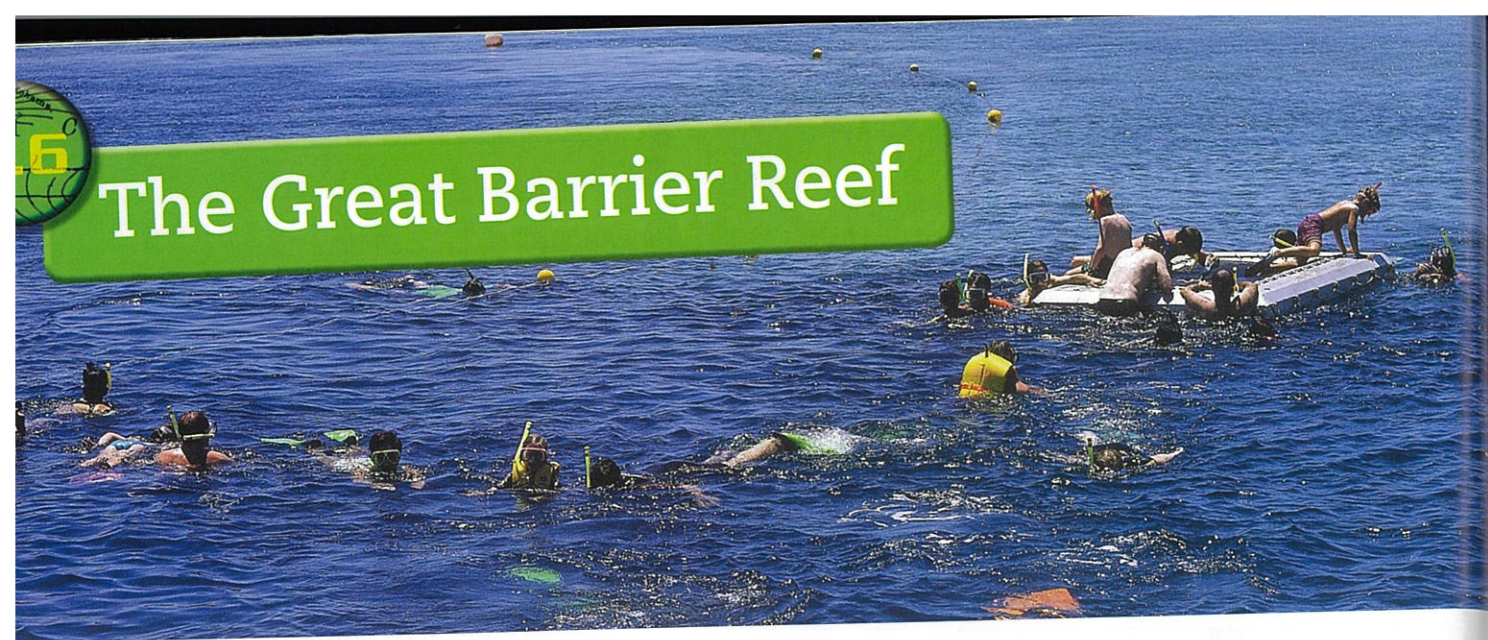


6 The Great Barrier Reef



4.23 The Great Barrier Reef is the largest World Heritage area on the planet and is often referred to as the only living organism that can be seen from space. This is only partly true, as the reef itself is actually made up of many millions of tiny organisms called polyps.



PROTECTING THE GREAT BARRIER REEF

The Great Barrier Reef is an environment that is worth protecting for the future. The process of protection has been influenced by government decisions.

Between 1970 and 1974 a royal commission investigated the possibility of oil mining on the Great Barrier Reef. The results recommended against oil exploration, instead finding that the area should be protected through the establishment of a government authority to manage the reef.

As a result of this, on 20 June 1975, the Australian Government formed an organisation called the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA). This organisation has managed the reef environment ever since.

