

Feedback on the Draft Ecotourism Plan for Queensland's Protected Areas 2022-2027 – Redefining ecotourism in a changing world

Thank you for the opportunity to provide initial feedback on the draft Ecotourism Plan for Queensland's Protected Areas 2022-2027 – Redefining ecotourism in a changing world.

The National Parks Association of Queensland Inc. (NPAQ) values its partnership with the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service and welcomes such opportunities to share, add value and continue a constructive dialogue.

Overall, the priority areas for action set out in the draft plan appear to be well-founded. Collectively, they present as a significant commitment by the Queensland Government to invest in the recovery of the Queensland ecotourism industry, but not at the expense of protected area values. For that reason, NPAQ is supportive of the draft plan and would be interested to know what level of investment is envisaged and how that investment would be sourced.

NPAQ also offers the following comments in relation to each of the priority areas for action.

1. Deliver innovative ecotourism products and experiences to showcase Queensland's world-renowned protected areas.

Given the limited extent of terrestrial protected area in Queensland, currently at only 8.5% of the state, NPAQ would encourage the Government to focus on improving existing ecotourism products and experience, rather than initiating new products and experiences on greenfield sites. NPAQ would also welcome the opportunity to be involved in the assessment and prioritisation of areas for improvement, so that it can more effectively advocate for those improvements. See also comments about the protected area acquisition program under Priority Action 4 below.

2. Enhance ecotourism in Queensland's iconic marine environments through new public facilities to support experiences.

NPAQ welcomes the proposed introduction of public facilities that will help mitigate visitor impacts to local marine environments, whilst at the same time improving the overall visitor experience. NPAQ would encourage QPWS to adopt this approach more broadly across the protected area estate. Visitor experiences should be carefully designed to complement the local natural and cultural values of protected areas and be supported by appropriate infrastructure.

3. Restore nature by working with the ecotourism industry and research organisations to develop new regenerative tourism and citizen science offerings on protected areas.

NPAQ welcomes the inclusion of opportunities for regenerative tourism and citizen science on protected areas and a supporting grants program. NPAQ itself runs programs that could support and benefit from these endeavours and would welcome further discussion about how a potential partnership could evolve.

NPAQ would, however, be concerned if ranger resources were merely redirected from core conservation and park management activities to achieve this outcome. NPAQ would appreciate reassurance that any new ranger capacity to support regenerative tourism and citizen science on protected areas would come with adequate, additional funding.

NPAQ also notes that there is little mention in the draft plan of existing impacts on protected areas from inappropriate visitor use. While some of these impacts can be attributed to tourism, it is more likely that the majority contribution is by locals conducting predominantly recreational activities. The islands of Moreton Bay, for example, are under increasing pressure from locals, which are threatening the very values that warranted their national park and world heritage status. Any effort to implement regenerative tourism and citizen science on such protected areas should be preceded by effective measures to curb the damage being undertaken in those areas.

4. Facilitate new ecotourism projects on land adjoining protected areas and sustainably reuse cleared and degraded land.

NPAQ would suggest replacing the word “adjoining” with “outside”, to recognise that adjacency is not always ideal, necessary or available. NPAQ would also like to request that any facilitation and/or support by Government for new development is only provided where the park values, visitor experiences and existing infrastructure within the protected area are sufficient to support the expected increase in visitation. NPAQ would not be supportive of new ecotourism projects outside of protected areas that merely create immediate pressure for on park visitor management and infrastructure.

The concept of adjacent ecotourism potential as a criterion in the protected area acquisition program needs further clarification. NPAQ is a strong advocate for acquiring suitable land for inclusion in the protected area estate and is supportive of consideration being given to the ecotourism potential of that land at the time of inclusion. This could present a unique win/win situation, given the Government’s ambitions to support recovery of the ecotourism sector and double the area of national parks by 2030.

Whilst adaptive reuse of previously cleared areas and degraded land in protected areas could lend itself to ecotourism development, NPAQ suggests it could also lend itself to rehabilitation and regeneration activities, which would complement Priority Action 3.

5. Partner with Traditional Owners in the planning and delivery of ecotourism projects on protected areas to ensure outcomes are culturally appropriate and aligned with Traditional Owner priorities.

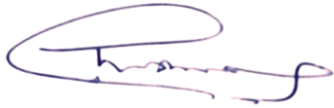
NPAQ is a strong advocate for supporting Traditional Owners to deliver on-Country programs. The major barrier preventing this from happening to date has been financial and business support. NPAQ would be keen to hear more about what support is being considered for Traditional Owners under this priority action. NPAQ would be concerned if Traditional Owners were encouraged to deliver experiences on Country, only to later fail due to lack of support and resources. This would not be a good outcome for anyone.

6. Build the capacity of the ecotourism sector operating on protected areas to deliver world class visitor experiences and reduce the environmental impact of their operations.

NPAQ is supportive of improved interpretation and guide accreditation to enhance visitor experiences in protected areas and welcomes this initiative. Such programs typically come at a cost, however, and NPAQ would be interested to know how the Government intends to fund and/or encourage the uptake of such programs.

Similarly, NPAQ would be keen to understand how this could be applied to free and independent travellers and locals, who are not under the guidance of ecotourism operators. As mentioned previously, any good work carried out by the ecotourism sector could come to no avail if the impacts of other users are not kept in check.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide input to the draft ecotourism plan. Please contact Chris Thomas on 0427 024 579 or ceo@npaq.org.au for any further queries or follow up.



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