

Turtle Group National Park

Management Plan

1998

Prepared by: **Queensland Parks & Wildlife Service (QPWS), Department of Environment and Science**

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The Turtle Group National Park Management Plan 1998 has been extended in 2023, in line with the Queensland *Nature Conservation Act 1992* (s120G). Minor amendments have been made. There has been no change to the plan's original management intent or direction.

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Summary

This management plan provides the framework and guidelines on how Turtle Group National Park will be managed. It sets out the considerations, outcomes and strategies that proposed to form the basis on which day-to-day management decisions are made.

This plan was prepared in May 1998, in accordance with s 125 of the *Nature Conservation Act 1992* (Act). In 2023 the plan was extended, in keeping with s 120G of the Act. For further information on this plan or the planning process, please contact the Department of Environment and Science at ParkManagementPlans@des.qld.gov.au.

This management plan was prepared by Department of Environment and Science staff. Thanks are due to those groups and individuals who made submissions in response to the draft plan.

1. Management directions and purpose

1.1 Management directions

The Turtle Group National Park is a group of six islands which are referred to as islands (a) to (f) within this plan. The Group is one of 13 island national parks in the Cairns Section of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (GBRMP), which also contains 29 other non-national park islands or groups of islands. All of the islands in the Cairns Section will be managed in a co-ordinated, strategic manner to provide for a range of conservation and recreational settings.

The Turtle Group National Park is dedicated under the *Nature Conservation Act 1992* and must be managed in accordance with s17 of the Act:

- to provide, to the greatest possible extent, for the permanent preservation of the area's natural condition
- to protect and present their cultural and natural resource values, and
- to ensure that the only use of the islands is nature- based and ecologically sustainable.

One of the prime purposes of management is to preserve the highly significant natural and cultural values of the islands whilst also providing and managing a range of visitor settings.

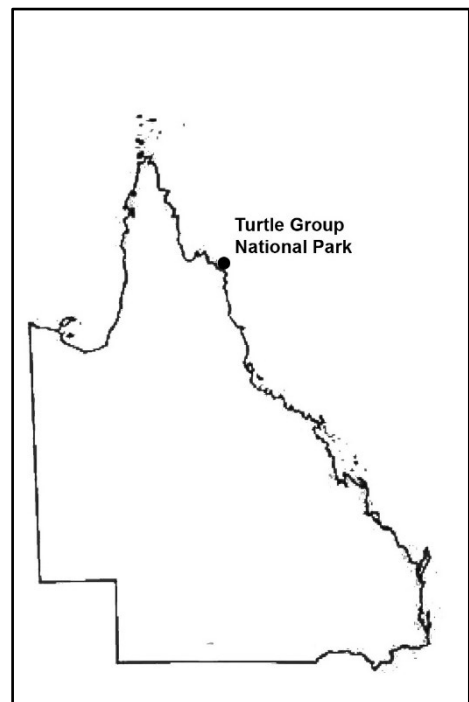
The Turtle Group supports nesting populations of various bird species, both terrestrial and marine including bridled tern, Caspian tern, roseate tern, pied imperial-pigeons, sea eagle and osprey. The Group will be managed to ensure that disturbance to the bird populations is minimised. Access to individual islands will be prohibited during the breeding season if monitoring indicates that visitor levels are affecting successful breeding.

The islands will be promoted for their natural values. Visitor numbers will be kept to levels that have a low impact on the experience of fellow users. No infrastructure facilities will be permitted. Commercial activity permits for access to the Group will be considered only for small scale operations (i.e. 15 persons or less) and only for activities compatible with the remote, natural setting.

The Group has no permanent ranger presence but is visited regularly by marine parks Rangers. No facilities are provided. Visitors will need to be self-sufficient. The islands are suited to those who wish to birdwatch, snorkel on the adjacent reefs and generally engage in minimal-impact, nature-based activities in a natural, undeveloped setting.

Complementary management of waters adjacent to the national park islands is vital and close co-operation between Department of Environment and Science and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) is essential if key natural values of these islands are to be protected.

In managing the Turtle Group National Park, opportunities will be provided to traditional owners, stakeholders and the general community to be involved in and consulted about planning and management. Involvement of traditional owners will be promoted. This plan is not intended to erode or extinguish any native title rights.



