

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE ENQUIRY INTO THE IMPACT OF MARINE DEBRIS

Dear Secretary,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to this inquiry. Marine Debris and its impacts upon marine life and the marine environment are the key issues that Eco Barge Clean Seas Inc. was formed to address. We urge you to act decisively to recommend action to address these growing problems.

Eco Barge Clean Seas Inc. is a not-for-profit environmental organisation that was established in Airlie Beach, Queensland, to engage the community and protect the marine life and aquatic environment of the Whitsunday Islands region by:

- (1) enabling groups of volunteers to remove marine debris to reduce its impacts (The Whitsunday Marine Debris Removal Program);
- (2) reducing land-based litter and littering behaviour to prevent the occurrence of local marine debris; and
- (3) providing care for sick and injured marine turtles at the Whitsunday Turtle Rescue Centre.

The Whitsunday Marine Debris Removal Program was originally launched in June 2009 and to date has been responsible for removing over 130,000 kilograms of marine debris from the Whitsunday Region. This has made a huge difference to the Whitsunday Islands and the marine life that call this region home, but having dealt with much of the accumulated debris, we have found that the marine debris continues to arrive in the south-east trade winds, at some locations at rates in excess of 2 kilograms per day. As more debris arrives on the windward facing islands, approximately 40 maintenance clean-up trips per year are required to prevent it from accumulating again. Most of these trips are simple day trips, but to reach the highly impacted southern island group, an annual expedition is required, staying for 4 nights on Lindeman Island; the first of these trips yielded 2.7 tonnes of marine debris from just 10 beaches!



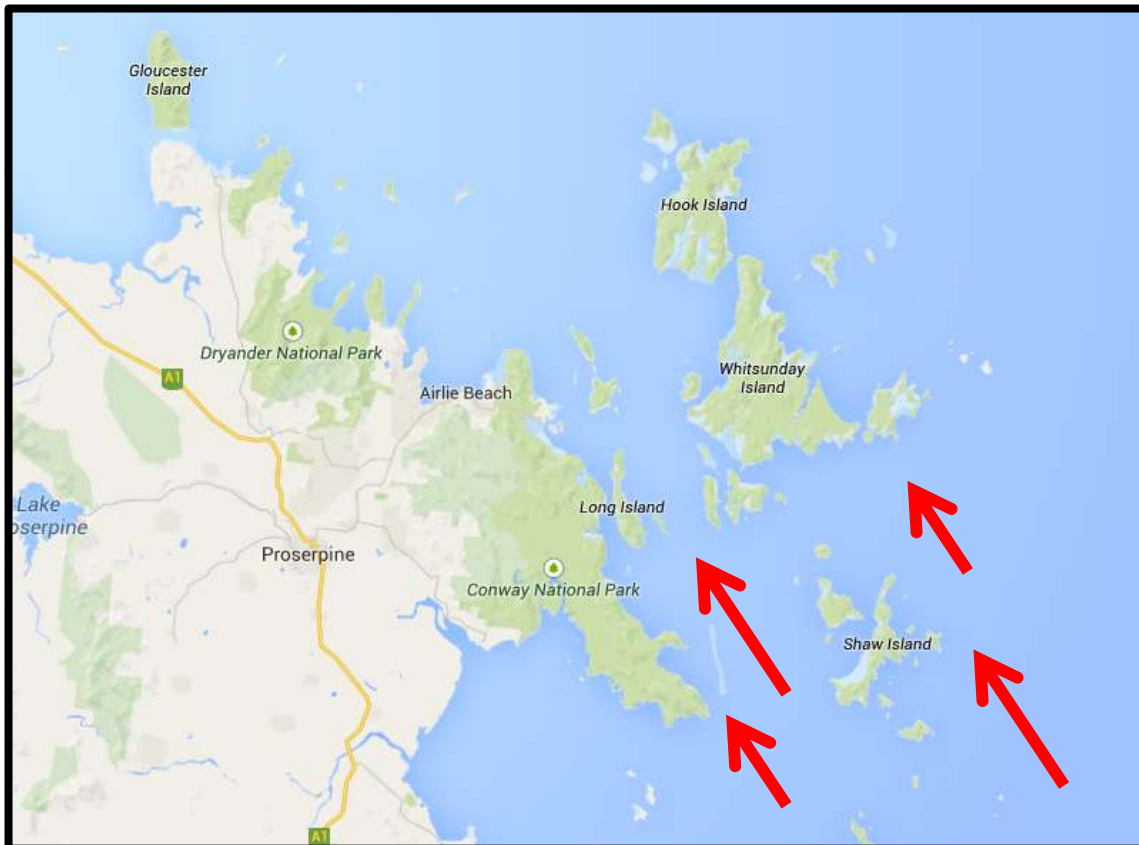
A highly impacted beach in the Whitsunday Islands



