

2.1 The community collaborates to ensure the protection of wildlife through research, nature conservation, regenerating biodiversity, and safeguarding individual animals from harm.

Australia-wide policies that afford protection to cetaceans in the Whitsundays include the [Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act](#), [Action Plan for Australian Cetaceans](#), and [Australian National Guidelines for Whale and Dolphin Watching](#). Within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (GBRMP), cetaceans are further protected under the [Operational Policy on Whale and Dolphin Conservation in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park](#) and [Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Regulations](#). Lastly, [A guide to tourism operations and other commercial activities in the Whitsundays](#) (pg. 49) recognises the Whitsundays as an important calving ground for Humpback Whales and has adopted more stringent approach distances within the [Whitsunday Whale Protection Area](#). It also prohibits whale watching as part of a tourist program within the protection area.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) has [zoning](#) in place to help manage and protect the values of the Marine Park that people enjoy. Each zone has different rules for activities that are allowed, activities that are prohibited, and activities that require a permit. Zones may also place restrictions on how some activities are conducted. [Zoning Map 10A](#) has the current zoning for the Whitsunday Island Group.

On top of marine park zoning, the Whitsundays also has the [Whitsundays Plan of Management](#) (POM). The intent of the POM, in alignment with other management tools, is:

- To protect and conserve identified values and World Heritage values within the Marine Park and Planning Area;
- To ensure, for particular areas in which nature conservation values, cultural and heritage values, or scientific values, are, or may be, threatened have appropriate proposals developed to reduce or eliminate the threats;
- To ensure management for the recovery and continued protection and conservation of species and ecological communities that are, or may become:
  - extinct, extinct in wild, critically endangered, endangered, vulnerable, or conservation dependent;
- To ensure that activities within areas of the Marine Park are managed on the basis of ecologically sustainable use;
- To provide a basis for managing the uses of particular areas of the Marine Park that may conflict with other uses of the area or with the values of the area;
- To provide for the management of areas of the Marine Park in conjunction with community groups in circumstances where those groups have a special interest in the areas concerned;
- To enable people using the Marine Park to participate in a range of recreational activities.

The Marine Park Authority does not intend that the POM will impair or extinguish any native title rights in the Planning Area.

Outlined in the POM, the Authority has identified threats, issues, and strategies for the conservation of whales and dolphins (pg 11) and Cultural and heritage values (pg 14-19).

In the proposed Whitsunday Whale Heritage Area, collaboration occurs on many different levels to ensure the protection of cetaceans.

Cetacean protection in the Whitsundays is important for ecological and cultural reasons. Ecologically, cetaceans provide significant contributions to the functioning of the marine ecosystem. Large migratory whales, like the Humpback, enhance marine primary productivity by fertilising ocean waters with iron-rich faeces and “pumping” micronutrients that influence the biochemistry of the marine ecosystem. They also represent an important and stable repository for carbon dioxide and, ultimately, their carcasses contribute to biodiversity and carbon sequestration on the ocean floor with whale fall ([The Role of Cetaceans in Ecosystem Functioning: Defining Policies in the 21st Century](#)). The ecological importance of smaller cetaceans has been poorly quantified, but it is suggested that due to their high metabolic rate, small cetaceans could have large effect on ecosystem structure, dynamics, and function through a variety of mechanisms including top-down, bottom-up, and behaviour-mediated processes ([Functional Roles and Ecological Importance of Small Cetaceans in Aquatic Ecosystems](#)).

The Whitsunday Islands National Park is the traditional land and sea Country of the Ngaro People. The Queensland Department of Environment and Science (DES) Parks and Forest is currently working on the [Ngaro Track](#), set to open December 2024. This premium hiking experience is a low-impact walking track that acknowledges the enduring connection and responsibility to Land, Sea, and Sky Country as an integral element of the Ngaro peoples’ identity and culture. Ngaro People are assisting Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS) in supervising construction of the track as well as contributing to the development of interpretation, ensuring that the significance of Country is shown respectfully. As whale populations increase to pre-whaling numbers, their high presence in the Whitsundays is reminiscent of the past and has a strong impact on Traditional Owners whose continued connection to the sea is being renewed by having similar experiences to elders.

[Eye on the Reef](#), a citizen science monitoring program, is one of the easiest ways for anyone to get involved and help record reef health, animal sightings, or incidents through an app or online platform. The below table shows the number of recorded sightings uploaded to EYOR in the past ten years.

