



Australian Government

Department of Sustainability, Environment,
Water, Population and Communities

INTERIM GUIDELINES ON THE OUTSTANDING UNIVERSAL VALUE OF THE GREAT BARRIER REEF WORLD HERITAGE AREA— FOR PROPONENTS OF ACTIONS

In 1981 the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area was added to the World Heritage List for its **outstanding universal value**. The Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area is listed as a matter of national environmental significance through our national environmental law, the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Cth) (EPBC Act). The Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area covers an area of 348 000 square kilometres and is one of Australia's most significant environmental assets.

If your proposed action is likely to have a significant impact on the outstanding universal value of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area, you must refer the action to the federal environment minister through the Australian Government Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (the department), regardless of whether these actions have also been referred or approved under state or local government environment laws.

Referred projects will be expected to meet a high standard of assessment and include consideration of direct, indirect, consequential and cumulative impacts on outstanding universal value where relevant. This is to help Australia meet its international obligations to protect, conserve, present and transmit to future generations the outstanding universal value of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.

What is outstanding universal value?

Outstanding universal value (often shortened to OUV) is the key reference point for the protection and management of world heritage properties and is the central idea of the World Heritage Convention. Broadly, the meaning of outstanding universal value follows the common sense interpretation of the words:

- **Outstanding:** For properties to be of outstanding universal value they should be exceptional, or superlative – they should be the most remarkable places on Earth.
- **Universal:** Properties need to be outstanding from a global perspective. World Heritage does not aim to recognise properties that are remarkable from solely a national or regional perspective. Countries are encouraged to develop other approaches to recognise these places. Australia does this through National Heritage listing.
- **Value:** What makes a property outstanding and universal is its “value”, or the natural and/or cultural worth of a property. This is based on standards and processes established under the World Heritage Convention's Operational Guidelines (see whc.unesco.org/en/guidelines).

What is the outstanding universal value of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area?

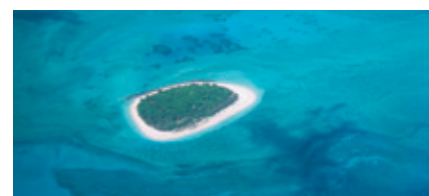
To be considered of outstanding universal value, a property needs to meet one or more of ten criteria, meet the conditions for integrity and, for cultural properties, authenticity, and have adequate protection and management arrangements in place. The criteria for outstanding universal value have evolved over time however the underlying concepts have remained stable. The Great Barrier Reef World

Heritage Area was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1981 for all four of the natural heritage criteria specified in UNESCO's *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* ([Operational Guidelines](http://whc.unesco.org/en/guidelines)).

The *natural* heritage criteria for world heritage properties are:

- **Criterion (vii):** Contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance.
- **Criterion (viii):** Be outstanding examples representing major stages of earth's history, including the record of life, significant on-going geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features.
- **Criterion (ix):** Be outstanding examples representing significant on-going ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals.
- **Criterion (x):** Contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation.

The key reference point for the outstanding universal value of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area is the Statement of Outstanding Universal Value for the property which can be found on the department's website at www.environment.gov.au/heritage/places/world/great-barrier-reef/values.html.



Conditions of integrity and authenticity

In addition to meeting one of the ten criteria to be considered of outstanding universal value, a World Heritage property also needs to meet conditions of integrity and for cultural properties, authenticity. The Great Barrier Reef is not listed as a cultural property and so does not need to meet the requirement for authenticity.

Integrity relates to the 'wholeness and intactness' of the property as at the time of inscription and how it conveys the values it holds. Integrity can also relate to the size of the property (is it of sufficient size to continue to represent the values?) and to any threats affecting the property (is it likely that the values will be significantly degraded?).

The Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area meets the condition of integrity, meaning that its natural attributes are considered to be whole and intact. That is, the property includes all elements necessary to express its outstanding universal value, is of adequate size to ensure the complete representation of the features and processes which convey the property's significance and is protected from threats.

Management of outstanding universal value

All properties inscribed on the World Heritage List must have adequate protection and management arrangements in place. How a country chooses to protect and manage its properties can vary, so long as it does so effectively.

An important way in which Australia meets its international obligations to protect the outstanding universal value of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area is by protecting the property's world heritage values under the EPBC Act. The world heritage values of the Great Barrier Reef

World Heritage Area are the same as the property's outstanding universal value and are encompassed within the property's Statement of Outstanding Universal Value, as noted above. The property is also protected under the *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975* and the *Great Barrier Reef Intergovernmental Agreement*.

