



## **PRIME MINISTER**

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER THE HON P J KEATING MP  
LAUNCH OF THE GREAT BARRIER REEF STRATEGIC PLAN,  
TOWNSVILLE, WEDNESDAY, 20 JULY 1994**

Ladies and gentlemen, may I begin by saying what a pleasure it is to be here with you today for the launch of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority's strategic plan.

It is always a pleasure to visit an area as beautiful as Townsville and the welcome you have given me today makes my visit even more enjoyable.

I don't think that anyone who has experienced the magnificence of the Great Barrier Reef would deny its significance, nationally and internationally. It ranks as one of Australia's greatest and best known natural features. It constitutes the world's largest marine protected area, extending for some 2,000 kilometres along Australia's northeast coast and covering an area of 344,000 square kilometres - about the same area as Victoria and Tasmania combined.

While the reef is an area of stunning natural beauty, it is also an extremely fragile habitat for thousands of different species of marine life, and has been declared the world's first particularly sensitive area by the International Maritime Organisation.

The reef is not only significant for its natural beauty and as a habitat, but also for its recreational, cultural and economic relevance. This encompasses commercial and recreational fishing, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage and activities, and tourism.

Economically, the reef is estimated to be worth an estimated \$1.4 billion per annum in tourism and fishing income, with tourism income growing at an estimated 10 per cent a year. The significance of an environmental feature unique in the world can never be measured in monetary terms, but I do think it is possible to note that the regional and national investment in the Great Barrier

Reef has an economically measurable facet, in addition to its other dimensions.

This collective investment is underpinned by a responsibility to protect and preserve the reef for the benefit of future generations of Australians and, indeed, for all those from around the world who are yet to marvel at the beauty of the reef.

Managing the reef in an ecologically sustainable way has been a priority for the Commonwealth and the Queensland Governments. I am pleased to be able to say that the peace and harmony which the reef can inspire have extended into Commonwealth- State relations when issues of protecting the reef have come up. Several complementary management agreements for the reef have been concluded between Queensland and the Commonwealth, and I thank the Queensland Government for its very welcome continued co-operation.

Recognition of the need to protect the reef dates back to 1975 when the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act was passed with bipartisan support. Formal international recognition of the reef's universal value came in 1981, when it was inscribed on the World Heritage List.

To further protect it, the Commonwealth enacted legislation in 1991 making it compulsory for all large vessels, particularly those carrying oil and environmentally hazardous chemicals, to carry a pilot while navigating the northern section of the reef. No other country in the world has been able to obtain international acceptance of the need for foreign ships to carry pilots in international waters, and I think this acceptance indicates the international recognition of the need to protect this unique natural wonder.

It is this need for protection and ecologically sustainable management of the reef that prompted the Great Barrier Reef Strategic Plan. The plan itself is an achievement unique in the world, and perhaps rightly so given the unique nature of the reef.

It represents an ambitious and farsighted effort to develop a long term vision for the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area, by formulating appropriate objectives and management strategies for ecologically sustainable development. Creating the plan involved a comprehensive, consultative process in which more than 60 peak organisations and representative bodies from a wide cross section of the community participated. An independent chairperson was employed to ensure that competing interests were considered and to facilitate the joint decision making process.

A draft plan was widely circulated for public comment and the final plan has been endorsed by the Queensland Government and the 60 or more government and non-government bodies. This, of course, reflects what ecologically sustainable development is all about, achieving an agreed and workable balance underpinned by maintenance of the ecological systems on which life depends.

It is a great example of an Australian solution to an Australian challenge. The challenge was one which no other country had faced, the solution is one which other countries and other regions of Australia can take as a model. I must congratulate Kayt Raymond on her considerable work as facilitator and leader of the negotiation and discussion process.

Even at this early stage, the strategic plan has already proven to be a useful and valuable working instrument. The plan formed a key component of the proposal for a Co-operative Research Centre to which my government pledged \$12.8 million over seven years in 1992. The centre carries out research into the sustainable development of the Great Barrier Reef and focuses upon enabling tourism and environmental managers to successfully address the stresses which impact upon the reef.

The plan was employed in formulating the Marine Conservation Strategy devised by the Australian committee to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. It also played a role in the Queensland Government's decision to ban petroleum exploration and production in its area of responsibility within the wider World Heritage area.

I want to take this opportunity to extend my congratulations and thanks to all those involved in formulation of the Great Barrier Reef Strategic Plan, particularly the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and the Queensland Government. I wish all of those involved with the plan every success in achieving their objective of long term ecologically sustainable development for the Great Barrier Reef. It is an objective all Australians share and one of significance to the world.