivered by tourism staff and highlighted an opportunity to improve interpretation and raise the bar across the entire tourism industry.

### **Actions Taken**

In 2017 the Reef Authority began collaborating with tourism operators to develop “A highly desirable and internationally recognised guiding program that builds the capacity, knowledge and presentation skills of the Great Barrier Reef tourism industry to deliver exceptional and memorable visitor experiences.” The Master Reef Guides (MRG) program was launched in 2018, crafted from the experience of existing national and international guiding programs, the tourism sector, protected area managers and marketing experts. The program consists of an online and in-field training component.

The comprehensive Reef Discovery Course was developed as a free online resource that covers the A-Z of all things Great Barrier Reef – and how best to share this knowledge with visitors. The

course consists of 10 modules and represents a one-stop-shop that synthesises and describes the World Heritage values of the Great Barrier Reef and the latest science and management information in a contemporary format. In addition to providing the basis of the Master Reef Guides program, the content of the online Reef Discovery Course is made available to anyone interested in learning up to date information about the Great Barrier Reef.

For the in-field training, the cohorts visit sites and receive training from experts including leading scientists, body language and public speaking specialists, professional guides from other regions, Traditional Owners, Marine Protected Area managers and several other field guiding experts. The requirements for Master Reef Guides training build on other Reef Authority initiatives and includes Eye on the Reef training for Reef Health Impact Surveys and Tourism Weekly. Once trained, the Guides can utilise the intimate relationship with the reef built through a high frequency of ongoing visits, to provide monitoring and compliance assistance.

Once qualified, all guides wear a uniform and become the key contact point on their operations for information relating to species identification, ecosystem interpretation, protection of values, best practice visitor management and coral reef health. These ambassadors can provide up-to-date information on the Great Barrier Reef, share stories on the World Heritage Area and explain what visitors can do to make a difference.



Figure 2: Master Reef Guides explain the wonders of the Great Barrier Reef Photo Credit: P. Warring Tourism and Events Queensland

## How Successful Has It Been?

Since inception 7 cohorts of Master Reef Guides have been trained totalling 123 Guides spread throughout the Great Barrier Reef on High Standard Tourism Operations. A 8th cohort is currently in training, and it is anticipated there will be around 150 Master Reef Guides trained by 2025. Once trained, Master Reef Guides mentor other staff within their operation and across the tourism industry, raising the standard of Great Barrier Reef tourism operators.

The Master Reef Guide training has been undertaken by a diverse group of people; teachers, island owners, operator owners, marine pilots (who break into the cruise ship industry), and videographers - who have in turn been able to share their knowledge with a diverse audience. To date, 2.3 million people have directly interacted with a trained Master Reef Guide. The Master Reef Guides Facebook and Instagram accounts have been viewed by a further 54 million people globally.

Master Reef Guides are considered the best in their field in relation to reef interpretation, master story-telling and experience delivery. Master Reef Guides provide their tour operators with the capacity to raise the level of service and

visitor experience – delivering benefits for the industry, visitors and the Great Barrier Reef itself. There has been huge demand from operators wanting to participate in the program. Improving the level of information provision has been a critical element contributing to responsible, sustainable tourism practices on the Great Barrier Reef.

The large social media outreach of the program, creates a positive feedback loop, bringing more business to tourism operators, and in turn educating more and more visitors. The goal of the program is to have a Master Reef Guide on every High Standard Tourism Operation that visits the Great Barrier Reef - setting the standard for tourists to receive the best possible experience. The program is also enabling the industry to play an active role in the protection of the Marine Park through the provision of reporting and compliance training.

The program is now in the enhancement phase, with a future enhancement plan looking to incorporate engagement on the world stage, annual mega masterclasses, regional mini masterclasses, assessment criteria and annual cohort intakes by 2026.

