



Australia's National  
Science Agency



# Monitoring human dimensions of the Great Barrier Reef

Key findings from the Social and Economic Long-Term  
Monitoring Program (SELTMP)

Survey of residents of the Great Barrier Reef catchment region,  
June–July 2023



Great Barrier  
Reef Foundation



Australian Government  
Great Barrier Reef  
Marine Park Authority



# What is SELTMP?

People are a part of the Great Barrier Reef (GBR). The Social and Economic Long-Term Monitoring Program (SELTMP) gathers data about Reef users, communities and industries, and their changing relationship with the GBR over time. This information assists Reef managers and decision makers, to help improve planning and management for the Reef's future.

**Funding acknowledgement:** SELTMP is funded by the partnership between the Australian Government's Reef Trust and the Great Barrier Reef Foundation, and is being delivered in partnership with CSIRO, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and the Queensland Government's Reef Water Quality Program.



## SELTMP objectives

The key science objectives of SELTMP are to:

- monitor changes in community attitudes towards the GBR, its values and management, and the perceived threats to those values
- predict attitudinal and behavioural responses to future management interventions in the Reef, and changes in Reef health
- monitor changes in social and economic well-being of Reef-dependent communities and the benefits they derive from the GBR
- Assess and monitor social and economic vulnerability, and adaptive capacity of GBR communities to changes in Reef condition and the wider system.

SELTMP contributes to the evaluation of five human dimension objectives of the Reef 2050 Plan, which correspond to indicators under the following headings:

1. Uses of the Reef and benefits
2. Attachment to the Reef
3. People protecting the Reef
4. Reef heritage and values
5. Public perceptions of Reef governance

## Methods

The 2023 SELTMP survey was administered online, across the Great Barrier Reef catchment region, from Cape York to Bundaberg, east of the Great Dividing Range. The survey was successful in achieving a large and geographically representative sample of residents across the region (see map on page 5).

In June 2023, 2,317 GBR residents completed the SELTMP survey. Among these:

- 1,510 were recruited through an online panel
- 807 were recruited via social media.

Participation in the survey was voluntary and all respondents remain anonymous, in accordance with CSIRO Human Research Ethics (069/21) and Privacy requirements.

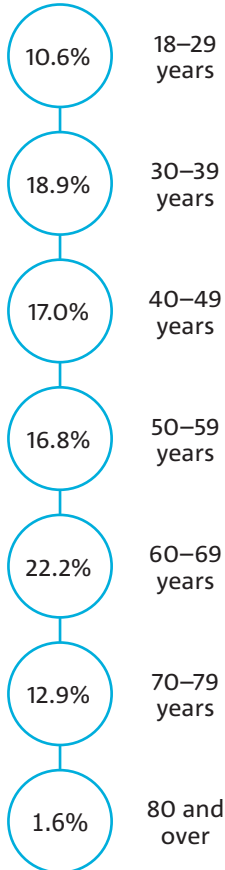
SELTMP has surveyed GBR catchment residents in 2013, 2017, 2021 and 2023. The results in this brochure are mostly from the 2023 survey. Some items from 2013, 2017 and 2021 are included for comparison.



# Who we surveyed

# 2,317

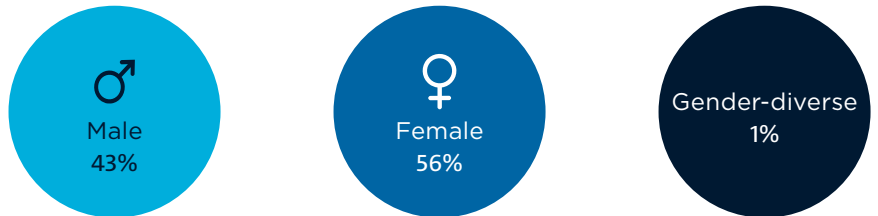
residents participated



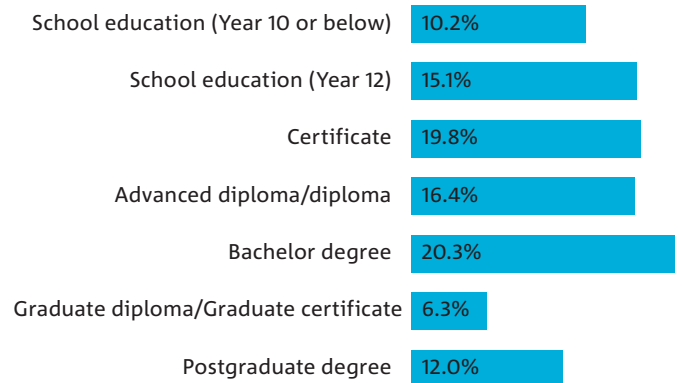
4.4% of the total sample identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander

