

Ecotourism Plan for Queensland's Protected Areas 2023–2028

Redefining ecotourism in a contemporary landscape



Introduction

Queensland in the face of global changes

Queensland is one of the most naturally diverse places on earth. Our landscapes include extensive reefs, Gondwana rainforests and remote deserts, which showcase iconic wildlife, varied ecosystems, awe-inspiring First Nations cultural heritage as well as post-contact heritage places and relics.

These unique characteristics give Queensland's ecotourism industry a competitive advantage. Research has shown that experiencing culture and immersing in nature is a primary motivator for domestic and international visitors. We, the Department of Environment and Science (DES), have developed the Ecotourism Plan for Queensland's Protected Areas 2023–2028 (the plan) with the intention to harness this motivator and encourage visitors to experience Queensland's environments in the most sustainable and beneficial way.

Recently, the global tourism industry has faced unprecedented challenges and uncertainty due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With the world now returning to travel, the appetite for connecting with nature and culture, and making a positive contribution to the travel destination has never been greater.

Planning for the future

In response to COVID-19 challenges, the Queensland Government collaborated with the tourism industry through an independent Tourism Industry Reference Panel (the panel) to identify recommendations for recovery and growth. In response to the panel's findings, a long-term tourism industry strategy (Towards Tourism 2032) has been developed, providing a strategic direction and phased approach to guide industry and government toward future growth and success for Queensland tourism.

The plan strategically aligns with the priorities outlined in Towards Tourism 2032 and provides the framework for ecotourism in protected areas while acknowledging the importance of these areas and the legislative, policy and strategic planning requirements of park management.

The plan recognises that recent global events have fundamentally changed how we relate to, and depend on, the natural world and the people around us. The ecotourism industry can lead the calls for change in favour of travelling for good and experiencing our diverse natural and cultural values in the most sustainable way for the environment and all communities.

The future includes an exciting opportunity to showcase Queensland's natural and cultural assets and innovative ecotourism experiences to the world in the lead-up to, during, and after the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Department of Environment and Science acknowledges the Country and people of Queensland's First Nations. We pay our respect to Elders past and present.

We acknowledge the continuous living culture of First Nations Queenslanders—their diverse languages, customs and traditions, knowledges and systems.

We acknowledge the deep relationship, connection and responsibility to land, sea and sky Country as an integral element of First Nations identity and culture.

This Country is sacred. Everything on the land has meaning and all people are one with it.

We acknowledge First Nations peoples' sacred connection as central to culture and being.

First Nations people speak to Country, listen to Country, sing up Country, dance up Country, understand Country and long for Country.

We acknowledge and thank First Nations Peoples for the enduring relationship connecting people, Country and ancestors—an unbreakable bond that safely stewarded and protected the land, waters and sky for thousands of generations.

Artwork by Boyd Blackman, a Butchulla man.

We have a once-in-a-generation chance to reach a new global audience and promote Queensland as a destination where visitors can embrace environmentally sustainable travel, become actively involved in regenerative visitor experiences, and connect with Country and community like never before.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) defines ecotourism as the:

Environmentally responsible visiting of relatively unspoilt natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features—both past and present), that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations.

Importance of protected areas

The DES Protected Area Strategy 2020-2030 (PAS) uses the IUCN definition of a protected area: a clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated, and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values.

