

# Sustainable Visitor Capacity Management Study

## Cooloola Recreation Area

Summary of recommendations and government response  
2024

### Introduction

Over the next ten years South East Queensland is expected to see a population increase of more than one million people.

Balancing this growth and the competing demands for access and use of coastal areas requires careful long-term planning to balance visitor safety and experiences with the conservation of nature, cultural and social values. The Queensland Government is committed to providing current and future generations of Queenslanders and wider visitors with unique, memorable and safe experiences, whilst also protecting the environment.

South East Queensland's Cooloola, Bribie Island and K'gari (Fraser Island) Recreation Areas are three of the most popular and iconic destinations for day and overnight visitors managed by the Queensland Government.

To assist in the long-term planning for these areas, Sustainable Visitor Capacity Management (SVCM) studies were commissioned by the Queensland Government.

SVCM studies are an important evaluation and planning tool to inform the development of management plans and visitor strategies. The studies aim to balance the community's contemporary uses and future needs and desires with conservation intent, socio-economic benefits and visitor satisfaction and wellbeing. Management plans provide the direction for day to day protected area management to ensure key values are conserved and activities are effectively managed.

The studies are based on community consultation and independent observations of visitor usage and recreational trends, and assessments of sustainability of visitor interactions with the natural environment and infrastructure.

As the three combined SVCM study areas attract up to 23,714 vehicles and 592,809 camper nights per annum, it was essential to stage the studies across annual cycles of low and peak visitor periods and successive seasons to ensure that visitation trends, challenges and opportunities were accurately captured.

The studies were undertaken by consultants Earthcheck Pty Ltd. The Cooloola study was completed first, followed by Bribie Island and K'gari (Fraser Island). The studies were undertaken sequentially to align with the timeframes for each area's management planning process (progressing in collaboration with each area's Traditional Owners) to ensure findings are considered in the development of the management plans.

Undertaking and analysing three planning processes on three high-value areas while post-covid travel was normalising has been a unique opportunity. It has provided valuable insights into the conservation and recreation ethos of hundreds of thousands of community members from the most highly populated area of the state.



The Cooloola SVCM summary and response document aligns the recommendations and government responses to six key themes:

- Management capability and partnerships
- Conservation
- Capacity and permitting
- Visitor safety
- Infrastructure
- Visitor experience.

These SVCM processes have provided an excellent opportunity to gain insight into the challenges, opportunities and seasonal demands across the 3 study areas to inform planning and enhanced management.

Specifically, the Cooloola SVCM study has informed the draft Cooloola Recreation Area Management Plan. Stakeholders and the community will now have a further opportunity to provide feedback as part of the Cooloola Recreation Area Draft Management Plan Review during the public consultation period, which starts in May 2024.

The staged delivery and consideration of the SVCM studies, individually and collectively, in conjunction with existing park management and planning processes has already resulted in additional resourcing and investment by the Queensland Government to advance priority actions to improve conservation and visitor management outcomes. This document sets out the actions already completed and further commitments to continue to improve the conservation and management of Cooloola.

## Summary of process

The Queensland Government commissioned Earthcheck Pty Ltd to undertake Sustainable Visitor Capacity Management (SVCM) studies for Cooloola, Bribie Island and K'gari (Fraser Island) Recreation Areas.

The studies spanned annual and seasonal visitation periods and assessed current site demands and impacts. The studies surveyed user and stakeholder groups to identify values and views about current visitation and sentiment towards visitor management options and priorities for consideration in the management planning processes.

The Cooloola Recreation Area study covers the entire recreation area with a focus on the identified areas of Double Island Point, Teewah Beach, Teewah Camping Zone, Freshwater Campsite, Rainbow Beach and lagoon area, and Upper Noosa River, and included:

- analysis of existing data, including management, enforcement and decision-making structures and subsequent site visits
- stakeholder engagement with the Kabi Kabi People and the Butchulla People, community members, business and tourism operators, current permit holders and internal Department of Environment, Science and Innovation (DESI) subject matter experts
- analysis of economic and visitor benefits and environment and community issues.

