

Marine life the latest fan of organic farming

From benthic invertebrates to fish, crustaceans and other organisms, the underworld inhabitants of Australia's marine system will fare better under a future that considers more widespread uptake of organic farming, says Biological Farmers of Australia (BFA).

According to the '2007 Water Quality Report for the Great Barrier Reef' – released last week - most of the nutrient loads which damage underwater eco-systems come from agricultural land use that increases fertiliser and pesticide run-off into marine systems (1).

Organic farms have no hand in synthetic farm chemicals that make their way to Australia's coast, and are actively addressing Australia's water quality and estuary issues, says BFA Director, Dr. Andrew Monk.

"Organic farms prohibit the use of synthetic farm chemicals which are ending up in our waterways.

"And organic land is less likely to suffer from erosion because organic systems are serious about better perennial ground-cover."

The Water Quality Report found chemicals were most likely to enter Australian waterways through soil that was swept away or eroded; or through run-off in high rainfall areas.

"For this reason, organisms and habitats which suffer most from agriculture can only benefit from a decrease in farm chemical use and an increase in organic production - where stringent standards exist to regulate production in an environmental context," says Dr. Monk.

Recent reports on the health of the Great Barrier Reef found 16,600 tonnes of nitrogen and 4,180 tonnes of phosphorous were making their way to the protected area each year.

National figures estimate 141,000 tonnes of nitrogen and 19,000 tonnes of phosphorus are exported down rivers each year from areas of intensive agriculture – twice and three times the nutrient load of Australian rivers since pre-European settlement respectively (2).

The Water Quality Report found Queensland's Burdekin catchment was responsible for most of the nutrient damage currently inflicted on the Great Barrier Reef, contributing to 48% of total nitrogen and 64% of total phosphorus input.

Rhonda Pirrone, organic mango grower from Ayr (Burdekin catchment) says the environmental potential of organic practices to contribute to better water ecology and quality was evident.



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“Organic systems simply do not put in the nutrients that eventually end up in water ways and run-off is also reduced because of a natural increase of protective vegetation where no herbicides are used.”

The report said studies have connected loss of inshore reef biodiversity to adjacent areas of intensive agriculture; and said high toxicity levels in marine organisms from several commonly used pesticides was recorded.

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(1) 2007 Water Quality Report Great Barrier Reef catchments and inshore ecosystems, Reef water quality partnership QLD Government Environmental Protection Agency: <http://www.epa.qld.gov.au/publications?id=2640>

(2) Australian Agriculture Assessment 2001:
http://www.anra.gov.au/topics/agriculture/pubs/national/agriculture_nutrient_loads.html

For more information or contact details for organic operations in your area, contact the BFA media department on (07) 3350 5716 ext. 222 E: marketing@bfa.com.au

The BFA has a vision for organic industry growth and education in Australia. Request a copy of the *Australian Organic Market Report 2008* to see how the industry is achieving its goals. More information is available at http://www.bfa.com.au/index.asp?Sec_ID=260



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