

Spatial and temporal patterns of flood plumes in the Great Barrier Reef, Australia

Thesis submitted by

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Abstract

This thesis considers the eutrophication of our coastal systems and the potential for anthropogenic driven change in these systems. The influence of river waters and plume driven nutrients and sediments into nearshore systems is also documented. Known changes in the Great Barrier Reef and associated Queensland catchments, including land use change, river water quality, flood plume extent and variation, coral cover, coral reef processes and any related changes are presented.

This research spans a number of large, long term data sets collected over the last 10 years, including long term chlorophyll *a* data set, and flood plume extents and water quality concentrations both in plumes and around inshore coral reefs. Modelling of all this data demonstrates that the inshore reef of the GBR is becoming more productive, with assessment of risk being highest for the inshore reefs adjacent to the Wet Tropics catchments.

This thesis outlines the potential changes in the nutrient availability by summarising a long term data set of chlorophyll *a*. The data collected in the seven years demonstrate persistent cross-shelf and regional differences in chlorophyll concentration. Seasonal trends are generally consistent between regions. There are pronounced gradients between inshore and offshore sites, indicating a strong terrestrial influence in the inshore lagoon of the GBR. Results from chlorophyll monitoring support the idea of an inner-shelf polluted zone adjacent to the developed catchments from Port Douglas to Harvey Bay (end of southern region), and relatively unpolluted zone on the inner-shelf north of Port Douglas and generally on the middle and outer shelf. The middle shelf between Cape Grafton and Cape Tribulation (central region) is also somewhat polluted due to its proximity to the coast and polluted rivers. In general, Coral Sea and outer shelf mean chlorophyll concentrations are close to 0.2 $\mu\text{g/L}$, areas of the GBR Lagoon without polluted river influence have mean concentrations near 0.3 $\mu\text{g/L}$, long-term mean concentrations in areas subjected to polluted river influence are near 0.6 $\mu\text{g/L}$ while event concentrations in waters affected by flood plumes from polluted rivers are near 3 $\mu\text{g/L}$.

This larger part of this body of work has looked at the dispersal and extent of flood plumes, the importance of flood plumes as a source of nutrients and sediments and the

potential risk of riverine influence on the nearshore ecosystems of the GBR. Through the course of this work, I have monitored and measured flood plumes associated with cyclones from 1991 to 2000. The sampling events were Cyclone Joy (1991), Sadie (1994), Violet (1995), Ethel (1996), Justin (1997), Sid (1998), Rona (1999) and Steve (2000).

Plume distributions presented in chapter 4 establish that the main driving influence on plume dispersal is the direction and strength of wind and discharge volume of the river. Wind conditions are dominated by south-easterly winds which drive the plume north and towards the coast. The greater number of plumes mapped over this study (Violet, Ethel, Justin, Sid and Rona) were restricted to a shallow nearshore northward band by stronger south-easterly winds following the cyclone. However, under relatively calm conditions such as those following Sadie, light offshore winds allowed the plume to disperse seaward and north over much of the shelf and there was a short period of direct impingement upon mid and outer-shelf reefs. The flood plumes associated with Cyclone Joy in the Fitzroy River also moved offshore, following light northerly winds, eventually impinging on reefs of the Capricorn-Bunker group.

The amount of rainfall that falls over a particular catchment can have a marked effect on distribution of the plume. Another factor in the distribution of flood plumes is the influence of headlands on the movement of the plumes ('steering'). This can be observed most clearly in the vicinity of Cape Grafton (slightly south-east of Cairns) in extent of the Sadie, Violet and Ethel plumes where northward moving plumes are steered across the Green Island Reef. Green Island Reef appears to be the one mid-shelf reef of the GBR, south of the Daintree, which is regularly covered by river plume water. Therefore the assessment of plumes impacting on the mid-shelf reefs adjacent to the Barron River (Green Island) are expected to be underestimates due to effects from other river systems to the south "steering" past Cape Grafton.

Data presented in chapter 5 demonstrates that the composition of plumes is strongly dependent on particular events, between days and through a single event, depths and catchment. Timing of sampling is critical in obtaining reliable estimates of material exported in the flood plumes. There is a hysteresis in the development of a flood plume, which is related to catchment characteristics (size, vegetation cover and gradient), rainfall intensity and duration and distribution of flow volume. The time lag difference

is significant in the smaller Wet Tropic rivers (Herbert to Daintree) compared to larger Dry Tropic Rivers of the Burdekin and Fitzroy.