The findings and recommendations from these studies build on many of the current management strategies already in place and provide further direction to help improve the future long-term management of these areas including the development of strategies that balance the needs of multiple user groups and First Nations peoples without irreversible negative impacts on the natural, cultural, social environment and quality of visitor experience.

## Recommendations—Key themes

### Management capability and partnerships

Summary of recommendations	Response	Status	Commitments
<b>MCP1:</b> Consider enhanced operational resourcing, to improve on-ground management capacity and focus across key recommendation themes and areas.	Endorsed.	Implemented.	Additional front line operational positions and funding have been committed by the Queensland Government.  This includes a new permanent Principal Ranger Coolooloa Operations position and three additional Coolooloa ranger positions (appointed).
<b>MCP2:</b> Consider enhanced compliance and education resourcing to improve capacity, reach and effectiveness in delivering key compliance and sustainability messages, and promotion of positive visitor behaviour.	Endorsed.	Implemented.	Further additional management positions and funding have been committed by the Queensland Government.  This includes a new permanent Regional Principal Ranger Visitor Management and Compliance position and a permanent Regional Compliance Optimisation Manager position.
<b>MCP3:</b> Enhance communications with partners and the local community to promote further collaboration and inclusion in contemporary park management directions, and enhance communications to visitors to promote the area's natural and cultural values, potential threats to the values, and how they can contribute to its sustainability.	Endorsed.	Implementation commenced and progressing.	The additional management and operational positions listed above, along with additional regional positions, are committed to enhanced communication and collaboration with Coolooloa partners, the local community and visitors.
<b>MCP4:</b> Consider further enhanced resourcing, including a dedicated compliance strike team, with recruitment targeted to people with demonstrated compliance experience, where appropriate.	Endorsed.	Implemented.	Two new regional compliance support positions have been committed and appointed. These positions are focussed on compliance activities detected through the Automated Number Plate Recognition System (ANPRS).  A compliance Strike team led by the State Compliance Optimisation Manager undertakes targeted compliance operations with Police.  The Queensland Government will monitor compliance trends and efforts in collaboration with other agencies. Where further needs are identified, additional resourcing will be considered by the Queensland Government.

#### Summary of additional resources committed

- The Queensland Government has committed 5.2 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) positions to improve operational and support capability in the Coolooloa Recreation Area.
- \$1 million has also been committed to Coolooloa capital works upgrades (refer to Infrastructure theme).

## Conservation

Summary of recommendations	Response	Status	Comments
<b>C1:</b> Adopt endorsed SVCM recommendations into planning considerations and work with Traditional Owners to review and publicly consult on the Cooloola Recreation Area Draft Management Plan to ensure a balance of conservation of natural and cultural values and recreational use.	Endorsed.	Implemented and ongoing.	<p>Co-drafting of the Cooloola Recreation Area Draft Management Plan with the Kabi Kabi People and the Butchulla People is complete and the Plan is ready for public consultation.</p> <p>The Draft Cooloola Recreation Area Management Plan will be finalised in consultation with Kabi Kabi and Butchulla People following public consultation with a Final Management Plan expected to be released in late 2024.</p>
<b>C2:</b> Implement actions to reduce the threats of fire, visitor impacts, improper waste disposal and bush toileting.	Endorsed.	Implemented and ongoing.	<p>Threat reduction actions have been implemented including maintaining a ban on open campfires to minimise the threat of unplanned fire on sensitive coastal ecosystems, and enforcing portaloos regulations.</p> <p>Key threat reduction actions will be addressed in the Final Management Plan and Visitor Strategy with an increased focus to direct additional government resource investments to threat reduction priorities. This includes a permanent continuation of open campfire bans, increased portaloos regulation compliance, along with consideration of additional ablutions/amenities. Waste management will be the subject of targeted communications and compliance, and an ongoing matter for regional planning, dialogue and strategic partnerships with councils.</p>
<b>C3:</b> Monitor impacts on natural and cultural values and employ agile and adaptive management strategies.	Endorsed.	Implemented and ongoing.	<p>Monitoring the impacts on the area's values and implementing agile and adaptive management has commenced as part of the enhanced Parks Health Checks and Values Based Management Framework.</p> <p>This work will be ongoing with key management activities recorded in the new Parks Eco-system management information system.</p>
<b>C4:</b> Explore feasibility of seasonal/nightly beach driving limits for fauna conservation.	Alternative approach endorsed.	Recommended action completed.	<p>Recommendation to explore the feasibility of seasonal/nightly beach driving closures has been fulfilled.</p> <p>The findings determined that seasonal/night driving limits are not supported at this time, based on an evaluation of the potential threats balanced with the need to maintain essential tidal access to the gazetted road for residents, fishers, campers and emergency services.</p>
		Alternative approach progressing.	<p>Alternative approach is to enhance visitor education and communication materials to discourage non-essential night-time driving during seasonal nesting cycles.</p> <p>Joint operations with the Queensland Police Service will continue as well as existing compliance activities from both police officers and rangers.</p>

