

Great Barrier Reef

Marine park complete (almost)

Canberra

By a few strokes of the cartographer's pen, virtually the whole of the Great Barrier Reef is now a marine park and under the jurisdiction of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, a body created in 1975 at the urging of a Royal Commission inquiring into oil drilling on the reef. An area covering 344,000 square kilometres, the reef has only recently been declared a park, following an agreement between Queensland and the federal government, although it was placed on the World Heritage List in 1981.

The authority, comprising three members including a representative of the Queensland government, had the task of recommending to the federal government areas of the reef to be incorporated into a marine park, for which purpose it divided the reef into seven sections. With its recent acquisition of the Northern, Central and Southern sections (proclaimed park on 31 August), and the Townsville and Inshore Southern section (30 October), that responsibility is now discharged. But the abrupt enlargement of the reef area the authority controls, from 14 per cent to 98.5 per cent since the change of government earlier this year, will strain resources. The authority says it will need 180 extra people simply to monitor the reef from the air.

The largest system of corals and associated life, the reef stretches for almost 2,000 kilometres in a complex maze of 2,500 individual reefs and boasts at least 24 bird species, 6 species of turtle, 1,500 species of fish, 300 species of hard coral

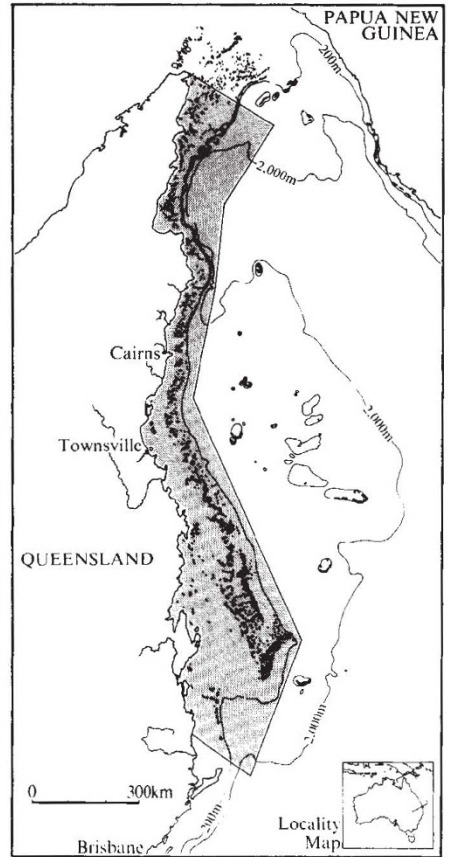
and 4,000 species of mollusc.

The park's northern boundary is latitude 10°41' S, north of which is territory disputed between Papua New Guinea and Australia. On the west, the park boundary touches the Queensland coast at the low water mark only when, as spelt out by the Minister of Environment, Mr Barry Cohen, in the House of Representatives on 2 November, there are special circumstances, such as fringing or in-shore reefs, adjacent on-shore national parks, critical habitats for endangered species, such as dugong feeding or turtle nesting areas, or areas important to the conservation of species of the reef.

Heavily-used tourist areas are also included within the park, but in general, ports and waters adjacent to industrial, urban or agricultural land are excluded.

The Queensland government was at first opposed to the park reaching the low water mark and even now would prefer a boundary some miles offshore. A decision taken by the Fraser government in 1981 to extend the Cairns section to the low water mark, against the wishes of the Queensland government, was the turning-point in the development of the park.

The administration of the park could not be more complex. Initial capital works will be paid for by the federal government, but subsequently the two governments will share expenditure on capital and operational costs equally. The authority will conduct and coordinate research, all of which is contracted out to institutions such as the Commonwealth Scientific and



The shading shows the Great Barrier Reef Region as defined in the 1975 act.

Industrial Organization and the Australian Institute of Marine Science, while the day-to-day running of the park is the responsibility of officers of Queensland's National Parks and Wildlife Service.

The Swiss-cheese park is dotted with islands belonging to the Queensland government, many of which are state national parks. Almost Kafkaesque in absurdity, these state parks end at the high water mark and since the marine park ends at the low water mark, special provisions have been made for the intertidal regions, which will be administered jointly by the two governments. A ministerial committee representing both state and federal governments coordinates policies on reef matters.

The authority has been able to acquire such a large area relatively quickly only because of the permissiveness of its writ. The marine park differs from most national parks in that most present activities will be accommodated. The only restrictions specified by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park are on oil drilling and mining, but after an area has been part of its park for some time, zoning plans will be drawn up with public participation and may prohibit the collection of specimens or fishing in selected zones. Nevertheless, an activity in which substantial investment has been made is rarely prohibited, as zoning in Capricornia, the first section to be declared park, has demonstrated. As a spokesman for the authority explained, "proclaiming the park is the easy part, zoning it will be difficult".

Vimala Sarma

Aldabra's new status

THE Seychelles Islands Foundation is celebrating Aldabra's designation by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a World Heritage Site with a photographic exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute in London. Aldabra, an uninhabited raised coral atoll in the Indian Ocean, became a rallying cry for ecologists in the 1960s after the British Ministry of Defence surveyed the island as a possible site for a military airfield. The plans were eventually dropped and since 1976 the island has been part of the Republic of the Seychelles.

Aldabra is most famous for its large population of giant tortoises (it is probably the only terrestrial ecosystem dominated by a reptilian herbivore) but also supports many bird and plant species. As the ecology of the island is comparatively undisturbed by man and controlled largely by the climate, Aldabra is a unique natural laboratory. Fortunately, difficulty of access and inhospitable terrain deter tourists.

The Seychelles Government is keen to conserve Aldabra for scientific study, and

in 1980 established the Seychelles Islands Foundation, an independent charity, to manage it. The foundation maintains on the island a research station built by the British Royal Society, which meets half of the £50,000 annual cost. Contributions to the Seychelles Islands Foundation, which is dependent on funds it raises itself, are handled by the Royal Society in London.

Tim Beardsley



The white-throated rail, found only on Aldabra