

# The Politics of Protecting the Great Barrier Reef

## Course Description

Comprised of 900 islands that stretch over 1,600 miles, the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) is roughly half the size of Texas. It's the only living organism visible from space. Despite its status as an Australian icon and UNESCO World Heritage Site, the GBR's very existence is under threat. In 2016, it experienced the worst episode of coral bleaching in recorded history—around 90 percent of corals in Far North Queensland died. This led *Outside* magazine to publish an [obituary](#) for the GBR. As with Mark Twain, reports of the GBR's death were an exaggeration; but it's true that the Reef faces numerous and formidable challenges—coastal development, agricultural run-off, ocean acidification, coral bleaching, damage from shipping traffic, overfishing, and global warming, among others. How could such a beloved environmental treasure be in such a beleaguered state? This course takes students to Townsville, Australia—home to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority—to unravel that puzzle.

Doing so requires a level of engagement that transcends glossy tourist brochures and sensationalist news headlines. Students will learn firsthand the complex political, economic, and societal contexts within which the GBR exists. The Reef is located in Queensland, a state that is roughly two-and-a-half-times the size of Texas. Queensland is known for having a conservative political culture, and agricultural and energy industries play important roles in its economy. The GBR lies in close proximity to important farming and mining regions. Large ports, like the one in Townsville, enable Australia's agricultural and mineral commodities to enter the stream of global commerce. Bound for mainly for Asia, large container ships ferry their cargos through the Reef's fragile ecosystems. And, of course, the GBR is, itself, a tourist-magnet—more than two million visitors each year inject roughly AU\$6 billion into Queensland's economy. In addition, over 70 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Traditional Owner groups maintain longstanding and continuing relationships with the GBR region. These various interests complicate policymaking processes with respect to protecting the Reef.

In examining these processes, we will pursue answers to the following questions:

1. What, according to the most rigorous scientific studies, do we know about the current state of the GBR's ecosystems?
2. What is the policy status quo? In other words, what laws and policies are in place to manage and protect the GBR, and what levels of government are responsible for implementing these policies? What explains the adoption of these laws and policies—in other words, what are their political and economic foundations?
3. Who are the socioeconomic actors that are engaged in activity that either directly or indirectly affects or involves the GBR? Do these actors have competing or complementary interests? How are their interests represented in the legislative and policymaking processes?
4. How well are existing laws and policies working? Are there better options? And, if so, what are the political prospects for their adoption? To what extent is GBR-policy driven by scientific evidence versus political imperatives?

In answering these questions, the course considers the role of political institutions, party politics, economic interests, societal values, activists, and experts in shaping policy outcomes. It does so through a combination of classroom learning and on-site investigation at the Reef. The latter entails visiting the GBR and seeing firsthand the difference between healthy and unhealthy coral reefs; learning from leading GBR researchers about the threats to the Reef; and, meeting with representatives from various political, economic, and societal sectors with interests in the GBR. The course will combine regular classroom meetings with group-based, active learning. Individually, students will assume the role of researchers charged with ascertaining the state of the GBR, evaluating the effectiveness of current policies, and assessing the GBR's future prospects. Within those parameters, they will be free to focus on a specific issue of their choice.

The course will have a regular classroom schedule, but its defining feature will be its access to the GBR and various people with special knowledge and interests in the Reef. Students are expected to prepare for their meetings and excursions, which will entail: (1) researching the people with whom they will meet and the places they will visit; (2) identifying what they wish to learn from their meetings and excursions; and, (3) drafting specific questions to ask in their meetings and excursions.

## **Learning Objectives**

Two main learning objectives animate this course.

First, despite our specific focus on the Great Barrier Reef, we urge students to consider how the challenge of conserving the GBR exemplifies the broader challenge that humans face everywhere today on global, national, and local scales as we try to preserve the environment over the long term while maintaining short-term economic growth. The GBR serves as a case study for applying critical thinking skills that are crucial to defining public policy problems, identifying potential solutions, and shepherding those solutions through contentious political processes. Students will learn how to cut through the complexity to discern the actors, interests, and ideas at play and analyze how all of those interact with institutional configurations and processes. They will cultivate their ability to do so from a comparative perspective.

