



*Cooperative Research Centre for the Great
Barrier Reef World Heritage Area*
Tourism Program School of Business James Cook University



Understanding Tourist Use of the Great Barrier Reef: The Whitsundays Visitor.

Based on data collected by researchers in
CRC Reef Project B2.1.1

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Background to the Project

This study was conducted as part of the research activities in CRC Reef Project B2.1.1: *Understanding Tourist Use of the GBRWHA*. The major objectives of this project are to describe and understand the nature of GBR tourism to assist in the development of more sustainable tourist activities in this World Heritage Area.

What we did

Visitor surveys were handed out to passengers on reef operations in North and Far North Queensland coastal regions. A total of 2215 passengers completed the survey (response rate of 75%). Surveys were distributed on weekdays and weekends between July and November during 2001.

The reef operations surveyed included a variety of sizes and types of boats, and lengths and purposes of the trip. People were surveyed on large and small day trip boats, island trips, overnight cruises, diving trips, and bareboat cruises. Locations and operations were chosen from various places between Port Douglas and the Whitsunday region.

The surveys were collected in several different ways. On day trips, surveys were distributed by research staff, completed by passengers and returned to the researcher during the return journey. In a similar manner, tourism personnel assisted with data collection on overnight reef trips. People visiting the reef on a bareboat cruise were asked by the bareboat operator to complete a post-return survey on the completion of their trip. On most reef trips, surveys were conducted in English only, with the exception of day trips going to a reef pontoon, on which surveys translated for Japanese and Chinese visitors were available. The survey design was consistent across all locations and operations, with only minor question differences in the overnight and bareboat trip surveys.

What we did next

This report was prepared in response to a request for more specific information about visitors who travel to the Great Barrier Reef and its adjacent islands from the Whitsundays (n=557).

Key Findings

The survey was completed by 557 Whitsundays visitors. These respondents:

- were mainly first time visitors to the GBR (60%),
- had an average age of 37,
- were predominately international visitors (51%) from the UK/Ireland,
- were most likely to be with a spouse or partner (32%) or in a family group (29%),
- were mostly planning to spend 1-7 days in the region (65%), and
- were most likely to have snorkelled (77%), been swimming (61%), or gone on a semi submersible tour (52%).

The three main sources of GBR information were:

- friends/family members
- brochures/pamphlets picked up within the region
- books/library

The most important factors for visitors when choosing this reef tour were

- it offered opportunities to snorkel
- it advertised opportunities to see marine wildlife

In regard to their overall reef experience, 15% of the visitors thought that there were too many other people, 20% felt there were too few wildlife encounters, and 28% thought there was not enough information about the reef.

Overall, visitors were very satisfied with their GBR visit. Eighty-seven percent of visitors gave an overall score of between 8 and 10 (on a rating scale where 0=not at all satisfied and 10=very satisfied) with a mean score of 8.79. Seventy-seven percent of visitors said that they would definitely recommend a trip to the GBR to others, while 44% said that they would definitely like to visit the reef again.

Who are Whitsundays visitors?

The sample consisted of 56% females and 44% males. Just over half of the visitors (51%) were international visitors mainly from the UK/Ireland (40%). Interstate visitors accounted for one third of visitors and were predominately from NSW/ACT (43%) and Victoria (37%). Seventy percent of Queensland visitors were from outside the GBR region (Table 1). Visitors' ages ranged between 15 and 82 with the average age being 37 years. The 21-30 year age group accounted for almost one third (32%) of the sample (Figure 1).

Table 1. Usual place of residence

International Visitors	51%
US/Canada	23%
UK/Ireland	40%
Other Europe	29%
Asia	4%
Other	4%
Interstate Visitors	33%
NSW/ACT	43%
Victoria	37%
Western Australia	6%
South Australia	11%
Tasmania	1%
Northern Territory	2%
Queensland Visitors	16%
GBR residents	30%
Other Queensland residents	70%

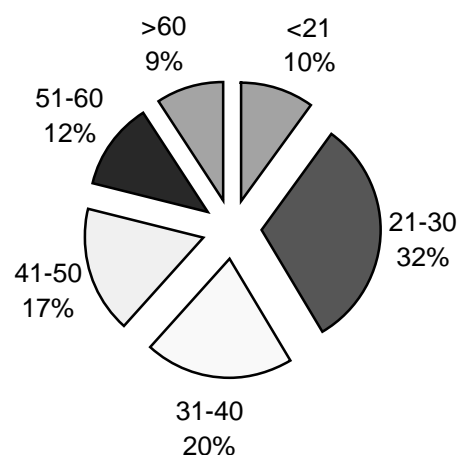


Figure 1. Age of visitors

Thirty-two percent of visitors travelled with their spouse or partner and 29% of visitors travelled with their family (Figure 2). Over half (54%) of the visitors had two adults in their travel party, while 71% had no children travelling with them (Table 2).

