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Conserving Australia's Great Barrier Reef: 'The Best Expedition in the World'

Ben Southall

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In the first of an exclusive series, former island caretaker and ambassador for Tourism Queensland Ben Southall explains why the Great Barrier Reef needs protection and how the 'Best Expedition in the World' will help

Over the next four months, my office will be a Hobie Kayak and 40ft Sunsail Catamaran, as I peddle, paddle and sail my way up the Great Barrier Reef. This 1600km epic voyage of discovery is being championed as 'the Best Expedition in the World' and rightly so. My mission will be to explore and promote one of the most diverse ecosystems on the planet. I will spend much of my time investigating why the Great Barrier Reef is the best managed coral reef system in the world and sharing these insights with an international audience.



I'll also get to enjoy close interaction with Queensland's awe-inspiring marine life. I'll have a front row seat during the humpback whale migration and I'll get to join the dance of the manta rays. I'll get to find Nemo in the anemones and swim alongside the dolphins as they give me a view into a world we know little about. I'm particularly excited about meeting the 'Guardians of the Reef': the individuals, community organisations, businesses and government bodies who are actively protecting the reef and helping to support its long-term sustainability.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) is the chief guardian of the reef, and has won numerous international awards for its innovative and effective eco-initiatives. 'Eye on the Reef' is one of the most successful programs developed by GBRMPA, in partnership with the tourism industry and reef research community. While selected tourism operators collect biological information at frequently visited reef and island sites; community and reef members help detect large-scale coral bleaching, which has not been sighted since 2002. This team effort contributes to ensuring Great Barrier Reef is effectively managed. It's uplifting to see so many businesses participating in the protection of their greatest local asset – one of the natural wonders of the world. The Great Barrier Reef is home to the highest number of

independently certified environmentally friendly operators on any coral reef system in the world. That's something that Queensland can be incredibly proud of.

The Best Expedition in the World is an opportunity for me to play my part and inspire others to do the same. In July, I will collaborating with Reef HQ, GBRMPA's aquarium. We will be creating the world's largest underwater classroom and delivering the message of marine conservation and the Great Barrier Reef to school children around the world via video-conferencing.

During the expedition, I will also be conducting research dives for Reef Check to monitor the health of the coral, and staying at university research stations to learn about students' ongoing eco-projects. Although there is a huge amount of work being done to help protect and preserve the Great Barrier Reef it could be too little too late. If ocean's continue to heat up and acidify at the rate they have been over the past few decades, only a huge push from governments around the world to clean up their acts can guarantee the future existence of micro-environments such as this.



I might be a Pom, but I'm incredibly passionate about education, research and conservation in relation to Great Barrier Reef. It's not just one of Australia's greatest assets; it's also one of the seven natural wonders of the World. The Great Barrier Reef is something people from all corners of the earth can enjoy and should try to protect. We are custodians of these incredible underwater gardens and if future generations aren't privy to the same experiences that we are, it's a loss to the entire planet.



Fast Facts: The Great Barrier Reef

- The Great Barrier Reef is the largest and most extensive coral reef system in the world, comprising of around 2900 individual coral reefs, 600 continental islands and 300 coral cays.
- It represents approximately 10 percent of all coral reefs in the world.
- It spans two thirds of the northern eastern coastline of Australia, extending north from Bundaberg to Cape York.
- It is 2300km long and approximately 350 000 kms². That's 70 million football fields.
- It is the largest natural feature on earth and its impressive size makes it the only living structure that can be seen from the moon.
- Individual coral reefs on the Great Barrier Reef range in size from less than one hectare to over 1,000 km² and each has its own unique shape.
- Its largest continental island is Hinchinbrook Island at an impressive 317 km². Its

largest coral cay is North West Island, located in the southern part of the Great Barrier Reef. It is 1.1 km² in size.

Follow Ben during his epic 1600km trip at www.islandreefjob.com. To find out more about the Great Barrier Reef, go to www.visit-queensland.com

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