



**Cooloola Recreation Area  
Sustainable Visitor Capacity and Management Study**

**Recommendations**

May 2022

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## **Disclaimer**

*The information and recommendations provided in this document are made on the basis of information available at the time of preparation and the assumptions outlined throughout the document. While all care has been taken to check and validate material presented in this report, independent research should be undertaken before any action or decision is taken on the basis of material contained in this report. This report does not seek to provide any assurance of project viability and EarthCheck accepts no liability for decisions made or the information provided in this report.*

## 1. Purpose of this report

This report provides a summary of analysis and recommendations for the Cooloola Recreation Area: Sustainable Visitor Management and Carrying Capacity Study (SVCM).

The accompanying **Technical Appendices** document contains a consolidated summary of detailed research conducted during the study including reports on the community, permit holder and business & tourism surveys.

### 1.1. Study Requirements

The aim of the SVCM study is to assess current site profiles, demand, and impacts, inform future management decisions and tourism strategies, and demonstrate an achievable and sustainable outcome for these areas.

The SVCM study considers the current use and condition of Cooloola Recreation Area as well as future aspirations of key stakeholders. Recommendations are provided to address current management issues and intentions and may recommend a range of future options including changes to use of sites, alternative opportunities, adjusting uses at sites, and infrastructure and management actions that will positively assist in achieving a more sustainable and enjoyable visitor experience.

The overall SVCM project is being delivered in two stages:

1. Cooloola Recreation Area and Bribie Island Recreation Area in the first stage; and
2. K'gari (Fraser Island National Park) in the second stage.

Key project components include:

- Assessment of sites against contemporary protected area and recreation area management practices.
- Analysis of existing data, reports, management plans and other information provided by the Department of Environment and Science (DES) on each of the sites.
- Engagement with key stakeholders.
- Site visits to assess the situation at key visitor nodes.
- Determination of carrying capacities for each site (where possible given data constraints) and modelling of the pattern and level of usage.
- Provision of recommendations to implement the identified capacities.
- Provision of recommendations on incorporating adaptive management principles, including monitoring and review timeframes and thresholds for change.
- Review of visitor behaviours and current compliance arrangements for both commercial and non-commercial visitors, resulting in recommendations about enforcement of visitor behaviour and capacities.

## 1.2 Project Methodology

Key stages in the methodology used to undertake the project are as follows:

<b>I.Site Assessment/Fieldwork and Data Analysis</b>	
Best practice & policy review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review of literature and international best practice on tourism carrying capacity to identify practices and techniques employed in similar environments.</li> </ul>
Review of existing carrying capacity methodology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consideration and review of the Department's current datasets carrying capacity methodology against contemporary practice.</li> </ul>
Review of existing data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A comprehensive review of the existing data, to understand visitor flows, geophysical and ecological characteristics, and tourism impact (volume and value).</li> </ul>
Identification of data/input gaps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identification of any data gaps which are essential to identify carrying capacities and inform management decisions.</li> </ul>
Review of management, enforcement and decision-making structures in relation to the sites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A review of the governance structures in which the destinations are managed.</li> </ul>
Site reviews	<p>A program of site review facilitated by QPWS Rangers to review geophysical and biological attributes, constraints and opportunities that exist as well as to review and understand existing infrastructure and visitor services that support the experiences. The site reviews helped:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify the site's special values and any existing visitor facilities.</li> <li>Define the desired setting to maintain the visitor experience, taking visitor behaviour into account.</li> <li>Assess any visitor impacts on site condition.</li> <li>Identify any constraints on visitor use of the site (such as car parking capacity).</li> </ul>
Helicopter perspective on the Recreation Area, balanced with site-specific reviews	<p>To best address carrying capacity and sustainable visitor management issues, a balance of site-specific and area-wide perspectives has been taken. Issues such as entry points, area-wide policies, compliance, safety, traffic movements have significant area-wide aspects, as well as the site-specific issues at visitor hotspots. Individual sites reviewed for Cooloola Recreation Area are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teewah Camping Area</li> <li>Double Island Point, Beach and Lighthouse</li> <li>Rainbow Beach/ lagoon area</li> <li>Teewah Beach</li> <li>Upper Noosa River</li> </ul>

<b>II. Stakeholder Engagement</b>	
<p>An extensive program of consultation with identified key stakeholders – Traditional Owners, Commercial tour operators, Local residents/park users, Peak conservation bodies, Local Councils, Local Members, Tourism Industry, Research institutions, Queensland Government – police, ambulance, QFES, Queensland Parks and Wildlife Services and Partnerships.</p>	<p>Consultation was conducted via:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One to one interviews with key stakeholders.</li> <li>• Workshop meeting with Kabi Kabi elders.</li> <li>• DES teams including Coastal and Islands Region, Permissions Management and Ecotourism Development, On-Park Visitor Experience, Parks and Forest Policy Unit, Compliance, Great Sandy National Park, and Communications and Engagement Unit.</li> <li>• Distribution of an e-survey to tourism businesses including commercial tourism operators/permit holders<sup>1</sup> (alongside individual interviews with key businesses).</li> <li>• Distribution of an e-survey to vehicle/ camping permit holders for Cooloola Recreation Area over the previous two year period.</li> <li>• Distribution of an e-survey to the local community – using social media and existing community networks (Noosa Council).</li> </ul>

<b>III. Analysis</b>	
<p>Weighing up economic and visitor benefits and environmental and community issues makes determination of a site or destination’s carrying capacity a complex issue. It is probable that different thresholds will apply to different sites and vary over time given changing market circumstances. A one-size-fits-all approach for assessing carrying capacity of tourist destinations is unlikely to be feasible; therefore, a framework or model needs sufficient flexibility to account for individual site circumstances. As such a framework built around DPSIR (drivers, pressures, state, impact and response</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DPSIR is a causal framework for describing the interactions between society and the environment: Human impact on the environment and vice versa because of the interdependence of the components. The European Environment Agency have adopted this framework. The components of this model are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Driving forces: e.g., industry, tourism, economic growth, population.</li> <li>• Pressures: e.g., pollution, land-use change, population growth.</li> <li>• States: e.g., water quality, soil quality, air quality, habitat, vegetation.</li> <li>• Impacts: e.g., visitor experience, ill public health, habitat fragmentation, economic crisis, environmental damage, biodiversity loss.</li> <li>• Responses: e.g., policy, regulations.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> From 19<sup>th</sup> September to 17<sup>th</sup> October 2021, surveys were distributed to community, permit holder and business stakeholders. The surveys were instigated to fill gaps in evidence required to develop well-informed recommendations on carrying capacities and visitor management options. The surveys covered overall sentiment towards Cooloola Recreation Area, as well as perspectives on identified sites.