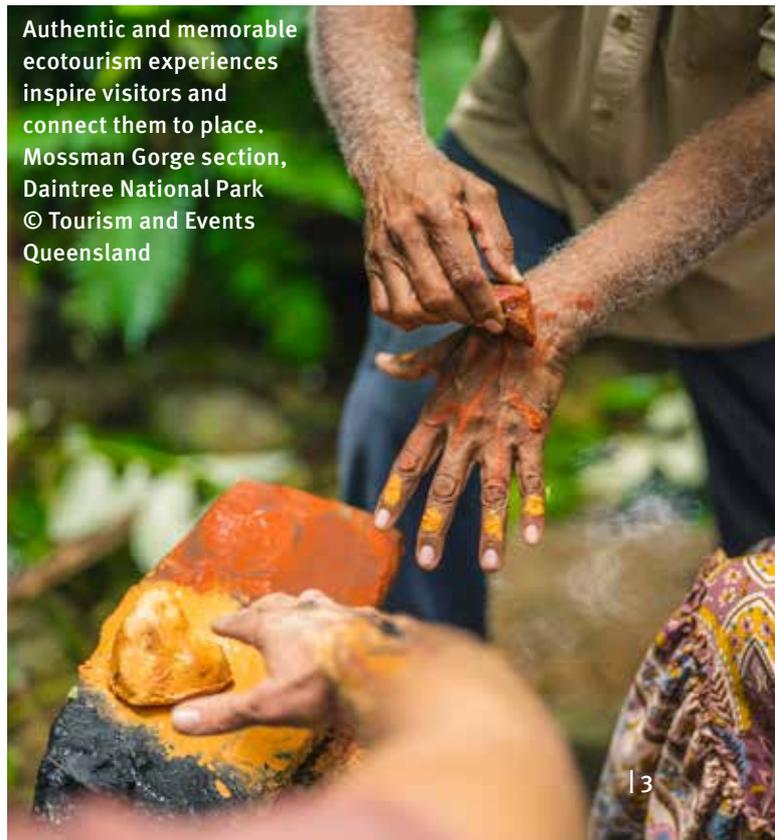
The PAS references protected areas as being important for many environmental, cultural, social and health benefit reasons such as:

- conserving nature and providing refuges for diverse lifeforms including threatened species
- providing ecosystem services for human populations such as fresh air, clean water, pollination, flood control and productive soils and oceans
- carbon sequestration in areas such as old growth forests and mangroves and playing a functional role in mitigating climate change
- providing First Nations peoples with a connection to Country

- providing opportunities to recognise and respect First Nations peoples' rights and interests, and to work together to collectively nurture and protect the environment
- enabling active connection with nature and culture and nature-based recreational activities that increase physical activity, foster psychological wellbeing, reduce anxiety and stress and improve self-esteem
- providing economic benefits to local communities through employment across multiple sectors including on parks as rangers and contractors; First Nations ranger groups; joint management of parks with First Nations peoples; and jobs associated with hospitality and tourism, education, leisure, fitness, outdoor recreation, wellbeing, conservation and research.

For the purposes of this plan, terrestrial protected areas include national parks, conservation parks, resources reserves, special wildlife reserves, nature refuges and coordinated conservation areas. Marine protected areas include marine parks, marine national parks and declared fish habitats.

Authentic and memorable ecotourism experiences inspire visitors and connect them to place. Mossman Gorge section, Daintree National Park © Tourism and Events Queensland



Our priority areas

The priority areas and actions in this plan are in no particular order. This plan begins to re-frame how we think about sustainable ecotourism and focuses on visitors consciously connecting with and contributing to where they visit. We want people to not only choose to reduce their impact on the environment, but to proactively make a positive difference and leave a destination in a better state than when they arrived. We want them to be advocates for the environment and immerse themselves in education and conservation as we collectively commit to a regenerative future.

We want to inspire our visitors with authentic and memorable natural and cultural experiences, so they can influence others to seek those same connections and experiences. We want to motivate people to do more to preserve and restore our protected areas and World Heritage areas and make an even greater contribution to regional economies and communities.