Measurements of all parameters taken further away from the river are influenced by physical and biological processes occurring over time as the elevated concentrations in the river water mixed with the lagoonal waters of the GBR. Concentrations on NO_x and DIP ranged from 10-15 μM and 0.2-0.5 μM at sites close to the river mouth and declining to levels between 0-2 μM (NO_x) and 0 – 0.2 μM at higher salinity concentrations. Though these later concentrations are still high in comparison to baseline concentrations they do reflect influences by other processes. The distribution of nutrients within the plume is a function of riverine inputs, mixing and biological activity which add or remove nutrients.

Modelling of the plumes associated with specific weather conditions has demonstrated that inshore reef areas adjacent to the Wet Tropics Catchment (between Townsville and Cooktown) regularly experience extreme conditions associated with plumes. Inshore areas (north of the Burdekin and Fitzroy Rivers) receive riverine waters on a less frequent basis. Spatial distribution of the frequency of plume coverage delineates the inshore area of the GBR, which is annually inundated by flood plume waters. Chapter 4 presents a summary of the frequency and distribution of the all flood plumes mapped in the GBR over the last 10 years.

As part of the assessment of the impact of flood plumes on GBR ecosystems, an estimate is required of the areal and volumetric extent of plumes emanating from the rivers draining to the GBR. The observed distribution of flood plumes between 1994 and 1999 serves as a baseline for evaluating baseline distribution with respect to variables controlling plume extent. Based on these observations, a summary of plume distribution for waters discharging in the vicinity of the Russell-Mulgrave and Barron Rivers has been developed with six qualitative fields of plume distribution (inner1, inner2, inner-mid, mid, mid-outer and outer). A model was developed to estimate the expected distribution of a plume using variables which include wind speed and direction coupled with river flow data. Formulation of expected plume distribution over a longer time period than individual observations allows for the identification of reefs that are subject to plumes and an estimate as to the frequency of impact. Based on the model an estimate of spatial extents of plumes has been made using the Barron River as a case

study. The hindcasted model provided a preliminary estimate of how frequently plumes extend to a particular area of the GBR. Based on the data for the Barron River it is estimated that in the past 58 years, a plume may have reached the mid-shelf reefs (outer category) on 18 occasions.

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Table of contents

Papers arising from this thesis	4
Abstract	6
Acknowledgements	10
Chapter One: The mechanism and transport of flood plume waters into the Great Barrier Reef	23
1.1 Introduction	23
1.2 Research question 1: Is there any evidence of nutrient enrichment in the GBR lagoon?	25
1.3 Research question 2: What governs the movement and extent of riverine plumes in the GBR	27
1.4 Research question 3: What are the biogeochemical processes in riverine plumes discharging into GBR waters	28
1.5 Research question 4: What is the extent of variability in nutrient and sediment transport in GBR waters	29
1.6 Research question 5: Identification of areas of risk from increasing nutrient and sediment delivery into GBR waters	31
1.7 Thesis outline	31
Chapter 2: Research question 1: Is there any evidence of nutrient enrichment in the GBR lagoon?	34
2.1 Introduction	34
2.2 Methods	36
2.2.1 Study area	36
2.2.2 Ambient water condition sampling sites	38
2.2.3 High nutrient conditions (River plume sampling)	39
2.2.4 Sample collection	41
2.2.5 Data analysis	41

2.3.	Results	42
2.3.1	Spatial analysis of chlorophyll concentrations.....	42
2.3.2	Land use activity	46
2.3.3	Contribution of high flow events to the phytoplankton biomass	48
2.3.4	Temporal patterns in chlorophyll biomass.....	48
2.4.	Discussion	51
2.4.1	Spatial concentrations of chlorophyll biomass	51
2.4.2	Influence of plume waters on chlorophyll concentrations	53
1.5	Is there evidence of nutrient enrichment in the GBR?.....	54
Chapter 3: The extent and duration of plume waters in the GBR (mechanism for transport of new material)		58
3.1	Introduction.....	58
3.1.1	Great Barrier Reef catchment and rivers.....	58
3.2	Materials and Methods.....	64
3.2.1	Aerial mapping of flood plumes	64
3.2.2	Frequency of plume distribution	64
3.2.3	Hindcasting of plume distribution based on current knowledge of plume extent and shape	65
3.3	Results.....	67
3.3.1	Aerial mapping of plumes.....	67
3.3.2	Preliminary assessment of risk area for GBR	76
3.3.3.	Hindcasting of plume distribution based on current knowledge of plume extent and shape	78
3.4	Discussion	85
3.4.1	Plume extent and direction.....	85
3.4.2	Plume frequency	86