model of intervention) components has been used.	
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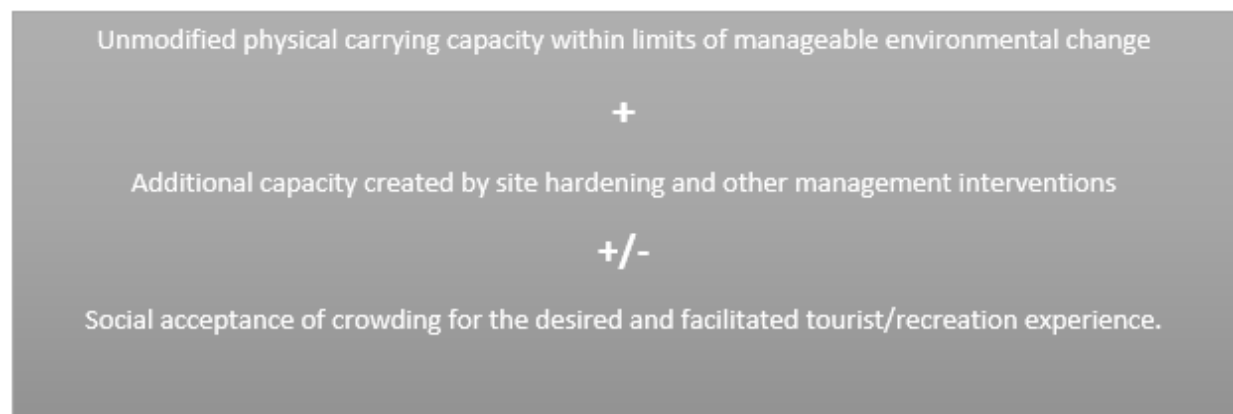
<b>IV. Reporting</b>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Key research/study findings and recommendations</li><li>• Technical appendices report</li><li>• Final report</li></ul>

### 1.3 Concept of Carrying Capacity

Discussion on the growth limits and carrying capacity of tourism destinations is not new. Carrying capacity has been at the heart of sustainable tourism management and aims to provide “time/space-specific answers” at individual sites.

There are many definitions of this concept, the most prominent of which in a tourism context is from the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) which defines carrying capacity as “*the maximum number of people that may visit a tourist destination at the same time, without causing destruction of the physical, economic and socio-cultural environment and an unacceptable decrease in the quality of visitors’ satisfaction.*” In recent times, the concept of over-tourism and its triggers/measures has become intertwined with carrying capacity.

However, the reality is that calculation of a “single carrying capacity number” is often not feasible for reasons such as inability to factor in future management action, quality/limits on data inputs and differences in threshold established by tourists and residents, and ecological resilience for individual sites. However, the concept of carrying capacity can still be used to identify critical impact thresholds, and for examining changes (i.e., a tool which aids sustainable management). In summary:



By defining a carrying capacity, managers have a benchmark for planning use and against which monitoring of visitor numbers and ecological change can be assessed to inform adaptive management.

### 1.4 The Need for Decisive Action on Sustainable Management Solutions

The need for sustainable management solutions at Cooloola Recreation Area is twofold:

- I. To respond to immediate peak management pressures;
- II. The need for a destination management approach; and
- III. To respond to inevitable longer term increased pressure – driven in part by recreational and leisure trends and, SEQ population growth.

#### 1.4.1 Immediate peak management pressures

Immediate pressures on infrastructure are apparent at peak periods. For instance, Vehicle Access Permits (VAPs) purchases have risen 29% between 2016/17 (90,443) and 2020/2021 (116,689). In addition, there were 67,824 VAP purchases in the first 6 months of 2021/22<sup>2</sup>, a figure which is 30% in advance of the previous year. If this trend continued throughout the remainder of the 2021/2022

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<sup>2</sup> 30 June to 31 Dec 2021



financial year, VAP purchases for the year will exceed 130,000 (an increase of over 40,000 on pre-COVID numbers).

While ferry usage includes resident as well as visitor traffic, similar growth trends can be seen:

- Annual vehicle traffic increased from 188,413 in 2012/13 to 231,669 in 2018/19<sup>3</sup> (the last full year prior to COVID impact – this equates to 23% growth at an average of 3.8% per year.
- Growth during the COVID period has further accelerated, with vehicle numbers growing from 231,669 in 2018/19 to 265,915 in 2020/21- this equates to a further 13% growth since 2018/19 at an average of 6.5% per year.

As per analysis of ferry traffic volumes, excluding the most severe lockdown periods, demand at Cooloola Recreation Area has accelerated during the COVID period, with anecdotal evidence indicating that a new visitor audience, less familiar with National Park surrounding and regulations being attracted as part of overall growth.

Growth in demand during 2021 can in a large part be attributed to COVID and its restrictions on travelling interstate and overseas which saw Qld residents not only holidaying at home, but keen to get out into nature and beaches once lockdown/s were lifted. This situation is echoed in National Parks across Australia where similar high user patterns are being experienced and management responses such as imposing vehicle limits or instigating temporary closures being put in place.

There is a clear trend in increased demand and visitation of a period of time, however it is important to note that there will undoubtedly be some moderation in demand once international travel for Australians is considered safe again.

#### 1.4.2 The need for a destination management approach

Areas such as Teewah Beach and Double Island Point, and Cooloola Recreation Area as a whole, are now increasingly being seen by visitors as destinations in their own right. Management needs to take a similar destination-wide approach. It is recognised that usage patterns in Cooloola Recreation Area are complex. Considerations include:

- Visitors accessing the site are using daily, weekly, monthly, and annual Visitor Access Permits (VAPs). Visitors also have the option to buy a joint K'gari/Cooloola Recreation Area monthly VAP.
- Visitors enjoy a range of experiences including enjoyment of nature, camping, socialising, fishing, 4WD, and surfing.
- Management intent and priorities of First Nations Peoples - Kabi Kabi First Nation and Butchulla Native Title Aboriginal Corporation.
- Amenity of Noosa Northshore and Teewah Beach residents.
- Rainbow Beach residents who use the beach for through access.
- Commercial tourism operators (CTOs) operating in the Cooloola Recreation Area
- The relationship between business opportunities for the Rainbow Beach community and visitors camping at Cooloola Recreation Area. Associated trade is seen as important for Rainbow Beach businesses.
- The business needs of Commercial Tourism Operators in the Recreation Area.

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<sup>3</sup> Noosa Shire Council

- Balancing competing user demands of user groups with the values and desired state and values for the Recreation Area.

### **Management Context**

Management context and strategic intent is provided in the Cooloola Recreation Area Management Plan, which is currently at draft stage, and in the application of the Values-Based Management Framework (VBMF).

Cooloola Recreation area is managed to the Exceptional Level of Service for visitor management due to the significant number of visitors; its status as an international tourism destination; and the need to conserve the very high natural values which are critical to the visitors' experience. Exceptional is the highest Levels of Service (LoS) benchmark used to set the desired management standards across all Queensland National Parks.

The Values-Based Management Framework (VBMF) is an adaptive management cycle that incorporates planning, prioritising, doing, monitoring, evaluating and reporting into all areas of QPWS's park planning and management accountabilities.

Adaptive management is fundamental to the Values-Based Management Framework (VBMF). Monitoring the condition of key values, through time, is essential for determining the effectiveness of on-ground management. The condition of key values is assessed through the Health Checks program. Adaptive management enables QPWS to be more flexible and proactive and improve management effectiveness over time. Forests and reserves are kept healthy by:

- managing and protecting the things that matter most—our key values
- strategically directing management effort towards priorities
- delivering our custodial obligations as a land manager
- setting a level of service for all parks, forests and reserves
- building systems that support decision making for adaptive management
- building support for what we do through accountability and transparency
- striving for improvement through structured learning and doing.