Second, students will develop their capacity to conduct research, analyze information, and write in a clear and concise manner. They will sharpen abilities to collect and evaluate information from multiple sources, including journalistic accounts, think tank and government reports, and peer-reviewed research. Students will also learn how to conduct interviews. By producing a final paper that will be published online, they will learn how to use their experiences in the course to produce robust analyses and generate insights for a wider audience.

## **Grades**

**I have a zero-tolerance policy on plagiarism.**

Grades will be determined accordingly:

25% **Attendance, Class Participation, and Small-Group Assignments.** Throughout the class you will have attendance quizzes and small-group assignments. You are expected to attend all class meetings and excursions. No excuses will be accepted for missing class meetings. Attendance will also be recorded for out-of-class meetings and tours. You must attend these, or your grade will suffer. You must also write a professional thank-you note for each guest speaker.

50% **Semester Project.** Students will work in pairs to produce a paper that will be published in an online Australian Studies forum. Each paper will examine some aspect of the politics of protecting the GBR. The paper must:

1. describe a specific challenge or issue facing the GBR, identifying its causes and consequences;
2. describe current policies (federal, state, and/or local as relevant) that address or purport to address the challenge, if such policies exist;
3. explain the political, economic, and/or societal reasons for existing policies; or, if no laws or policies exist, explain why that's the case; and,
4. if laws or policies exist, assess the extent to which they are meeting the challenge, whether alternative policies might work better, offer policy recommendations, and assess the political prospects for policy improvement. If no laws or policies exist, describe possible alternatives that may be adopted, offer policy recommendations, and assess the political prospects for their adoption.

In addition to utilizing course resources, the paper should incorporate information and insights obtained from meetings with representatives from economic, political, and societal sectors as well as from the various excursions. It must draw from a range of sources, including government reports, think-tank publications, and peer-reviewed articles.

40% will be assigned based on the quality of the paper. 10% will be based on student participation in peer review exercises.

Final papers are due by June 20.

25% **Learning Journal.** This consists of three entries, each of which must respond to the following prompts. Word range: 500-600 words.

Entry 1: Due June 1 by 2pm.

1. Why are you taking this course? Be honest.
2. What are your personal aspirations for learning in this course? If you didn't bring any with you, then develop them now. You will be asked to revisit them in subsequent learning journal entries.
3. Identify two assumptions about Australia and two assumptions about the Great Barrier Reef that you have at the start of this course.

Entry 2: Due June 11 by 5pm.

1. Revisit your first learning journal entry, reflect on your personal learning aspirations and your assumptions about Australia and the GBR, and consider what you've learned so far in the course. Be specific.
2. Identify and explain two things that you have learned. Be specific.
3. How do they relate, if at all, to your initial assumptions about Australia and the GBR? To what extent have those assumptions been challenged or reinforced? Be specific.
4. To what extent did the readings, interviews, or excursions inform what you learned? Be specific.
5. How does what you've learned fit with your personal learning aspirations for the course?

Entry 3: Due June 21 by 3:30pm.

1. Revisit your previous learning journal entries and reflect on what you've learned in the course.
2. Identify and explain the most significant learning experiences that you had in this course. Be specific.
3. To what extent were you able to accomplish your learning objectives? Be specific.
4. To what extent did your learning experience transcend those objectives? Be specific.
5. In terms of skills and content, what are the most valuable takeaways from this course? Be specific.

## Course Readings

Students are expected to have completed the readings in advance of each meeting and to be prepared to participate in a discussion of the material. Class meetings will be discussion-based, with an expectation that all students participate in a meaningful and informed way. If such discussion does not occur organically, it will be incentivized through the use of quizzes.