## Capacity and permitting

Summary of recommendations	Response	Status	Comments
<b>CP1:</b> Maintain current camper capacities and consider opportunities for additional camping and day use areas, including off-park options.	Endorsed.	Implemented and ongoing.	<p>Camper capacities are being maintained with appropriate management flexibilities to rest sites (i.e. closing camping sites for rest periods and re-directing campers to alternative sites on a rotational basis).</p> <p>Camper capacity management and monitoring will be ongoing including consideration of opportunities for additional camping and day use areas and off-park options in consultation with the Kabi Kabi People and the Butchulla People. This will be considered through the management planning process, and visitor strategy development, and as future needs increase and other strategic camping opportunities are identified.</p>
<p><b>CP2:</b> Further consider options to improve regulation of day visitor and vehicle access permit numbers during peak periods including:</p> <p><b>CP2(1):</b> regulate vehicle numbers in the new booking system for the 20 busiest days each year.</p> <p><b>CP2(2):</b> enhance compliance around vehicles without Vehicle Access Permits entering the area.</p> <p><b>CP2(3):</b> increase compliance around permit uses (e.g. exemption holders are using their exemption for the intended purpose of direct travel through the Recreation Area only).</p>	<p><b>CP2(1):</b> Endorsed in-principle.</p> <p><b>CP2(2):</b> Endorsed.</p> <p><b>CP2(3):</b> Endorsed.</p>	<p><b>CP2(1):</b> Commenced.</p> <p><b>CP2(2):</b> Implemented.</p> <p><b>CP2(3):</b> Commenced.</p>	<p>Options to maintain sustainable visitor numbers at peak periods are currently being considered and/or implemented as recommended and will be further informed by the Management Plan public consultation process. The outcomes will be communicated in the new final Management Plan and Visitor Strategy with appropriate flexibility to respond to changing circumstances.</p> <p>Subject to the outcomes of consultation on the Management Plan, government may investigate new permit types to help with planning and better manage peak seasonal visitation demands.</p> <p><b>CP2(1):</b> Regulation of visitor numbers at peak periods is undergoing practical evaluation and consideration with functional capability being incorporated into the development of the new camping booking system.</p> <p><b>CP2(2):</b> A dedicated team is enforcing compliance against all Automatic Number Plate Recognition System breaches to ensure full compliance with Vehicle Access Permit purchase requirements and to help better understand and manage total vehicle numbers.</p> <p><b>CP2(3):</b> Increased education will take place for vehicle access permit exemption holders to ensure they are using their exemption for the intended purpose of direct travel through the Recreation Area, to help minimise congestion at peak times. Where non-compliance with conditions is identified, additional compliance actions will be taken.</p>
<b>CP3:</b> Consider the possibility of shuttle buses to ferry people to destinations at peak times.	Not endorsed.	No action.	<p>Government will not be providing shuttle buses as public transport options into the recreation area.</p> <p>Although, consideration may be given to a permit application from a suitably qualified commercial operator.</p>
<b>CP4:</b> Enhance the camping and vehicle access permits booking systems.	Endorsed.	Implemented and progressing.	<p>Development of a new camping and vehicle access booking system has commenced.</p> <p>The new camping and vehicle access booking system will enhance capacity to monitor, regulate and report on total visitor numbers, to help inform decision making about overall and individual site capacities.</p>

