



# CAN-197-Coral Planting-GBR

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Reprinted 5/1/20



## Tour operators are using their down time to plant new corals in the Great Barrier Reef



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April 29, 2020, 5:20 p.m.



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So far, five tour companies and many researchers have joined the effort to nudge the Great Barrier Reef back to health through coral clipping. (Photo: Debra James/Shutterstock)

If we're going to reboot a world shut down by a pandemic, we have to think creatively. For some Australian diving tour operators, that means ferrying marine biologists to the Great Barrier Reef instead of traditional customers.

Those teams are using a special technique called coral clipping to plant coral pieces in the areas of the reef that have been most damaged by climate change, [according to Karryon](#), an Australian travel news site. Think of it as a human-induced recovery plan for a human-induced problem.

In all, five tour companies have signed up for the [Coral Nurture Program](#), a partnership between tourism and science to improve stewardship of the reef.

"There are two new things about this program," Scott Garden, CEO of Passions of Paradise, tells the travel website. "It is the first time on the Great Barrier Reef that tourism operators have worked alongside researchers and the first time that a coral clip has been used to attach corals to the reef."

"It involves finding fragments of opportunity — coral fragments that have naturally broken off — and attaching them back on to the reef using a coral clip."

Another kind of coral clipping involves what's known as "[super corals](#)," systems that have already adapted to warmer, more acidic waters. Scientists say clippings from these corals can be transplanted to nurseries where the system is at-risk, and ultimately cultivate a tougher, somewhat more climate-resistant crop. But this program hinges on a much simpler concept:

"Once they find a coral fragment they attach it to the nursery to grow and as it grows they can take fragments from it to attach to the reef giving them a continual source of new corals," Garden explains. "The 12-month project finishes next month, however, the operators can continue to operate the nurseries and outplant the corals."

It all adds up to a dramatic, though necessary, change of course for companies that once filled their catamarans with reef-gawking tourists.

### **Rebuilding with nature instead of against it**

Coral reefs will be an essential building block in a post-coronavirus world. Not only do they shelter countless marine animals, they also protect humans as well, forming a natural buffer against waves, storms, and floods.

Given our current coronavirus predicament, it's also an especially timely task: Coral reefs are considered the "medicine cabinets of the 21st century."

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"Coral reef plants and animals are important sources of new medicines being developed to treat cancer, arthritis, human bacterial infections, Alzheimer's disease, heart disease, viruses, and other diseases," the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration [notes on its website](#).

Reefs also fuel economies, as major tourist draws in [more than 100 countries](#). But the extreme sensitivity of corals may also be their undoing. Everything from ship traffic to overfishing to human-induced climate change are having a perilous impact on the world's reef systems.

A view of the Great Barrier Reef from space, captured by NASA's Terra satellite. (Photo: Jacques Descloitres/NASA/GSFC)

An estimated 50% of the Great Barrier Reef, for example, has already been lost, with [experts predicting](#) the rest could disappear within the next 30 years.

But then along came a pandemic. While the fatally contagious coronavirus has devastated communities, it has also kept millions of people indoors. And the natural world, including plants and animals, have taken the opportunity to

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thrive. Even [whales](#) are basking in the newfound silence of the oceans, as cargo ships idle in ports. That's to say nothing of the greenhouse gas emissions that have ebbed substantially since the world went into lockdown.

Recognizing the potential for an Earth 2.0 — one that sees the environment as the key player in a world rebooted — community and political leaders are hoping to capitalize on that momentum.

New Zealand seems to be getting that memo. The country's Green Party wants to pour \$1 billion into "[green jobs](#)" that would kick-start not only the economy, but also a battered environment.

And although the Australian effort may not seem as ambitious as its neighbor's countrywide plan, its impact could run deep.

According to Karryn, the tour operator Passions of Paradise has already sown 1,000 pieces of coral on Hastings Reef, a horseshoe-shaped nursery on the Great Barrier Reef. And, of course, that kind of investment is bound to make a healthy impact on the bottom line.

"When tours resume passengers will be able to snorkel over the site which boasts healthy marine life and corals near the nursery," the company's CEO, tells the site.

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*The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing"....Edmund Burke*

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