

THE STORYTELLERS OF THE GREAT BARRIER REEF

STORY BY NARELLE BOUVENG

More than 100 dedicated Master Reef Guides are sharing the GBR's most important stories with visitors in a bid to inspire its greater protection.

Master Reef Guides at Lady Elliot Island help tourists appreciate the natural wonders of the reef and better understand its threats.

SCIENTISTS SAY THE future of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park will depend on whether it can adapt to climate change, but admit their message can be misinterpreted as a death knell rather than an alarm bell (see page 96). That's where storytelling comes in.

"We're scientists, not storytellers," says Dr David Wachenfeld, Research Program Director of the Australian Institute of Marine Science and former chief scientist for the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) for more than 25 years. David says that storytelling plays a pivotal role in reef protection.

"Learning is an important part of the visitor reef experience," he says. "When science is explained in a relatable, relevant and honest context by local guides trained to understand, manage and protect the reef, it can lead to a deeper connection that can inspire a commitment to do more to protect it."

Storytelling was the catalyst for science, tourism and government to partner in 2019 and launch the first-of-its-kind Master Reef Guides (MRG) program, says Fiona Merida, GBRMPA's Director of Reef Education and Engagement.

Working in tourism as a marine biologist and guide before joining GBRMPA in 2003, Fiona recognised that local guides were the bellwethers of reef education, but found limited training and professional development opportunities were available to them.



Peter Gash (above), Lady Elliot Island's leaseholder, prepares for landing.

Initially taking reference from the highly successful Savannah Guides program – launched in Queensland in 1988 to inspire visitor interpretation of the natural and cultural histories of Gulf Savannah Country – Fiona says the MRG program was adapted to suit the GBR's unique environments and is evolving in readiness for what scientists say will be the biggest challenge facing the reef: climate change.

"Since inception, MRGs have become the gold standard in reef tourism, playing both a critical role in sharing the GBR's

myriad wonders, but also educating visitors about its threats, challenges and fragilities,” Fiona says.

As the program enters its sixth year, hot on the heels of the planet recording its highest global temperature in 2023, Fiona says it’s more important than ever for MRGs to navigate climate change as part of the greater reef conversation.

TO FIND OUT how storytelling is making a difference, I joined Fiona, program mentors and 20 new recruits on Queensland’s Lady Elliot Island, 90km north-east of Bundaberg on the southernmost tip of the planet’s largest coral-reef ecosystem.

En route, I discover my pilot is Peter Gash, the current custodian of Lady Elliot Island and an esteemed MRG alum and mentor. This isn’t the first time I’ve met Peter, visited Lady Elliot Island, or revelled in the depths of his knowledge as an MRG.

In the moments between pointing out dugongs grazing on lush seagrass meadows in Moreton Bay and dolphins cavorting in the cerulean waters circling K’gari, Peter says: “MRGs are the most profound thing to happen to the GBR. Being part of the first cohort on Lady Elliot Island in 2019 was an exciting experiment at first, but the initiative served as a ‘supercharge’ for the greater reef community to collaborate our knowledge and forge ways to work better together across the entire reef.”

As a return holiday guest, I’ve snorkelled beside Peter previously on what I consider to be Queensland’s most abundant reefs and have made the most of his intricate knowledge of the rich biodiversity they support. But I’ve been equally ►

MRGs Brian Connolly and Blake Angus-Cedar (below, L-R) share First Nations perspectives of Sea Country as passed down by their Elders.



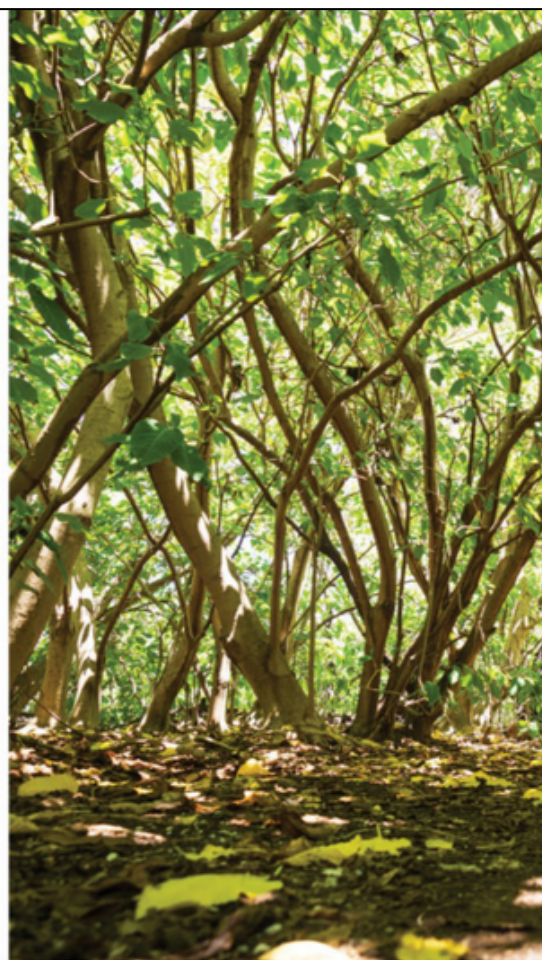
“Our turtle habitat has increased by as much as 125 per cent,” Peter says.



The distinctive yellow rash vest of an MRG (right) identifies the gold standard for guides operating on the GBR.



