

CORELLA

Journal of the Australian Bird Study Association

VOLUME 20

MARCH, 1996

NUMBER 1

Corella, 1996, 20(1): 1-13

MANAGEMENT OF HUMAN VISITATION TO SEABIRD ISLANDS OF THE GREAT BARRIER REEF MARINE PARK REGION

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Received 5 August, 1994

Millions of seabirds of 22 species breed on over 78 islands surrounded by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (GBRMP) of Australia. Although many of the islands are Queensland national parks, some are part of the GBRMP, are vacant crown land or are under a lease arrangement. The importance of the islands to the breeding of each seabird species varies from those that provide for significant numbers with predictable, regular breeding to those with insignificant numbers and/or unpredictable sporadic breeding. The number of tourists visiting the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) has increased enormously in recent years and the trend is expected to continue. During the past decade, park management agencies have been hard put to respond adequately to the large increases that are occurring in tourist and private recreational use on the Reef. Many places previously considered to be remote are now within one-day cruising range of major urban centres due to advances in vessel technology. Increasing tourism is bringing increasing demand to allow visitation to previously unvisited places and to vary the nature of existing visitation. Currently about 20 per cent of the Great Barrier Reef region and more than 30 per cent of seabird islands are within one-day operational range of major mainland departure points. By 2001 it is possible that over three-quarters of the region and its seabird islands will be within one-day range. Such advances in vessel technology are expected to exacerbate the demand on park management to 'cater for' visitors and to 'open up' new areas. The current growth in 'ecotourism' may also foster an increasing demand for tourist visitation to seabird islands. This paper examines access to GBR seabird islands for commercial and private recreational, research and other purposes in the light of increasing visitation to the Reef. The current management of human visitation to the islands is outlined. The paper concludes that human visitation to certain tropical seabird islands on the GBR is sustainable and justifiable provided that it is well regulated and that adequate monitoring occurs. A code of conduct for people visiting seabird islands is proposed. A project to prepare Australian national guidelines for the management of human visitation to marine islands with breeding seabirds is now underway.