## Sample description:

### Gender



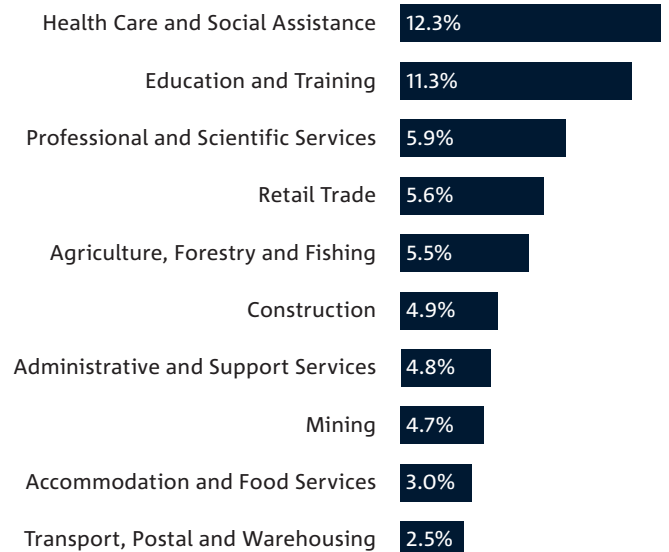
### Education



### Employment sector\*

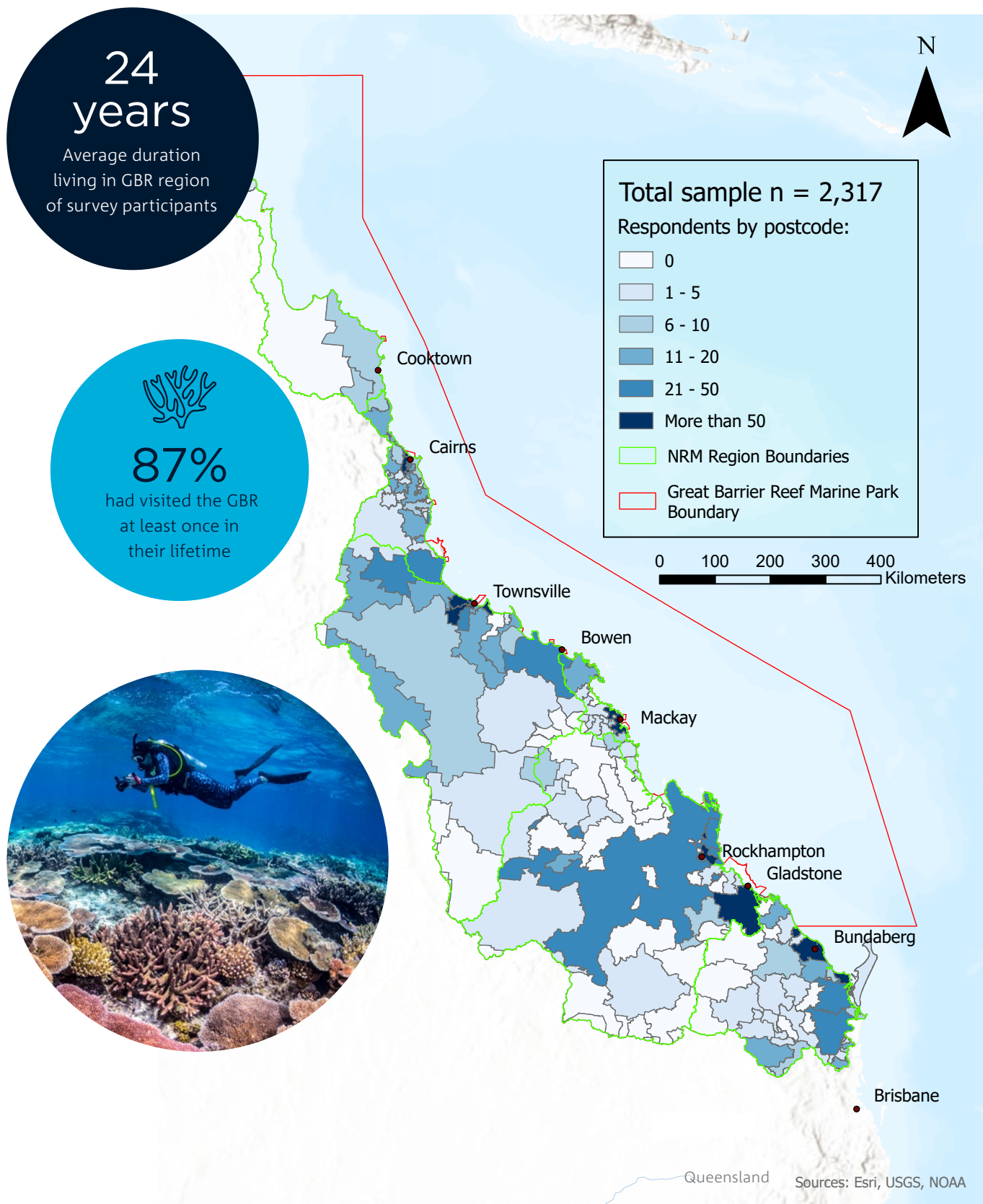


12.3% were employed in the Health Care and Social Assistance sector



\*Top ten employment sector categories, based on the Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification system, ranked by number of survey respondents.