Levels of Service are applied to eight park management elements for each park:

- Fire management
- Pest management
- Natural values management
- Historic cultural heritage management
- Community and third party interests management
- Visitor management
- Field management capability
- Operational planning and management support

### 1.4.3 Longer-term management pressures

Longer term management requirements will need to be informed by appropriate data, but there seems to be little doubt that population growth will mean increased demand for recreational space, including Cooloola Recreation Area.

Trends including increasing usage, as well as future population growth suggestions are clear:

- The increased demand for SUVs and 4WD vehicles shows no sign of slowing down<sup>4</sup>. Sales of 4WDs in Australia show consistent above average growth compared to other vehicle types. Similarly, caravan sales continue to show strong growth (26.7% over the 5 years to 2020)<sup>5</sup>
- Strong demand in national parks from visitors. In Australia, over the ten years from 2010 to 2019, the number of domestic overnight visitors going to a national park or state forest increased more than 120% to reach 11.5 million nationally. Visitors in Queensland going to a national park or state forest increased more than 85% to 2.5 million over the same time period. 8.8% of visitors in Queensland went to a national park or state forest in 2010, by 2019 this share grew to 10.8% and by 2021 had reached 12.4% of all visitors in Queensland.<sup>6</sup>

As noted in figure 1, population growth projections are significant - local and regional recreational demand is highly likely to drive usage levels. These regions are the key source areas for visits to Cooloola Recreation Area.<sup>7</sup>

Figure 1: Forecast Local and Regional Population Forecasts

Area	Population Growth
South-East Queensland <sup>8</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anticipated growth of an additional 1.9m people between 2017 and 2040 (growth of 54%).</li> </ul>
Sunshine Coast <sup>9</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forecast growth from 351,424 in 2021 to 518,004 in 2041 (approximately 166k additional people – growth of 47%).               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For the 2021-2031 period, forecast growth is for 85,361 additional residents, with annual growth of 2.2% (24.3% overall growth).</li> <li>• For the 2031-2041 period, forecast growth is for 81,218 additional residents, with annual growth of 1.7% (18.6% overall growth).</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Significant demographic shifts will also occur, with over 40,000 of the total forecast growth between 2021 and 2041 taking place in the 75+ age group.</li> </ul>

<sup>4</sup> [https://documents.parliament.qld.gov.au/committees/TRC/2021/VehSafetyStdTech/qton-24May2021\\_AAAA.pdf](https://documents.parliament.qld.gov.au/committees/TRC/2021/VehSafetyStdTech/qton-24May2021_AAAA.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://caravanstats.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2020-Caravan-and-Campervan-Data-Report.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> NVS, Tourism Research Australia, 2021

<sup>7</sup> Appendix 2, question 2

<sup>8</sup> <https://dsdmipprd.blob.core.windows.net/general/shapingseq.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.sunshinecoast.qld.gov.au/Experience-Sunshine-Coast/Statistics-and-Maps/Population-Growth>

<https://www.qgso.qld.gov.au/issues/5276/qld-population-projections-regions-reports-local-government-areas-sa2-report-2018-edn.pdf>

The pressure of increasing demand at Cooloola Recreation Area being driven in part by continued population growth is understood. Management action will be necessary to mitigate the potential of unchecked growth. While a simplistic scenario, the potential impact can be illustrated by considering that if visits to Cooloola Recreation Area were to continue to grow in tandem with population forecasts with no capacity limits, this could mean annual VAP purchases of approximately 225,000 in 2040.

### 1.5 The need to manage to balance environmental and visitor risks

The implications of short to medium and longer-term demand drivers of the types noted in section 1.4 can be viewed in the form of a series of management risks. Considerations include:

- Visitor safety outweighs other considerations. It is reasonable to assume that a combination of peak visitor volumes and behavioural issues such as speeding, and dangerous driving in populated beach areas could relate to increased visitor safety risks.<sup>10</sup> There would seem to be a number of visitor hotspot areas, where it would be legitimate to take visitor management actions solely on the basis of improving visitor safety. With increased peak visitor pressure and an increased volume hazardous driving behaviour, safety risks could increase, heightening the need to consider management responses on capacity, environment, and visitor behaviour.
- Key drivers such as population growth and continued popularity of 4WD/beach and nature-based activities mean that the status quo in terms of management arrangements at peak periods may not be tenable beyond the short to medium term, with pressures highly likely to continuing to grow. A combination of capacity management, visitor management, infrastructure and compliance measures will be essential into the future.
- Any inability to measure usage or impact to an appropriate level gives rise to potential risk in terms of accounting for statutory obligations under legislation and international agreements:
  - This can be managed by focusing on gaining a better understanding of the underpinning issues which impact on management obligations, safety, environment, and visitor experience.
- Intermittent and emerging compliance operations and monitoring systems<sup>11</sup> are observing high levels of non-compliance at present, with a need to consider mitigating actions.
- QPWS has systems for recording regulating CTOs and camping, but there are currently no tools to regulate overall volume of vehicle-based visitors. A variety of visitor access permits being available for Cooloola Recreation Area (daily, weekly, and annual) exacerbates monitoring challenges.
- Visitor volume and behaviour issues at Cooloola Recreation Area are of concern for local residents, Noosa Council, and conservation stakeholders, with significant coverage in local and regional media.
- An exceptionally busy set of peak demand periods over 2022 and beyond may intensify demands for more urgent management solutions.

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<sup>10</sup> Technical Appendix 2, Q19

<sup>11</sup> Analysis of traffic management cameras by QPWS estimates an approximate 30% non-compliance rate in vehicles having the appropriate VAP

## 2. Overview of Capacity Issues

### 2.1 Overview

Research during the study has confirmed that capacity issues manifest themselves at Cooloola Recreation Area, particularly during peak visitation periods. Key issues to note are:

- Evidence demonstrates there are **capacity impacts, especially at peak times**.
- Evidence demonstrates **demand will continue to increase**, driven by population growth and societal/leisure trends.
- The area has a **complex range of visitor groups**, accessing the site via daily, weekly, monthly and annual VAPs as well as Rainbow Beach residents using the beach as a through-route. 693 Rainbow Beach residents currently have exemptions (of a total of 1,477, which includes Teewah Beach residents, contract workers, volunteers, education groups etc.)
- There are currently no accurate **means to measure and regulate** overall visitor numbers, including day visitor peaks.

### Drivers and Pressures

Chapter 1 of this report discusses a range of drivers and resulting pressures which contribute to peak-period capacity challenges - recreation, population growth and tourism are to the fore. Management priorities for Cooloola Recreation Area recognise the economic potential of tourism, however, at present the area's user profile indicates that recreation and leisure pressure is a greater driver of capacity and demand than tourism/ economic activity.