	<b>Year</b>	<b>Sightings on EYOR</b>
1	2022	224
2	2021	51
3	2020	35
4	2019	112
5	2018	79
6	2017	68
7	2016	289
8	2015	186
9	2014	34

10	2013	101
11	2012	262

GBRMPA then uses this data to inform management decisions, aid research, and continue the protection of the Reef and all its inhabitants.

The GBRMPA has a Whitsunday Local Marine Advisory Committee (LMAC) that meets quarterly and provides advice and information back to GBRMPA to guide the conservation of the Marine Park. The Chair and Secretary of the Whitsunday LMAC and a couple of other members are also on the Whales of the Whitsundays (WoW) Steering Committee.

There are many ways for recreational users to get involved in conservation and protection of wildlife in the Whitsundays, but one of the more educational programs is Reef Discovery. Reef Discovery is an online course that aims to improve knowledge and understanding of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area, its cultural connections, biological diversity, management and protection, and how best to interpret this information to visitors. The free course, designed as a primer by GBRMPA, aims to inspire people to learn more about the Reef, how valuable it is and how to deliver accurate information about it in an interesting and memorable way. All you need to do to get started is email your details to [reefdiscoverycourse@gbrmpa.gov.au](mailto:reefdiscoverycourse@gbrmpa.gov.au).

For those interested in volunteering their time to aid in conservation and animal welfare initiatives there are also many different opportunities: Fauna Rescue, Eco Barge Clean Seas Inc., Whitsunday Conservation Council, OUCH Volunteers, just to name a few. These organisations have had major positive impacts on our local environment. The Reef Protection Marker Buoy Program is a great example. It was a joint project with [OUCH Volunteers](#), a local nonprofit, and Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS). Their goal was to minimise anchor damage to corals by marking the edge of the reefs with marker buoys and requiring boats to anchor outside of them. It was an extremely successful campaign and marker buoys are now being used from Lady Elliott Island at the southern end of the Reef all the way to Port Douglas at the north. Currently, [Whitsunday Conservation Council](#) (WCC) is working for the protection of Green Turtles and Dugongs through the [Go Slow for Those Below](#) initiative in Pioneer Bay, Airlie Beach of the Whitsundays to protect them from boat strikes in their shallow grazing area. It has been supported by Whitsunday Regional Council and as part of this initiative, Maritime Safety Queensland (MSQ) has purchased two buoys and GBRMPA is considering purchasing more. This is a great example of the local conservation and animal welfare community coming together for an extremely beneficial outcome for Green Turtles and Dugongs. For anyone interested in volunteering their time [Reef Catchments](#) has a great list of potential opportunities.

Local tourism businesses are also involved in conservation and animal welfare initiatives. Ocean Rafting and the Whitsunday Charter Boat Industry Association (WCBIA) are great examples of this. The WCBIA represents members operating a multi-million-dollar charter boat tourism industry within the Whitsunday region of the GBRMP. They are in partnership with Ocean Rafting, James Cook University, and Reef Catchments to monitor water quality. This long-term monitoring initiative should paint a picture of the Whitsunday catchment, allowing for appropriate management to be implemented to better protect the beautiful Whitsundays. As well as the water monitoring program, [Ocean Rafting](#) is also a major Eye on the Reef contributor, has two Master Reef Guides on staff, is involved with Citizens of the Great Barrier Reef, has been involved with the Whitsunday Reef

Restoration Project since its inception in 2018, and is involved with marine debris initiatives including hosting beach clean-up events.

Living in this beautiful area also carries with it the responsibility of being prepared for natural disasters like cyclones, floods, earthquakes, and wildfires. The [Whitsunday Region Local Disaster Management Plan](#) has been prepared to assist the Whitsunday Local Disaster Management Group to protect the community and community assets from disaster events that may impact and affect all or part of the Whitsunday Regional Council Area.

As we are coming into the summer months, and the possibility of an El Nino event becomes surer, preparation has also begun to ensure that mechanisms are in place for coordinating and facilitating responses to environmental incidents such as mass coral bleaching events, Crown of Thorns starfish outbreaks, and cyclones. The Marine Tourism Incident Response Group is currently being stood up to be as ready and prepared for summer as possible. This summer will arguably be one of the best datasets ever captured in one summer, with the current setup of 26 different groups planning to gather bleaching data.