

**Media Release from the Reef and Rainforest Research Centre.**

## **REEF SHARK SIGHTINGS WORTH UP TO \$1,375**

Dr Alastair Birtles from James Cook University and his team (Peter Valentine, Natalie Stoeckl, Matthew Curnock, Arnold Mangott and Susan Sobotzick) have started a four year study that is looking at the social and economic values of iconic marine animals that tourists encounter when visiting the Great Barrier Reef.

**Part I of the study has focused on dive-tourism in the northern region, and has found that Key Species have High Economic Values when left alive in their natural environment.**

Preliminary figures suggest that visitors who scuba dive spend approximately \$6,000 AUD in the region. Almost 90% of that expenditure (approximately \$5,321 per person) is directly attributable to the dive-boats since most of these visitors would not have come to the region if they had not had the chance to go scuba diving.

The team asked visitors to indicate the 'importance' of key marine species when choosing to go on a dive-boat trip. They found that marine turtles, sharks and maori wrasse were rated of highest value. Potato cod, moray eels and leafy scorpion fish also rated highly. Dr. Birtles said "Tourists related the presence of these species to the health and environmental quality of the Great Barrier Reef."

If one divides the visitor expenditure that is attributable to dive-boats (\$5,321) across key marine species according to the 'importance' that visitors have placed on them when choosing to go on a dive trip, then this suggests that each sighting of a shark by a diver could be worth up to **\$1,375** tourist dollars to the region. This is similar to the value of a turtle sighting at up to **\$1,360** or encounters with big fish valued at up to **\$1,354**.

The research team still has much work to do. They are looking at other ways of trying to measure the relative value of key species. They also plan to survey non-dive visitors and visitors to other areas of the Great Barrier Reef. But it is clear that these marine species can help the region earn money by simply 'being there'.

Col McKenzie, Secretary of Dive Queensland and Board Member of Association of Marine Park Tourism Operators (AMPTO), said "The value of seeing these animals on a trip to the reef has always been recognised by Dive Operators now Dr. Birtles' research confirms this with dollar values." "It is the presence of these species that attracts visitors and makes the Great Barrier Reef special compared to many other reefs around the world. These marine animals are obviously economically important to the region."

The research is conducted with the support of funding from the Australian Government's Marine and Tropical Sciences Research Facility (MTRSF) which is implemented in North Queensland by the Reef and Rainforest Research Centre.

For further information on these results please contact Dr. Natalie Stoeckl on (07) 4725 0766

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