MEDIA RELEASE
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Reef and Rainforest Research Centre (RRRC), Cairns
For immediate release

Crown of Thorns cull passes 400,000

New technologies and techniques have allowed control divers to remove 400,000 Crown of Thorns Starfish from the Great Barrier Reef and protect the $7 billion tourism industry dependent on it.

However the rapidly-spreading outbreak of the spiked, coral-eating starfish means more resources and attention are needed to protect the Reef.

Populations of Crown of Thorns Starfish (*Acanthaster planci*) have exploded in recent decades, causing huge impacts on the health of the Great Barrier Reef.

A single Crown of Thorns Starfish can grow up to a metre wide and eat its own body weight in healthy coral in a single day, with the species believed to be responsible for up to half of all coral loss on the Reef.

Changing water conditions linked to coastal agricultural run-off and climate change are thought by scientists to be the main causes of outbreaks.

Since July 2013 the Association of Marine Park Tour Operators (AMTPO) has been running a program to control populations of Crown of Thorns Starfish using divers armed with injector syringes.

Divers based off two vessels, MV *Hero* and MV *Venus*, have been alternately tracking populations of Crown of Thorns and deploying trained divers who swim down to the Crown of Thorns to inject them with lethal compounds.

The starfish's toughness and numbers mean controlling their population is a monumental task, spurring AMPTO to bring in new techniques and technologies increase the efficiency of the control program.

These include the introduction of a new bile-salt based solution for a guaranteed one-shot kill injection and the use of the *Audamus*, a six-metre Nyad vessel that manta-tows a reconnaissance diver around *Hero* during control dives to search surrounding coral bommies for more Crown of Thorns Starfish.

These upgrades have paid off, with AMPTO passing the 400,000 mark of culled Crown of Thorns in February 2016 and having successfully protected the major tourist dive sites off Cairns.

However project co-ordinator Steve Moon says more resources and attention are needed as the outbreak front spreads ever further south.

"Coral cover at most dive sites has at least been maintained since the program got underway," Steve said.

"Despite this the front of the outbreak has moved through Cairns and is now estimated to be off the coast of Innisfail and well on its way to Townsville.

"What's become clear is that additional resources are required to implement adequate controls to maintain sustainable coral cover from Townsville to the Whitsundays."

In 2015 AMPTO partnered with the Reef and Rainforest Research Centre (RRRC) and gained access to Australian Government funding.

The program is now funded by the RRRC and the Queensland Government.

The program also involves the recruitment and training of young Australians to become control divers under the Skills Queensland initiative.

The current class of divers will graduate from the program in June.

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