MEDIA RELEASE
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CAIRNS ORGANISATION WINS TWO CATEGORIES AT AUSTRALIA'S LONGEST-RUNNING AND MOST PRESTIGIOUS SUSTAINABILITY AWARD

The innovative work of the Reef and Rainforest Research Centre (RRRC) has seen the Cairns-based organisation named as winner of not just one, but two categories at the 2023 National Banksia Sustainability Awards.

No strangers to tackling the country's most challenging ecological problems, ***Reef and Rainforest Research Centre*** were the clear winner amongst a highly competitive field of some of Australia's best social and environmental sustainability initiatives at the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre last night.

For the past 34 years, the Banksia Awards have amplified Australia's brightest leaders, change-makers, and innovators who are making a positive impact on the world. And this year's message was strong: For humanity to survive, biodiversity must thrive.

AGRICULTURE AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AWARD: The RRRC's success in this category saw RRRC Managing Director, Sheriden Morris, join with ***Prof Damien Burrows*** (**JCU/TropWATER**) and ***Dr Aaron Davis*** (**JCU/TropWATER**), along with ***CANEGROWERS Cairns Region*** to work with farmers across the Russell-Mulgrave catchment (just south of Cairns) to achieve sustainable change in farming practices.

"Project 25", as it is known, was developed through the **National Environmental Science Program**'s **Tropical Water Quality Hub** and administered through the Cairns-based RRRC. Acknowledging the extensive government investment over the past few decades, which used a range of programs and approaches to improve water quality on the Great Barrier Reef, the team identified that controversy surrounding their effectiveness had led landholders to lose trust in the science being delivered.

> ***"The first step was to build new trust frameworks and to provide sugar cane farmers with ways they could adapt their practices to more sustainable methods. We did this by embracing technology that put the data in their own hands," Sheriden explains.***

Adopting a citizen-science approach to water quality monitoring, the team collaborated with cane growers, who decided where best to place a network of water quality sensors in the Russell-Mulgrave catchment, which allowed them to observe nitrogen concentrations in runoff from their own properties. Using this information, catchment hotspots were identified and the growers themselves could decide from a range of mitigation methods. Participating farmers continue to regularly engage with researchers and the data, and are actively and positively promoting their engagement with the project to convince other farmers of the project's benefits.

The outstanding success of this work has led to significant further investment and works in the catchment funded by the Reef Trust Partnership and Great Barrier Reef Foundation, with stakeholders suggesting this model be rolled out across other regional catchments of the Great Barrier Reef.

Quote Attributable to Sheriden Morris: This recognition of the work we carry out is proof that even the most seemingly overwhelming environmental problems can be tackled through innovative, targeted research programs that are driven to produce solutions. This is practical, direct action that delivers real-world outcomes for the Reef. The RRRC knows how to invest wisely, how to drive applied science for solutions, then how to implement those solutions.

BIODIVERSITY AWARD: The RRRC's second Banksia Award win was for the organisation's marquee project which is defending coral and biodiversity on the Great Barrier Reef by developing and delivering innovative programs to control the Crown-of-thorns starfish.

RRRC's Managing Director, ***Sheriden Morris***, along with a team of researchers with the **National Environmental Science Program**, topped the highly competitive field ahead of some of Australia's best scientific minds who are tackling the country's most challenging environmental problems.

For this project, RRRC Managing Director, ***Sheriden Morris*** was joined by ***Dr David Westcott*** (**CSIRO**), ***Dr Cameron Fletcher*** (**CSIRO**), ***Dr Roger Beeden*** (**GBRMPA**), ***Dr Mary Bonin***, and ***Dr Suzanne Long*** – among many others - in conceiving, researching and implementing this novel approach to Crown-Of-thorns starfish management.

The team applied principles of Integrated Pest Management (IPM), which is a well-established agricultural practice on land, to manage outbreaks of the highly destructive coral-eating marine pest.

This project was also brought together under the banner of the **National Environmental Science Program**'s **Tropical Water Quality Hub**, with a focus on working collaboratively with on-water COTS control operators **AMPTO** and **InLoc** to research, implement, and rigorously evaluate the success of using IPM for coral reef protection.

