Designated a World Heritage Area in 1981, the Great Barrier Reef is one of the world’s great natural systems, and one that supports the national economy of Australia annually to significantly more than A$2 billion. Of this total, tourism accounts for an estimated A$1 billion, generated by 1.5 million visitors per year. But does tourism to the Reef fit comfortably with the core World Heritage value of sustainability? And how can the range of operators whose livelihoods have been built upon tourism be marshalled to ensure long-term sustainability for the Reef? Tourism to the Reef and its surrounding area is managed by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA), which was created in 1975. Here, the GBRMPA’s Annie Ilett and Chris Thomas, Director and Assistant Director of Tourism and Recreation respectively, review the evolution of tourism in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, and outline the philosophy behind the recently proposed revisions to the Park’s tourism and recreation management framework.
The Great Barrier Reef is an area of great natural beauty extending over 2,000 kilometres along the Queensland coast of Australia, with 3,000 reefs and 900 islands. It supports a diverse population of coral, sponges, molluscs, marine plants and over 15,000 species of fish. The Great Barrier Reef is an icon for nature tourism. Tourism is the single most important economic activity on the Great Barrier Reef, attracting 1.5 million visitors per year. It has an estimated annual value of A$1 billion, which is around four times that of the next largest industry, commercial fishing. Maintaining the integrity of the Reef is critical to the quality of the tourism product it offers. Unregulated tourism cannot continue without bringing about the degradation of the very environment that tourists come to the Reef to explore.

World Heritage status demands that the Great Barrier Reef is managed according to the core values of conservation and sustainability. Tourism is the primary means of presenting the World Heritage values of the Great Barrier Reef first-hand and, because of the nature of access to the Outer Reef in particular, very few people can enjoy and experience those values without the assistance of the tourism industry.

Nature and extent of the Reef tourism industry
The Great Barrier Reef tourism industry is highly diverse. There are day tour operations to islands, coral cays and reef-based pontoons. There are extended live-aboard operations, charter diving vessels, charter fishing boats, jet skis, cruise ships, self-sail bareboats and other hire operations including windsurfing and, increasingly, sea kayaking. Around 80 per cent of the total tourism market is serviced by half a dozen pontoon operations. These large-scale operations take up to 400 people at a time to the outer reefs, coral cays and continental islands on modern, wave-piercing catamarans. The rest of the tourism industry on the reef is provided by over 700 operators ranging from medium to often very small, family-based businesses, which typically take fewer than 20 people to the Reef at one time.

Regardless of the style, size or specific destinations of these operators, they provide their customers with a similar range of activities including opportunities to swim, fish, snorkel, scuba dive, view coral from glass-bottomed boats, semi-submersibles and/or underwater observatories and to learn about the reef environment through guided snorkelling tours, slide shows and video presentations.

During the 1980s and 1990s, there was rapid growth in the diversity, capacity and range of Reef tourism products offered through innovation and the sophistication of the market. Annual growth rates in the early 1980s were approximately 30 per cent. The number of commercial tour operators increased tenfold in ten years, with more than 35 times as many visitors visiting four times as many sites. Introduction of new vessel technologies such as high speed catamarans, wave-piercers and emerging technologies such as ‘wing in ground effect’ craft (WIGs), mean that tourists are now able to visit reefs further offshore in a single day.

This rapid growth of tourism both in numbers of operations, numbers of visitors and geographic spread has been a cause for some concern. Further, with air access centred around transport nodes at Cairns and Hamilton Island, tourism ‘hotspots’ have developed in the Cairns Area and the Whitsundays. Indeed around 85 per cent of tourism on the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park is concentrated into approximately 5 per cent of its total area. These
factors have all provided extra challenges for governments in managing the potential negative environmental and social impacts of increasing tourism on the Great Barrier Reef, balanced with the increasing economic importance of the industry. In addition, the management provisions themselves have also grown rapidly in response to the increasing demand for access to the Reef by tourism operators.

