

The Resilience of the Reef (and Reef Tourism)

The lifestyle values of reef tourism companies contribute to the resilience of those companies and to better conservation outcomes for the Reef itself.

The Great Barrier Reef is one of Australia's most spectacular natural attractions. Tourism to the reef contributes \$5.8 billion to the Australian economy per annum and sustains 55,000 jobs.

Yet coral reefs on the Great Barrier Reef and worldwide are under threat from climate change, overfishing, and land-based pollutants from agriculture and development. As a result there is concern over the future of the Great Barrier Reef's tourism sector, and the communities that depend on it.

Reef tourism is not only under threat from the degradation of coral reefs, it is also subject to a range of other socio-economic and political disturbances – anything that negatively affects the number of tourists travelling to the Great Barrier Reef. For example, the terrorist attacks in the USA in 2001 and the Asian outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2003 both negatively impacted on tourism to the Reef. More recently, the financial crisis of 2008 and the ongoing global recession, coupled with a strong Australian dollar, have spelt tough times for the reef tourism industry.

Tough times in this specialist nature-based tourism sector should be of concern to conservationists. Reef tourism companies play an important role in local conservation activities on reefs, such as crown-of-thorns-starfish outbreaks over the past decade. In addition, a vibrant economy based on reef tourism means that broader society and government are more likely to fund and support actions to conserve reefs. As the Great Barrier Reef generally lies more than 20 km offshore, companies that take visitors to dive and snorkel on reefs are critical to a healthy reef tourism system.

Working with colleagues Natalie Ban and Michael Hall, I have recently explored the relationship between the lifestyle values of nature-based tourism enterprises, their resilience, and their support of and contribution to the conservation of Australia's Great Barrier Reef. The research involved semi-structured interviews with the owners and senior managers of 48 reef tourism enterprises.

We showed that the lifestyle values of reef tourism company owners and senior staff not only strengthens the resilience of reef tourism companies but is also associated with greater company support of, and participation in, conservation activities. Lifestyle values refer to the motives that entice owners and staff of tourism enterprises to live and work in a chosen natural attraction.



Ecotourism can play an important role in reef conservation in terms of education, awareness-raising and even in the control of crown-of-thorn starfish outbreaks.

In other words, companies whose staff are motivated to live and work on the Great Barrier Reef because of their love for the reefs and associated natural environment are more likely to survive slumps in tourism, and are more likely to support and participate in reef conservation activities. The lifestyle values of company managers and key staff therefore form a nexus between resilient reef tourism companies and reef conservation.

We believe that this relationship is probably not unique to reef tourism, and that it applies to nature-based tourism all around the world, from African savannas to Indian jungles. Nature-based tourism operators, motivated by lifestyle values and a desire to contribute to conservation of the environment, play an important role in local economies and conservation efforts.

Partnerships and synergies between conservation and other sectors are critical to stem the tide of biodiversity loss. Nature-based tourism enterprises whose owners and staff are motivated by lifestyle values are potentially valuable partners for conservation because of their conservation ethic.

Conservation agencies can strengthen the opportunities for nature-based tourism enterprises to contribute to conservation by:

- generating awareness and creating opportunities for enterprises to support and participate in conservation action;
- actively supporting the development of infrastructure and policies that enable enterprise support of conservation; and
- working in partnership with enterprises to reduce regulatory and other barriers that directly or indirectly hamper the ability and motivation for lifestyle-driven enterprises to contribute to conservation.

Conservation agencies should grasp the opportunity that the nexus of lifestyle values and conservation presents to ensure that nature-based tourism's contribution to conservation is maximised.

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