## Location of respondents

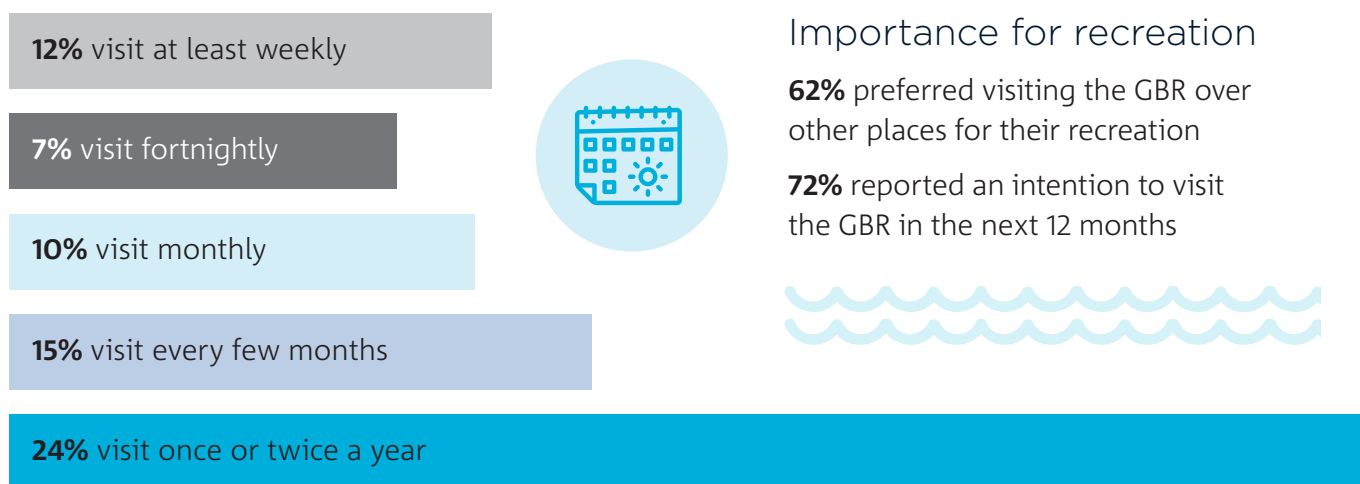


# Where would you rather be?



## How often do local residents visit the Reef?

**69%** of catchment residents visited the GBR for recreation in the previous 12 months. This was lower than visitation rates in 2013 (82%) and 2017 (85%), but higher than in 2021 (50%). Changes in visitation to the GBR from 2020 to 2024 may have been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic.