This IPM control program successfully achieved effective coral protection confirming that the IPM-COTS control program was a potent tool for achieving COTS control and protecting coral. Prior to this program, most people didn't believe this was possible.

> **"About 50% of the coral lost on the Great Barrier Reef is due to predation by COTS. Since the introduction of this IPM, more than 1.1 million COTS have been culled, protecting a reef area of more than 726,000 hectares," said Sheriden.**

The Australian Government has recently committed to long-term funding of the COTS on-water program.

Quote Attributable to Sheriden Morris: We have extraordinary research capability here in the Far North, where we develop real-world solutions by collaborating directly with COTS Control Operators, Reef Managers, Traditional Owners and the Tourism Industry for the protection of our amazing Reef. Almost 50% of the coral lost is due to the predation by COTS. By controlling COTS, we build the resilience of the Reef and buy valuable time in the face of climate change. We've got a lot of work to do - it's time to get on with it!

It was a big night for Cairns as former RRRC Board member, Alan Wallish, also won the Sustainable Tourism category. Alan owns Passions of Paradise, a marine tourism vessel, who took out the gong for his work in turning tourists into conservationists.

- ENDS -

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Images and video relating to the RRRC's Banksia Awards nominations are available here: https://bit.ly/RRRCBanksiaAwards

About Reef and Rainforest Research Centre: www.rrrc.org.au

The Reef & Rainforest Research Centre (RRRC) is a not-for-profit consortium of research providers, industry and community organisations that cooperate via a strong and effective engagement framework. For the past 17 years, it has worked at the intersection of conservation, Government policy development, and community economic development across northern Australia, the Torres Strait, PNG, and the Pacific using an innovative approach to improving the sustainability of management and use of tropical environmental assets. Addressing complex ecological problems which occur across the regions, the RRRC translates science-based research into creating innovative solutions to improve environmental outcomes, regional wealth, and create regional jobs. The RRRC has a unique focus on engagement with key sectors to deliver solutions based on good science that address key tropical environmental management issues. The aim is for end users to be aware of new research, to understand the implications, and then apply the new knowledge towards increasingly sustainable outcomes. This results in the maximum possible return on investment in public-good research, and the best possible benefit for the North Queensland region. Since 2006, the RRRC's activities have brought $350 million into the Far North's economy.

FACEBOOK: https://www.facebook.com/RRRCCairns
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About Banksia Sustainability Awards: https://banksiafdn.com/

The Banksia Sustainability Awards is Australia's longest-running and most prestigious sustainability awards, recognising innovation and leadership through the lens of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which aim to end extreme poverty, fight inequality and protect the planet through uniting businesses, governments, and citizens across the world. The annual awards are created by the Banksia Foundation, a not-for-profit organisation established in 1989 that recognise community members for their positive contributions to social and environmental sustainability initiatives through community engagement and sustainable business practices.

About the Crown-of-thorns starfish Control Program: www.cotsto.org

The Crown-of-thorns starfish (COTS, for short) occur naturally on reefs in the Indo-Pacific region, including the Great Barrier Reef, and feed on coral. In normal numbers on healthy coral reefs, COTS are an important part of the ecosystem. They tend to eat the faster-growing corals which gives the slower-growing species a chance to catch up, enhancing the coral diversity of our reefs. However, when the coral-eating starfish appear in outbreak proportions, the impact on coral reefs can be disastrous. COTS are estimated to have been responsible for nearly half of all GBR coral cover loss between 1985-2012. The targeted COTS control program involves trained divers injecting the starfish with bile salt (made in the liver of oxen) or vinegar, killing the starfish without harming the surrounding ecosystem. The COTS Control Program is the largest coral protection program on the Great Barrier Reef. Since 2018-19, the program has been delivered as a partnership between the Reef & Rainforest Research Centre (RRRC), the Great Barrier Reef Foundation (GBRF), the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) and funded by the partnership between the Australian Government's Reef Trust and the Great Barrier Reef Foundation. Since 2018, the COTS Control Program has taken direct monitoring and culling action on more than 81,000 high-risk hectares of the Great Barrier Reef, encompassing 270 high-value reefs and removing over 320,000 coral-killing starfish. Due to the program's strategic approach, it's estimated that more than eight times that area – 675,000 hectares of coral – has been protected from this significant threat to Reef health.