**Current management and regulatory frameworks**
For most people, public ownership remains the surest guarantee of conservation and equity safeguards over natural and cultural assets. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority was established under the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act (1975) to provide for the conservation, wise use and enjoyment of this unique natural asset, allowing for a range of commercial and recreational activities. A further role for the Authority is the presentation of the World Heritage values of the Marine Park.

In conjunction with the Queensland Government, the Authority has developed management tools to provide for a range of tourism and other opportunities throughout the Marine Park and to minimise the impacts of tourism activities on the fragile environment so that the diversity, integrity and productivity of the Reef is maintained.

Zoning Plans relating to tourism and recreation activities in the Marine Park, which were established under the Marine Park Act, require all tourism operations to have a permit to operate in the Park. At first these permits were relatively simple, but as demand for permits grew, along with increasing conflicts of use, the need for more effective management increased, particularly in high use areas and at environmentally and culturally sensitive sites. As a result, tourism permits over time have become more complex and increasingly prescriptive.

The Plans of Management for the Cairns Area and the Whitsundays were developed as further tools to manage the increasing demand and conflicting access at the two major tourism nodes. These plans are designed to manage:

- environmental protection of these high use sites;
- separation of different uses;
- resolution of conflicting use; and
- limitation of use where necessary.

Though the primary goal of the Authority is to protect the environment in a multiple use context, it is also drawn into management of access in an equitable and transparent manner. In the area of tourism this is not as simple as managing use between tourism and commercial fishing, for example, or between commercial tourism and private recreational use of the Marine Park. Managing tourism is also about fair and equitable access and use between, for example, a low-key sail boat of, say, six people sailing to an undefined destination and a high-speed catamaran carrying up to 400 people to a pontoon. In this way, managing multiple use is not just about managing between industries, but also about equitable management within sectors of one industry.

As a consequence of capping access in highly used areas of the Marine Park, the Authority has inadvertently become involved in market pricing issues, even though this is not the Authority’s core business. For example, a cap on the number of a certain type of permit inflates the value of that type of permit and, if used for
speculation rather than providing tourism opportunity, there is the potential to stifle growth and innovation in particular areas.

Other tools, such as voluntary codes of best practice, effective educational and interpretive programmes for both visitors and operators, and accreditation of operators and interpretive guides, are becoming an increasingly important component of the management of tourism on the Great Barrier Reef.

Reef-based nature tourism contributes to the conservation and protection of the Reef ecosystem, based upon sustainable use. The Reef is not just a product to be packaged and marketed. Reef tourism can bring large numbers of visitors into contact with a living natural system and create an understanding that would be otherwise impossible to develop. A community that understands the Great Barrier Reef and supports the protection of its natural and cultural values is essential to achieve effective management.

Reef tourism is an important component of Australia’s nature tourism offer. It is an important international trade item. Gone are the days when tourists come to see the Great Barrier Reef solely for ‘fun in the sun’. There is increasing demand for better customer service and more interpretive activities. With more of our visitors being environmentally aware than ever before, our tourists wish to see and learn about the places they are visiting.

From prescription to partnership
The Authority recognises that the current mechanisms used to manage tourism and recreation use, being a mix of legislation, Zoning Plans, Plans of Management, permits, best practice codes of conduct, and policies, have, over time, become overly prescriptive, placing unnecessary pressure on managing agencies and the tourism industry in particular. We had to ask ourselves whether there were better ways of managing tourism.

The Authority has improved its current procedures by developing a standardised system of permits for six classes of tourism operations.

- Vessel tour operation.
- Cruise ship operation.
- Aircraft tour operation.
- Long-range rover operation.
- Hire operation.
- Craftless operation.

The Authority has also streamlined the processing of permits with Queensland, enabling 70 per cent of permit applications to be processed within eight weeks, including requirements for Native Title notification.