Approximate frequency of visitation of the GBR in the previous 12 months for recreation (2023) (n=2,317)

# Livelihoods and the Reef

**23%** of catchment residents depend on the GBR for some of their household income:



42% of these people are associated with tourism



12% are associated with fishing



14% are associated with government



11% are associated with science and education

**10%** are 'strongly dependent' (i.e. GBR contributes 50% or more of their household income)



The Reef provides many other benefits to people

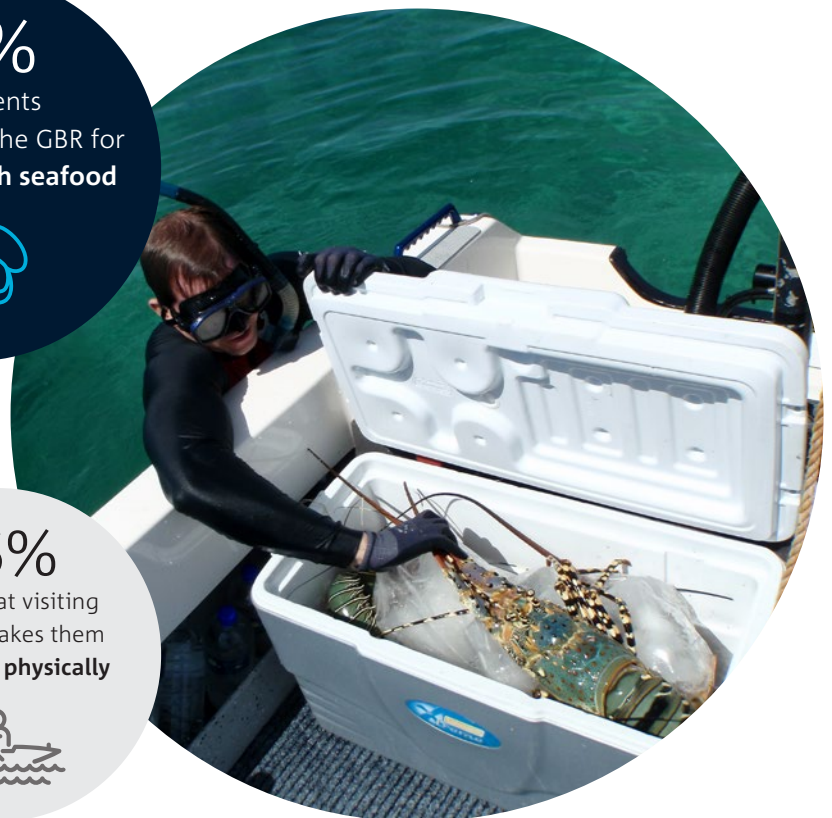
**77%**  
of residents  
strongly value the GBR for  
providing fresh seafood



**88%**  
agreed that visiting  
the GBR helps them  
unwind and de-stress



**86%**  
agreed that visiting  
the GBR makes them  
feel better physically



# What does the Reef mean to you?



“What do people do when visiting the GBR for recreation?”

## Recreation Activities

86% Mainland beach visits

77% Wildlife watching and appreciating nature

66% In-water activities such as snorkeling

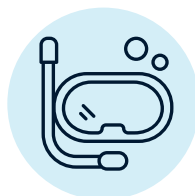
61% Island visits

50% Boating with own vessel

44% Boating with hired vessel

40% Fishing offshore

38% Fishing onshore



88% **feel proud**  
that the GBR is a  
World Heritage Area

86% agreed that living in the  
GBR region contributes  
positively to their  
overall **wellbeing**

70% agreed that living close  
to the GBR is important  
to them because  
of their **lifestyle**

53% agreed that the  
Great Barrier Reef is  
part of their **identity**



# Reef heritage and values

The Reef has rich and diverse Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural heritage that is highly valued by residents of the catchment region.



