

Handout 2

The Great Barrier Reef

The Great Barrier Reef is one of the great wonders of the natural world. It stretches over a thousand miles in the southern Pacific Ocean. The Reef is the largest coral reef on the planet. It is the only living thing that can be seen on earth from outer space.

Coral reefs begin as a colony of small sea creatures. Over time, as the creatures die, their connected skeletons form the base of the reef. Other creatures join the colony, and the process continues. Reefs grow slowly, at a rate of a few millimeters per year.

The Great Barrier Reef is not one reef. Rather, it is made up of over three thousand small reefs that lie close to each other. They are home to a huge number of animals and plants. Many of these can be found nowhere else on earth. Thousands of types of fish and hundreds of different birds live there. The Reef is also home to animals such as sea snakes and sea turtles. The Reef serves another purpose, as well. Many scientists believe that reefs like this one keep our oceans clean and healthy.

The Reef is filled with brilliant color and eye-catching shapes. Its beauty draws thousands of visitors each year from all over the world. Many of them enjoy swimming and diving in the clear, blue-green waters. Just think about sharing the water with a school of hot-pink fish or coming face to face with a sea snake! Visitors who do not want to brave the water can view it from one of the islands. They can also watch and enjoy the many kinds of birds that live there.

The Reef is fragile, and it can be easily damaged. It was recently added to the World Heritage List as a special protected site. The listing helps to make sure that the Reef will be protected. With luck and special care, the Reef will continue to benefit the earth and its people forever.