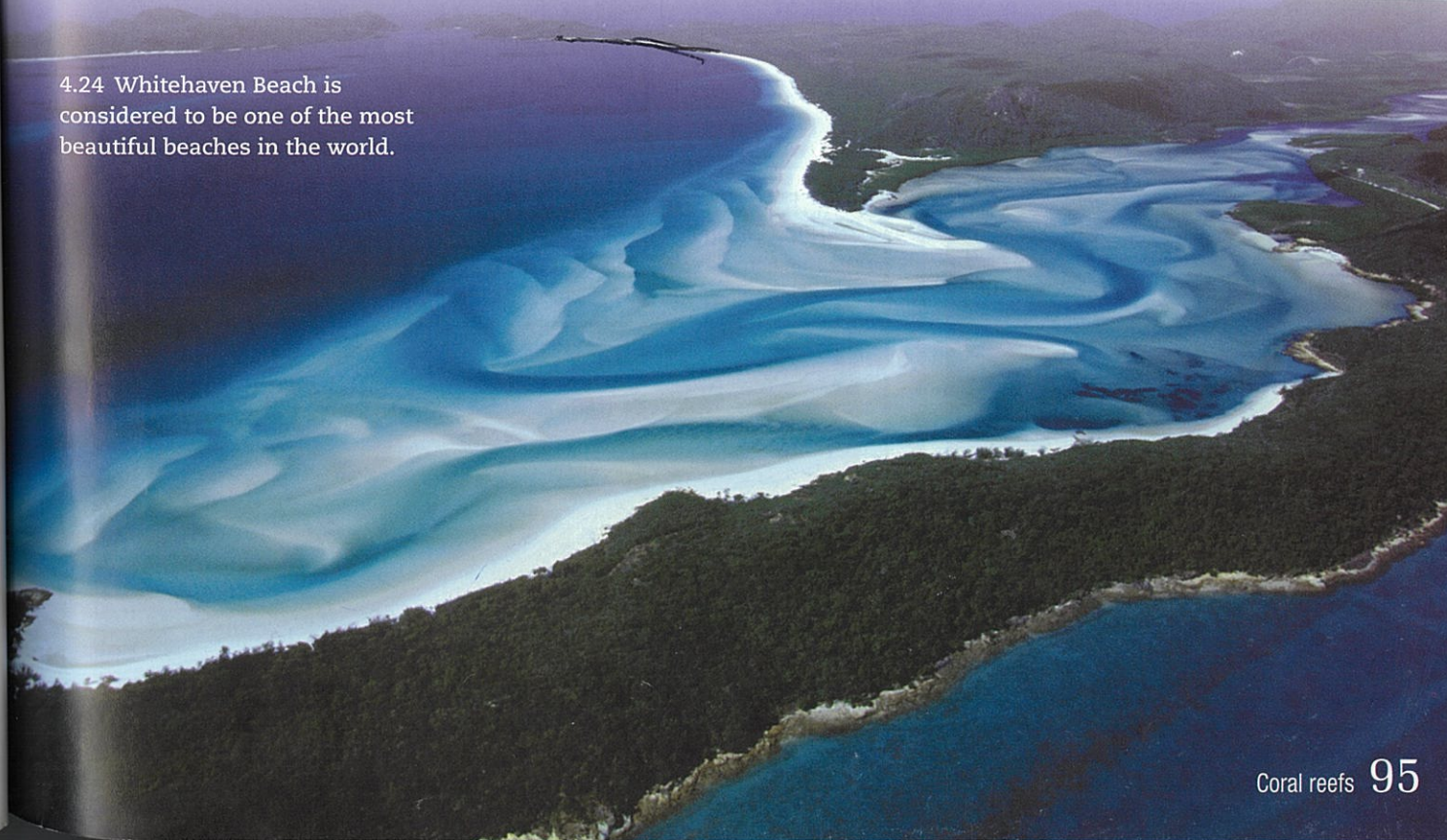
The importance of this reef environment and its careful management has made the Great Barrier Reef globally significant. A precious resource like this is worthy of World Heritage listing and in 1981 the area was added to the World Heritage List.

The management of activities within the area is a complex task. There are a range of activities around the reef that influence it as well as a range of groups who want to use the area. The aim is to ensure a balance between humans using the reef and maintaining the area's natural and cultural features.

GEOGRAPHY FOCUS

Whitehaven Beach is a 9-kilometre stretch of pristine, pure white silica sand fringed by brilliant blue water. It is one of the 74 islands of the Whitsunday group in the Great Barrier Reef close to Proserpine on the mainland.

4.24 Whitehaven Beach is considered to be one of the most beautiful beaches in the world.



The Great Barrier Reef is located off the Queensland coast, stretching over 2300 kilometres from the tip of Cape York to just north of Fraser Island. It is the longest barrier reef system in the world. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park is made up of a complex pattern of patch, fringing and barrier reefs. It has an overall area of 348 000 square kilometres and contains the world's largest World Heritage area.

4.21 Tourists from all over the world are drawn to the Great Barrier Reef to look at the wonders of the unique environment.

WHY IS THE GREAT BARRIER REEF UNIQUE?

The size of the Great Barrier Reef makes it the largest continuous collection of coral reefs in the world. It consists of over 2900 separate coral reefs and 940 islands, 300 of which are coral cays.

The range of living plants and animals on the reef also makes it unique for its biodiversity, which includes this variety of species:

- 360 types of hard coral
- one-third of the world's soft coral species
- 1500 species of fish
- thirty species of marine mammals including the endangered dugong
- six of the world's seven endangered turtle species
- 5000 mollusc species
- 800 species of echinoderms (starfish, sea urchins)
- 215 bird species
- thousands of different sponges, worms and crustaceans.

WHAT IS THE REEF'S VALUE?

The Great Barrier Reef supports a range of activities that earn money for Australia. The economic value of the reef and related activities has been estimated to be as high as AU\$5.8 billion. Tourism alone is worth around AU\$4.3 billion per year while commercial fishing is worth AU\$120 million.

The reef also acts as a barrier that protects property from damaging ocean swells. Also, some of the reef's plants and animal species contain medicines that could one day provide cures for diseases.

4.22 Location of the Great Barrier Reef