In practical terms, capacity issues impact on management in a number of areas:

### Impacts

- Natural pinch points, including the ferry and the roads leading to it. Visitation hits daily peaks at entry/leaving times – queuing traffic is noted as a problem at the ferry entry/exit points.
- High numbers of vehicles on the beach during peak holiday periods, with particular concentration at hotspots such as Teewah Beach Camping Zone, Double Island Point, and Rainbow Beach/ Lagoons.
- Clustering of visitors at hotspots such as the camping zones, Teewah Beach/ lagoons, and Double Island Point.
- Perception and optics – large streams/ parking of 4WDs on the beach can be perceived as being at odds with management values.
- Environmental and habitat challenges, the most significant of which in the context of a busy Recreation Area environment are litter, the impact of bush toileting, hardening/creep of areas surrounding campsites, and damage to dune ecosystems.
- Different stakeholder groups are impacted by high visitation levels in different ways;
  - Permit holders/ visitors are concerned primarily by falling experience levels.
  - Communities have a focus on conservation values and impacting on local amenity.
  - Conservation and environmental stakeholders have concerns regarding a range of issues regarding setting and habitat including damage to dune habitats and impact on flora/

fauna on the beach and inter-tidal zone. The impact of bush toileting at hotspots was a particular issue noted.

Review of stakeholder survey data and available environmental management information suggests that behavioural issues, and peak visitation contribute to:

- Decreases in experience levels of visitors.
- Loss of amenity for residents who are closest to traffic queues and visitor hubs.
- Concerns about damage to Traditional Owners' places of cultural significance

#### **States**

- Degraded habitats and environments, with bush toileting and damage to dunes/areas surrounding camping zones and visitor hubs. Community, business, and permit holder responses to surveys undertaken indicate that degraded habitats and environments is the area of most significant concern.

#### **Management Implications and Responses**

Available evidence gathered during the study points towards the need to implement visitation limits at peak periods alongside developing the capability to regulate (ability to book for the time you are visiting). A comprehensive and staged package of management responses could include:

- Benchmarking the desired state (value).
- Development and application of further specific measures for sustainable use.
- Establishment of tools to regulate those measures, and
- Monitoring mechanisms that enable the result of managed use against the desired state to be demonstrated.

### 3. Principles for Recommendations

The following principles underpin the recommendations for sustainable visitor management actions. The recommendations set out in section 4 of this report directly correspond to these principles.

- The balance of stakeholder sentiment and available environmental data indicates that the peak visitor volumes are too high and contribute to loss of experience as well as the potential for cultural and environmental impacts. However, to be credible with stakeholders, capacity is not the only issue – sustainable management solutions need to integrate capacity/volume, management, infrastructure, and visitor behaviour.
- Management actions need to be aligned with primary obligations for management of the natural environment and associated nature-based recreation, however stakeholders and user groups are diverse with strongly held views that do not always align with these requirements. As such, presentation as a package (capacity, compliance, pricing, infrastructure, experience) provides an opportunity to gain support and manage expectations.
- Feedback from user, community and business surveys and stakeholder interviews indicate that many of the immediate management concerns identified are associated with visitor behaviour. As a general principle, it is recommended that a suite of management actions including regulatory changes and compliance are implemented with a view to influence a positive change in visitor behaviour, with the impact of actions assessed against desired benchmarks.
- Setting daily capacity limits should be considered as part of the package of sustainable visitor management measures and responses. While limiting capacity is in many ways a final management response, the extent of ongoing drivers and pressures means that it should be considered as a management tool in the short to medium term.
- Determining carrying capacity requires a nuanced approach which relates to visitor demand and the characteristics of the National Park or Recreation Area in question. However, ideally a consistent set of management techniques, pricing and policies would be applied across the parks estate in SEQ, even if only focusing initially on parks which have a high value from a community recreation perspective. e.g., recreation areas. Tiered pricing based on value of setting and experience provided has merit for consideration.
- Short term management measures are necessary, but a perspective on managing longer term growth in recreational pressure will be required.
- Seeking an appropriate balance between enforcement and compliance, and proactive management. Despite the scale of management challenge, the aspiration should seek to balance social license with appropriate communication and management techniques.

- Management measures need to be enforceable. Without appropriate compliance, the management regime is undermined. Estimates from analysis of number plate cameras indicate that the rate of non-compliance for VAPs is approximately 30%.<sup>11</sup> This level of non-compliance is consistent, indicating that visitor behaviour is not yet changing. Further action and new approaches are necessary to bring about the required change.
- The stakeholder survey results summarised in **Technical Appendix 2** and their support for a range of management measures provides a sound basis for action to be taken. The visitor management issues identified are largely well known, however, strong levels of community, permit holder and business support give additional weight.

The open nature of Cooloola Recreation Area means that many of the recommendations are area wide. Where evidence allows, site-specific action is supported.



## 4. Recommendations

### 4.1 Short to medium term considerations

The following series of recommendations covering safety, capacity, infrastructure, pricing & fees, proactive visitor management, environmental management, business & economic measures, and site-specific issues, focus on short-term management considerations.

#### 4.1.1 Consideration of measures which improve safety for visitors

QPWS advise that visitor safety is the number one priority. A range of practical measures can be considered to improve visitor behaviour. Specifically relating to safety, consideration of the following is recommended.

1. **Speed.** Stakeholder surveys conducted during the study recorded strong levels of recognition of speed being a significant safety concern.<sup>12</sup> Outside camping areas, a maximum speed limit of 80 km/hr currently applies. While beach driving conditions vary with the tides, and there are practical reasons of requiring a certain speed limit to travel safely from A-B (between high tides), reducing the maximum speed limit may support an overall improvement in visitor safety. Setting of speed limits is best addressed as a cross-agency issue involving a number of Government Departments, Noosa Council, and other key stakeholders.

Consideration of a reduction of the speed limits outside camping areas to 60 km/hr could be valuable as part of a package of management issues.

Appropriate beach signposting (avoiding unnecessary signage clutter) and accompanying communication will be required if new measures are introduced in this area.

2. **Revised or current speed limit compliance** is recommended, and where possible, supported by a cross-agency compliance team, with communication on speed limits being reinforced as further support.
3. Linked to measures which enhance visitor safety and protect wildlife, **consider the introduction of measures which limit night-time driving** where these can be supported by monitoring and compliance systems. There are a number of examples of this type of technique being used in Australia and internationally (seasonally and on a year-round basis<sup>13</sup>). Issues requiring consideration include:
  - i. Exclusions may be required for resident, professional fisher access and emergencies.
  - ii. If action is taken in relation to protecting wildlife, impact and issues need to be clearly understood, with action taken as part of appropriate overall management.
  - iii. Aligning regulations with tidal patterns.
  - iv. Consideration of activities such as fishing which legitimately may require travel on the beach after sunset, and whether a permit (new type) would be required to facilitate this type of activity.
  - v. The practical ability to enforce regulations – an option to consider is the filter point being access to the ferry i.e., only certain permit holders would be granted access after 7pm. Alternatively, random night patrols undertaken by a dedicated

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<sup>12</sup> Appendix 2, question 19

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.broome.wa.gov.au/Home/Tabs/Latest-news/Protecting-our-turtles-with-temporary-beach-closures>

compliance team from time to time and particularly during implementation and peak use periods may be considered.

