

POSITION STATEMENT: USER CONTRIBUTIONS TO PROTECTED AREA MANAGEMENT

Context

Public protected areas are a significant focus for outdoor recreation and tourism in Queensland. There is increasing pressure from a range of recreational users and tourism interests to access public protected areas. Research by Tourism and Events Queensland shows a continuous increase in public protected area visitation over the past 10 years by domestic and international tourists. Analysis by KPMG predicts a 40% plus increase in international tourists arriving for the 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games and visiting public protected areas.

Funding for Queensland's public protected areas is the lowest of all states/territories (estimated at just \$16 per hectare by QTC in 2018), with managers often having to give higher priority to maintaining visitor facilities at the expense of biodiversity conservation activities. This is exacerbated by an increasing push by recreation and tourism interests to provide more visitor facilities in public protected areas to accommodate visitor demand. Without appropriate funding, the experience of visitors to public protected areas will be diminished as landscapes deteriorate through crowding, excessive use, weeds, fires and pest animals.

Research

A comprehensive review of literature, online platforms and past research by NPAQ has identified a range of user access fees applied across states and territories with a variety of user sentiments towards paying for access to public protected areas and use of specific facilities.

Key Findings

- Generally, international tourists are more willing to pay than domestic users.
- User pay systems vary between states/territories and are often not cost effective due to the cost of fee collection.
- Vehicle access fees are generally more acceptable than individual access fees.
- User sentiment on fees within public protected areas varies considerably.
- Funds derived from user pays systems are better received when re-invested in park management.
- Increasing demand for visitor facilities from the outdoor recreation and tourism sectors is putting additional pressure on popular public protected areas resulting in budgets being directed towards maintenance of visitor infrastructure and visitor management at the expense of conservation activities.

Policy Position

Having considered the findings of this research and current trends in tourism, especially ecotourism, NPAQ has determined to advocate for the six policy principles outlined below:

- 1) The ever-increasing tourism economic value of Queensland's public protected areas requires a commensurate increase from tourism appropriations by the State government towards effective visitor management and the provision and maintenance of appropriate visitor infrastructure.

- 2) Domestic and/or international tourists should also contribute to general protected area management (in lieu of paying taxes). Contributions should be collected via commercial tourism operators as per the environmental management charge applied by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority.
- 3) Broader user pays systems should be considered where:
 - a) An ongoing, higher level of visitor servicing is required for park management purposes; and/or
 - b) Capacity limits have been set to ensure sites are not degraded from over-use.
- 4) Where broader user pays systems are implemented, they should be:
 - a) Applied equitably across all users;
 - b) Supported by ongoing compliance monitoring and enforcement; and
 - c) Monitored annually to ensure they are fair, cost effective and efficient.
- 5) To help encourage off-peak visitation and smooth out annual visitation, differential pricing should be used to reflect any seasonal and/or geographic variability in additional visitor servicing (i.e. user pays systems may only apply at popular destinations at peak periods).
- 6) Revenue raised through users pays systems should be:
 - a) Retained by the collecting agency, in addition to any base funding (and not trigger a subsequent decrease in base funding);
 - b) Hypothecated wherever possible (i.e. reinvested into the parks from where the funds were raised); and
 - c) Reported annually for transparency purposes.

Endorsed by NPAQ Advocacy Committee in March 2025

For review in 2028