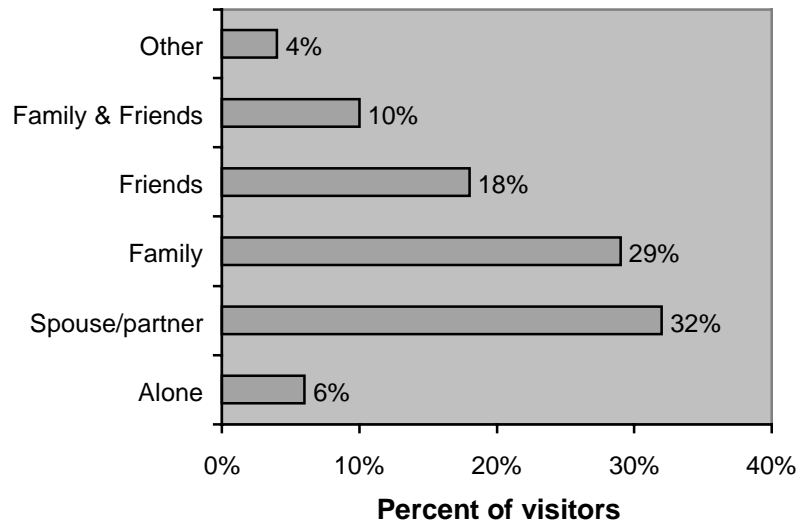


Figure 2. Type of Travel Party

Table 2. Total number of people and Children in Travel Party

No. in Travel Party	Adults (%)	Children (%)
0	0	71
1	8	8
2	54	9
3-5	29	7
6-10	5	0
>10	4	5

2. Previous Reef Experience

Sixty percent of the respondents were visiting the GBR for the first time on this trip. Half of the respondents were also visiting the region where surveyed for the first time. Of those people that had been to the GBR before, the majority were returning for the first time (50%) or for their third, fourth or fifth time. Most repeat visitors had last been to the reef earlier that year or 1-2 years ago in the months of July (27%), August (21%) and June (15%). For the majority of repeat visitors, their most recent reef trip left from the Whitsunday region (57%) or Cairns (27%) and was undertaken with a reef tour company (69%) (Table 3).

Thirty-nine percent of respondents had visited a coral reef, other than the GBR, before this visit. Within this group, the most commonly visited reef destinations were the Caribbean (33%), South East Asia (30%) and the South Pacific (25%) (NB. Multiple responses were allowed).

Table 3. Previous reef experience (n=228)

Variable	Percent of sample who have previously visited the GBR
Previous GBR visits	
1	50%
2	16%
3-5	22%
6-10	7%
>10	5%
Years since last visit	
This year	50%
1-2	18%
3-5	14%
6-10	5%
>10	13%
Most recent trip departed from	
Cairns region	27%
Port Douglas region	4%
Mission Beach	3%
Townsville region	4%
Whitsunday region	57%
Far Northern region (past PD)	1%
Southern region (past Whit)	5%
Means of travel (for most recent GBR visit)	
With a reef tour company	69%
Bareboat charter	18%
On a ferry/barge	9%
On a boat owned by family/friends	2%
On my own boat	2%

3. Travel Patterns and Planning Issues

Just over one quarter (26%) of visitors stayed more than 31 day away from home on this trip, while 21% stayed between 8 and 14 days (Figure 3). Thirty-two percent of respondents stayed in the region for between five and seven days. Another 25% percent of visitors stayed for two weeks (Figure 4). Twenty-seven percent of visitors used information they obtained upon arrival to plan most of their days and the attractions, activities and places they visited (Table 4). Twenty percent of visitors planned their trip between three and five months prior to their departure, while 19% planned this trip between six and eight months prior (Figure 5).

