

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

Question No: 171
Hearing: Supplementary Budget Estimates
Outcome: Agency / 1.1 BCD
Programme: Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA)
Topic: Crown-of-Thorns Starfish - control measures
Hansard Page: N/A
Question Date: 04 November 2015
Question Type: Written

Senator McLucas asked:

1. With control of Crown of Thorns starfish concentrated on high value tourism sites near Cairns, what control measures are in place for other parts of the Great Barrier Reef?
 - a) Who is undertaking control measures on other parts of the Great Barrier Reef (if this is occurring)?
 - b) Are these control measures (if any) funded by the Department? If so, how much funding is allocated?

Answer:

1. There is currently a low incidence of crown-of-thorns in the southern area of the Great Barrier Reef. Research indicates that primary crown-of-thorns starfish outbreaks are initiated in the area between Cooktown and Cairns through a combination of elevated nutrient availability following flood events (that increases the survival of the larvae), reduced numbers of natural predators and the water flow dynamics in the Great Barrier Reef lagoon. Prevailing patterns of water flow driven by the El Niño Southern Oscillation can spread larvae from the primary crown-of-thorns starfish outbreak area into the far northern section, and south into the central section of the Marine Park. Less frequent but more spatially extensive surveys indicate that adult starfish at outbreak proportions are affecting some reefs as far north as the Lockhart River and as far south as Townsville.

- a. Some tourism operators in other areas of the Great Barrier Reef have Marine Parks permits that allow limited culling of crown-of-thorns starfish at reefs they regularly visit. The Association of Marine Park Tourism Operators has trained a number of southern section tourism operators in crown-of-thorns starfish control methods, conducted one crown-of-thorns starfish control vessel voyage, and sent trained control team divers a number of times to determine the outbreak status of starfish in the Whitsundays.

In addition to the Reef-wide reef health surveillance provided by the Joint Field Management Program, Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service rangers are currently considering tactical culling on reefs in the Swains region to support recovery of highly connected reefs following the decade of extreme weather impacts that have affected the Great Barrier Reef.

- b. Between July 2012 and June 2015, the Department allocated a total of \$9.1M to the management of crown-of-thorns starfish outbreaks on the Great Barrier Reef. A proportion of this funded the Association of Marine Park Tourism

Operators crown-of-thorns starfish control team to train tourism operators across the Great Barrier Reef in control techniques, as well as assess the outbreak status in the Whitsundays and conduct one control voyage in that region. The control voyage found that densities of crown-of-thorns starfish in the Whitsundays were relatively low compared to those in the Cairns area.

In June 2015, the Department committed a further \$7M to ongoing crown-of-thorns starfish outbreak management for the period June 2015 to June 2018. This funding will support the operation of one Association of Marine Park Tourism Operators crown-of-thorns starfish control vessel and team. With this single vessel, tactical control of crown-of-thorns starfish is currently limited to 21 high priority reefs in the Cairns region. It should be noted that many of these priority reefs are highly connected to other downstream reefs and culling crown-of-thorns starfish in this area is likely to help protect reefs south of Cairns.

The Department does not fund activities undertaken by the Joint Field Management Program or those undertaken by individual tourism operators (under permit).