3.4.3	Hindcasting of plume distribution.....	88
4.1	Introduction.....	90
4.3	Methodology.....	92
4.3.1	Sampling design.....	92
4.3.2	Analytical Methods.....	93
4.3.3	Data analysis.....	99
4.4	Results.....	102
4.4.1	Variability between events and catchments.....	102
4.4.2	Constituent behaviour.....	110
4.5	Discussion.....	126
5.1	Introduction.....	135
5.2.	Methodology.....	138
5.2.1	Plume sampling.....	138
5.2.2	Concentrations in plumes related to catchment.....	138
5.2.3	Concentrations in plumes related to distance (reef concentrations).....	138
5.3.4.	Concentrations in plumes related to time (flow).....	139
5.2.5	Calculation of variability related to catchment, timing and distance....	141
5.3	Results.....	144
5.3.1	Concentrations in plumes related to catchment.....	145
5.3.2	Concentrations in plumes related to distance (reefs).....	145
5.3.3	Concentrations in plumes related to time (flow).....	151
5.3.5	Plume concentrations and reef exposure.....	153
5.4	Discussion.....	157
5.4.1	Concentration related to catchment.....	157
5.4.2	Concentration related to flow.....	158
5.4.3	Plume concentrations and reef exposure.....	158

Chapter 6: Analysis of risk from terrestrial runoff for the Great Barrier Reef

Chapter 6: Analysis of risk from terrestrial runoff for the Great Barrier Reef	161
Chapter 6: Analysis of risk from terrestrial runoff for the Great Barrier Reef	162
6.1 Introduction	162
6.2 Components of the model	163
6.2.1 River concentrations	163
6.2.2 Delivery of nutrient and sediments during flood events	164
6.2.3 Fluxes of nutrients and sediment	164
6.2.4 Nitrogen	165
6.2.5 Distance and direction of ecosystem from river mouth	165
6.2.6 Combined factors of model	165
6.3 Methods	165
6.3.1 Study area	165
6.3.2 Model	166
6.3.3 River Pollution Index	166
6.3.4 Plume direction factor	169
6.3.5 Ecosystem Risk Index	171
6.5 Results	172
6.5. Discussion	177
6.5.1. Implications for the GBR	177
6.5.2 Limitations of the model	177
Chapter 7: Conclusions	179

7.1	Implications of Changed Land-use for River and Plume Waters	180
7.2	Implications of Changed Land-use in the Catchment for GBR Ecosystems	181
7.3	Further Research	185
	References	188
	Appendix One: Peer reviewed outputs supporting thesis	209

Table of figures

Figure 1: The boundaries of the Great Barrier Reef, outlining the extent of the Great Barrier Reef catchments.....	24
Figure 2: Latitudinal sampling transects for the Long term chlorophyll monitoring program. Transects were grouped into further divisions of north, central and south regions.....	37
Figure 3: Design of sampling program for the ambient (baseline) conditions. Further details can be found in Steven <i>et al.</i> , 1998 and Brodie <i>et al.</i> , in press.....	38
Figure 4: Design of sampling program for high flow conditions. Further details can be found in Devlin <i>et al.</i> , 2002	39
Figure 5: Location of plume sampling sites that correspond with location of ambient sampling sites.....	40
Figure 6: Mean chlorophyll concentrations ($\mu\text{g/l}$) measured across the geographical transects separated into inshore and offshore area (a) and regional areas grouped into broad geographical regions (north, central and southern areas of GBR) (b)..	47
Figure 7: Mean average chlorophyll values over sampling period (1991- 2000). (a) Long term inshore chlorophyll data (blue) is compared with chlorophyll values taken in flood plumes (pink) from the inshore areas of the Cairns transect (b) Concurrent flow rates for the Barron River are reported (blue line).....	49
Figure 8: Mean monthly chlorophyll data (with SE) for the 8 transects on the Great Barrier Reef. Transects are placed in a north to south gradient. Data are grouped into inner (up to 20km off coast) and outer (> 20km off coast) cross-shelf areas).	50
Figure 9: Map of the Great Barrier Reef Catchment and major rivers draining into the Great Barrier Reef lagoon.....	61
Figure 10: Historical flow rates in comparison to the study period for Tully (Wet Tropics), Herbert (intermediate) and the Burdekin River (Dry Tropics).....	62
Figure 11: (a). Seasonal extremes in the Barron River, from the Atherton Tablelands the Barron River flows through the World Heritage rainforest (a) dry season – October	