96% valued the Reef's **biodiversity** highly



86% value the Reef's contribution to the **local economy**



88% value the Reef as an **international icon**



55% value the Reef's **Traditional Owner heritage**



83% value the Reef for **science and education**



92% of residents agreed that 'the **aesthetic beauty** of the GBR is outstanding'



# Perceptions of the Reef

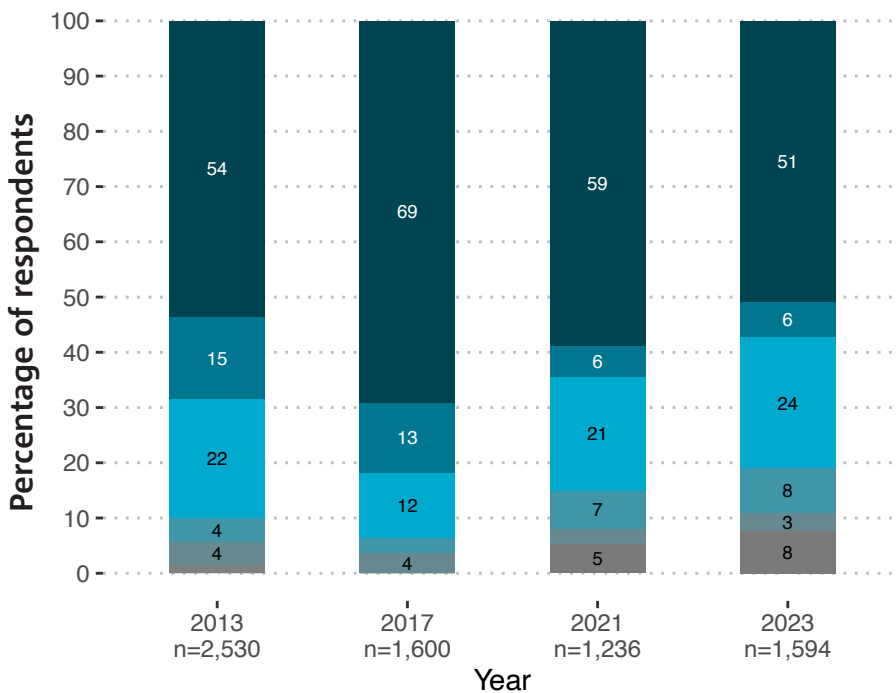
## Health



## Threats

Community perceptions of threats to the Reef have changed significantly over the last decade. In 2023, the most serious threats perceived by residents of the GBR region included: rubbish and marine debris, illegal fishing, crown of thorns starfish, land-based runoff, coastal development, and climate change.

Climate risk perceptions among users of the GBR have changed over time



- Climate change is a threat to the GBR, requiring immediate action
- Climate change is a threat to the GBR, but does not require immediate action
- I need more evidence to form an opinion about climate change and how it may threaten the GBR
- Climate change is not a threat to the GBR
- I do not have a view on climate change and how it relates to the GBR
- Climate change is a natural phenomenon (2013 only)
- I do not believe in climate change (2021 onwards)

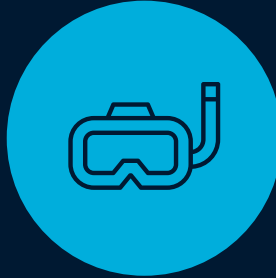
# Reef stewardship

What are people doing to help protect the Reef?



94%

of residents (who had visited the GBR at least once in their lifetime) indicated that they **dispose of food scraps and rubbish appropriately** most of, or all the time



92%

reported that they **avoid touching corals and marine life** most of, or all, the time



88%

**practice responsible fishing** most of, or all, the time

Participation in some stewardship behaviours was relatively low – like reporting suspicious activities to the authorities, and reporting interesting marine life sightings via the ‘Eye on the Reef’ app. There was also a proportion of residents who indicated that these actions were ‘not applicable’ to them.

## Factors influencing Reef stewardship

Among residents of the GBR catchment region:



79%

felt **morally obligated** to reduce any impacts they might personally have on the GBR



