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Keep cruises off remote coral reefs

Just 3% of the world's coral reefs remain in near-pristine condition; about one-third of these are located in the Coral Sea in the South Pacific Ocean. The Chesterfield reef ensemble, one of the world's largest atolls, is an example. It is part of France's overseas territory of New Caledonia, and its remoteness has so far preserved its wealth of biodiversity. We therefore call for the territory's government to drop its plans to open these precious reefs to the destructive effects of cruise ships and mass ecotourism.

The Chesterfield reefs were spared the 2016 mass-bleaching phenomenon that affected coral reefs around the world. They host the largest seabird colonies in the tropical western Pacific. Indeed, nitrogen from seabird guano may contribute to the resilience of reef-building corals. Comprising a remarkable variety of corals, the reefs host an abundance of diverse fish shoals and species such as the threatened fairy tern (*Sternula nereis*), several endemic marine gastropods and an endemic sea snake (*Hydrophis laboutei*). They are also a nesting site of regional importance for the green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*).

Cruise ships will inevitably disrupt the reef and lagoon habitats and fauna. Their hundreds of passengers will lethally disturb breeding seabird colonies, by repeatedly scaring away nesting adults. This could particularly affect the brown booby (*Sula leucogaster*), the lesser and greater frigatebirds (*Fregata ariel* and *F. minor*) and the sooty tern (*Onychoprion fuscatus*).

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Red-footed boobies (*Sula sula*) nesting on Loop Islet, Chesterfield archipelago. Credit: Philippe Borsa/IRD