A typical load of marine debris from a day trip to the Whitsunday Islands



Marine debris collected from 10 beaches on the 2014 four-day Expedition to the southern Whitsunday Islands



The arrows highlight the predominant south-east trade winds, and it can be seen the number of south-east facing bays and beaches in the Whitsunday Islands then act like a net and trap the marine debris that is moving north along the Queensland coastline.

An important part of the Whitsunday Marine Debris Removal Program has been to weigh, sort, count and record the collected debris; Eco Barge Clean Seas have been a major contributor to the Australian Marine Debris Database, providing data on the debris that we have collected in our region. The most commonly collected items from the Whitsunday Region are bottle tops, plastic drinking bottles, bleach/cleaner bottles, polystyrene foam and rope. In line with the CSIRO data, most of the debris is plastic. In particular, the top two items (bottle tops and plastic beverage bottles) alone can account for up to 48% of all categorised items in the beach collections. Reducing the careless disposal of these two items would therefore dramatically decrease the amount of debris in the marine environment.



Marine debris collected from South Molle Island.



Marine debris collected from Grimston Point.

For the full reports on our marine debris studies please see:

http://www.ecobargecleanseas.org.au/files/rep_pub/LMCF-Report.pdf

http://www.ecobargecleanseas.org.au/files/rep_pub/EEG-Report.pdf

http://www.ecobargecleanseas.org.au/files/rep_pub/CFOC-Report.pdf

A recent event illustrates the tragic impact of marine debris on marine life. While travelling through the Whitsunday Islands on the 1st September with a group of volunteers for a beach clean-up, the Eco Barge was flagged down by a nearby vessel. The skipper of the vessel informed us that he had had several sightings of a large Green Sea Turtle struggling at the surface, entangled in a yellow fishing hand-line. The Eco Barge crew and volunteers searched fruitlessly for this turtle, which had dived underwater and unfortunately could not be found. Knowing the likely fate of this animal, everyone on the barge was understandably distressed and we expected to hear of this turtle again soon. On Friday 4th September, a call was received by the RSPCA Marine Stranding Hotline from a member of the public who had found a large Green Sea Turtle stranded on Whitehaven Beach with a completely amputated front left flipper and wounds on the rear of its body. A turtle stranding response was launched in cooperation with Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service and the turtle was taken into care by the Whitsunday Turtle Rescue Centre. The cuts on this animal were clean and deep, suggesting fishing line entanglement. Taking into account the location, reported size and species it appears highly likely that this was the same animal reported on the 1st September. At some stage this turtle has either tried to rid itself of the fishing line, or become entangled in coral, and needing to return to the surface to breathe, it has broken free, severing its own flipper and severely lacerating itself in the process. To put this into perspective, this animal was a mature, breeding age male green turtle, in peak body condition, weighing in at over 120kgs. As they are migratory, this turtle had probably migrated hundreds of kilometres to reach the Whitsundays to breed, instead being permanently maimed by lost fishing gear.



Green turtle being rescued from Whitehaven Beach.



The extent of the damage caused by entanglement in the fishing line.

Please act promptly to address the issue of marine debris. Our environment, marine life and community deserve this.

Yours sincerely,

Jacquie Sheils

Management Committee Member
Eco Barge Clean Seas Inc.