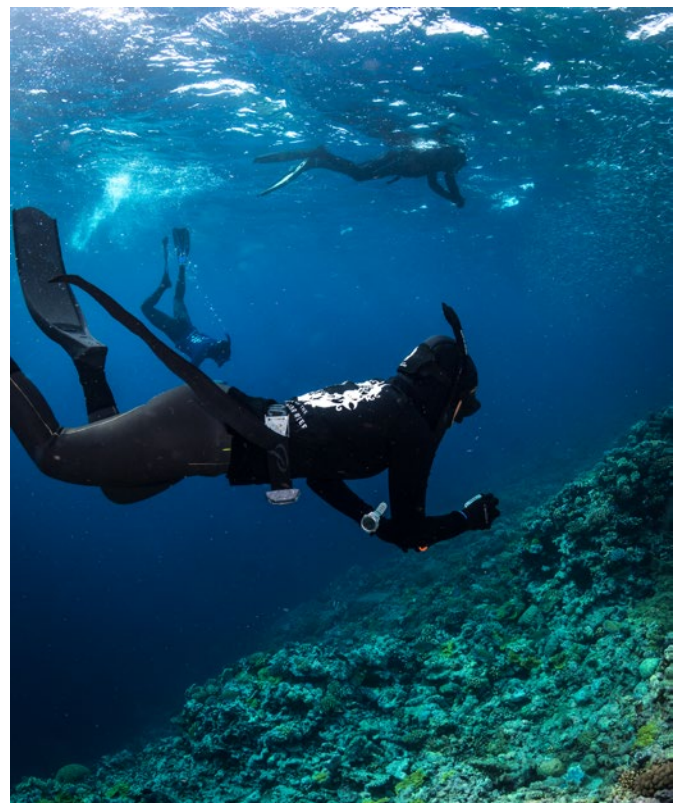
63%

agreed that **most people in their local area were trying** to reduce their impacts on the GBR