Materials available on canvas are marked by an asterisk. Readings will be selected from the following or similar works:

- The Open Textbook Editorial Group (eds). 2021. *Australian Politics and Policy: Senior Edition*. Sydney: Sydney University Press.
- David Ritter, ed. 2018. *The Coal Truth: The Fight to Stop Adani, Defeat the Big Polluters, and Reclaim our Democracy*. University of Western Australia Press.
- \*Pat Hutchings, et al., eds. 2019. *The Great Barrier Reef: Biology, Environment and Management*. Australian Coral Reef Society/CSIRO Publishing.
- \*Matt Curnock and Nadine Marshall. 2019. *Changes in the state of Great Barrier Reef tourism from 2013 to 2017*. CSIRO.
- \*Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA). 2022. *Reef Snapshot Summer 2021-22*.
- \*Linwood Pendleton, et al. 2019. “The Great Barrier Reef: Vulnerabilities and solutions in the face of ocean acidification.” *31 Regional Studies in Marine Science* 1-14.
- \*Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA). 2019. *Great Barrier Reef Outlook Report*. Commonwealth of Australia.

- \*McCalman, Iain. “Turtle War: Captain Cook’s Environmental Crisis on the Great Barrier Reef.” *The Great Circle*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2012, pp. 7–18.
- \*Morrison, Tiffany H. “Evolving Polycentric Governance of the Great Barrier Reef.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, vol. 114, no. 15, 2017, pp. E3013–21.
- \*Thorburn, P., et al. “Water Quality in Agricultural Lands Draining to the Great Barrier Reef: A Review of Causes, Management and Priorities.” *Agriculture, Ecosystems & Environment*, vol. 180, Elsevier B.V, 2013, pp. 4–20.
- \*“Facilitating Sustainable Innovations for SMEs in Tourism Industry”, Robyn Bushell and Bruce Simmons in *Tourism, Climate Change and Sustainability*, edited by Maharaj Vijay Reddy, and Keith Wilkes, Taylor & Francis Group, 2012.
- \*“Tourism and Sustainability,” Maharaj Vijay Reddy and Keith Wilkes in *Tourism, Climate Change and Sustainability*, edited by Maharaj Vijay Reddy, and Keith Wilkes, Taylor & Francis Group, 2012.
- \*Mungalla: Past and Present, 2018.
- \*Noel Loos, “Mabo, Edward Koiki (Eddie) (1936-1992), *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (online).
- From time to time, I may post additional (short) readings to Canvas.

### **Required Pre-Course Reading**

Read the *Australian Politics and Policy* (Senior Edition) textbook that is freely available [here](#).

Watch *Australian Journey: The Story of a Nation in Twelve Objects* [here](#). Of particular note, Episode 4 “Our Island Home” is about the Great Barrier Reef. The website for that episode also contains a bonus interview that is highly relevant to the course.

### **Course Outline**

The course will consist of four separate activities, all are mandatory:

1. **Regular Class Meetings:** We will meet periodically for classroom sessions. For each of these class meetings, you are to have engaged with the assigned reading. *Quizzes* may be administered to incentivize this engagement.
2. **Special Class Meetings:** We will have a series of meetings with local representatives from the economic sectors of greatest importance for the GBR (including mining, shipping, fishing, agriculture, and tourism); political figures responsible for devising policies relevant to the GBR and representing the interests of local communities (including from local councils, State government, and the Federal government); local, state, and federal bureaucrats tasked with administering, implementing, and overseeing policies related to the GBR; various civil society groups with special interests in the GBR (including Indigenous peoples and environmental non-governmental organizations); and, researchers with special expertise in the science of water quality, climate change, and pollution. Your attendance is required and you are expected to come prepared with questions to ask the speakers.
3. **Excursions:** These activities will be organized to fit into our scheduled activities. I will take attendance, and this will be part of your attendance grade.
- 4.

