

KEEPING THE NATURAL WONDERS 'ALIVE'



What makes Australia's coastline so precious and under constant attention of more than a million visitors each year is now in dire need of protection. One of this planet's greatest natural wonders, The Great Barrier Reef, is being threatened and unless protective actions are taken, there won't be a wonder to admire.

The Reef is an example of natural perfection; it stretches along the coastline of Queensland for some 2,000 km and presents a very rare example of a compact structure created solely by coral reefs.

The appeal of the whole area has been attracting tourists since 1890s and gradually, more and more have been lured by the submarine world. Diving is one of the most popular activities here. Since the mid 1990s, the number of visitors has not changed dramatically. Most seek every opportunity to explore the coral reefs themselves.

The ideal way of approaching this quest is snorkeling. It doesn't need special skills, the needed equipment is not painfully expensive and the overall experience is very rewarding. Scuba diving is basically 'next in line'; however it requires more experience and larger investment. For those, who try to avoid getting wet, local tourist operators prepared the "subs" - glass-bottomed boats - which have become very popular as well.

Whatever way the tourist fancy, there are rules which need to be obeyed. Touching the coral is not recommended - not only is there a risk of getting stung or hurt in any way - but more importantly, the human touch may damage the polyp and the coral will end up dying. That is only a tip of the iceberg. Extensive fishing, pollution, environmental instability, heavy tourism - all these present major hazard to the health of the Great Barrier Reef. Local government is now facing a major task - either they realize the threat and make necessary steps to prevent it, or lose the one thing which is the 'tourist hook' - the coral.

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