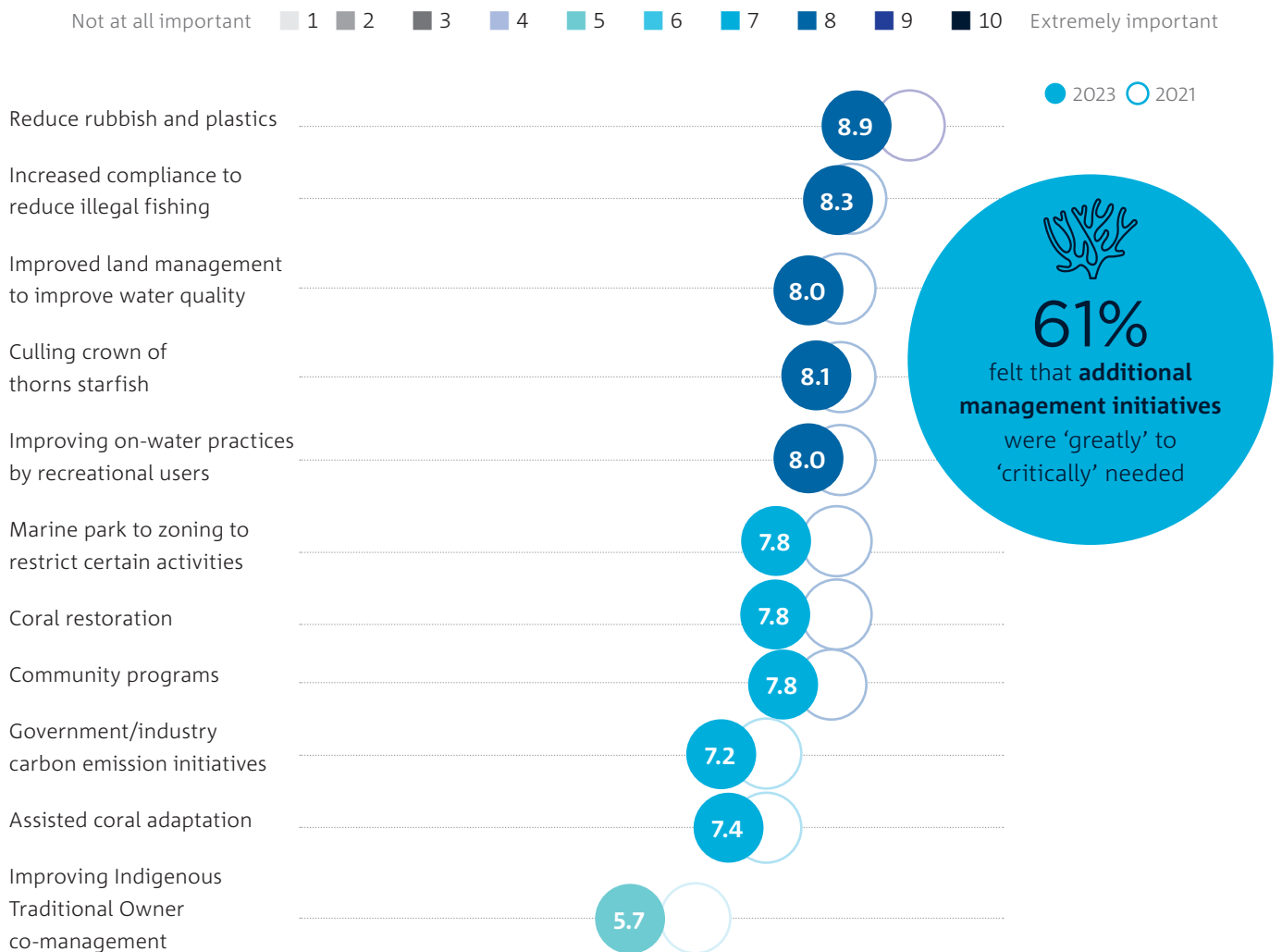
38%

felt they could **not make a personal difference** in improving the health of the GBR



# Public perceptions of Reef management

## Perceived importance of management initiatives



Average ratings of the importance of various GBR management initiatives (n=2,317).





A large proportion of residents in the GBR region do not feel they are well connected to management processes and decision making.

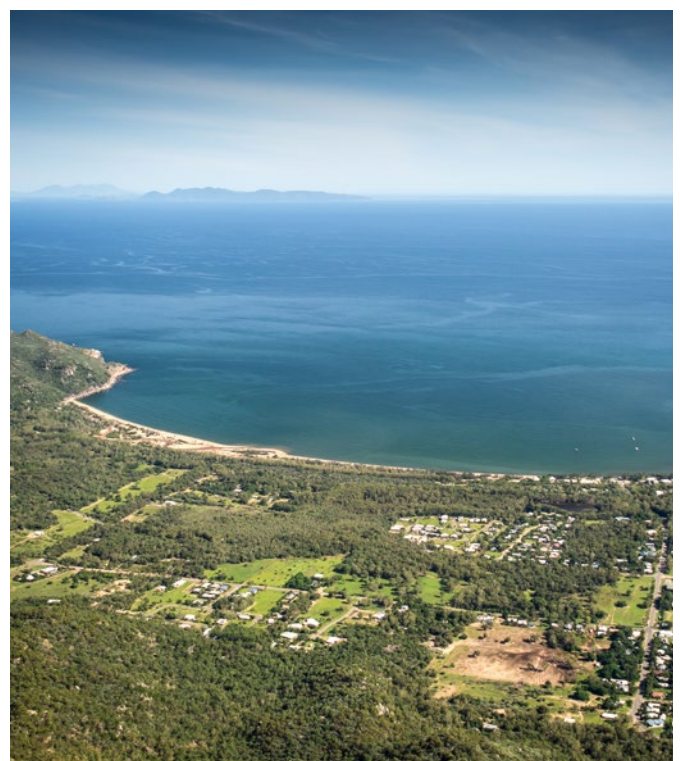
**53%** of respondents said they were **satisfied** with how the GBR was being managed