Summary of recommendations	Response	Status	Comments
<b>CP5:</b> Consider options to de-incentivise the practice of ghost camping bookings.	Endorsed.	Implemented and progressing.	<p>A regulatory review has commenced to identify ways to prevent the practice of ghost camping bookings and to support appropriate controls to be developed in the new camping booking system.</p> <p>Should the regulatory review identify additional or ongoing issues in relation to ghost camping bookings, and following an evaluation of the effectiveness of the systems and process enhancements in the new camping and vehicle access booking system, the Queensland Government will consider further regulatory change if required.</p>
<b>CP6:</b> Consider increasing fees and charges to contemporary market rates to support further investment into the Cooloola Recreation Area.	Not endorsed.	Considered and no further action.	The government will not be increasing fees and charges at this time given the current cost of living pressures.



## Safety

Summary of recommendations	Response	Status	Comments
<b>S1:</b> Work cooperatively with other government compliance and enforcement agencies to address unsafe and unsocial behaviours related to vehicles and driving, and other offensive and inappropriate conduct.	Endorsed.	Implemented and ongoing.	DESI is working cooperatively with other government compliance and enforcement agencies including Police, Maritime Safety Queensland and local councils to improve safety and visitor behaviour. This is bolstered by on-ground targeted compliance operations under the direction of the QPWS&P State Compliance Optimisation Manager, with additional resources brought in from across the South East region.
<b>S2:</b> Align penalties under the <i>Recreation Areas Management Act 2006</i> (RAM Act) with penalties under the <i>Transport Operations (Road Use Management) Act 1995</i> (TORUM Act) to deter unsafe vehicle operation.	Endorsed.	Implemented and ongoing.	Alignment of RAM Act penalties to TORUM Act financial penalties came into effect on 15 September 2023.  Further alignment of RAM Act penalties to the TORUM Act penalties will be investigated with relevant agencies in relation to attribution of demerit points for offences in addition to the aligned financial penalties.
<b>S3:</b> Consult with other government agencies to consider further regulatory options for improving visitor behaviours. This may include reducing speed limits at identified locations, double demerit points, imposing restrictions relative to driver experience and/or night-time driving, imposing bans on repeat offenders, empowering vehicle seizures and impoundments.	Endorsed.	Implemented and progressing.	DESI is consulting with other government agencies about improving visitor behaviour and further regulation options. Agreed options will be considered in the area's Final Management Plan and Visitor and Compliance strategies.  Initiatives requiring further regulatory consideration will be considered and actioned as required.

## Infrastructure

Summary of recommendations	Response	Status	Comments
<b>IN1:</b> Assess the feasibility of new ablutions and amenities in high-use visitor settings (e.g. Double Island Point).	Endorsed.	Partially implemented and progressing.	Initial planning has commenced for possible siting and feasibility investigations for new ablutions and amenities to improve services adjacent to high-use visitor sites.  Further planning and feasibility assessments for new ablutions and amenities sites will commence in May 2024 to inform future funding.
<b>IN2:</b> Consider future funding needs and revenue options for enhanced maintenance and improvements to visitor infrastructure including roads, trails, parking areas and camping and day use area infrastructure.	Endorsed.	Partially implemented and progressing.	The Queensland Government has recently committed \$1 million to the upgrade of Harry's Hut Bridges, Kinaba Bird Hide, Upper Noosa River Jetties, and the Cooloola Great Walk signage. Upgrades to Harry's Hut bridge and the Kinaba Bird Hide are completed.  Future funding for maintenance and improvements to visitor infrastructure such as roads, trails, parking areas and camping and day use areas will continue to be prioritised through the Recreation Areas annual budget process.
<b>IN3:</b> Investigate and invest in technologies such as Automatic Number Plate Recognition System (ANPRS) and Radio Frequency Identification (RFID).	Endorsed.	Implemented and ongoing.	The Automatic Number Plate Recognition System (ANPRS) has been installed at Cooloola and the additional SVCM study areas on Bribie Island and K'gari.  DESI will continue to evaluate and implement emerging technologies to support improved management of the RAM area.
<b>IN4:</b> Engage with telecommunication service providers to improve mobile phone and internet coverage and connectivity.	Endorsed in principle.	Commenced.	Improved telecommunications are the primary responsibility of the Australian Government.  DESI will continue to engage with telecommunication providers and advocate for additional investment in improved communications.



