



Science teachers inspired by first hand look at Barrier Reef

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Programme highlights reef conservation and management.

Natalie Poyhonen

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[Transcript](#)

CHRIS O'BRIEN: Teachers from the United States are in the country learning about marine

conservation. Though they've been teaching from text books about the Great Barrier Reef for years, diving on the reef, left some of them breathless. It's testament to the theory that experience is truly the best teacher. Natalie Poyhonen reports.

(FOOTAGE OF TROPICAL FISH AND CORAL)

NATALIE POYHONEN: The wonders of the Sea world have long been a drawcard for overseas tourists. But now there's a new type of visitor.

KATIE KRAFTE, NORTH CAROLINA MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER: A lot of us here are teachers, we teach science, we love science but to actually be able to come here and experience it first hand in a tank and out on the reef is amazing.

HAWAII BIOLOGIST: The colour is amazing I've never seen anything like it.

PATRICK WALDEN, NEW JERSEY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER: There's nowhere else in the world you could do anything remotely close to this.

NATALIE POYHONEN: These Americans are learning just what it takes to educate the public about the Great Barrier Reef and also how to help preserve the marine system.

PROFESSOR CHRIS MYERS, MIAMI UNIVERSITY: It's a group of mostly about 50 per cent teachers and others are environmental professionals, some work in zoos or aquariums or environmental fields and it's a graduate program so almost all of these students are part of a Masters degree, called the global field program.

PROFESSOR HAYS CUMMINS, MIAMI UNIVERSITY, OXFORD, OHIO: I'm very impressed with the huge effort towards the conservation and preservation of the reef, of the Great Barrier Reef, it seems like it's beyond Reef HQ, it seems like most of Australia seems to be behind this conservation effort, we don't have anything quite like it back in the States.

NATALIE POYHONEN: This is the second group to come to Townsville's Reef HQ Aquarium in the past two years. The facility is the national education centre for the reef.

FRED NUCIFORA, DIRECTOR REEF HQ AQUARIUM: The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park is the most well managed marine park or natural resource even, on earth and what is testament to what we're doing here today is student groups from across the globe are coming to seek us out to learn how we do it.

NATALIE POYHONEN: The students are learning about the tools Reef HQ use to communicate with classrooms around the globe. That includes the chance to explore the world's largest living coral reef aquarium.

(FOOTAGE OF INSTRUCTOR WITH DIVERS)

INSTRUCTOR: We might go down the little gully to begin with so I'll lead the way.

NATALIE POYHONEN: At the same time that the group is learning about aquatic life for their own studies they're also being taught how to assess the health of the reef, albeit in the still waters of the tank.

PROFESSOR HAYS CUMMINS: Right now the students are getting the foundation which will allow them when we go out to the reef to be more accomplished at identifying coral and fish.

NATALIE POYHONEN: or the Americans it's an opportunity to bring the classroom activities to life.

PATRICK WALDEN: Diving in an aquarium tank like that is incredible, I don't know really how to explain it I just feel that all the hard work and the studying finally culminates in an experience here and then we take that out to the reef and it's just terrific.

KATIE KRAFTE: The hammer heads, the baby hammer heads I don't think I'll probably ever get a chance again to swim with them, it's really cool.

NATALIE POYHONEN: It's that level of excitement and enthusiasm that the program leaders want these students to take back to their workplaces.

PROF. HAYS CUMMINS: To give them the confidence and the foundation they need to be comfortable in the classroom setting to talk about these topics.

NATALIE POYHONEN: The learning's not just one way. The group will also study the exhibits at the aquarium to give an American perspective on environmental education.

PROFESSOR CHRIS MYERS: It's the perfect laboratory for public engagement because most of the people who go through a zoo and aquarium they just sort of look at the animals and then they move by some of them might read the signs but there's so much more that's possible and so trying to come up with creative ideas for interactives and other ways that they can make a difference right there and feel like they're a part of the conservation story.

NATALIE POYHONEN: But there's also a distinctly Australian experience in this course gaining an understanding of how traditional owners are playing a role in preserving the Great Barrier Reef.

(FOOTAGE OF AMERICAN STUDENTS GOING THROUGH THE MANGROVES)

GARY PRIOR, TRADITIONAL OWNER: To give them a hands on experience and up close with our mangroves and to get their hands dirty and to touch and feel marine animals and habitat, our mangrove system.

NATALIE POYHONEN: It's also about sharing knowledge which has been passed down from generation to generation.

(GARY PRIOR TALKING TO STUDENTS)

GARY PRIOR: This is also the antidote for box jellyfish stings

(GARY PRIOR TALKS TO NATALIE POYHONEN)

GARY PRIOR: It's funny you know I was brought up here, my eldest grandfather would always take me through the mangroves and I never ever thought that one day I'd be sharing it with a group of marine biologists from Miami Beach and America.

MARYELLEN DWYER, MATH AND SCIENCE TEACHER, OHIO: It's overwhelming, it's gorgeous but I'll have to process it when I get home.

NATALIE POYHONEN: Like many of the other people in this group Maryellen Dwyer will have a ready audience of children to share her experience with.

MARYELLEN DWYER: If I can get just a fraction of the pictures that we've all taken to share it's going to be quite an eye opener for all of them, as it is for us but we get to touch it and feel it.

PROFESSOR CHRIS MYERS: And I think that's part of the neat part of this is creating an alliance of people from very diverse settings and backgrounds who all have an interest in environmental stewardship and global understanding and having them work together.