#### 4.1.2 Consideration of introducing caps on day visitor and camping capacity as part of a package of management measures

Analysis conducted during this study indicates that **combined day visitor and camping total of 900 – 1000 vehicles** as the threshold beyond which, peak visitation levels at Cooloola Recreation Area can be defined. Technical Appendix 4 contains an analysis of capacity issues, including consideration of a number of daily capacity capping options and their potential impact.

Consideration of the following is recommended:

5. Regarding **camping capacity**, while there are certainly a range of management and behavioural issues associated with camping, an overall beach camping capacity of **1,500 persons/250 sites** seems appropriate, factoring in the dynamic nature of the coastal environment and the potential safety issues along this stretch of coastline e.g., high-risk landslip areas. Prioritising retention of this level of camping provision supports the economic benefits derived from tourism and the nearby Rainbow Beach community.

This capacity reflects current levels of campsite provision. In the next 3-year period, camping capacity should not exceed this capacity. Regarding camping visitors, sustainable visitor management recommendations should focus on management, compliance, communication, and behaviour issues (covered in following sections).

6. Regarding **day visitor/ daily VAP capacity**, it is recommended that behaviour change, and other management initiatives are prioritised in the first instance, but that a cap on daily VAPs is considered for introduction on a trial basis as a means of controlling growing day visitor pressures.

This cap on day visitors/ daily VAPs would be in addition to a VAP allocation for camping visitors identified in recommendation 5. If combined with actions to address non-compliance with VAPs and application of other recommended compliance and behaviour change measures, this package has the potential to result in a step-change in overall sustainable visitor management capability.

7. Regarding a **permitting/ VAP system** which enables daily visitor volumes to be regulated, options are presented in Technical Appendix 4 (Table C). For the identified peak days per year where traffic movements are significantly above the norm (up to 20 days per year), consider the introduction of a system where access is based on requiring a **single daily peak period VAP**. This option is recommended on the basis of providing the strongest level of management control on capacity. Considerations include:

- i. An appropriate number of joint camping/VAP permits could be reserved (for example 1,500 camping spaces/ 250 sites would require up to an estimated 500 VAPs).
  - The introduction of a VAP package consisting of camping and vehicle permits could support management in this area.
  - The need for dynamic booking system capability that allowed VAPs to be allocated between day visitors and campers up to the total capacity limit i.e., spare VAP capacity could be allocated to day visitors if campsites are not fully booked.

- ii. Available daily VAPs (excluding allocations for camping) could be **capped at a trial number, for example in the range 400-500**, and made available to visitors on either a ballot or first come-first served basis. The key to obtaining the necessary management control is to require these VAPs to be pre-booked during defined peak periods.
- Exclusions for resident exemptions would still apply (conditions for travel purpose could be considered e.g., direct route from Rainbow Beach to Noosa only).
  - A new or adapted booking system would be required to ensure efficient operation of a ballot system. Alternatively, this recommendation could potentially be implemented as a variant of the restricted access permit used during COVID. In the short term, an option to consider could be working in partnership with Noosa Council/ ferry operator to determine whether a permit check system could be introduced prior to boarding the ferry. Ideally, longer-term solutions would be technology-led e.g., RFID or QR codes.
  - In the longer term, compliance effort could be enhanced by an automated system that links number plate recognition with issuing of penalties.
  - Consideration would need to be given to the booking horizon/advance booking period for daily VAPs in peak booking periods. Experience with camping permits indicates that if the horizon is too long, no-shows/ghost bookings is likely to occur. A ballot system for peak periods would negate this concern.
  - Achieving a reduction in current non-compliance levels with VAPs requires further consideration of strategies that could be implemented.
  - In general terms, the range of VAP options (daily, weekly, monthly, and annual) currently available for Cooloola Recreation Area makes managing daily visitor capacities challenging, however it is noted that this may require regulatory change, and a regulatory impact statement, as well as system enhancements, but benefits would likely be realised.
  - Subject to resources, ideally a daily capacity limit should be trialled for a 12 month period to evaluate systems effectiveness and before/after impact on user experience and environment.

#### 4.1.3 Consideration of communication measures which support sustainable visitor management

Improved communication as one element of overall sustainable visitor management gained support from all stakeholder groups in consultation feedback. Improved communication could take the form of a range of tactical measures including on the ground information and signposting/ interpretation, the proactive and educational role provided by rangers, digital and website information, and regular communication with permit holders.

Consultation feedback reiterated the challenges of communicating effectively among across a diversion range of stakeholders – public sector partners, local communities, businesses, visitors and not for profit groups/ volunteers. Consideration of the following is recommended:

8. Establish a **collaborative marketing framework** which reflects the appropriate balance of visitor experience and national park setting for Cooloola Recreation Area, working closely with councils and tourism organisations. An enhanced focus on visitor communications can reinforce the special nature of the Recreation Area and the management conditions that

apply. 4WD and scenic drives are an important part of the experience for many visitors, and at present, this image of the area is reinforced with marketing imagery typically including vehicles on the beach. As part of communications in the future, strategic use of a broader range of imagery can assist in bringing about perception change and reinforce longer-term management intent.

9. **Integrate communications as a tool** into sustainable visitor management. For instance, delivering communications on options for dispersal or alternative coastal/ national park locations when booking levels are high or high volumes of day visitors are expected. This type of initiative can be delivered by QPWS via its digital and social media channels but will also have much more weight if co-ordinated with tourism organisations and councils. This type of tool has value from the perspective of improving visitor experience as well as helping to mitigate potential impact from high visitation levels.
10. A regular and consistent **program of communication with local communities** – this could include communications about dispersal and anticipated peak demand, and also reiterate the intent and conditions of permit exemptions for local residents i.e., traversing the beach to ease business and daily commutes.

#### 4.1.4 Investing in infrastructure which supports sustainable visitor management

The provision of appropriate dedicated infrastructure has been shown to play an important role in management at high volume National Parks.<sup>14</sup> At Cooloola, given the linear nature of the beaches and characteristics of the area, the opportunity for additional infrastructure to play a role in sustainable visitor management is reasonably limited. However, the current infrastructure, particularly the availability of public toilets has challenges in meeting demand in peak periods. Consideration can be given to the following:

11. The portable-toilet mandate has provided a mitigating solution for bush toileting by campers, however, there are still challenges for day visitors. It is impractical to require day visitors to bring portable toilets, therefore it is reasonable to examine the feasibility of **new permanent toilet provision** or additional capacity – in particular, in the vicinity of Double Island Point.
12. While communications infrastructure is not a QPWS-led matter, consideration should be given to the **enhancement of communication capabilities**, including communication and connectivity by mobile phone between QPWS and QPS and for the public, and for electronic devices that rangers use to perform real time VAP, camping permit, vehicle registration and driver license checks.

#### 4.1.5 Pricing and Fees that Reflects Demand and Management Costs

Pricing across most types of tourism experience is an accepted tool to support demand management and visitor management. The current camping fee structure of \$6.85 per person per night, or \$27.40 per family per night is a uniform rate applied across all camp sites. In comparison, most other states and territories apply more flexible and sophisticated pricing systems which take account of demand in separate locations as well as seasonal/peak periods.