1994 (b) wet) season – March 1995 floods. (<i>Photos: J. Taylor 1995</i>)	63
Figure 12: Area selected for modelling of hindcasting plume conditions	66
Figure 13: Tracks of cyclones over the Queensland coast from 1991 to 2000	67
Figure 14: Flood plumes associated with Cyclone Joy, 1991	71
Figure 15: Flood plumes associated with Cyclone Sadie, 1994.....	71
Figure 16: Flood plume associated with Cyclone Violet, 1995.....	72
Figure 17: Flood plume associated with Cyclone Ethel, 1996.....	72
Figure 18: Flood plume associated with Cyclone Justin, 4th March 1997 – Southern Rivers	73
Figure 19: Flood plume associated with Cyclone Justin, 25th March, 1997, Wet Tropics River	73
Figure 20: Flood plume associated with Cyclone Sid, 23 rd January 1998, Burdekin River	74
Figure 21: Flood plume associated with Cyclone Sid from Wet Tropics and Burdekin River.....	74
Figure 22: Flood plume associated with Cyclone Rona, 14 th February, 1999.....	75
Figure 23: Flood plume associated with Cyclone Steve, 2000	75
Figure 24: Frequency of plume formation from 1991 - 2000	77
Figure 25: Plume distribution for the Wet Tropics area, between and including Johnstone and Barron Rivers	80
Figure 26: Plume distributions for study area between Barron River and Russell-Mulgrave rivers.....	81
Figure 27: Conceptual model of plume movement in response to variable weather conditions.....	82
Figure 28: Predicted plume distribution based on the flow rates and wind data for the Barron River section for the period 1943 to 1999. Extreme events can not be predicted by the model as those series of variables have not been measured over the study period.....	84

Figure 29: Idealized representation of the relationship between concentrations of a dissolved component and a conservative index of mixing for an estuary where there are single sources of river and seawater. For a component (A) is greater in seawater than in river water and (B) for a component whose concentration is greater in river water than in seawater (Chester 1990).	99
Figure 30: Sampling sites within each plume event	101
Figure 31: Mixing curves for dissolved nitrogen species for Violet Plume for Wet Tropics catchments	103
Figure 32: Mixing curves for dissolved nitrogen species for Violet Plume for Wet Tropics catchments	104
Figure 33: Mixing curves for Cyclone Violet for DIP, DON, DOP and SiO ₄ for three Wet Tropics catchment	105
Figure 34: Mixing curves for dissolved nitrogen species for Justin Plume for Wet Tropics catchments	106
Figure 35: Mixing curves for chlorophyll for Justin Plume for three Wet Tropics catchments	107
Figure 36: Mixing curves for Cyclone Violet for DIP, DON, DOP and SiO ₄ for three Wet Tropics catchment	108
Figure 37: Mixing curves for all constituents in the Fitzroy Plume for a Dry Tropics catchments	109
Figure 38: Mixing curves for SPM sampled in the Burdekin plumes. Events included Justin (1997) and Sid (1998)	110
Figure 39: Selected mixing profiles for SPM (suspended particulate matter) for the Wet Tropics catchments	111
Figure 40: Mixing curves for NO _x sampled in the Burdekin plumes. Events included Justin (1997) and Sid (1998)	112
Figure 41: Selected mixing profiles for NO _x (nitrate and nitrite) for the Wet Tropics catchments	113
Figure 42: Mixing profiles for NH ₄ (ammonia) sampled in the Burdekin plumes. Events	