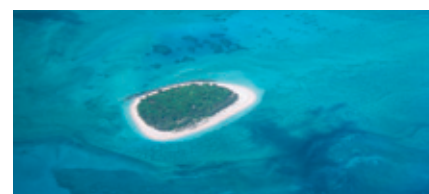
For further information on the Australian Government's management of the outstanding universal value of the Great Barrier Reef visit www.environment.gov.au/heritage/publications/gbr/gbr-managing.html.

For more information on outstanding universal value and on the outstanding universal value of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area, visit www.environment.gov.au/heritage/places/world/great-barrier-reef/pubs/outstanding-values-factsheet.pdf.

Also see whc.unesco.org/en/guidelines for further information on outstanding universal value and requirements for integrity and/or authenticity and management arrangements.

How do I decide if my action is likely to have a significant impact on the outstanding universal value of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area?

The Australian Government is developing guidelines to assist any person proposing to undertake a new development, activity or action that may impact on the outstanding universal value of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area to decide whether the action will require approval under national environment law. The guidelines may be in the form of an EPBC Act policy statement.



In the interim, if you think that your action is likely to have a significant impact on the outstanding universal value of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area, you may wish to seek expert advice. You should also seek out further information via the websites provided above, read the frequently asked questions and the case study below and consider your proposed action in that context. If you are unsure, you should seek guidance from the Business Entry Point Section of the department at epbc.referrals@environment.gov.au or phone 1800 803 772.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is a significant impact?

A significant impact is an impact which is important, notable, or of consequence, having regard to its context or intensity. Whether or not an action is likely to have a significant impact depends upon the sensitivity, value, and quality of the environment which is impacted, and upon the intensity, duration, magnitude and geographic extent of the impact.

The department's significant impact guidelines defines a significant impact on outstanding universal value – as expressed through a property's world heritage values - as the real chance or possibility that one or more of the world heritage values will be lost, degraded, damaged or notably altered, modified, obscured or diminished. You should consider these factors when determining whether an action is likely to have a significant impact on the outstanding universal value of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. To read the department's significant impact guidelines visit: www.environment.gov.au/epbc/publications/pubs/nes-guidelines.pdf

It is important to note that actions that occur outside of the world heritage area may also have a significant impact on the outstanding universal value of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area depending on the scale, intensity and location of the action. The department's Protected Matters Search Tool is the most accurate representation of the boundary of the GBRWHA to date which is available on the department's website at: www.environment.gov.au/epbc/pmst/index.html.

What types of actions could have a significant impact on the outstanding universal value of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area?

Types of proposed developments within the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area or its adjoining catchments that may require referral to the federal environmental minister include, but are not limited to:

- agricultural developments that involve a substantive change (for example, intensification of activities or change in land use that culminate in a change in water quality)
- aquaculture developments
- defence activities
- industrial developments (for example, liquefied natural gas and minerals processing facilities/infrastructure)
- major dams or changes to the natural water regime
- mining and extractive industries
- port facilities and dredging
- residential and tourism developments
- sewage and water infrastructure
- shipping
- transport infrastructure (for example, railways).



How do I refer?

For more information on how to make a referral under the EPBC Act please contact the [Business Entry Point](mailto:epbc.referrals@environment.gov.au) at epbc.referrals@environment.gov.au www.environment.gov.au/epbc/assessments/referral-form.html or phone **1800 803 772**.

What do I need to consider throughout the referral and assessment process?

When referring a proposed action under the EPBC Act you must consider impacts to outstanding universal value of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. Attributes of the outstanding universal value of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area that may be impacted as a result of actions include, but are not limited to:

- views from the air, ground and underwater
- species diversity and abundance, including microfauna
- endemic species
- iconic species and other species that are important to ecosystem processes such as dugong, dolphins, turtles, whales, corals, seagrasses and seabirds
- seabird and turtle breeding colonies
- habitat diversity including seagrass, mangroves and coral reef components
- unique landforms and seabed structures
- water quality
- ongoing links between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and their sea-country.

Although the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area is not inscribed on the World Heritage List under cultural criteria, the Statement of Outstanding Universal Value for the property under criterion ix acknowledges the 'strong ongoing links between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and their sea-country'. Consideration of impacts on this aspect of the Statement of Outstanding Universal Value should be guided by the principle that: Indigenous

people are the primary source of information on the value of their heritage and the active participation of Indigenous people in identification, assessment and management is integral to the effective protection of Indigenous heritage values. [*Ask First: A guide to respecting Indigenous heritage places and values*](#) provides a practical guide on effectively engaging Indigenous people in this kind of process.

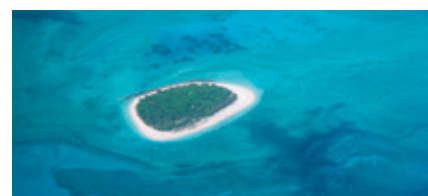
What else do I need to consider?