In comparison to commercial providers and the price levels levied in other states and territories, the current \$6.85 fee is low. Certainly, the market could bear an increase without impacting on demand.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.npca.org/articles/2861-infrastructure-needs-in-our-national-parks>  
<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2011/10/05/mejor-infraestructura-para-parques-nacionales>

Equivalent basic commercial campsites in the region are typically in the \$15 to \$20 per person per night<sup>15</sup> range. It is recognised, however, that pricing is driven by government policy.

As noted, the price point for VAPs, especially daily VAPs is low in comparison to other states. It is recommended, subject to government policy frameworks, that the pricing of peak period VAPs be reviewed, with increases to a level that limit ghost/no-show bookings being considered. The current daily VAP fee of \$13.60 is not a deterrent for ghost/no-show bookings. Most states and territories do not have daily vehicle permits as a purchase option but by way of comparison

- Tasmania's daily pass costs \$40 per vehicle/ \$20 per person (excluding Cradle Mountain).
- Victoria does not have vehicle fees but makes extensive use of peak/shoulder/off peak pricing to differentiate on fee levels.<sup>16</sup>
- An analysis of National Park fee comparisons is contained in **Appendix 3**.

While not an issue related to capacity, issues such as undervaluing the National Park setting and the low price encouraging the habit of ghost bookings/constantly re-booking sites does start to impact on capacities. Certainly, if caps get placed on daily numbers at some stage in the future, the issue of ghost bookings will heighten in importance for permit holders and some proactive regulation is recommended.

If pricing changes are able to be presented as a larger package of management measures to enhance experience, protect habitats, and better manage the space, this offers potential to build acceptance. It is recognised that hypothecation of revenues can be challenging for Governments, being able to demonstrate to customers how their contributions are directly supporting improved management can be valuable.

13. To support consistent facility provision and maintaining quality of experience, subject to government policy, consideration could be given to implementing **new pricing structures for camping and vehicle access**. Options include:

- i. If the current per person pricing regime for camping is maintained, consider raising the daily camping fee to a minimum of \$10. This level of fee remains below the norm in a range of commercial camping options across the Sunshine Coast and Fraser Coast<sup>17</sup> regions.
- ii. Given the challenges and demand that destinations such as Cooloola Recreation Area face, the introduction of peak period or variable pricing has merits. Once again, if related directly to quality of experience, infrastructure maintenance and effective management. Stakeholder survey feedback is supportive of this type of measure being considered. Given the demand for camping at Cooloola, it is reasonable to consider setting a higher fee for this area compared to QPWS sites elsewhere in Queensland.
- iii. Consider enforcing the current legislated modification fee for camping (\$15 fee every third modification) or building in a stronger incentive (applying the fee to every

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<sup>15</sup> EarthCheck research

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.parks.vic.gov.au/where-to-stay/ballots-and-peak-season-bookings/tidal-river-summer-ballot#Prices>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.visitfrasercoast.com/accommodation/>  
<https://www.visitsunshinecoast.com/search?refinementList%5BproductCategoryId%5D=ACCOMM&page=4&configure%5BattributesToRetrieve%5D%5B0%5D=productName&configure%5BattributesToRetrieve%5D%5B1%5D=productDescription&configure%5BattributesToRetrieve%5D%5B2%5D=productCategoryId&configure%5BattributesToRetrieve%5D%5B3%5D=multimedia&configure%5BattributesToRetrieve%5D%5B4%5D=productImage&configure%5BattributesToRetrieve%5D%5B5%5D=startDate&configure%5BattributesToRetrieve%5D%5B6%5D=endDate&configure%5BattributesToRetrieve%5D%5B7%5D=endDateTimeStamp&configure%5BhitsPerPage%5D=12&configure%5Banalytics%5D=true&configure%5BenablePersonalization%5D=true&query=camping>

booking, or every second booking) to directly address the habit of customers booking exclusive use of sites and modifying bookings continuously to secure a site 'in case' they decide to camp.

- iv. To help address the issue of ghost camping, and reinforce the value placed on visiting a National Park, consider adoption of a per site pricing regime. Ideally, sites would be individually numbered, but it is acknowledged that enforcing compliance in a remote location such as Cooloola Recreation Area would be challenging.
- v. Subject to government policy, pricing of peak period VAPs could be reviewed to increase to a level that prevents ghost bookings/ no-shows. The current day permit fee of \$13.60 is too low to be an effective disincentive. With regard to fee levels for daily vehicle permits, only Tasmania offers a direct comparison within Australia where rates of \$40 per vehicle/\$20 per person apply State-wide (excluding Cradle Mountain).

Daily fees would need to be considered in the context of existing weekly and monthly fees but considering an uplift of the VAP fee from the current \$13.60 to \$20 would be legitimate in the context of Tasmania's current charges. Considering a VAP variant of consisting of a vehicle fee plus extra passenger cost also has merit.

- vi. An alternative model, used by some jurisdictions is to offer a range of annual VAP packages. For example – a Gold VAP gives vehicle access to the area for the year with exception to specific high peak block-out periods i.e., Christmas, Easter, Australia Day and peak school holiday periods, a Silver VAP could include periods of further high use block-out periods covering all school and public holidays, and a premium Platinum VAP could include access on any date throughout the year, and pricing would be commensurate. It could include free camping for platinum holders at a designated site (would still require a booking).

#### 4.1.6 Effective compliance which supports a great visitor experience

Consensus from stakeholder feedback is that behaviour change among the current demographic visiting Cooloola Recreation Area has a significant part to play in sustainable visitor management and has the potential to play a key role in addressing some of the capacity issues being experienced. However, stakeholders are also aware that there is an appropriate balance to be struck between ensuring rules are enforced and enabling visitors to enjoy a high quality experience.

Specifically relating to behaviour change, consideration of the following is recommended.

14. Taking a **zero tolerance** approach to important compliance matters (speed, reckless driving, wilful damage, causing nuisance, environmental damage). This measure gained strong support in consultation feedback across all stakeholder groups. Alongside effective communication and information, zero tolerance can be a key pillar in the overall approach to compliance and enforcement, albeit implementation and resourcing challenges are noted.
  - i. Introducing enhanced compliance monitoring (wider technological base monitoring), Number Plate Recognition System monitoring, and cross referencing booking monitoring and PINS, can play an important role in supporting a zero tolerance approach.
15. Applying **appropriate penalties which incentivise compliance**. This issue received strong support across stakeholder surveys and consultation feedback. Subject to legislative change in

some cases, and agreement with partners including Queensland Police Service (QPS), options for consideration include:

- i. Introducing increased penalties which function as a more effective deterrent to inappropriate behaviour. For instance, the ability for rangers/ authorised officers to issue driving penalties in the same manner as QPS i.e., demerit points on licences as well as fine for driving offences. It is appreciated that legislative change to support this type of measure would need to be supported by government, however this type of penalty is likely to have significantly more impact than modest financial penalties alone.
- ii. At present, many of the behaviour problems experienced are attributed to younger age groups, including P-plate drivers. Focusing regulations to this age group seems a practical solution but it does raise valid social concerns. An option to consider is the impact of compliance measures that apply to all visitors but would have a particular impact on this visitor demographic – for instance, applying double demerit points to driving offences on the beach.
- iii. Active application of existing driving and related regulation to build the deterrent levels for beach driving offences, and alignment with the DTMR-based driving related offence penalties and driver licence related points system (as enforced by Queensland Police). For instance, hooning laws allow for measures such as impounding vehicles and banning vehicles from the road. Knowledge that these laws are being applied can potentially have a significant impact on behaviour.
- iv. Enhancing change to “Direction to Leave” Provisions. At present a visitor who is directed to leave a Recreation Area can return in 24/48 hours. Changing provisions to make this a 7 day or longer period (relative to the type/seriousness of offence) would ensure offenders were not able to reconvene immediately after being directed to leave.
- v. For identified offences, the ability to prohibit visitors or identified vehicles from visiting the area is a potentially valuable compliance tool. The key to application of this type of measure is incorporating unique identifiers into VAP and camping booking systems. Technological solutions which support verifiable ID would be ideal - validating as correct upon the vehicle details being presented before proceeding with the purchase of the permit.

**16. Resourcing compliance** to a level commensurate with the management task. There is consensus among all stakeholders about the increasing scale of task for rangers and partner agencies. Options to consider include:

- i. Continued co-ordinated action among partner agencies – QPWS, Queensland Police Service (QPS) and the Department of Transport and Main Roads (DTMR). Resourcing constraints are recognised, however the ability to support the application of a new package of compliance measures for Cooloola Recreation Area consistently over a period of time has the potential to bring about significant behaviour change.
- ii. Given the scale of the visitor management challenge in SEQ Parks including very high-volume locations such as Cooloola Recreation Area, a move to recruiting QWPS teams with compliance/ enforcement skills has merit. For instance, a dedicated compliance team (authorised officers in the RAM Area) which could support ranger teams on the

ground through SEQ at peak times would enhance overall management capability. This dedicated type of 'drive in' compliance team(s) from outside the Region would potentially be the most efficient and effective means of achieving improved levels of visitors' compliance, through both direct intervention and operational training and mentoring of local rangers. This type of unit would be well-placed to support night-time compliance checks where required.

- iii. Continued adoption of technological solutions which aid visitor management is also an important consideration. Installation of number plate recognition cameras has been a great step forward however there have been ongoing compliance issues experienced - devices and systems which provide QPWS with greater understanding of visitor movements and which aid efficient compliance should continue to be pursued.

#### 4.1.7 Proactive Visitor Management

A wide range of practical ideas were suggested by stakeholder groups to improve safety and visitor experience and minimise potential for environmental impact and conflict between user groups. It is natural that there are varying views among stakeholder groups on management options which should be prioritised. Options include:

17. **Campfires in National Parks** remain a contentious issue, with many respondents to the stakeholder surveys seeing campfires as part of camping experiences. However, in this area, safety considerations should continue to be the primary consideration. In areas with high bushfire risk and challenges with connectivity, the ban on open fires is essential. Reviewing communication to ensure there is clarity about what type of BBQs are allowed, should be considered.
18. **Minimising potential for user group conflict** is an ongoing management issue in most National Park settings, with zoning being a common mitigation technique. As visitor numbers grow, the rationale for considering new zones (such as suggested for jet skis) will grow stronger.
19. **Campsite Management.** Development of camping zones has been perceived to have generally worked well, however, stakeholder feedback has shown that visitor experience is still detrimentally impacted by overcrowding and concerns about the number of visitors per campsite, especially in relation to large groups at peak times. The following actions can be considered:
  - i. Individually numbering sites is the ideal solution for management purposes, however, the remote nature of the area, may cause practical implementation and compliance challenges.
  - ii. Health and Safety concerns related to landslides have meant that some areas of beach camping are unsafe and have been closed. If space is available, a review to identify options for dispersal of visitors over additional zones has merit for consideration.
  - iii. Consideration of the allocation of camping zones that are preferable for larger groups of campers could assist in avoiding conflicts between groups seeking a different experience.



#### 4.1.6 Management measures which support conservation and enhancement of habitats

Degradation of habitats is one of the impacts of peak visitor volumes and inappropriate visitor behaviour.

20. **Bush toileting** is perhaps the highest profile and most visible environmental and health issue at Cooloola Recreation Area. Initial indicators are that the application of the portable toilet policy to campers has largely been well received, however it will take persistence to ensure the policy has had the desired environmental impact. Survey feedback suggests that bush toileting remains an issue in peak periods for day visitors.

Options to mitigate the issues include:

- i. Reviewing locations where additional permanent toilets could be installed, including in the vicinity of Double Island Point.
- ii. Anecdotal feedback suggests that lack of good quality information on the impacts of visitors on environmental values is a limiting factor for overall sustainable visitor management. Options to consider include:
  - Annual onsite health checks are currently conducted and provide valuable detailed information on site issues. For key sites, an option to consider is conducting health checks on a more regular basis (potentially twice yearly), however the initial focus should be on determining the key environmental issues which need to be measured. An onsite evaluation (based on a consistent framework) can guide prioritisation of research/monitoring investment and outcomes.
  - Explore additional partnerships with university and conservation partners on specific priority research areas.

#### 4.1.7 Delivering sustainable economic business and economic benefits through commercial tourism

Commercial operators in the Cooloola Recreation Area provide an important means of delivering the economic potential of National Parks, supporting employment, and generating local expenditure. Compared with high-volume issues associated with camping and day visits at Cooloola, commercial tour business activity does not represent a significant overall capacity concern at present, however, realisation of available and assigned capacity is a risk, as repeatedly demonstrated across high/emerging demand sites in parks history.

21. From a business perspective, transparency in terms of opportunities/number of commercial permits available and clarity on appropriate types of activities is key. Consider undertaking a **review of tourism market demand and innovations in nature-based tourism**, current business activity, and their alignment with the values/setting of Cooloola Recreation Area, as part of the basis for proactive engagement with businesses.
22. The most frequent issue raised by commercial tourism operators is the need for permit conditions which allow them to be **responsive to quickly moving market circumstances**. Any review should consider mechanisms which allows for appropriate amendments to permit conditions alongside adherence/ penalties for non-compliance with permit conditions. If businesses consistently do not adhere to contracted conditions, it is reasonable that appropriate penalties/ permit cancellation are applicable.

## 4.2 Site-Specific Recommendations

### Double Island Point

Double Island Point is an extremely popular destination, with stakeholder feedback and analysis demonstrating that as a visitor hotspot, it is a microcosm for the range of sustainable visitor management challenges identified in this report. It is understood that a range of management options are already under consideration, including Maritime Safety Queensland (MSQ) currently reviewing the introduction of a 6-knot speed zone at Double Island Point as a means of addressing safety, user conflict and environmental concerns.

1. Review opportunities for new **public toilet provision** in the vicinity of Double Island Point (south) to provide facilities in this day visitor hotspot.
2. Double Island Point attracts large numbers of vehicles at peak times - consider implementation of a **vehicle exclusion zone** within say 100m of Double Island Point, as a means of improving visitor experience, improving visual amenity and reduction potential for compaction in the intertidal zone.

