

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
Legislation Committee
Answers to questions on notice
Environment portfolio

Question No: 254
Hearing: Additional Estimates
Outcome: Agency
Programme: Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA)
Topic: Marine Debris Plastics
Hansard Page: 40
Question Date: 08 February 2016
Question Type: Spoken

Senator Whish-Wilson asked:

Senator WHISH-WILSON: I have a question in relation to marine monitoring and the Reef Report Card. I am interested in what it spells out about the amount of plastic in the water washing up on the Great Barrier Reef islands and beaches.

Dr Reichelt : We have a specific program on cleaning up plastics and debris, and I mentioned the 22 tonnes this year. My understanding is that we do not specifically collect statistics, other than what is cleaned up—and it is quite a lot—and where it is distributed. But I do not have statistics on things like microparticles and other ways that plastics can pollute the ocean. I would have to check whether any are collected.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Is there any breakdown of that? Does it go to any database like Tangaroa Blue or anyone else to actually look at what types of items you are finding?

Dr Reichelt : I have been with Tangaroa Blue and have seen how they operate. They do a sorting, and I think they would break it down. Could I get those statistics for you?

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Yes, if you could—and if, under the National Threat Abatement Plan, there is any effort put towards looking at marine animals that are impacted by various forms of debris.

Dr Reichelt: I will take that on notice, and I am particularly concerned about microparticles as well as the macro. The macro chokes turtles; the micro: it turns out corals can eat them.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: That is right.

Dr Reichelt: So, it is a matter of great concern to us. I will see what statistics we have.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: And do you have any interactions with the tourism industry on marine plastics at all?

Dr Reichelt: We have a close relationship and working relationship with Tourism on that specific issue. I am not sure whether our advisory group, which meets regularly from Tourism, has raised that with us, but I will check that as well.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Thank you.

Answer:

For the past 18 months, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority has been delivering the Great Barrier Reef Marine Debris Clean-up project. This project is funded by the Australian Government's Reef Trust and is executed in partnership with marine debris removal groups Tangaroa Blue Foundation and Eco Barge Clean Seas as well as Reef Guardian Councils.

The project seeks to minimise the source and occurrence of marine debris in the Great Barrier Reef. It does so by fostering community uptake of litter conscious behaviours through an awareness-raising campaign and on-ground actions that highlight the impacts of marine debris on the Great Barrier Reef ecosystems.

To date, 22,121 kg of marine debris has been removed from the Great Barrier Reef coastline during the lifetime of this project. All items collected have been recorded using the Australian Marine Debris Initiative methodology developed by Tangaroa Blue Foundation and entered into the Australian Marine Debris Initiative database.

As part of this project, the marine debris collected comprised of 222,198 items. Of this, 172,339 items were of plastic origin. They included items such as straws, food packaging items, bottle caps and broken plastic remnants. This plastic accounted for 77 per cent of the total debris collected. As items are collected by volunteers, the methodology relies on each volunteer's ability to see the debris. This means that micro plastics (smaller than 1mm) are not collected but removing the visible plastic items will eliminate the opportunity for these pieces to degrade down to microplastic sizings.

Investigating the impacts of plastics on marine mammals within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park is outside of the scope of this project. However, a member of the project team attended the Threat Abatement Plan for marine debris workshop in August 2015.

The agency's Tourism Reef Advisory Committee supported tourism industry involvement in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Debris project at their bi-annual meeting in April 2015. The tourism industry was involved in the Great Barrier Reef Clean-up at a regional scale, with marine tourism operators promoting events and providing staff assistance with on ground support. Further, a marine debris working group was established to explore options to reduce marine debris associated with tourism sources.