## Daily Schedule

Tuesday 31 May	Day 1: Orientation to the state of the Great Barrier Reef  Hutchings, et al., chaps. 1, 11, 12 & 14.
Wednesday 1 June	Day 2: Townsville - Managing the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park  **“Evolving polycentric governance of the Great Barrier Reef, Morrison. *GBRMPA (2022), <i>Reef Snapshot Summer 2021-22</i> .
Thursday 2 June	Day 3: Townsville - The role of the state and federal governments in protecting the GBR: Current policy arrangements, alternatives, and implementation  <i>Australian Politics and Policy</i> , “Commonwealth–state relations,” pp. 185-203 & “Queensland,” pp. 248-268. *GBRMPA (2021), chap. 7.
Friday 3 June	Day 4: Townsville - Understanding the threats of the GBR  *GBRMPA (2021), chaps. 2 & 5. *Pendleton, et al.
Saturday 4 June	Day 5: Townsville – Australian history and the Great Barrier Reef  **“Envisioning Australia,” Christof Mauch, Ruth Morgan, and Emily O’Gorman in <i>Visions of Australia</i> . **“Through the Reef: Settler Politics, Science, and the Great Barrier Reef,” Rohan Lloyd in <i>Visions of Australia</i> . **“Turtle War: Captain Cook’s Environmental Crisis on the Great Barrier Reef,” McCalman.
Sunday 5 June	Day 6: Townsville – Great Barrier Reef Experience #1 – Introduction to snorkeling and the reef  Hutchings, et al., chaps. 5, 9, 15, and 30.
Monday 6 June	Day 7: Townsville - Stakeholder interests: agriculture, mining, fishing, and tourism  Hutchings, et al., chap. 10.  GBRMPA (2021), pp. 117-33.  Ritter, chaps. 9 & 13.
Tuesday 7 June	Day 8: Townsville - Indigenous peoples and the GBR  Ritter, Prologue. *GBRMPA, chap. 4.

	<p>*<a href="#">Loos</a>.</p> <p>Walk to the Mabo Memorial Sculpture that honors Eddie Koiki Mabo, a local man whose historic court case upended Australian land law and politics. Walk to Robert Towns Sculpture that commemorates Robert Towns who helped fund infrastructure in the region in the 19th century, laying a foundation for Northern Queensland's modern economy.</p>
Wednesday 8 June	Day 9: Townsville – Indigenous perspectives
	<p>Excursion to <a href="#">Mungalla Station</a>, land managed to by traditional (i.e., Indigenous) landowners</p> <p>*Mungalla: Past and Present, 2018.</p> <p>*GBRMPA (2021), pp. 91-95, 103.</p>
Thursday 9 June	Day 10: Townsville to Hidden Valley
Friday 10 June	Day 11: Hidden Valley - Sustainable tourism and the Great Barrier Reef
	<p>*“Tourism and Sustainability,” Reddy and Wilkes.</p> <p>*“Facilitating Sustainable Innovations for SMEs in Tourism Industry,” Bushell and Simmons.</p>
Saturday 11 June	Day 12: Hidden Valley – Impacts of agriculture and development planning
	<p>*“Water quality in agricultural lands draining to the Great Barrier Reef,” Thorburn, et. al.</p> <p>Hutchings, et al., chap. 13.</p>
Sunday 12 June	Day 13: Hidden Valley to Townsville
	No reading assignment.
Monday 13 June	Day 14: Townsville - Economy and trade
	<p>Australia, <a href="https://oec.world/en/profile/country/aus">https://oec.world/en/profile/country/aus</a>.</p> <p>Australia's trade statistics at a glance,</p> <p><a href="https://www.dfat.gov.au/trade/resources/trade-at-a-glance/Pages/default">https://www.dfat.gov.au/trade/resources/trade-at-a-glance/Pages/default</a>.</p> <p>*GBRMPA (2021), pp. 135-47; 151-53.</p>
Tuesday 14 June	Day 15: Townsville - Environmental activism and the GBR
	<p>Ritter, chaps. 9 &amp; 13.</p> <p>*GBRMPA (2021), pp. 174-75.</p>

Wednesday 15 June	Day 16: Townsville
	Free Day
Thursday 16 June	Day 17: Townsville to Magnetic Island - Great Barrier Reef Experience #2 – Field study  * Curnock and Marshall.
Friday 17 June	Day 18: Magnetic Island - Restoration of adjacent coastal ecosystems  *Hutchings, et al., chaps. 10 & 30
Saturday 18 June	Day 19: Magnetic Island - Reef Restoration Program  *Hutchings, et al., chap. 13
Sunday 19 June	Day 20: Magnetic Island  Group Work
Monday 20 June	Day 21: Magnetic Island  Group Work
Tuesday 21 June	Day 22: Magnetic Island to Townsville  Travel
Wednesday 22 June	Day 23: Townsville to USA