However, these are short-term improvements. As a longer term solution, the Authority has been exploring how it could develop a real partnership to manage the Reef through harnessing the entrepreneurial drive of the private sector to ensure environmentally compatible development. This would underpin the conservation of the Reef and the development of the industry. The industry, in turn, would provide the means by which the unique values of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area are presented to the global public.

The Authority established the multi-stakeholder Tourism and Recreation Reef Advisory Committee (TRRAC) in February 2000. With the assistance of the Authority’s Tourism and Recreation Critical Issue Group, it has reviewed the current management arrangements, together with the concerns of industry, managers and other stakeholders. The TRRAC has also looked beyond our current management arrangements to provide advice on the design of a new cooperative framework, which will integrate management provisions for sustainable tourism and recreation use of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. Whilst there are still many issues yet to be considered for each component of the proposed new framework, it would be premature to say that this proposal will be the model for the management of Marine Park tourism in the future. Through hard work and enthusiasm, however, the TRRAC has a sound foundation ready to seek comment and input.
In parallel with this process, the Queensland government is also facing similar questions and is exploring a better way of managing tourism and recreation through its Tourism in Protected Areas programme. The Commonwealth and State approaches are being encouraged to complement each other. This seamless approach to permitting is already proving useful to operators who run nature tourism programmes across both the sea and the land.

A new framework
The TRRAC has identified an overall aim of maximising opportunities for tourism and recreation in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park that are ecologically sustainable, equitable and efficient. Their new cooperative proposal was developed by taking apart the existing management arrangements and identifying those that have proven merit and are already in place (including existing Zoning Plans and Plans of Management). The new framework has then been purpose-built, integrating the proven components in a new way and introducing some new concepts. The new framework relies on a partnership between the Authority, the marine tourism industry and other key stakeholders in establishing the basic ground rules and taking substantial responsibility for ensuring that activities within the Marine Park are ecologically sustainable and world-class.

Fundamental to the cooperative framework is an incentives scheme that encourages tourism and recreation users to continually improve their operating standards in the Marine Park (including presentation of World Heritage values) with a regulatory backstop if required. The move from prescriptive permit systems to greater cooperative management based upon performance standards is a cornerstone of the new cooperative framework, and lifts the bar on current practices, where tourism and recreation users of the Marine Park are required to meet identified performance standards linked to the right to access most of the Marine Park. The need for prescriptive permits is further removed by separating the permission to operate generally in the Marine Park from the right to access sites of limited opportunity. The criteria for accessing sites of limited opportunity could be defined in terms of performance standards relating to both environmental outcomes and presentation of World Heritage values.

The GBRMPA has been piloting such a new approach to management in the bareboat sector of the industry. The management framework for the bareboat industry framework sits within the context of the Whitsundays Plan of Management and Zoning Plans, but moves from a prescriptive to a performance-based system, with greater emphasis on management of impacts and sites rather than regulation of users. It also relies on setting operating standards as a major management tool, supported by sound training and accreditation of operators. The approach relies heavily on a sound partnership between the GBRMPA, the Queensland Government, the bareboat industry and other users, which can establish basic ground rules for management. It is also dependent upon the bareboat industry taking substantial responsibility for ensuring that activities within the Marine Park are sustainable and world-class.

This approach would be a new way of delivering management in the Marine Park. Under the new framework, incentives would be created for the tourism industry for the right to share in the access to the Reef in return for presentation and protection of the resource. By harnessing the entrepreneurial drive of the tourism industry and moving from a prescriptive approach to a performance approach managing agencies have the potential to more efficiently protect and present the Great Barrier Reef in a genuine partnership with the tourism industry.

The TRRAC believes that sharing of expertise, knowledge and resources in such a cooperative partnership with the Authority will deliver for all parties better partnerships, more cost-effective management and, primarily, more efficient protection of the environment and world-class presentation of World Heritage values.