



## ‘Hero’ rejoins fight against Reef-eating predator

A ship dedicated to countering a serious threat to the health of the Great Barrier Reef and the tourism economy it supports will be heading back out to sea after a two-week refit.

*MV Hero*, one of two vessels in the Crown of Thorns Starfish Targeted Control Program, will sail from Cairns Seaport on Tuesday morning after repairs and refits.

The vessel carries a complement of 11 divers trained to find the coral-eating Crown of Thorns Starfish and inject them with a compound derived from ovine and bovine bile, which kills the starfish without risk to any other marine organisms.

Crown of Thorns Starfish feed on living coral and are a major threat to the health of the Great Barrier Reef. Culling efforts are more important than ever now to help ensure that corals that have survived consecutive mass bleaching events are not consumed by starfish.

*Hero* has spent two weeks in drydock receiving refits to its hull, equipment, interior and tender, including new below-waterline paint and even new carpets.

The Crown of Thorns Starfish Targeted Control Program is a cooperative effort between the Australian government’s National Environmental Science Programme (NESP), Reef and Rainforest Research Centre (RRRC), the Association of Marine Park Tourism Operators (AMPTO) and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA). It is supported by the Queensland and Australian governments.

AMPTO Project Manager Steve Moon OAM said *Hero* would be heading to areas in which Crown of Thorns Starfish aggregations were expected to occur off the coast near Mission Beach.

“Crown of Thorns Starfish tend to spawn around about the same time as coral, the timing of which is mainly determined by the lunar cycle,” Mr Moon said.

“To spawn they group together in huge numbers, which we call an aggregation. The ‘front’ of the Crown of Thorns Starfish outbreak currently extends from Mission Beach to Taylors Beach at the

moment so we'll be heading there, because that's where we're likely to find the large aggregations of adult starfish. These are the ones that can eat the most coral so they're the ones we'll be prioritising for removal."

Divers on *Hero* can remove around 3000 starfish per 10-day voyage. Effectiveness of control efforts has been significantly improved thanks to the uptake of research managed by RRRRC under the Tropical Water Quality Hub (TWQ) of the National Environmental Science Programme (NESP), especially the development and application of Integrated Pest Management principles to Crown of Thorns Starfish culling efforts.

Since 2012 the Targeted Control Program has removed over 620,000 starfish.

With each starfish able to eat around 20 square metres of coral over its lifetime, this equates to more than 12 million square metres of coral preserved that would have otherwise been consumed.

The Great Barrier Reef tourism industry is worth over \$6 billion per year and supports over 60,000 jobs in Queensland, and is the primary driver of international tourism visitation to Cairns.

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