Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
Legislation Committee
Answers to questions on notice
Environment portfolio

Question No: 251

Hearing: Additional Estimates

Outcome: Agency

Programme: Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority

Topic: Seagrass in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park

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Question Date: 08 February 2016

Question Type: Spoken

Senator Singh asked:

Senator SINGH: All right. How many types of seagrass do we have in the marine park?

Dr Reichelt: I will have to check. I am prone to have a guess but I should not on that one.

Senator SINGH: Because that is one of the key habitats that is declining, is there anything that can be done to promote the growth of seagrass? I am interested in knowing what kinds of seagrass there are, which ones have declined more than others and what is being done to promote the growth of those ones that have declined? If you want to take in on notice, that is fine.

Dr Reichelt: If I could on the first—that would give you an accurate answer that way. We do have a diverse range of seagrasses, and they breed in different ways. Some of them generate proper gills that move along the coast. Some of the things we are starting to recognise is that the potential for recovery may be strong but it may be that the habitats have been altered by flood and sediment movements to prevent that. There are discussions on interventions happening now amongst researchers and program managers at the authority: are there simple, low-risk interventions we could take along the coast to greatly enhance the recovery rate? The other thing I am pleased to see is that discussions around water quality are happening in both the federal programs, which are very significant. The reef trust now are also encompassing ecosystem repair. The best thing, perhaps, in some places will be to repair the adjacent wetland.

Senator SINGH: Are you taking on notice the types and those that have declined versus—

Dr Reichelt: I will take on notice the types, yes. If I could take that on notice and regard that I have answered the types of things that people are considering, because the actual restoration work, I would say, is not at a mature stage. There are discussions occurring among scientific groups but we do not have a program now that we can report to.

Senator SINGH: No, that is fine. I would just like to know the types of seagrass that we have in the marine park and particularly those that are deteriorating.

Dr Reichelt: Yes, I will.

Senator SINGH: I understand there is no program or project in place, so I presume there is nothing being done to promote the growth of seagrass that is declining. You said there is no program, so I probably do not need an answer to that.

Dr Reichelt: Sorry, I just want to be clear that there are massive programs underway to provide improved water quality in habitats along the coast—huge programs, one of the world's largest—

Senator SINGH: I am just talking about the seagrass.

Dr Reichelt: If you are thinking just of seagrass, I would have to check. If find I am wrong I will report that. We will tell you about the types and nature and what we see as the risks and vulnerabilities to seagrass, which we have published, and will draw your attention to those.

Answer:

Fifteen species of seagrass occur within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

Monitoring indicates seagrass condition has generally been improving since 2011 as meadows recover from widespread declines across 2009 to 2011. Overall, however, seagrass remains in poor condition. Current rates of recovery indicate that a return to moderate condition may occur within the next 1-2 years if there are no major disturbances.

Declines occurred across all species however recovery rates have varied.

There is no specific program for promoting seagrass growth and past attempts at seagrass restoration in the Great Barrier Reef have been unsuccessful. The greatest driver for successful seagrass growth is light. Improving water quality remains the best way to improve light regimes for enhanced seagrass growth. The Reef Water Quality Protection Plan and the coastal ecosystem system repair work are the key programs that focus on this important action.