

Coral Spawning Success: Boosting Reef Resilience in the Whitsundays

Boats4Corals, Whitsunday Reef Island Initiative

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Last night, the Whitsundays experienced a remarkable event as corals across the region simultaneously spawned, releasing millions of egg and sperm bundles into the water. This annual reproductive phenomenon is crucial for reef restoration, and Reef Catchments, along with key partners from the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS), Southern Cross University, Traditional Owners and local tourism operators, were on-site to collect coral spawn as part of the innovative Boats4Corals program.

The project team were strategically positioned around the Whitsundays to find the best coral spawn slicks thanks to surveys delivered last month, which looked at the presence or absence of coral eggs.

AIMS project lead Dr Deborah Foote said: “This year’s coral assessments were a great success. Participants from four local organisations took part in the checks, building capacity in the region for future reef restoration initiatives. The team identified plenty of coral colonies with eggs, which provided valuable information when choosing sites for collection of coral spawn.”

The collected spawn was promptly transported to specially designed larval pools at Hook Island, where it will develop into coral larvae over the next five to six days. Once the larvae are ready to attach themselves to the ocean floor, they will be strategically released into degraded reef areas, providing these habitats with a much-needed recovery ‘boost.’

Reef Catchments Manager, Cass Hayward, says, “Coral spawning is an amazing event. It brings so much new life into the system. Through Boats4Corals we are trying to funnel some of that new life into particular areas which need a helping hand.”

Since the inception of the Boats4Corals project in 2020 which builds on a technique pioneered by Southern Cross University’s Distinguished Professor Peter Harrison, hundreds of millions of coral larvae have been successfully released into sites that have suffered considerable damage from Cyclone Debbie, with a focus on areas that have shown slower recovery than others. These efforts are vital as we work towards understanding how best to help enhance the resilience of the Great Barrier Reef’s coral ecosystem and supporting the long-term health of marine biodiversity.

A significant outcome of this project has been the training and upskilling of local tourism operators and Traditional Owners, equipping them with the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in this important conservation work. By involving local communities in these efforts, the project is fostering a deeper connection to the reef and promoting sustainable tourism practices.

Great Barrier Reef Foundation Managing Director Anna Marsden said: “Right in the heart of the Great Barrier Reef, the Whitsundays is a critical sanctuary for the Reef’s diverse marine life.

“The Foundation is pleased to be working hand in hand with scientists, the tourism industry, local community, Traditional Owners and Reef Catchments in the Whitsundays to help reefs recover from the impacts of climate change, including coral bleaching and increasingly severe cyclones using an innovative larval reseedling technique,” Ms Marsden said.

“The combination of the tourism industry’s leadership, boats, local knowledge, and people-power with scientifically-backed knowledge allows us to achieve reef restoration at a greater scale than researchers can achieve alone.”

Reef Catchments Manager, Cass Hayward, elaborates, “Larval reseedling has been pioneered by scientists and researchers. Boats4Corals is all about the sharing of that information and method with local people. Building local capacity, such as within the tourism industry and Traditional Owners, is really the crux of this project.”

Reef Catchments invites the Whitsunday community to stay tuned to their social media channels for updates on the final numbers of spawn collected and larvae released.

The Reef Islands Initiative is a Great Barrier Reef Foundation program, supported by funding from Lendlease, the Australian Government’s Reef Trust, the Queensland Government and the Fitzgerald Family Foundation. Delivery of the Whitsunday Reef Islands Initiative is managed by Reef Catchments and is in partnership with the local Reef community including Traditional Owners, reef managers, scientific researchers, and tourism operators.

For additional details about this project and Reef Catchments’ ongoing efforts to restore reef health in the Mackay Whitsunday Isaac region, visit www.reefcatchments.com.au.

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Images

[Coral spawning - Johnny Gaskell](#)



[Tourism operators around a larval pool - Johnny Gaskell](#)



[Boats4Corals team releasing coral larvae - Cass Hayward](#)



About Reef Catchments

Reef Catchments are the Natural Resource Management (NRM) group for the Mackay Whitsunday Isaac region.

We facilitate change and work for long-term solutions to sustain, protect, and improve our region's natural resources and environment, now and into the future.

Our team are skilled and outcome-focused people, all dedicated to looking after the environment in the Mackay Whitsunday Isaac region.

For more information: www.reefcatchments.com.au