

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

**Question No:** 262  
**Hearing:** Budget Estimates  
**Outcome:** Agency  
**Programme:** Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority  
**Topic:** VISITOR NUMBERS  
**Hansard Page:** 107  
**Question Date:** 27 May 2014  
**Question Type:** Spoken

**Senator Urquhart asked:**

Senator URQUHART: ..... And attached to that question—and I am happy for you to take this on notice too—can you provide any detail on how you will increase the number of visitors using high-standard tourism operators? And, relating to the percentage of Reef HQ visitors who participate in talks and tours that deliver key messages about the risks to the reef, can you explain what these key messages are?

Dr Reichelt: I can take the detail on notice, but perhaps I could explain to you that the high-standard operators are third-party certified eco-standard operators. We have been working with the tourism industry over many years to see that number increase. It is now heading up towards 60 per cent of all visitors to the Great Barrier Reef on commercial tourism travelling with what we call high-standard operators. That means that these operators adhere to the highest ecological standards for their operation. We encourage that as an incentive program, and we actively promote and make the public aware that operators that have this certification are operating in a highly sustainable way.

**Answer:**

***Increasing the number of visitors using high standard tourism operators***

The increase in the uptake of this program by operators can be attributed primarily to the incentives the agency provides to operators including a longer operating term for the associated Marine Parks permits (15 years rather than the standard six years), profiling on the agency's website and profiling high standard operations at the Australian Tourism Exchange. Using these incentive approaches, the number of Reef-based tourism operators that are certified as operating to high standards has increased from 44 in 2009 to 62 in 2013 out of approximately 800 operators that offer a Reef-based tourism product. It is important to note that our performance indicator for this initiative is 'the percentage of visitors to the Reef using tourism operators accredited as high standard' and the agency has been actively targeting those tourism operators which carry the highest volume of visitors to be involved in the program. This has resulted in 64 per cent of the 2.09 million visitors in 2013 travelling to the Reef with high standard or ECO certified operators.

***Key messages about the risks to the reef delivered to Reef HQ visitors***

The overarching messages Reef HQ Aquarium promotes to its visitors are:

- The Great Barrier Reef (the Reef) is the largest living structure on the planet.

- The Reef is incredibly rich and diverse. While it's known mostly for its large maze of colourful reefs, its intricate architecture also provides a home for a huge number of plants and animals.
- The Reef is internationally recognised for its outstanding biodiversity. The World Heritage status of the Reef recognises its great diversity of species and habitats. Conserving the Reef's biodiversity is not just desirable - it is essential. By protecting biodiversity, we are protecting our future and our children's future.
- Coral reefs and other tropical marine ecosystems are subject to frequent disturbances, from threats such as cyclones, crown-of-thorns starfish outbreaks and influxes of freshwater as well as from a range of human activities. These events often damage, stress or kill components of the ecosystem.
- Ecosystem resilience refers to the capacity of an ecosystem to recover from disturbance or withstand ongoing pressures. It is a measure of how well an ecosystem can tolerate disturbance without collapsing into a different state.
- Given enough time, a resilient ecosystem will be able to fully recover from such disturbances and become as biodiverse and healthy as before the impact. Similarly, a resilient ecosystem may be able to absorb the stresses caused by these disturbances with little or no sign of degradation.
- The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) uses a suite of management tools to look after the Reef's biodiversity and build resiliency. These range from legislation, zoning plans and permits to research, partnerships, education and compliance.
- The Reef's vast size and complexity means that a collaborative approach is one of the most important considerations for the long-term management. Any one organisation working in isolation cannot achieve what is necessary to protect the Reef. GBRMPA is not the sole provider of services to manage and conserve the Reef and many other government agencies, stakeholders and community members play a crucial role.

The key messages that are delivered through Reef HQ Aquarium about the risks to the Reef are informed by The *Great Barrier Reef Outlook Report*, a stock-take of the Great Barrier Reef, its management and its future. Particular focuses are on the factors influencing the Reef's values. As stated within the 2009 *Great Barrier Reef Outlook Report* these are:

### ***Climate change***

- Primary impacts are increasing sea temperature, ocean acidification and rising sea level.
- Impacts from climate change have already been witnessed and all parts of the ecosystem are vulnerable to its increasing effects, with coral reef habitats the most vulnerable.
- The Reef is not immune to the threat of climate change. Climate change, together with other human pressures is having cumulative effects on the Reef. Although environmental managers cannot directly control climate, there is an urgent need to identify possibilities for reducing climate-induced stresses on the Reef ecosystem, and

to develop strategies to support natural resilience and adaptation in the face of uncertainty.