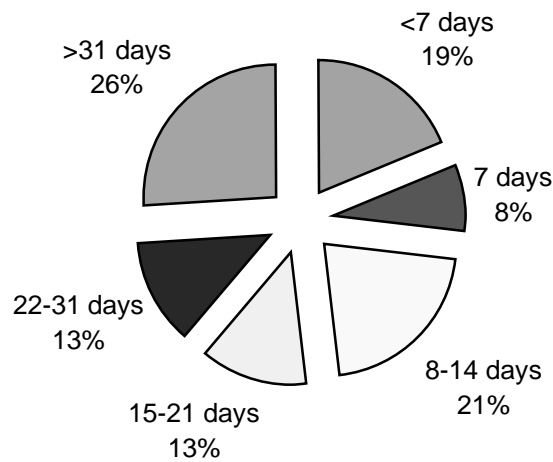


Figure 3. Number of nights away from home

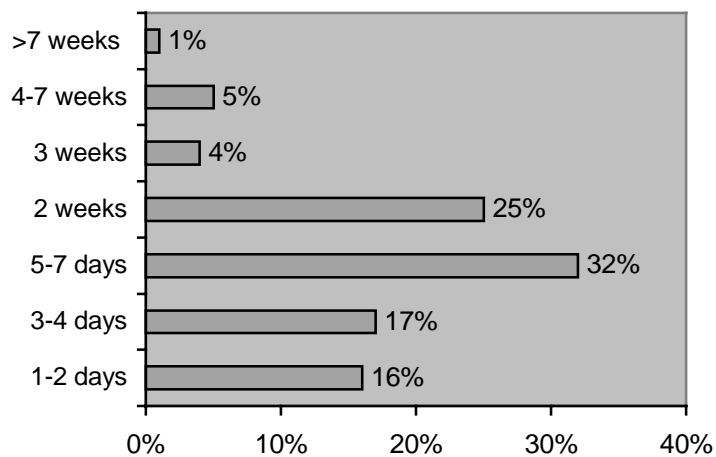


Figure 4. Number of days in the region

Table 4. Approach to planning this trip

Planning Approach	% of Visitors
I chose an <u>already organised</u> package tour	12
I organised <u>most</u> of my days and the attractions, activities and places I would visit <u>before I started</u> the trip	14
I had planned <u>some</u> of my days and the attractions, activities and places I would visit <u>before I started</u> the trip	23
I used information I obtained <u>upon arrival</u> to plan most of my days and the attractions, activities and places I would visit	27
Most of my plans and decisions are made from <u>day to day</u>	23

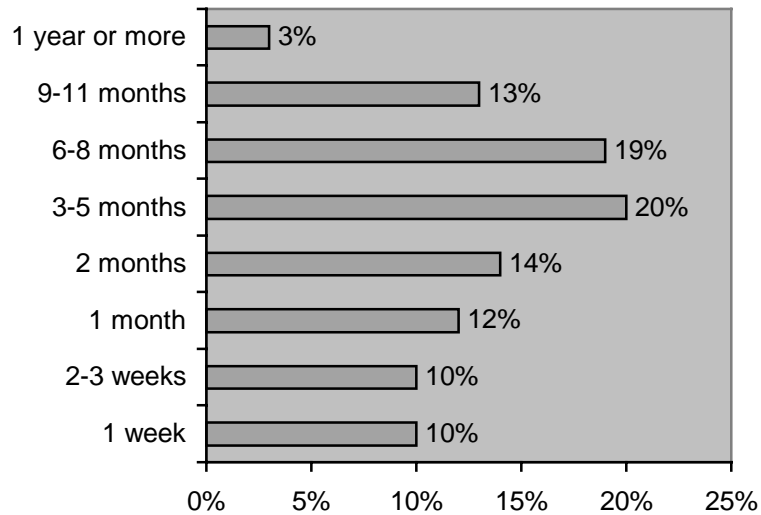


Figure 5. Total trip planning time

4. Information Sources

Thirty-seven percent of the respondents gained knowledge about the Great Barrier Reef from their friends and family members while brochures and pamphlets that they picked up within the region and books and libraries were also a widely used information source for visitors (28% respectively) (Table 5).

Table 5. Sources of information about the Great Barrier Reef

Information Sources	% of Visitors
Friends/family members	37
Brochures/pamphlets picked up within the region	28
Books/library	28
Articles in newspapers/magazines	24
Other travellers	23
Been before	21
Tour operator/company	21
Brochures/pamphlets picked up outside the region	19
The internet	19
Booking/information centres in the region	15
Travel Agent	15
Other	10
Accommodation	8
I had no information	2
Automobile association	2

NB. Multiple responses were allowed.

5. Factors influencing choice of Tour

The most important factors in choosing a Great Barrier Reef tour were opportunities to snorkel (48% of visitors rating very important), and opportunities to see marine wildlife (34%) (Table 6).

Table 6. How important are these factors in choosing a Great Barrier Reef tour?

Features important for choosing a Tour	% Rating Very Important	Mean (Average)
It offered opportunities to snorkel	48	4.0
It advertised opportunities to see marine wildlife	34	3.8
The departure day and time best fitted my schedule	30	3.5
The price matched my budget	26	3.4
The size of the boat	23	3.1
It was recommended by others	22	3.2
It offered opportunities to dive	17	2.4

Rating scale: 1=Not at all important, 5=Very important.

6. Motivation for visiting the Great Barrier Reef

The most important reasons for visiting the Great Barrier Reef were to experience the beauty of nature (68% of visitors rating very important), and to be in a natural place (59%) (Table 7).

