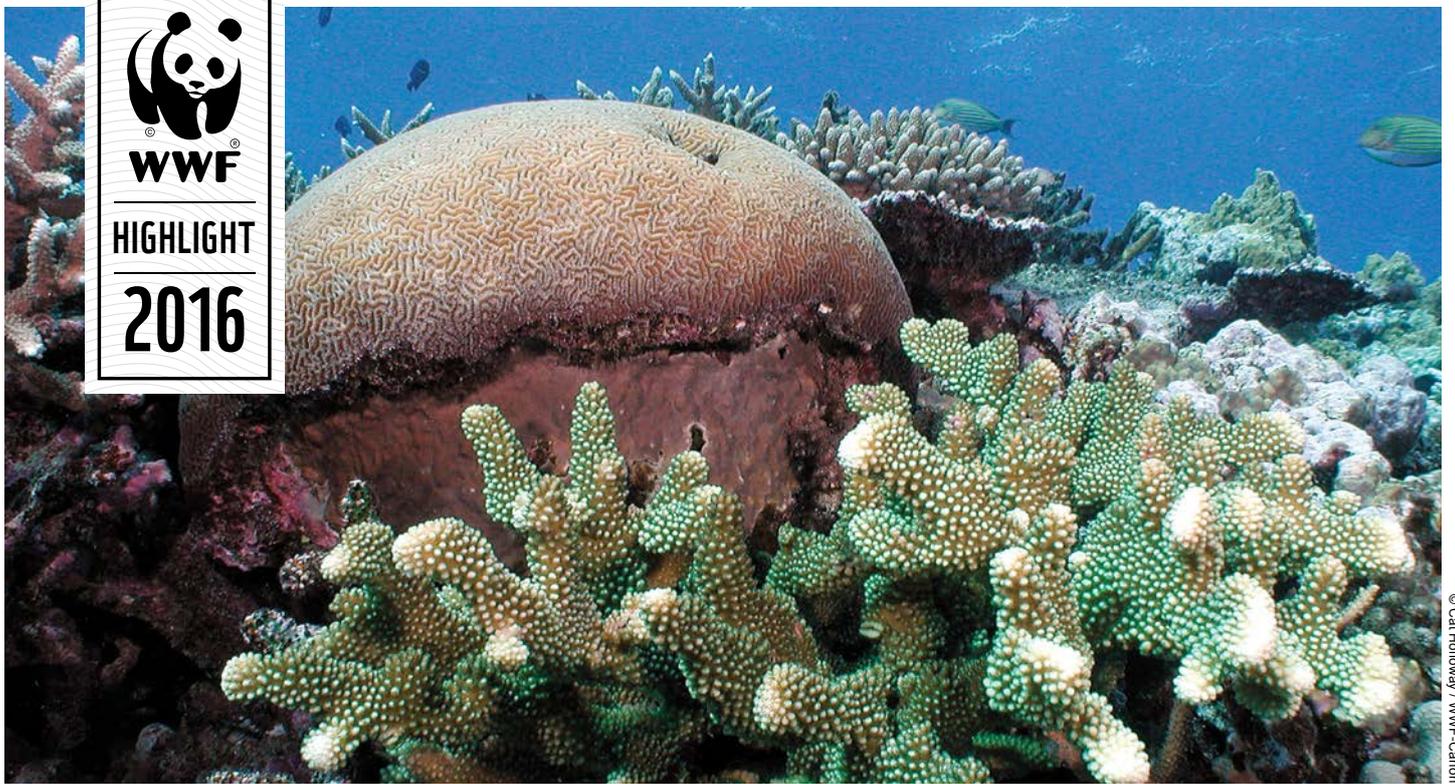




WWF

HIGHLIGHT

2016



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# SUGARCANE

**A project in Queensland works with farmers to grow sugarcane more sustainably – and the Great Barrier Reef is benefiting.**

Think of threats to the Great Barrier Reef, and outdated land management practices are probably not the first thing that comes to mind. Yet run-off from sugarcane and other farms near the coast can have severe impacts.

The reality is that the health of the Great Barrier Reef is in steep decline, and farm pollution is one of the root causes. Nitrogen from farm fertiliser run-off is the highest-risk pollutant. Excess nitrogen leads to algal blooms, feeding juvenile Crown of Thorns Starfish, which multiply to plague proportions. These Starfish are responsible for over 40 per cent of the loss of coral cover on the Great Barrier Reef, which has declined by half in the last three decades.