- People can make a difference by changing their behaviour to reduce their environmental and carbon footprint.

### ***Catchment runoff***

- The Reef receives the runoff from 38 major catchments which drain 424,000 km of coastal Queensland. Over the last decade, the declining quality of water entering the Reef has been recognised as a major threat to the ecosystem.
- Nutrients, pesticides (including herbicides) and sediments are entering the Reef.
- People can adopt reef responsible behaviours and industry and adopt best practice to ensure the water reaching the Reef is of a good quality.

### ***Coastal development***

- Coastal development, primarily driven by industry and population growth, is still significantly affecting coastal habitats that support the Reef, connectivity between habitats and the water quality of the Reef.
- Clearing or modifying wetlands, mangroves and other coastal habitats will impact on the health of the Reef.
- Pollution in particular marine debris (single use plastics, plastic bags and discarded fishing tackle) can be ingested by or entangle species of conservation concern causing death.

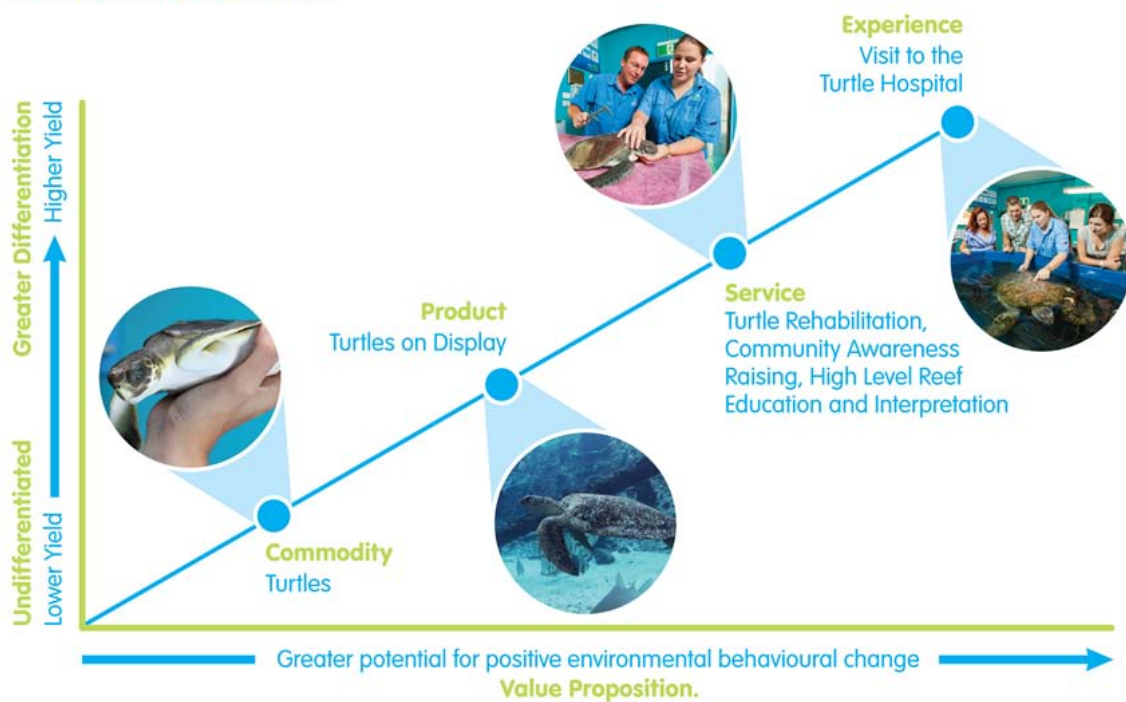
### ***Direct use – extractive***

- The impacts of different commercial and non-commercial uses of the Great Barrier Reef Region overlap and are concentrated inshore and next to developed areas.
- Illegal fishing and hunting can affect the ecosystem processes and put added pressure on species of conservation concern.

Reef HQ Aquarium has strived to develop true “Hero Experiences” for visitors to participate in. The *Hero Experience Spectrum* in the diagram below demonstrates how moving from offering individual commodities, products and services to delivering compelling and engaging experiences serves to increase the value proposition to the visitor and most importantly increases the potential for positive environmental behaviour change adoption.

## The Hero Experience Spectrum

This diagram illustrates the process of moving from offering individual commodities, products and services to delivering compelling and engaging experiences



An example of a *Hero Experience* is the Reef HQ Aquarium Turtle Hospital. The turtle hospital operates under and promotes the **C.A.R.E (Conserve. Act. Rehabilitate. Educate)** philosophy playing a key role in raising community awareness in relation to threatened species and encouraging behavioural change that will benefit these threatened species.