included Justin (1997) and Sid (1998)	114
Figure 43: Selected mixing profiles for NH ₄ (ammonia) for the Wet Tropics catchments	115
Figure 44: Movement of dissolved inorganic nutrient species through salinity gradient. All data is averaged over salinity range. Error bars represent 95% confidence limits.....	116
Figure 45: Mixing profiles for DIP (dissolved inorganic phosphate) for the Burdekin catchment	117
Figure 46: Selected mixing profiles for DIP (for the Wet Tropics catchments).	118
Figure 47: Mean and standard error along salinity gradient for DIP in plume waters..	119
Figure 48: Mean and standard error along salinity gradient for Particulate N and P in Wet Tropics catchments.....	121
Figure 49: Mean and standard error along salinity gradient for chlorophyll <i>a</i> in Wet Tropics	122
Figure 50: Selected mixing profiles for chlorophyll <i>a</i> (for the Wet Tropics catchments)	123
Figure 51: Mean and standard error along salinity gradient for DON and DOP in Wet Tropics	124
Figure 52: Nitrogen and Phosphorus ratios (DIN:DIP and TN:TP) against salinity. Circle denotes Dry Tropics samples and square denotes Wet Tropics.....	125
Figure 53: Representation of constituent behaviour for dissolved and particulate nutrients, SPM and chlorophyll <i>a</i>	129
Figure 54: Conceptual diagram of variables which influence reef concentrations during plume events.	137
Figure 55: Selection of sites related to catchment and divided into inshore and reef sites	140
Figure 56: Flow rates associated with Russell-Mulgrave over February and March 2000. Sampling for water quality parameters was initiated during the first flush event and the extreme flow associated with Cyclone Steve (2000).....	142

Figure 57: Map outlines Wet Tropics area which has detailed reef water quality sampling. Plume frequency and hindcasting were modelled in this area.	143
Figure 58: Individual water quality sites sampled in Cyclone Steve (2001) around three selected reefs.	143
Figure 59: Dissolved nutrients (NH ₄ , NO _x and DON) concentrations for plume and reef waters for individual catchments.	147
Figure 60: Dissolved nutrients (DIP, DOP and SiO ₄) concentrations for plume and reef waters for individual catchments.	148
Figure 61: Chlorophyll and SPM concentrations for plume and reef waters for individual catchments.	149
Figure 62: Flow vs concentration relationship between Wet Tropic catchment and DIN (NO _x +NH ₄).	151
Figure 63: Nitrate+nitrite (NO ₃ and NO ₂), ammonia (NH ₄) and chlorophyll concentrations measured over four reef sites over a first flush and large flow event.	155
Figure 64: Correlation between flow and DIN, DIP, chlorophyll a and salinity for Cyclone Steve sampling. Flow is presented for Russell-Mulgrave river over high flow event associated with Cyclone Steve.	156
Figure 65: The Plume direction factor. Location of the reefs in relation to the river mouth is how the PDF is calculated.	170
Figure 66: Rating of risks at high risk as calculated by the ERI model. High risk was denoted as total ERI being greater than 0.9.	175
Figure 67: Estimation extrapolation of Ecosystem Risk Index categories for the Great Barrier Reef.	176

Table of tables

Table 1: Summary of chlorophyll concentrations for each transect in the study. Data was separated into summer (Nov – April) and Winter (May – Oct). Comparative data for flood plumes is also presented for the inshore summer period.....	43
Table 2: Two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) of transect chlorophyll a concentrations (Chlorophyll a concentrations \log_{10} transformed prior to analysis). Explanatory variables include (a) regional transect, (b) cross shelf area, (c) interaction between transect and area and (d) season.	44
Table 3: Weather and flow conditions for each sampling period	68
Table 4: Idealised plume distribution based on the observed events 1994 – 1999 for the Barron and Russell-Mulgrave River section.....	82
Table 5: Acronyms and symbols for nutrient and other water quality parameters collected in the plume waters.....	93
Table 6: Details of water sampling for each plume event.....	95
Table 7: Water samples and associated analyses for each plume event	98
Table 8: Minimum salinities and maximum and mean (+SE) nutrients, chlorophyll and suspended particulate matter concentrations from the catchment plumes in GBR surface waters.....	144
Table 9; Mean and maximum values for reef samples associated with GBR catchments.	146
Table 10: Calculation of change in mean concentrations of constituents for each catchment. –ve indicates a overall loss from inshore sites to reef sites and +ve indicates overall gain.	150
Table 11: Description of data sources and factors used in calculation of River Pollution Index.....	167
Table 12: Calculated River Pollution Indices for GBR Rivers.....	168
Table 13: Example of Ecosystem Risk Index (ERI) calculation for two reefs (Round-Russell Reef and Tobias Spit).....	172
Table 14: Summary of ERI calculation for the 154 reefs included in the analysis.....	174