### Teewah Beach

Teewah is one of the visitor hotspots where there is stakeholder consensus on a number of issues including;

- Litter
- Dangerous driving
- Speeding
- Damage to habitats

Overall recommendations for Cooloola Recreation Area cover the issues identified with regard to Teewah Beach.

### Teewah Camping Zone

The Teewah Camping Zone is the visitor hotspot where stakeholder identified the most severe management issues including:

- Too many visitors at peak times
- Excessive noise/ parties
- User conflicts
- Too much traffic
- Litter
- Damage to the environment e.g., driving on dunes
- Inappropriate visitor behaviour e.g., hooning, dangerous driving

3. The focus at Teewah Camping Zone is on **campsite management**.

Considerations can include:

- i. Feedback on the campfire ban was mixed, with the permit holder survey indicating support for 'traditional' camping activities. However, safety is paramount, with bushfire risk mitigation requiring a firm policy stance.
- ii. Positioning sale of campsites as per a site rather than per person.

- iii. Reviewing communications and information at campsites to build awareness of the park setting and values.
  - iv. Review on an ongoing basis the opportunity to establish/ re-establish camping zones as a means of providing opportunities for effective management and minimising user conflict.
4. Prioritising Teewah for continued compliance and environmental monitoring.

### Freshwater Campsite

Compared to other locations, project research and stakeholder research has identified only minor capacity and visitor management issues at Freshwater.

5. Demand for beach camping has grown strongly in comparison to inland sites such as Freshwater. **Review marketing of the site**, to identify opportunities to redirect demand as a beach alternative.

### Rainbow Beach/ Lagoons

The lagoons area is one of the visitor hotspots where there is stakeholder consensus on a number of issues including;

- Too many visitors at peak times
- User conflicts including jet skis
- Too much traffic
- Damage to the environment
- Inappropriate visitor behaviour

Prioritising the Rainbow Beach/ lagoons precinct for enhanced compliance and environmental monitoring action. For example, use of jet skis is an issue which generated concern throughout stakeholder research – in terms of conflict with other users and potential environmental damage. It is noted that MSQ is conducting consultation at the time of writing to implement speed restrictions. Options which aid visitor management and improved experience for further consideration include:

6. Development of a **zoning plan** for the Double Island Point/ lagoon precinct, factoring in motorised/ non-motorised zones to reduce conflict (if needed post MSQ review).
7. Working in partnership with other agencies to **support compliance**.

### Upper Noosa River

Survey feedback indicated that capacity problems are not at the level seen on the beaches, survey respondents did identify 'too many visitors on the river' as the most significant concern for the Upper Noosa River sites. Stakeholders value retention of the wilderness setting.

8. Management actions should continue to focus on maintaining the wilderness setting. Consideration can be given to:
- i. Monitoring and addressing bush toileting.
  - ii. Maintaining the focus on low-impact free and independent and commercial activities.
  - iii. Monitoring speed limits and resulting bank erosion issues.

### 4.3 Longer term Considerations

Longer term management requirements will need to be informed by appropriate data, but there is little doubt that population growth, alongside a range of societal trends will mean increased demand for recreational space, including Coolooloa Recreation Area.

Trends including increasing usage, as well as future population growth suggestions are clear:

- Immediate pressures on infrastructure are apparent at peak periods. For instance, Vehicle Access Permit<sup>18</sup> (VAPs) purchases have risen 29% between 2016/17 (90,443) and 2020/2021 (116,689). In addition, there were 67,824 VAP purchases in the first 6 months of 2021/22<sup>19</sup>, a figure which is 30% in advance of the previous year. COVID travel restrictions have encouraged people to take more trips close to home, which combined with the perception of the health and wellbeing benefits and safety in outdoor environments, have driven strong demand. As international travel restrictions ease and consumers' confidence returns, growth seen during the COVID period would be expected to moderate, nonetheless longer term growth is set to continue.
- Population growth projections are significant - local and regional recreational demand is highly likely to continue to drive usage levels. South-east Queensland and the Sunshine Coast region in particular, are the key source areas for visits to Coolooloa Recreation Area.
  - Sunshine Coast - forecast growth from 351,424 in 2021 to 518,004 in 2041 (approximately 166k additional people – growth of 47%)<sup>20</sup>.
  - SEQ - anticipated growth of an additional 1.9m people between 2017 and 2040 (growth of 54%)<sup>21</sup>.

Longer term management considerations include:

1. Access to the area requires 4WD vehicles, which in significant part, is where environmental and resident amenity concerns stem from. In the longer term, if visitor vehicle movements on the beach are to be managed, **innovations** such as beach shuttle buses may be considered. Examples such as the Royal National Park bus service<sup>22</sup> and in US National Parks<sup>23</sup> show that these types of services can have a role to play in visitor management. While not a beach setting, the shuttle bus transport arrangement in Tasmania's Cradle Mountain/Lake St Clair National Park was specifically set up to protect the important values of the World Heritage Area and preserve the visitor experience by limiting vehicle numbers in the park.
2. **Consideration of seasonal, or sectional closures** to parts of the National Park and recreation area, access infrastructure permitting. There are numerous examples of this type of measure in National Parks around the world, which can be often driven by issues such as nesting seasons, as well as providing a period for natural rejuvenation. As an example, a

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<sup>18</sup> Total VAP's active

<sup>19</sup> 30 June to 31 Dec 2021

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.sunshinecoast.qld.gov.au/Experience-Sunshine-Coast/Statistics-and-Maps/Population-Growth>

<sup>21</sup> <https://dsdmipprd.blob.core.windows.net/general/shapingseq.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/things-to-do/guided-tours/royal-national-park-bus-service>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.nationalparkstraveler.org/2009/07/park-shuttle-bus-systems-are-growing-popularity-heres-look-some-popular-examples>

decision has recently been made to restrict vehicle access to Broome's Cable Beach<sup>24</sup> at night during turtle nesting season.

3. Anticipated continued growth in demand means that hardened infrastructure and application of enhanced visitor management alone is unlikely to retain the desired service levels for Cooloola Recreation Area. **Day visitor as well as camping capacity limits** are likely to be a core part of longer-term management planning. In this context, it may also be appropriate to consider prioritising investment in alternative sites and experiences across South-east Queensland to manage demand.
4. Further **zoning** which identifies the areas that can accommodate larger visitor numbers may be required, alongside appropriate dedicated infrastructure and management resources.
5. **Continuing exploration and adoption of technologies** such as Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) incorporation into permits will be required to aid sustainable visitor management. RFID technology enables greater understanding of visitor movement and activity, as well as supporting compliance (in principle, RFID technology could be integrated with compliance systems, resulting in automated issuing of PINs).
6. While QPWS has no influence over decisions by telecommunications companies on **connectivity infrastructure** and does not invest in this type of public access communications technology, improved communication connectivity infrastructure would support visitor safety as well as visitor management and compliance initiatives. Partnership opportunities to enhance connectivity should continue to be explored.

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.broome.wa.gov.au/Home/Tabs/Latest-news/Protecting-our-turtles-with-temporary-beach-closures>