Proponents must consider impacts on other matters of national environmental significance and comply with relevant Queensland state government legislation and the Commonwealth *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975*. For more information visit:

- www.environment.gov.au/epbc/publications/pubs/nes-guidelines.pdf
- www.gbrmpa.gov.au/about-us/legislation-regulations-and-policies.

Proponents should also be aware that the Australian and Queensland governments are undertaking a comprehensive strategic assessment of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area and adjacent coastal zone. The broad objective of the comprehensive strategic assessment is to ensure that state and federal planning systems enable sustainable development while protecting the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area for future generations. This includes consideration of direct, indirect, consequential and cumulative impacts of development on the property's outstanding universal value. Project by project referrals that occur during this period will be considered by the department in a manner consistent with this objective.

For more information on the comprehensive strategic assessment of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area and adjacent coastal zone visit www.environment.gov.au/epbc/notices/assessments/great-barrier-reef.html.



Case study—How would this actually work?

This hypothetical case study explores what the Australian Government Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (the department) might give regard to when considering a referral for a development that is likely to have an impact on the outstanding universal value of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.

The department has received a referral for a development which is likely to impact on the outstanding universal value of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.

During the assessment of this project, the department would consider potential impacts on attributes of the outstanding universal value of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area under the four criteria as outlined in the Statement of Outstanding Universal Value. The department would also consider impacts on the integrity of the property and relevant management arrangements. The following provides examples only of attributes of the outstanding universal value of the property that may be considered and is not intended to be a complete list.

Criterion (vii) Contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance

Consideration may be given to impacts on visual aesthetics, naturalness and water quality. Ecological communities and species listed under this criterion, for example migrating whales, dolphins, dugongs, whale sharks, sea turtles, seabirds and concentrations of large fish may also

be considered. The department may consider the nature of the site (any existing developments or changes to natural state), the size and type of the development, the surrounding region and relevant measures proposed to mitigate impacts on visual amenity such as height restrictions and restrictions on buildings on ridgelines.

Criterion (viii) Be outstanding examples representing major stages of earth's history, including the record of life, significant on-going geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features

Impacts on attributes under this criterion may be considered, including the uniqueness of the site in terms of its location within the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. The department may also consider impacts on coral reefs, sand barriers and sand dunes, impacts on ongoing processes of erosion and accretion of coral reefs, and erosion and deposition processes along the coastline.

Criterion (ix) Be outstanding examples representing significant on-going ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals

Impacts on the diversity of flora and fauna and on feeding and/or breeding grounds for internationally important migratory seabirds, cetaceans and sea turtles may be considered. The department may also consider matters such as breeding, spawning and nursery habitats for resident species of the



Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. Flora and fauna would not necessarily be considered for their conservation status under this criterion, but for the ecosystem services they provide that support the biological health and long term viability of the outstanding universal value of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. Consideration may also be given to how the values of the proposed site contribute to the outstanding universal value of the property overall.

Criterion (x) Contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation

Impacts on biological diversity would be considered, including for example, impacts on species diversity, abundance and endemic species and on habitat diversity such as seagrass, mangroves and coral diversity. Impacts on EPBC listed ecological communities and species of conservation significance and their habitat (for example, dugongs and seagrass beds) would be considered both as matters of national environmental significance and as components of the outstanding universal value of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. Impacts on non-EPBC listed communities that contribute to this criterion, for example coral habitat, would also be taken into account with reference to the extent of similar habitat elsewhere within the world heritage area, the amount of habitat to be impacted and the amount of fragmentation due to habitat loss and development.

Integrity (meaning that the outstanding universal value of the property is intact and protected from threats)

Direct, indirect, consequential and cumulative impacts to the outstanding universal value of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area as a result of the proposed action would be considered.

Direct impacts may include for example direct clearing of vegetation and habitat, construction of buildings and impacts to water quality through runoff.

Indirect and/or consequential impacts may include, but are not limited to, the risk of weed invasion, pollution, noise, increased boat strike on marine fauna and increased impacts from recreational activities, such as fishing. The department may also consider road upgrades and supporting water and power infrastructure and the possibility that urban development and population growth may be encouraged in the surrounding region as a result of the proposed development. Consideration may also be given to changes to the shoreline as a result of land reclamation.

Cumulative impacts which may be considered include coastal development (including habitat loss and degradation, and underwater noise) and changing landscape character, catchment runoff (creating greater accumulation of toxins and bacteria), climate change impacts such as extreme weather events and the combined effects of the proposed development in light of these.



Where can I get more information?

For more information please visit the websites at the addresses provided throughout this guidance note. For up-to-date information on outstanding universal value and the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area also visit the department's website at www.environment.gov.au/epbc/about/index.html.