Table 7. Reasons for this Great Barrier Reef visit

Motivations	% Rating Very Important	Mean (Average)
To experience the beauty of nature	68	4.6
To be in a natural place	59	4.4
To experience something new and different	57	4.4
To experience an undeveloped environment	48	4.1
To escape normal routine	45	4.0
To rest and relax	41	3.9
To learn about a coral reef	37	3.9
To learn more about nature	36	3.9
To have some excitement	28	3.7
To develop skills like diving/snorkeling	24	3.3
To be with others who enjoy things I enjoy	18	3.1
To experience some solitude	16	2.8
To be physically active	16	3.2
To be close to friends and family	11	2.0
To meet new people	7	2.5
To get some exercise	5	2.2

Rating scale: 1=Not at all important, 5=Very important.

7. Participation in activities

The most popular activities undertaken by visitors on their reef trip were snorkelling (77%) and swimming (61%) (Table 8).

Table 8. Activities visitors did while on their trip

Activities	% of Visitors
Snorkelling	77
Swimming	61
Semi submersible tour	52
Underwater observatory	27
Island-based activities	24
Helicopter scenic flight	18
Glass bottom boat	18
Marine Biologist guided snorkel tour	13
Scuba diving – introductory	10
Fishing	10
Reef talk	7
Scuba diving – certified	4
Jet skiing	3
Sailing	2
Boom netting	1

NB. Multiple responses were allowed.

Note. Not all activities were available on each surveyed reef trip.

8. Satisfaction

Eighty-seven percent of visitors gave an overall score of between 8 and 10 (on a rating scale where 0=not at all satisfied and 10=very satisfied) with a mean score of 8.79 for their overall satisfaction with their reef experience. Seventy-seven percent of visitors said that they would definitely recommend a trip to the Great Barrier Reef to others (Figure 6).

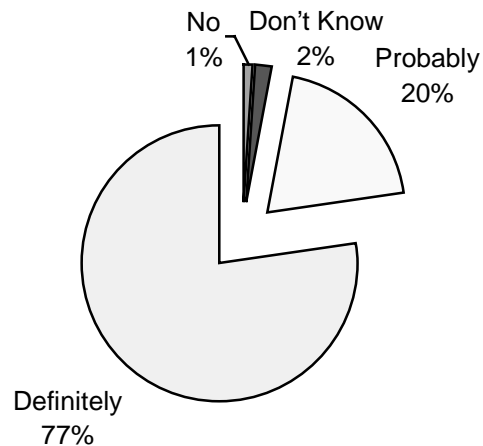


Figure 6. Recommend a trip to the Great Barrier Reef to others

The majority of visitors said that all of the factors in Table 9 were about right, however, 15% of visitors felt that there were too many people on the reef, while 20% and 28% said that there was not enough wildlife encounters and information about the reef respectively.

Table 9. Attitudes toward aspects of the reef experience

Factors	Percent of Sample			
	Too few/not enough	About right	Too many/too much	Did not matter
Number of other people	0	70	15	15
Number of other boats	0	62	9	29
Built facilities	8	69	2	21
Number of activities available	8	78	1	13
Wildlife encounters	20	70	2	8
Amount of information about the reef	28	64	1	7

Just over three quarters of visitors (76%) said that the friendliness of staff was very good and 63% said that staff knowledge was very good (Table 10).

Table 10. Satisfaction with features of the trip

Features	% Rating Very Good	Mean (Average)
Friendliness of staff	76	4.7
Staff knowledge	63	4.5
Cleanliness of the environment	58	4.5
The fish	57	4.4
Water quality	55	4.4
Tour facilities (boat, pontoon etc)	54	4.4
The coral	51	4.3
The overall environment	46	4.3
Information about the reef	40	4.0
Information about the tour	36	4.0
Marine life other than fish or coral	32	3.7

Rating scale: 1=Very poor, 5=Very good.

9. Future Reef visitation

Just under half (44%) of visitors said that they would definitely like to visit the reef again, while 41% felt that they would visit the reef again if they returned to the region. Of those respondents definitely planning to return, 27% were unsure of when they would return and 25% said they would return within two years. Sailing trips and day trips on a bigger boat were the preferred type of trip for a repeat visit (Table 11).

Table 11. Likelihood of repeat reef visits

Intention to visit the reef again	Percent of sample
Yes, definitely	44%
Yes, if I come back to this region	41%
Don't know	12%
No	3%
When do you plan to return	Percent of sample who definitely intend to visit the reef again (n=131)
Not sure	27%
Within 2 years	25%
In the next few days	24%
Within 12 months	18%
More than 2 years	7%
Type of operations for a future reef trip*	Percent of sample who definitely intend to visit the reef again & know what type of trip they will take (n=131)
Sailing trip	45%
Day trip on a bigger boat	15%
Overnight dive trip	14%
Day trip on a smaller boat	12%
Other	17%
<i>Same boat</i>	43%

* Multiple responses were allowed.