MRG's (above) hail from numerous countries, speak multiple languages and hold many different roles across high-value reef operators on the GBR.



spellbound by his own story, resurrecting the 42ha, once-barren, sphere-shaped coral cay of Lady Elliot Island – stripped bare by mining for its phosphate-rich guano – into one of Australia's leading eco resorts. Fiona says passion is the essential hallmark of any MRG and places Peter at its pinnacle.

This visit he is mentoring recruits, demonstrating both his relatable storytelling and passion for sustainability while on a walking tour of the island. Peter shares how he's replaced fossil fuels with renewable energies and runs the resort on solar power. He captivates MRGs by explaining his processes for desalinating sea water and converting island waste into usable resources. He shows them his plant nursery and shares his plans for revegetating the island.

"The future of how tourism operates is a vital part of the future management plan for the Marine Park," Peter says.

In 2018 Lady Elliot Island was selected as the first "climate change ark" via the Great Barrier Reef Foundation's Reef Islands Initiative. A large-scale seven-year regenerative program shared between the resort, Traditional Owners (TOs), local businesses, community and government followed. Invasive plants are removed and endemic species are returned, with the aim of restoring the natural coral-cay ecosystem.

Peter leads us onto an avenue of revegetated pisonia trees to demonstrate the positive changes already occurring. A cacophony erupts from a colony of migratory nesting seabirds as we approach.

"We've seen bird species return to the island in their thousands already," he shouts above the ruckus, "and our turtle habitat has increased by as much as 125 per cent."



Lady Elliot Island is home to a small population of noddies (above), but thousands flock to the island each summer to breed.

In 2018 the Great Barrier Reef Foundation selected Lady Elliot Island to become the first "climate change ark" (below).



PHOTO CREDITS, TOP LEFT: COURTESY COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA REEF AUTHORITY/BRADEN SMITH; ALL OTHER PHOTOS: NARELLE BOUVENG



A seven-year regenerative program is helping restore endemic pisonia trees on Lady Elliot Island.

FIELD TRAINING FORMS a valuable touchpoint for recruits who've already completed three months of online learning, sharing up-to-date information on reef science, cultural heritage and responsible, sustainable tourism practices.

"To see it up close like this leaves me in awe of the nature that lives here, but also knowing it wasn't always like this gives me hope for the future, too," says Heath Robinson, the youngest MRG recruit.

"Regeneration, like everything else on the reef, is optimised when the natural cycle finds balance. But we need to work hard to leave places better than we found them if we are to realise that potential," Peter says.

Peter is also learning a thing or two about storytelling from recruits. Jacinta Shackleton is a marine biologist and talented photographer and videographer who spotlights the reef's myriad curious inhabitants and discusses the challenges they face with her 180,000 Instagram followers.

Jacinta credits Peter and the MRGs for empowering her to step outside a more traditional marine biology role – and in doing so, use her voice and vision to promote reef advocacy. "Introducing people to the reef and watching them take home a greater respect and appreciation for it has always been my primary mission," she says. "But sharing reef love with people who may not have the opportunity to visit personally is a valuable bonus when they can learn to love and protect it from afar."

In stepping into the future of guiding, Sean Ulm – MRG mentor, Distinguished Professor of Archaeology at James Cook University and Director of the ARC Centre of Excellence for



Peter Gash (above, centre) teaches MRG recruits about the importance of using clean energies to power tourism in the GBRMP.

Indigenous and Environmental Histories and Futures (Cairns) – reminds recruits how important it is to also examine the past.

Taking us on a metaphorical deep-dive into the reef's geological Creation story, Sean says First Nations and Torres Strait Islander peoples hold what's estimated to be a more than 9000-year history with the most modern version of the GBR. Via this custodianship, they are acknowledged as the reef's first storytellers, but also its first scientists and innovators... essentially the first MRGs.

"We should be collaborating with TOs when on Country – land or sea – and if you don't know who they are, ask, find out and seek collaboration," Sean encourages recruits.

Fiona says TOs co-managing the reef has been a long-held goal of GBRMPA, and this pathway is being fostered through the MRG program. Five TOs are part of the 123 specialist MRGs operating across a network of high standard tourism operators, spanning 348,000sq.km of the Marine Park.

Joining the latest cohort are Blake Angus-Cedar, representing Wunyami Cultural Walking Tours and Great Adventures, and Brian Connolly from Dreamtime Dive and Snorkel in Cairns. For both men, storytelling is deeply rooted in their spiritual and cultural connection to the reef as passed down by their Elders, from whom they respectfully seek permission before sharing cultural stories.

WHEN RECRUITS GIVE a final presentation to demonstrate their storytelling prowess, Blake simply asks us to close our eyes and quietly draws our attention to the sounds of our surroundings.

Like a guided meditation, he says the melody of waves gently washing over coral-encrusted shores tells us where it's safe to shelter, while the waves crashing further out on the reef warn of ever-present dangers. He says the sound of the wind can be learnt like a language; moving through the trees, it carries the murmur of thousands of noddy terns nurturing and guiding their chicks. And he asks us to consider every one of the sounds we hear as being connected and contributing in some way to the health and balance of this ecosystem.

He reminds us that these songs of Country are always here, playing on repeat every moment we live. He poses a simple question: Could it be that we are simply forgetting how to listen to this story? ■