Our priority areas for action:

1. Deliver innovative ecotourism products and experiences to showcase Queensland's world-renowned protected areas.
2. Enhance ecotourism in Queensland's iconic marine environments through new public facilities to support experiences.
3. Partner with First Nations peoples in planning and delivering ecotourism projects on protected areas to ensure outcomes are culturally appropriate and aligned with First Nations peoples' priorities.
4. Facilitate new ecotourism projects on land adjacent to protected areas by sustainably reusing developed and degraded land, and continue to promote low-impact ecotourism on DES-managed land such as enhancing camping areas and reusing existing heritage structures.
5. Work with the ecotourism industry and research organisations to develop new regenerative tourism and citizen science offerings on and adjacent to protected areas.
6. Build the capacity of the ecotourism sector operating on protected areas to offer exceptional visitor experiences and reduce the environmental impact of their operations.

The Queensland Government is committed to providing best-practice, meaningful ecotourism experiences within and adjacent to national parks and other protected areas. All ecotourism proposals on protected areas are subject to rigorous assessment and approval processes that consider the environmental, cultural, social and financial impacts of the proposal on the area, providing for an overall positive benefit to our parks and other protected areas.



Junior Turtle Rangers help scientists collect valuable marine turtle data at Mon Repos Conservation Park
Cathy Gatley © Queensland Government

Working with our partners and aligning with key strategies

We continue to work closely with our partners to ensure transformational visitor experiences in Queensland's protected areas:

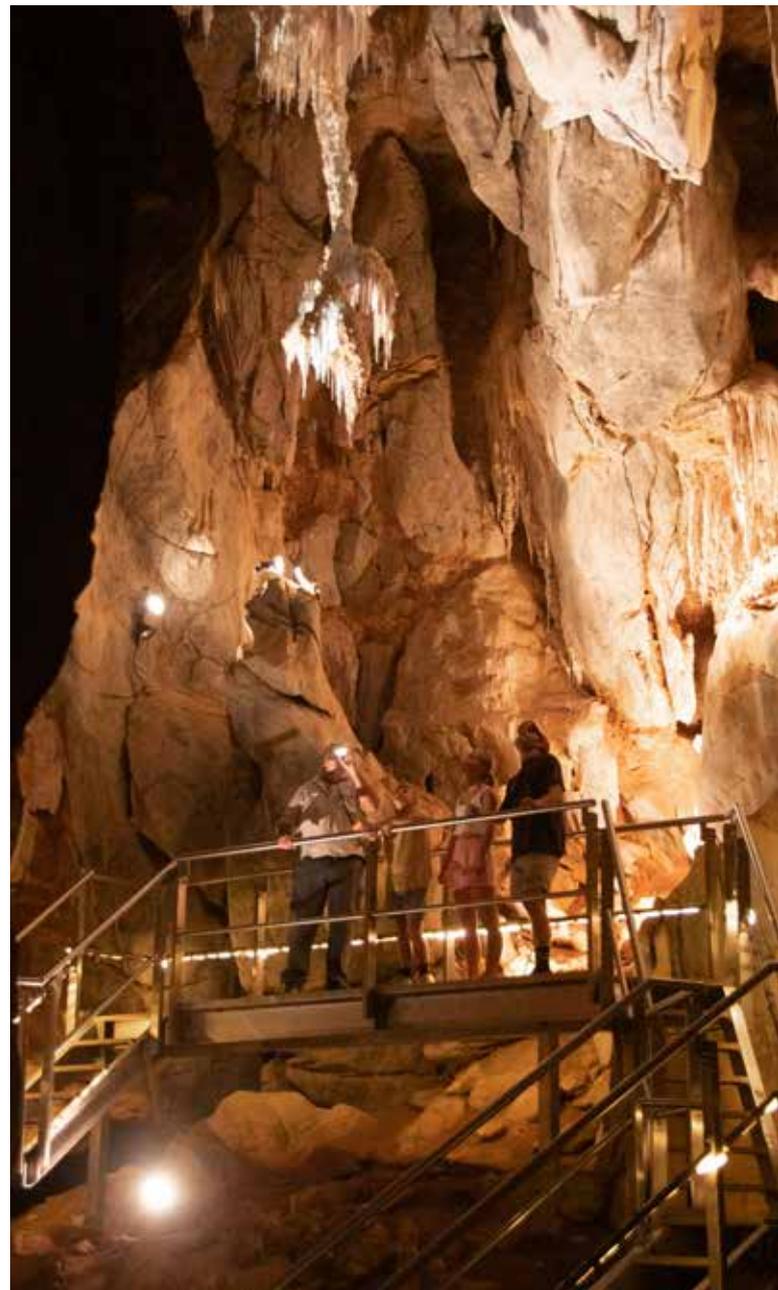
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Queensland on whose Country we work
- tourism industry operators and tour guides
- tourism industry bodies
- conservation and research organisations
- local councils and communities
- key state and Australian Government departments.