## Visitor experience

Summary of recommendations	Response	Status	Comments
<b>VE1:</b> Develop a Visitor Strategy aligned to the Management Plan incorporating relevant SVCM findings.	Endorsed.	Partially implemented and progressing.	Drafting the Cooloola Recreation Area Visitor Strategy is underway. This aligns with the endorsed SVCM findings.
<b>VE2:</b> Continue to provide a range of settings and zones for sustainable recreational activities balanced with conserving the environment, including beach driving, camping and remote wilderness experiences.	Endorsed.	Partially implemented and progressing.	Priority zones and settings for a mix of sustainable recreational activities have been considered in interim planning. These will be further informed through the Management Plan public consultation process.  Agreed settings and zones will be identified in the final Management Plan and Visitor Strategy.
<b>VE3:</b> Review site zoning and definition to better accommodate specific user groups. This includes redefining camp sites and revising site bookings to allocate campers to specific sites to respond to changing user needs (e.g. family-oriented sites and dedicated bookable caravan/camp trailer sites).	Endorsed.	Partially implemented and progressing.	Individual site zoning and definition to meet the changing needs of user groups has been considered in interim planning and further consideration will be subject to the feedback received from the Management Plan public consultation process.  Agreed site zoning and definition will be included in the Visitor Strategy and integrated within the camping and vehicle access booking system.
<b>VE4:</b> Assess the feasibility of trialling vehicle exclusion buffer zones and time limits at key visitation sites.	Endorsed.	Partially implemented and progressing.	Preliminary feasibility considerations for trialling vehicle exclusion zones and time limits at key sites has been considered in interim planning. This will be informed by public consultation on the Management Plan.  Vehicle exclusion buffer zones and time limits at key sites will be addressed in the final Cooloola Management Plan and Visitor Strategy.
<b>VE5:</b> Support the development of an industry stakeholder-led collaborative marketing framework, including marketing alternative local destinations to spread the visitation (e.g. consideration of opening other beaches to 4WD visitation in consultation with local councils).	Endorsed in principle.	Delivery led by others.	DESI is working with the Department of Tourism and Sport and tourism industry stakeholders to implement the 'Towards 2032' tourism vision incorporating VE5 in kind commitments where appropriate.  In-kind support will continue to be provided to tourism industry stakeholders to lead and develop a collaborative marketing framework. This will include marketing alternative destinations and additional beach access to council-regulated areas subject to availability.
<b>VE6:</b> Consider how amendments could be accommodated for commercial permittees to allow an agile and adaptive approach to accommodating new initiatives and activities in a dynamic market.	Endorsed in principle.	Ongoing.	DESI is currently undertaking a regulatory review process and actions to consider greater flexibility for commercial permittees will be examined in this process.

Summary of recommendations	Response	Status	Comments
<b>VE7:</b> Continually re-evaluate high demand commercial site capacities appropriately balanced with sustainable access by free and independent travellers.	Endorsed in principle.	Ongoing.	DESI will continually reevaluate commercial site capacities and the needs of free and independent travellers as part of the adaptive management of the Recreation Area.
<b>VE8:</b> Continually review commercial activity agreements and permits at appropriate intervals to ensure conditions remain contemporary, the level of usage is appropriate, and any latency which may support new product opportunities is addressed so that overall tourism market opportunities are not adversely affected.	Endorsed.	Implemented and ongoing.	Commercial activity agreement and permit reviews will occur on a periodic basis to ensure permit latency does not adversely affect overall tourism opportunities.