The Australian and Queensland governments want to reduce nitrogen pollution by up to 80 per cent in key catchments, under the Reef 2050 Plan<sup>1</sup>. Reaching those targets means that current farm practices need to change, and visionary sugarcane farmers are eager to be leaders in the drive for solutions.

“We’ve been branded as environmental vandals, and that hurts,” says Tony Bugeja,

whose family has been growing cane near the Queensland coast for three generations. “We live on the doorstep of the reef, and we don’t want to harm it.” Besides, farm inputs are expensive: “When we put nutrients into the ground, we want to get the most out of them,” says Tony. “We can’t afford to have chemicals leave our property.”

## ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

Established in 2008, the Australian government’s Reef Programme funds cane growers to farm more sustainably. But changing practices is not easy: thousands of farming families in the region often struggle to make a living; few can afford to invest in new methods and machinery without the certainty of an immediate return.

That’s where Project Catalyst comes in, a partnership between WWF, natural resource management groups Reef Catchments, NQ Dry Tropics and Terrain, The Coca-Cola Foundation, the Australian government and local sugarcane farmers. The project supports farmers to trial, monitor and share information on cutting-edge practices to improve farm

*“If we can prove the effectiveness of what Project Catalyst is doing for the Great Barrier Reef, it has the potential to be scaled up and replicated in other sugarcane-growing regions around the world. With sugarcane covering around 24 million hectares in more than 90 countries, it has the potential to make a massive difference.”*

Michelle Allen  
Public Affairs and  
Communications Manager  
Coca-Cola South Pacific

## WWF TARGETS

**2020** 25% of global sugarcane production will be Bonsucro certified

## PROGRESS

3.8% of global sugarcane production is Bonsucro certified (February 2016)

## PRIORITY COUNTRIES

### Production

Brazil, India, China, Thailand, Pakistan, Australia, South Africa, Guatemala, Mexico, Colombia, Fiji

### Markets

China, India, USA, EU, Japan, Brazil

## CONTEXT

### Threats

- Habitat conversion;
- Soil erosion and degradation;
- Agrochemical use;
- Water use and pollution;
- Greenhouse gas emissions;
- Labor and land tenure rights, health, payment (minimum wage and contracts) and training of workers.

### Opportunities

- Potential to reduce habitat destruction and biodiversity loss in some of Earth's most precious natural places;
- Greenhouse gas avoidance and mitigation through biofuel production for fuel and plastics;
- Improve water quality and availability;
- Improve livelihoods.



management, water quality, landscape health, farm economic viability and social well-being of rural communities.

The practices, some of which have been devised by the farmers themselves with support from Project Catalyst partners, range from new cultivation strategies to equipment modifications. When the project began in 2009, 19 farmers were involved; there are now about 80 growers who farm more than 15,000 hectares.

## COMMON GOALS

Getting involved in the project makes good sense to cane farmers. Joe Muscat, a second-generation farmer in the Mackay region, explains why: "I do not believe there is any grower who would deliberately set out to harm the environment, but the first stage of change is understanding, and that is what this programme helps promote."

A number of the practices trialled by the project have been taken up by the industry. Banded mill mud application, initially trialled by Project Catalyst grower Gerry Deguara, is now widely used across the industry with an estimated 25 per cent of the volume of mill mud used. The mill mud, a by-product of the sugar cane milling process, is rich in nutrients. It is

applied at rates up to 60 per cent lower than traditional methods and provides a cost saving to growers as well as reducing nutrients.

Tony Bugeja is one of the pioneers of using variable rate application of fertilisers. By tailoring fertiliser rates to yield potential, farmers are able to move away from the wasteful practice of 'one rate fits all' approach. Variable rate fertiliser application is now seen as best practice and been adopted by many farmers.

Tony believes Project Catalyst has shown how farmers and environmentalists can work together toward a common goal. "At first we were getting nervous looks from people for working with WWF, but now more and more people are interested in what we're up to," he says. "We must be doing something right."

1 The Reef 2050 Long-term Sustainability Plan, Australian Government and Queensland Government 2015, <http://www.environment.gov.au/marine/gbr/publications/reef-2050-long-term-sustainability-plan>



Bonsucro aims to improve the social, environmental, and economic sustainability of sugarcane.

[bonsucro.org](http://bonsucro.org)

For more information,  
please visit

[www.panda.org/markets](http://www.panda.org/markets)



### Why we are here.

To stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature.

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