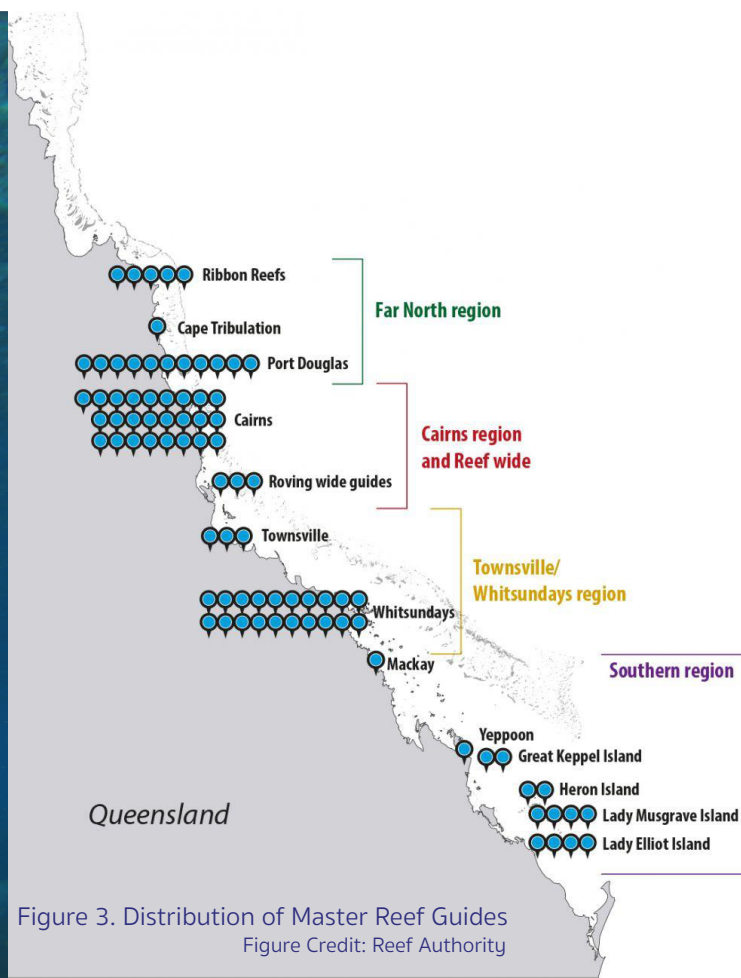
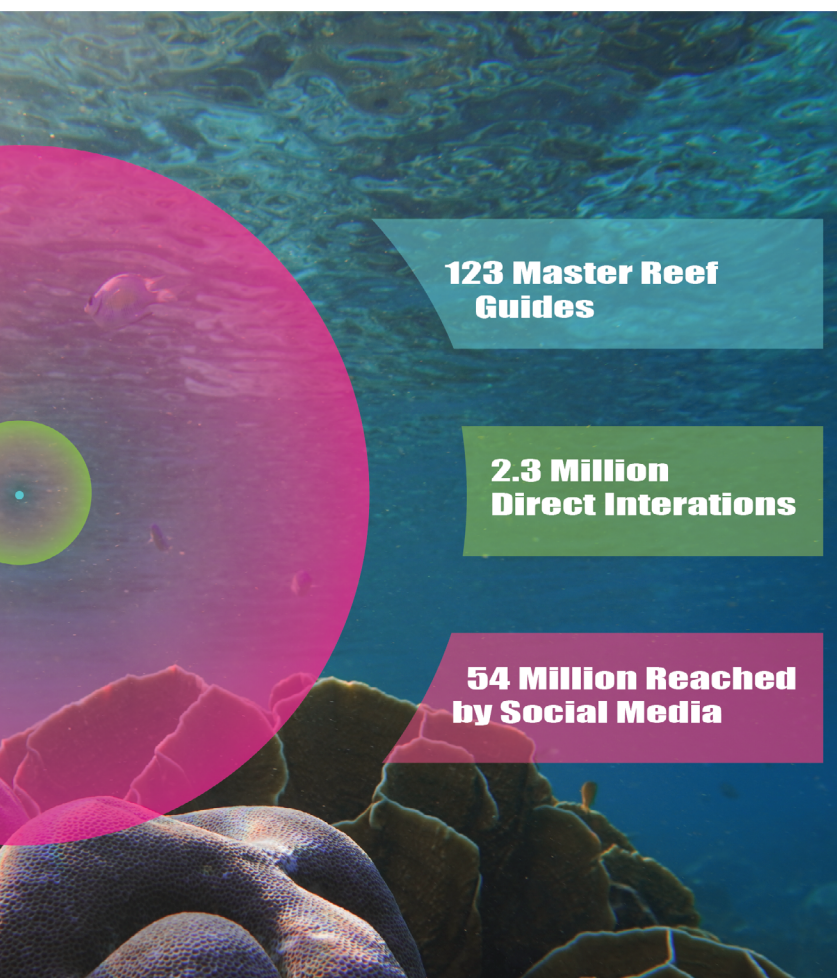


Figure 3. Distribution of Master Reef Guides  
Figure Credit: Reef Authority

## Key Challenges and Lessons Learnt

*Maintaining the integrity of the program is an ongoing process:*

- The strength of the program relies on the Guides being up to date on the status of the Reef, new research findings and management actions. To make sure up-to date information is being provided to guests, the content of the program must continually evolve, and Guides must also engage in on-going training.
- The program is developing master classes on different issues, to ensure the Guides remain informed as knowledge evolves.
- Maintaining a close network among the Guides and trainers has been achieved by utilising social media and group communication channels where they can exchange knowledge, latest findings and advice.

*Training needs to be relevant:*

- It was found that the Guides learn better when they are out on the water and interacting. So, the format of the program was changed to 2 days of mandatory training in the classroom, followed by 2 days on water.
- As so much promotion and education has been happening through social media, the program brought in a videographer expert to teach the Guides how to capture good content and make it interactive and appealing on social media.

*Importance of Uniform/ Brand:*

- A common uniform worn by all trained Guides has been successful in sending a visual message to visitors of the professional qualification the Guides hold.
- The MRG brand has enabled marketing bodies to support and promote a brand that represents quality and a focus on visitor experience delivery, without linking or promoting to a specific business.

*Managing the increasing demand for the program and media:*

- As the program gains traction and becomes embedded in marketing and promotional strategies, there has been increased demand from operators wanting to complete the training. This has required the establishment of a strong governance framework, open and transparent selection processes and quality assurance checks.
- Ensuring all material related to the program is developed with a quality lens is critical to the success of managing a shared brand: communication materials, media interviews and Guide promotion and presentation are maintained through a central business manager. Given the global focus on the health of the Great Barrier Reef, responses to media must be timely but accurate and balanced. The establishment of key messages, talking points and media training has maximised reach and message delivery.

*Relationships are critical:*

- Retaining engagement of all partners is critical to ongoing success: the program must work with and for the Reef Authority, individuals undertaking the program, their employers, and tourists.
- Working with traditional owners is helping create links and reconcile conflict between traditional custodians of the reef and the industry that depends on it.

## Lead Organisation

Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority

## Partners

Association of Marine Park Tourism Operators  
Tourism and Events Queensland

## Additional Resources

Find out more about Master Reef Guides [here](#)

