

**Romancing the Reef:
history, heritage and the hyper-real**

Thesis submitted by

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Abstract

The Great Barrier Reef is regarded as one of the natural wonders of the world and is recognised as having World Heritage significance. The wealth and complexity of its natural attributes form the basis of a rich and complementary human history. However, management of the region is focused on the conservation of natural attributes, sometimes at the cost of human interests and cultural values. This is symptomatic of the way in which many heritage properties are managed and is a source of problems in the identification and interpretation of heritage. There is a need to better understand the human dimensions of such 'natural wonders' to ensure effective management. In order to address some of these issues, this thesis explores visitor experiences and knowledge of the Great Barrier Reef with a particular focus on the non-local experiences and knowledge that underpin the region's global recognition.

One of the major issues for management is the mutable nature of heritage values. This research therefore seeks to develop an understanding of how such heritage values are formed, transformed and sustained over time. It takes an historical approach to understand the ways in which visitor knowledge of the Reef has been constructed and transmitted both temporally and spatially. Methods novel to heritage assessments are developed and implemented to identify and contrast visitor experiences in the past and those of the present.

The study focuses on visitor sensory experiences of the Reef as a means to understand knowledge of place. A concept of sensuousness is defined and used to understand how knowledge of place is constructed through the human senses, and communicated within and between generations.

The research identifies a number of significant changes in the way in which visitors have constructed and understood the Great Barrier Reef. These include the creation of idealised Pacific islands at the expense of an Australian location and character; the transformation of the dangerous underwater world into a controlled and benign coral garden; and the synecdoche of the coral garden as representative of the Reef as a whole. Central to these constructions is the way in which simulacra are used to create experiences that are increasingly both dislocated and disembodied. As a consequence visitor knowledge of the Reef has shifted from sensuous perception of the Reef as a place or series of places, to the construction of imaginative and photographic simulacra that manifest as experiences of space and non-place.

Through the exploration of this case study, the thesis makes a contribution to both theoretical and methodological issues in heritage studies.

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

ACF	Australian Conservation Foundation
ACIUCN	Australian Committee for the International Union for the Conservation of Nature
AHC	Australian Heritage Commission
Aus. Mus.	Australian Museum
ANHC	Australian Natural Heritage Charter
ANTA	Australian National Travel Association
CRC Reef	Cooperative Research Centre for the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area
GBR	Great Barrier Reef
GBRC	Great Barrier Reef Committee
GBRMPA	Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority
GBRWHA	Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area
ICOMOS	International Council on Monuments and Sites
JCU	James Cook University
NAA	National Archives of Australia
NLA	National Library of Australia
Reef	Great Barrier Reef
RNE	Register of the National Estate
SAAS	School of Anthropology, Archaeology and Sociology
ScreenSound Australia	National Screen and Sound Archive
VSL	State Library of Victoria
WHA	World Heritage Area
WWF	World Wildlife Fund

Statement of Sources

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

Celina Pocaal

Signature

3 December 2003

Date