**63%** agreed that tourism activities are well managed

**50%** agreed that fishing activities are well managed

**35%** perceived **opportunities** for themselves to **have a say** in how the GBR is managed

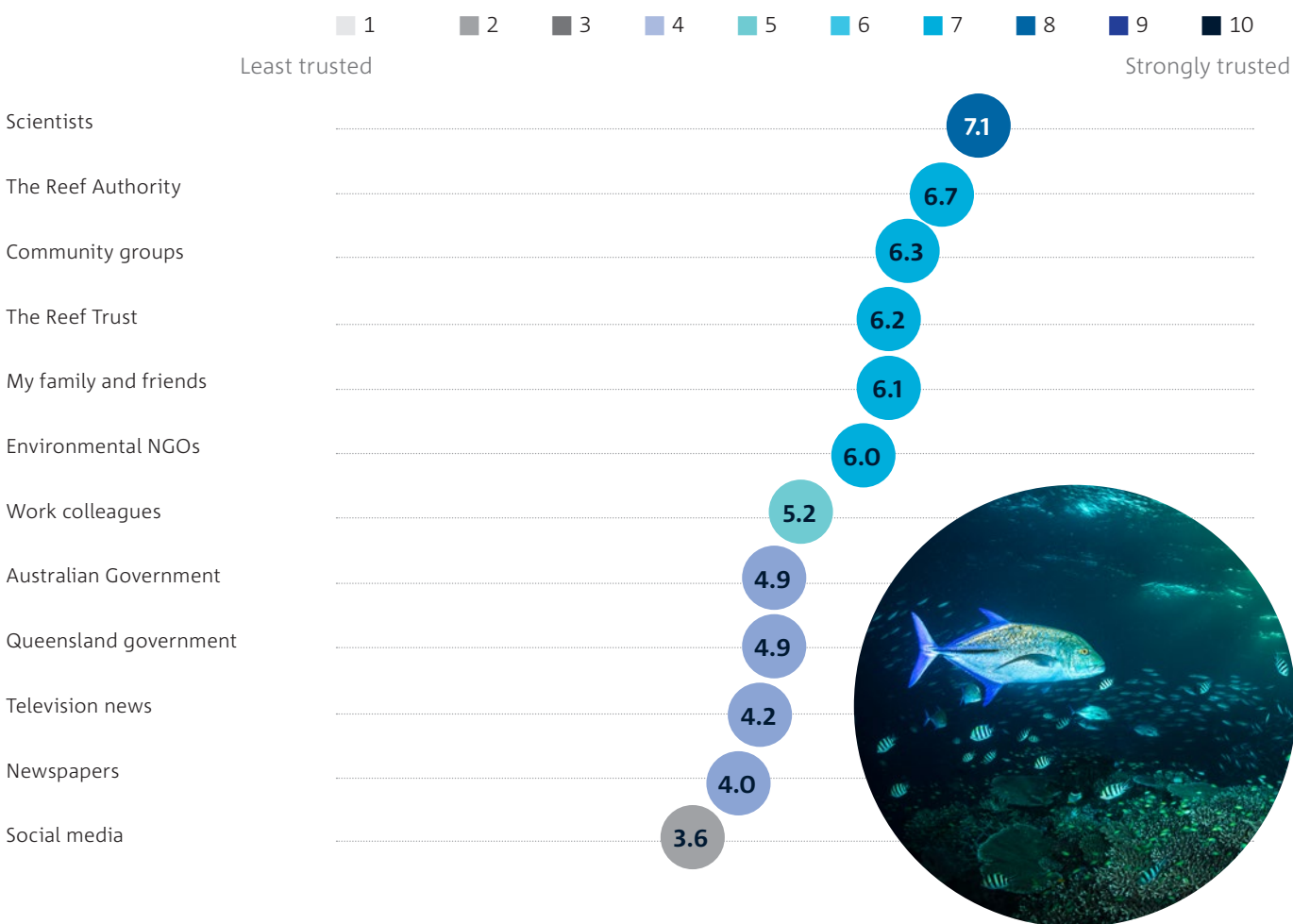
**22%** of people felt that they have some **personal influence** over how the GBR is managed





## Most trusted sources of information about the GBR

Our scientists, and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (The Reef Authority), are the most trusted sources of information about the GBR, followed by community groups, local environmental groups, and Australian-based environmental non-government organisations. However, ratings of trust in these and other sources have changed over time.



Average ratings of trust in information about the GBR from various sources (2023; n= 2,317)



## Changes over time



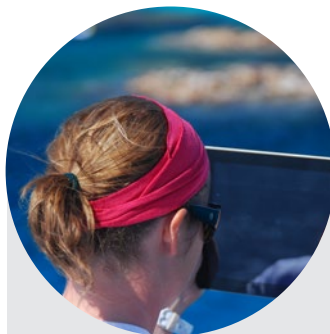
### Trust



**Trust in scientists from research institutions** was lower in 2023 compared to 2021



**Trust in family, friends, and work colleagues** was moderate and on par with levels in 2021



**Trust in both newspapers and social media** was low in 2023, similar to previous years



**Trust in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority** was slightly lower in 2023 compared to 2021

## SELTMP Research Team



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SELTMP is guided by an End-User Reference Group, with representatives from the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, the Queensland Government's Office of the Great Barrier Reef, the Great Barrier Reef Foundation, the GBR Regional Report Card network, and the Commonwealth Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water.

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