

## A summary of the Mackay-Whitsunday Healthy Rivers to Reef Partnership's future directions to improve our annual waterway health report card

The Partnership was established in 2014 and comprises 22 Partners who include representatives from the agricultural, industrial, ports, government, recreational fishing, NRM, community, Traditional Owner, research institutions and tourism sectors.

### 2014 and 2015 report cards

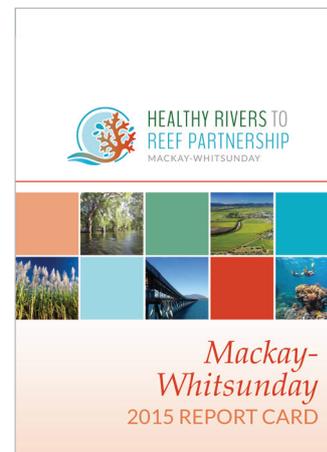
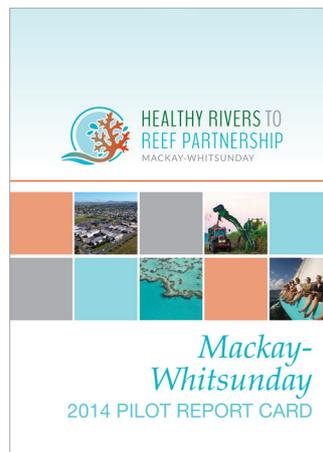
Our 2014 pilot report card was released in October 2015. For the first time in the Region, over \$4 million worth of monitoring of our freshwater river basins, estuarine areas and marine environment was integrated into one reporting product. The 2014 pilot report card results revealed patchy coverage by the monitoring programs with either a complete lack of data or a lack of suitable data for:

- The Don and Proserpine River basins for water quality
- All freshwater river basins and estuarine zones for fish barriers (an indicator of habitat and hydrology)
- The entire southern inshore marine zone (south of Cape Palmerston) for all environmental indicators
- The inshore north marine zone for coral and seagrass
- The central inshore marine zone for water quality and coral
- All zones (freshwater river basins to offshore marine) for fauna – an indicator of ecosystem health

Of the data the pilot report card presented, areas of particular concern were:

- The Plane Creek and Pioneer River basins for poor water quality scores
- The Plane Creek, Pioneer, O'Connell and Don River basins as well as Sandy Creek and the O'Connell River estuary zones for poor habitat and hydrology scores
- The Whitsunday inshore marine zone for poor seagrass scores and very poor water clarity scores
- The central inshore marine zone for poor seagrass scores
- The offshore marine zone for poor coral cover and macroalgae scores

To find out more about how the report card scores are derived go to our website ([www.healthyriverstoreef.org.au/report-card](http://www.healthyriverstoreef.org.au/report-card))



The 2015 report card was released in October 2016 and built upon the foundational work of the pilot report card. Through collaborative work with various research organisations, Partners and other stakeholders, the Partnership was able to integrate existing environmental datasets to fill data gaps for the following areas:

- Water quality in the central inshore marine zone
- Seagrass in the northern and central inshore marine zones
- Fish barriers in all freshwater river basins and estuarine zones
- Fish community health (fauna) in the Plane Creek, O'Connell and Pioneer River basins.

Of the data the 2015 report card presented, areas of particular concern were:

- The Plane Creek basin for poor water quality scores (particularly contaminants)
- Poor to very poor contaminant scores for the Plane Creek and Pioneer River basins and the estuaries of Gregory River, Sandy Creek and Rocky Dam Creek
- Very poor scores for wetland extent in the Plane Creek, Pioneer, O'Connell and Don River basins
- Poor to very poor seagrass scores in the northern and Whitsunday inshore marine zones

### Building a better report card

The Partnership's primary objective for the coming year and beyond is to improve the ability of our annual waterway health report card to inform us about the condition of our freshwater river basins, estuaries and marine environments.