In redefining ecotourism in protected areas, we will continue to align with key strategies and plans that promote responsible, sustainable ecotourism that is consistent with conservation values and ecosystem processes, as well as best-practice management of protected areas, including visitor experiences.

These include:

- DES Strategic Plan 2022–2026 [DES]
- Queensland's Protected Area Strategy 2020–2030 [DES]
- The Values-Based Management Framework [DES]
- The Gurra Gurra Framework 2020–2026 [DES]
- Towards Tourism 2032 [Department of Tourism, Innovation and Sport (DTIS)]
- Nature-based Tourism Strategy 2021–2024; and Ultimate Transformational Experience Guide [Tourism and Events Queensland]
- Wet Tropics Sustainable Tourism Plan 2021–2031 [Wet Tropics Management Authority]
- Tourism Management Action Strategy [Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and DES]
- Climate Action Plan 2030 [DES]
- Conserving Nature—a Biodiversity Conservation Strategy for Queensland [DES]
- Queensland First Nations Tourism Plan 2020–2025 [Queensland Tourism Industry Council]

- Queensland Government Reconciliation Action Plan 2018–2021 [Department of Seniors, Disability Services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships [DSDSATSIP]
- National Agreement on Closing the Gap—Queensland's 2022 Implementation Plan [DSDSATSIP]



Discover hidden caverns and stunning limestone formations on a ranger-guided cave tour. Chillagoe (Mungana) Caves National Park © Tourism and Events Queensland



Creating ecotourism experiences to reignite our connection with nature, culture and each other. Forts Walk, Magnetic Island National Park.
© Tourism and Events Queensland

1

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

At DES, we want to go beyond conserving our precious natural spaces. Our aim is to create experiences that offer deeper, more authentic ways for visitors to connect with our national parks, marine parks, World Heritage areas and other protected areas and leave those places better than before.

We are currently partnering with First Nations peoples and the private sector in consultation with other key stakeholders to create world-class nature-based experiences through our *Queensland Ecotourism Trails* program. These multi-day walking and cycling trails will provide opportunities for visitors to completely immerse themselves in our protected areas, while contributing to park management and planning through regular monitoring and reporting.

The exceptional offerings provided by these trails will bring new visitors to the regions, supporting local jobs and businesses, including those operated by First Nations peoples.

Priority actions

- 1.1 Continue to deliver world-class ecotourism experiences in key locations, including multi-day options.
- 1.2 Explore innovative and low-impact ecotourism experiences within protected areas.



Queensland's marine parks and coastal protected areas provide visitors with unique and memorable ecotourism experiences. Tangalooma Wrecks, Moreton Bay Marine Park © Lauren Jubb

2

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

Queensland is home to unique marine environments including those within the world-renowned Great Barrier Reef, Great Sandy, and Moreton Bay marine parks.

Along the length of the Queensland coast, visitors can create life-long memories by engaging in unforgettable land and water-based experiences such as discovering First Nations culture and post-contact relics, island camping, reef and wreck diving, snorkelling, watching iconic marine wildlife and boating. Introducing new public facilities will provide greater opportunity to explore marine parks, as well as adjacent national parks, such as protected areas on islands.

