

Moored just outside the fringing reef, we take the smaller boat to shore. Nymph Island has the promise of crocodiles; someone saw tracks on the beach. I ask our skipper Dan, "Could there be crocodiles on this island?" "Definitely a strong possibility" he says "with that lagoon in the middle". "Can they swim all that way from the mainland?" I ask. "They could easily swim the twenty or thirty kilometres to Nymph Island in a day," he says. "The young males get kicked out of home by the dominant adult male, so they head off to other places, sometimes far from home. When they're old enough and ready to breed, they head back to the mainland to find females and a new home. But yes, there's probably a few young males here". "Oh" I said.

With that in mind, we avoided going to the interior of Nymph Island and instead kept to the perimeter. The northern edge of the island is a coral reliquary. Banks of piled corals, broken shards, looking like giant middens, a motherlode of calcium carbonate. What caused this? We all wonder. Successive layers, ranging from weathered grey on top, to cream, ochre and white; larger pieces on the ocean side of a long freestanding mullock heap, smaller pieces on the lee side. I pick up a shard as big and heavy as a thighbone. How many thousand tonnes of coral is here, I wonder? Tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands?

A pair of terns ward us away from their lair as we inspect the assembly line of coral relics. As we skirt around the southern side of the island, we wade along a large channel on the receding tide. Small, cobalt blue kingfishers flit around the mangroves and a crocodile lurks only in our imaginations.

### **A walk around Nymph Island – Sarah Hamylton**

The Great Barrier Reef has 1,100 islands, broadly grouped into vegetated sand cays, unvegetated sand cays and low wooded islands. As I begin walking around Nymph Island, I ponder the twenty or so islands that I have visited. Their marked geography tells the story of how they have evolved over the last 3000 years, shaped by wind, waves and storms. This is a place where geography matters. Spanning almost 2000 km along the Queensland coastline, the location of each island dictates fundamental environmental characteristics like tidal range and cyclone frequency.

This is the third Low Wooded island I have walked around in as many days and I begin to predict the transitions of its character as I walk around its periphery. The beach sands along the northern aspect slowly disappear moving eastwards, giving way to a conglomerate rubble platform on the windward side, where tall white rubble ramparts signify a recent storm or cyclone. Skirting around the corner, rubble gives way to honeycomb bedrock with the native succulent herb *Sesuvium* nestled into the cracks. Longstanding thongs, crates and bottles and other plastics litter the strandline, gathered by wind and waves. Toward the island interior, layered terraces of rubble of varying shades signify different periods of island building. Large depositional events bring a virgin white cover of rubble that slowly blackens with algae over time. A large sand spit forms in the west, where waves wrap themselves around the submerged reef platform to deposit the sands they have transported from the coral fringes.

The spatial patterns that are evident in, around and on reef islands are signatures that can be read like a book. An aerial photograph presents clues as to the geomorphological processes shaping these formidable, forlorn landscapes. Just when it appears that I've got the measure of these islands, something new and unexpected arises, like a lagoon or a swathe of fallen Pandanus trees. But the anchor is up and we are away to the next smudge of low trees on the watery horizon. On goes the mysterious wonder of the reef.

### **A walk around Nymph Island – Leah Gibbs**

This is our third island. A pattern is emerging. We land on the leeward side. Feet touch down on coarse sand. The water's smooth here. Clear and turquoise. Walking east along the northern shore, the bleached white corals are mounded in high berms. Perhaps, I think, delivered here by cyclone events. Mangroves creep at the water's edge.

I keep walking around the island, clockwise: southeast, then south, and reach the windward side. The sand transitions to coarser materials as I go: shells and dead corals; shells, dead corals and thongs; shells, dead corals, thongs and a fridge door. The same process that builds the island brings the plastics. The windward side is exposed to the dominant south-easterly swell. And the swell brings life to the corals, sediment to the mangroves, and plastic to the beach.

Most surprising to me is how unsurprising it is. I expected to see plastic on these islands. I'm struck by how unremarkable it now seems. How disposable bottles, tangles of fishing nets, plastic drink crates, all seem so in place here. And I understand—or think I do—their story. Or at least part of it. Their complex source: our consumerist society, the prevalence of petrol-chemical products, the near-miracle of plastics' durability, global economies, etc. And that there can be an 'etc.' in such a tragedy. That it has all become so expected.

Each object offers a glimpse into the lives that brought it here. A green pen with a small business name and phone number still intact. A complicated arrangement of sturdy plastic drink crates, roped together, presumably to secure them on board. And the dishwashing liquid bottle, lying without a scratch. It's a different brand to the one I buy, but otherwise might have been brought here from my kitchen. The direct connection between the degradation of the reef and my everyday life is unavoidable.

### **A walk around Nymph Island – woven account by Kim Williams, Sarah Hamylton, Leah Gibbs**

Moored just outside the fringing reef, we prepare to take the smaller boat to shore. Nymph Island has the promise of crocodiles; someone saw tracks on the beach earlier in the day. I ask our skipper Dan, “Could there be crocodiles on this island?” “Definitely a strong possibility” he says “with that lagoon in the middle”. “Can they swim all that way from the mainland?” I ask. “They could easily swim the twenty or thirty kilometres to Nymph Island in a day,” he says. “The young males get kicked out of home by the dominant adult male, so they head off to other places, sometimes far from home. When they’re old enough and ready to breed, they head back to the mainland to find females and a new home. But yes, there’s probably a few young males here”. “Oh” I said.

We land on the leeward side. Feet touch down on coarse sand. The water’s smooth here. Clear and turquoise. The Great Barrier Reef has 1,100 islands, broadly grouped into vegetated sand cays, unvegetated sand cays and low wooded islands. Their marked geography tells the story of how they have evolved over the last 3000 years, shaped by wind, waves and storms. A large sand spit forms to the west, where waves wrap themselves around the submerged reef platform to deposit the sands they have transported from the coral fringes. This is a place where geography matters. Spanning almost 2000 km along the Queensland coastline, the location of each island dictates fundamental environmental characteristics like tidal range and cyclone frequency.

With crocodiles in mind, we avoid exploring the interior of Nymph Island and instead keep to the perimeter. Nymph Island is the third low wooded island we’ve visited this week. A pattern is emerging - we begin to predict the transitions of its character as we walk around its periphery. The beach sands along the northern aspect slowly disappear moving eastwards, giving way to a conglomerate rubble platform on the windward side, where tall white rubble ramparts signify a recent storm or cyclone. Banks of broken corals look like giant middens, a motherlode of calcium carbonate. I pick up a shard as big and heavy as a thighbone. How many thousand tonnes of coral is here, I wonder? Tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands?



Rafael Carvalho in front of coral rampart on Nymph Island, Great Barrier Reef (photo: Kim Williams)

Skirting around the corner, a pair of terns ward us away from their lair. Rubble gives way to honeycomb bedrock with the native succulent herb *Sesuvium* nestled into the cracks. Mangroves creep at the water's edge. Toward the island interior, layered terraces of rubble of varying shades signify different periods of island building. Large depositional events bring a virgin white cover of rubble that slowly blackens with algae over time.

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Flotsam on Nymph Island (photo: Leah Gibbs)

As we skirt around the southern side of the island, we wade along a large channel on the receding tide. Small, cobalt blue kingfishers flit around the mangroves. Just when it appears that I have the measure of these islands, something new and unexpected arises, like a lagoon or a swathe of fallen Pandanus trees. But the anchor is up and we are away to the next smudge of low trees on the watery horizon. A crocodile lurks only in our imaginations.