



Speech by

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Hansard 19 February 2002

REEF PROTECTION

Ms JARRATT (Whitsunday—ALP) (11.54 a.m.): The Great Barrier Reef may well be Queensland's most valuable asset. The existence of the World Heritage listed Great Barrier Reef is not just a source of remarkable beauty; it also underpins the employment of thousands of people up and down the coast of Queensland. Each year more than two million people visit the reef, generating more than \$1 billion per annum in tourism dollars for the state.

Unfortunately, the reef is under threat on a number of fronts. One such threat to the reef, and in particular to the vulnerable fringing reefs that surround offshore islands, is that caused by the dropping of anchors onto coral and the dragging of anchor chains across coral beds. With approximately 300 commercial charter vessels operating in the Whitsunday section of the Great Barrier Reef and a further 800 recreational vessels registered in the area, it does not take a mathematical genius to work out just how much damage can be caused over time through the simple act of anchoring onto the fragile coral bed.

Mr Strong: Beautiful!

Ms JARRATT: It is indeed a beautiful area. In the Whitsunday area, the majority of the islands are fringed with extensive coral reef systems. During the early 1990s, it became obvious that if something were not done to protect those areas of reef from damage caused by anchor dropping, they may not survive at all.

In an attempt to reduce the impact while maintaining public access, a reef protection program was initiated and coordinated by local Whitsunday Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service staff. The program commenced with public consultation—as all good plans do—in bay planning and volunteer diver involvement to carry out physical reef survey work. In essence, the program has seen the installation of a series of reef protection markers located at particular points within a bay or along a reef edge to delineate a no-anchoring area. Triangular-shaped floats are attached to a line that is set in the seabed using a core drilling technique. Vessels entering a bay or reef to anchor are guided by these markers as to where the fringing reef starts. This is usually around the 10 metre to 12 metre mark where reef edges are not easily seen. Thus anchoring over the reef is reduced ensuring minimal impact on the reef system by anchors, anchor chains and vessel groundings.

In addition to the placement of reef protection markers, a system of moorings has been installed to allow vessels to tie up near coral systems without the need to drop anchor. Whilst such moorings are not a new concept, it is the method of securing the moorings to the seabed that is new. Traditionally, large concrete blocks were used to hold mooring ropes in place. But this method did not eliminate the risk of concrete blocks being bounced across the seabed by a vessel of too great a size. The new method involves drilling a core into the reef bed and inserting a steel pin encased in concrete into the core. Ropes are then attached to the pin, thereby providing a stationary anchor position as well as eliminating the risk of chain drag.

This unique system of anchor point installation was first developed for use in the Whitsundays and has now been copied by other groups around the country and possibly internationally. It has proven itself to be an innovative solution to the problem of coral damage while at the same time catering to the needs of the public by providing over 60 environmentally friendly mooring buoys on the reef.

A recent inspection of areas where the system of reef protection markers and mooring buoys have been in use revealed a high rate of coral regeneration. This is good news for everyone, and I congratulate Artie Jacobsen and his team from the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service Whitsunday for having the foresight and persistence to initiate this groundbreaking program in the name of reef protection. But this is not the end of the story.

Mr Cummins: There's more!

Ms JARRATT: Indeed, there is more. The reef protection program is now poised to enter a new phase that will see local tourism operators in the Whitsundays become involved in a mutually beneficial partnership with the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service. The plan involves establishing a system of mooring buoys dedicated to the exclusive use of commercial operators who would pay a fee in return for the service. This allows operators, particularly dive and snorkel boat operators, to have guaranteed access to a mooring at set times on given days. It is anticipated that a single mooring would be shared between several operators depending on individual needs. During times when the moorings are not being used by the dedicated operator, they revert to public usage. Fees collected would be put back into the program, thus expanding the potential for safe moorings while diminishing damage to the reef. At present, GBRMPA is designing policy that will allow moorings to be installed and agreements entered into consistent with the vision developed in the Whitsundays. I call on the state Minister for Environment to develop mirror legislation that will allow the maintenance of a cooperative partnership between the Commonwealth and the state with regard to advancing the reef protection program.

Time expired.