In collaboration with the tourism industry and management authorities, we are committed to sustainably protecting, promoting and presenting our unique marine environments and their values. We are also determined that visitors can connect to nature, sea Country and First Nations culture and post-contact heritage.

Priority actions

- 2.1 Improve responsible access to the Great Barrier Reef in the Whitsunday and Townsville areas through the Reef Trails project—installing new public moorings and no-anchoring areas to reduce impacts on coral ecosystems.
- 2.2 Explore new ecotourism opportunities in Queensland's marine parks and coastal protected areas.
- 2.3 Expand Queensland's protected area estate by acquiring high conservation value islands through the Great Barrier Reef Island Arks Acquisition project.
- 2.4 Enhance communication, engagement, and promotion of marine ecotourism experiences through appropriate DES visitor centres and digital campaigns.



Authentic First Nations experiences are central to a visit to the Mossman Gorge Cultural Centre. Mossman Gorge section, Daintree National Park © Tourism and Events Queensland

3

Partner with First Nations peoples in planning and delivering ecotourism projects on protected areas to ensure outcomes are culturally appropriate and aligned with First Nations peoples' priorities.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Queensland have a deep connection to Country, yielded from many thousands of years of custodianship of land, sea, and sky Country. Where appropriate, this connection can be shared to create enriching cultural experiences for visitors, while fostering economic opportunities for First Nations communities and businesses. We also want to encourage non-Indigenous ecotourism businesses to partner with First Nations peoples and support employment opportunities.

In walking together towards a holistic approach to responsible visitation and regenerative tourism, we aim to build strong relationships and partnerships with First Nations peoples in planning and delivering ecotourism experiences.

We want to deliver projects that allow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to showcase their on-Country ecotourism experiences and support their priorities for Country and community. These may include a range of interpretive and immersive visitor experiences.

Priority actions

- 3.1 Encourage opportunities for First Nations peoples to deliver on-Country experiences for visitors to protected areas through provision of guide programs and cultural information.
- 3.2 Continue to foster First Nations peoples' business opportunities arising from immersive cultural ecotourism experiences, including multi-day options.



Walkers can traverse spectacular Main Range National Park and portions of adjacent land on the Scenic Rim Trail
© Tourism Australia

4

Facilitate new ecotourism projects on land adjacent to protected areas by sustainably reusing developed and degraded land, and continue to promote low-impact ecotourism on DES-managed land such as enhancing camping areas and reusing existing heritage structures.

We aim to promote projects on land adjacent to protected areas that have the capacity and potential to deliver ecotourism experiences, unique and sustainable eco-facilities, and opportunities to experience and appreciate our protected areas. These are projects that will also achieve positive outcomes for biodiversity such as the revegetation of degraded areas to extend the viable habitat for endemic species.

We are also looking to reimagine the possibilities for previously cleared areas and post-contact heritage structures on DES-managed lands.

Priority actions

- 4.1 Support appropriate, unique and sustainable eco-accommodation and experiences adjacent to protected areas that enhance visitor engagement and appreciation of natural and cultural values on protected areas.
- 4.2 Adjacent ecotourism potential assessed in the protected area acquisition program and appropriate tenure arrangements are supported.
- 4.3 Consider unique and sustainable ecotourism opportunities on DES-managed land through the adaptive re-use of previously developed areas and heritage structures, and rejuvenation of existing camping areas and facilities.



Hiking to South Bald Rock walkers camp,
Girraween National Park
© Lachlan Gardiner

5

Work with the ecotourism industry and research organisations to develop new regenerative tourism¹ and citizen science offerings on and adjacent to protected areas.

The concept of regenerative tourism extends beyond sustainability but is simple at its heart—to leave places in a better state after visiting. Given Queensland's iconic and unique wildlife and environments, we are well placed to enable visitors to have life-changing experiences, and leave having made a positive impact.