This will be done by:

1. **Using existing monitoring data in the Region and making it suitable for use in the report card**

Some existing monitoring data in the Region is ideal for inclusion in the report card however work is generally required to make sure the data is suitable for use in the report card. This has been done with the fish barrier data in the 2015 report card, which had already been collected for the Mackay Whitsunday Water Quality Improvement Plan. The Partnership will continue to identify existing data that may be suitable for use in the report card as this represents a cost-efficient way in which to fill data gaps.



## 2. Integrating different datasets to report on one indicator

There are different monitoring programs in the Region measuring the same indicator (e.g. seagrass) in different ways. Work needs to be undertaken to align what is being measured so that we can report on one indicator and ensure there is consistency across the report card reporting zones as well as over time. An example of this is the Ports and Marine Monitoring Program (MMP) seagrass datasets.

The 2015 report card includes an interim measure for reporting on seagrass in the inshore marine zones using data from both of these programs, however the intention is to align these datasets more closely in future report cards. Integrating existing monitoring data in the Region will fill some existing data gaps in a cost-effective manner, as the data is already available.

## 3. Designing new monitoring programs for areas where data does not exist

In some areas of the Region there is simply no available data that can be used in the report card. For these areas the Partnership intends to design suitable monitoring programs and working collaboratively, investigate ways in which these programs can be funded including, where possible, utilising in-kind contributions of monitoring equipment from our research partners. This is the case for the Southern Inshore marine zone (south of Cape Palmerston), where there is no available data.

Some programs require more monitoring sites to give a more accurate picture of the condition of the whole of the Region. Following the Great Barrier Reef Water Science Taskforce recommendations, further water quality monitoring sites in the Region have been added to the Great Barrier Reef Catchment Loads Monitoring Program (utilised for the freshwater river basin assessment of water quality in the report card). The expansion of this program will ensure future report cards include data from more sites in each freshwater river basin.

## 4. Engaging with our communities to increase our knowledge of how our waterways and marine environment is valued

When the pilot report card was developed, social survey data from the 2013/14 Social and Economic Long Term Monitoring Program (SELTMP) for the Mackay and Whitsunday Regions was used to determine residents' levels of social satisfaction and value they placed on the Reef. These surveys did not include consideration of the Region's waterways (i.e. freshwater and estuarine environments). The Partnership is planning to re-assess how closely residents are connected to the Region's marine environments by asking the same questions as in 2013/14 to see if anything has changed, as well as including new questions on freshwater environments to get a complete picture of how our waterways are valued in the Region.

## 5. Understanding how all sectors of our Region are contributing to best environmental management practice (stewardship)

The 2014 and 2015 report cards include assessments of stewardship – best environmental management practice – amongst the different sectors in our Region (agriculture, ports, heavy industry, tourism, aquaculture and for the first time in 2015, urban). It is important to measure stewardship across all sectors of the Region including our recreational and commercial fisheries as well as the stewardship activities of our communities themselves (e.g. via volunteering initiatives). The Partnership is focused on continually improving all stewardship framework assessments including developing new frameworks in order to understand how our Region scores as a whole.



## How will we measure progress?

A publication will be released alongside each new annual report card detailing how we have improved the report card based around the objectives listed above.

## What are our Partners doing to improve waterway health?

The pilot and the 2015 report cards released to date have revealed some key areas of concern. Partners are working hard to improve the health of our waterways and marine environments within their own organisations. Go to our website to find out what our Partners are working on and where – (<http://healthyriverstoreef.org.au/activities-spotlight-mapping>)

Interested in keeping up to date with the Partnership's activities? Sign up for our newsletter here (<http://healthyriverstoreef.org.au/contact>). For further information you can contact Charlie Morgan (Executive Officer of the Partnership) on the contact details listed below.



## Contact

**Executive Officer of the Mackay and Whitsundays  
Healthy Rivers to Reef Partnership**

Phone: Charlie Morgan (07) 4964 6130

Email: [info@healthyriverstoreef.org.au](mailto:info@healthyriverstoreef.org.au)

[www.healthyriverstoreef.org.au](http://www.healthyriverstoreef.org.au)