We are supporting responsible and sustainable forms of tourism that preserve and sustain our environment's natural and cultural values; as well as projects adjacent to protected areas that heal Country by restoring and regenerating what has been, and continues to be, threatened or degraded.

Citizen science involves our visitors and the community participating in scientific research to expand the capacity and reach of environmental and conservation research.

By harnessing the concepts of regenerative tourism and citizen science, we want to involve visitors in activities that have positive benefits for the environment, First Nations peoples, as well as local and regional communities and businesses.

Priority actions

- 5.1 Work with the tourism industry to identify and incorporate regenerative tourism and citizen science opportunities for visitors to protected areas.
- 5.2 Run a targeted round of citizen science grants that enable visitors and the community to contribute to conservation and threatened species recovery on protected areas including DES' Gateway Visitor Centres.
- 5.3 Recruit dedicated Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service education rangers to support conservation and regenerative tourism offerings at key national parks.

1. Regenerative tourism: the next step in sustainable tourism—when visitors travel with a proactive mindset to leave a destination better than it was before they arrived, and experiences that go beyond a traditional holiday.



Inspiring environmental interpretation provides a quality, connecting experience for visitors and is integral to spreading conservation messages throughout the community. Undara Volcanic National Park
© Tourism and Events Queensland

6

Build the capacity of the ecotourism sector operating on protected areas to offer exceptional visitor experiences and reduce the environmental impact of their operations.

Inspiring and informative interpretation of our protected areas is vitally important. By telling meaningful stories, we can create visitor connections to places and cultivate a sense of belonging and willingness to help in their preservation. We need guides suitably skilled to create this connection of visitor to place. Increasing cultural capability and providing a focus on higher standards for guides working in protected areas and World Heritage areas will provide visitors with unforgettable transformational experiences.

We want to encourage First Nations peoples to deliver their own cultural experiences on Country. This ensures that the First Nations customs, traditions and knowledge is shared with visitors in a culturally appropriate way, providing transformative and immersive experiences which will in turn support Queensland's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The Queensland Government is committed to ambitious climate targets and we are well on our way to meeting our commitment to move to 50 per cent renewable energy by 2030 and reach zero-net emissions by 2050. We will actively work with tour operators to improve their sustainability.

Priority actions

- 6.1 Work with industry, universities, training providers and First Nations peoples to develop new programs that build in-depth knowledge of Queensland's unique natural and cultural values.
- 6.2 Work with tourism industry stakeholders to upskill guides and ecotourism operators working in Queensland protected areas and increase the uptake of ecotourism aligned training programs.
- 6.3 Expand provision of programs and advice that enables tourism operators on protected areas to implement best practice sustainable tourism including reducing emissions and water use and eliminating waste.
- 6.4 Work with DES' Gateway Visitor Centres to achieve ECO Certification and actively support site staff to complete EcoGuide Certification.



Discover an oasis off the beaten track.
Boodjamulla (Lawn Hill) National Park
© Tourism and Events Queensland

Summary of priority actions

- 1.1 Continue to deliver world-class, ecotourism experiences in key locations, including multi-day options.
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- 2.1 Improve responsible access to the Great Barrier Reef in the Whitsunday and Townsville areas through the Reef Trails project—installing new public moorings and no-anchoring areas to reduce impacts on coral ecosystems.
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- 3.1 Encourage opportunities for First Nations peoples to deliver on-Country experiences for visitors to protected areas through provision of guide programs and cultural information.
- 3.2 Continue to support First Nations peoples' business opportunities arising from immersive, cultural ecotourism experiences, including multi-day options.
- 4.1 Support appropriate, unique and sustainable eco-accommodation and experiences adjacent to protected areas that enhance visitor engagement and appreciation of natural and cultural values on protected areas.
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Cover image: Connecting with nature in
Dinden National Park on the wheelchair
accessible Clohesy River fig tree boardwalk
Photographer Andrew Watson
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