Map 1. Turtle Group National Park location map

1.2 Purposes

The Turtle Group National Park will be managed to ensure that:

- island fauna, particularly breeding seabirds, and their habitats, are conserved and protected
- the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with traditional affiliations to the islands are recognised, protected, and presented where appropriate
- visitor use is monitored and controlled so that the diversity and integrity of flora and fauna communities on the islands is maintained
- disturbance to island fauna at critical times of the year is avoided
- introduced plants and animals are controlled or eradicated where possible; and
- the natural setting is maintained to provide recreational opportunities consistent with a peaceful, low intensity, undeveloped, semi-wilderness experience.

2. Basis for management

2.1 Bioregional context

The Turtle Group National Park is located 10km offshore from Lookout Point which is approximately 75km north of Cooktown and 28km north of the nearest settlement at Cape Flattery. The adjacent section of coast is sparsely populated.

The Turtle Group is within the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) World Heritage Area and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. The surrounding reef and waters are managed under the provisions of the Cairns Section of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and the intertidal area is in the Cairns State Marine Park. The surrounding reef and intertidal areas are zoned Marine National Park.

There are 13 island national parks in the Cairns Section of the GBRMP and 29 other islands held under different tenures, both State and Commonwealth. The area has good representation of the different island structural type characteristic of the Great Barrier Reef i.e., continental islands, coral sand cays, mangrove islands and low wooded isles, resulting in a series of landscape settings of both geological and visual significance. The Turtle Group is unique in the Cairns Section, as it is a relatively large number of closely associated sand and shingle cays - some low-wooded and some with internal lagoons forming - situated on separate small reefs, thereby lacking the central reef-flat area common to the low wooded island type.

The Turtle Group National Park is of cultural significance to the Guugu Yimidhirr people from Hopevale, and the reefs surrounding the islands are important sites for traditional hunting and fishing.

The adjacent waters provide a reasonable, fair-weather anchorage for commercial and recreational fishing vessels and tourist vessels.

2.2 Values of Turtle Group National Park

2.2.1 Geology and landform

The Turtle Group consists of six small sand and shingle cays, two of them low wooded. It is located on a complex of reefs, with the total area of the islands being 3ha. The islands are shingle/sand cays with associated shingle banks and intertidal mangroves. They demonstrate various developmental stages of cay formation from a simple sand cay to cays with well-developed beach rock, shingle banks and, in one island, a lagoon formation. The cays contain areas of woodland, closed forest, vine forest, strand vegetation and mangroves.

2.2.2 Plants and animals

The Turtle Group supports grassland, dune woodland, closed woodland containing wongi *Manilkara kauki* and *Terminalia muelleri*, *Pemphis* closed scrub, vine thicket and mixed mangrove low forest. Island (a) is the largest of the Group, and has the most diverse vegetation. Turtles nest on the sandy beaches of this island and some of the smaller islands.

A range of bird species has been identified on the Turtle Group. A number use the islands for nesting, including the beach stone-curlew (vulnerable), bridled tern, Caspian tern, roseate tern, pied imperial-pigeon, sea eagle and osprey.

Migrant waders use the island beaches and reefs to rest and feed during migration.

Detailed surveys have not been undertaken of the surrounding fringing reefs, but they are considered to be in relatively good condition, although several consecutive episodes of Crown of Thorns infestation have impacted on the hard coral communities.

2.2.3 Cultural heritage

The Turtle Group and surrounding reefs are known to be a part of the 'sea country' of the Guugu Yimidjirr people from Hopevale. Traditional fishing, hunting and gathering are still practised. These islands are still a significant component of the local traditional cultural landscape and may have important cultural values in terms of their intrinsic natural landscape values and native plants and animals.

2.2.4 Scenic and aesthetic

The islands have a moderate scenic value and is in a relatively natural state. The dense green vegetation rises in strong contrast against the backdrop of clear blue open waters, varying shades of blue-green hued reef flat shallows and near-white sand beaches. There is no visible evidence of human activity or disturbance on the islands when viewed from the water.

2.2.5 Scientific and educational

The islands have a high research value, being in close proximity to the Lizard Island, on which a research station is located. Studies have been undertaken on geology, sea level change, flora and fauna and the variation in species diversity between islands.

2.2.6 Recreation and tourism

The Turtle Group and associated reef provide a fair-weather anchorage for recreational and commercial fishing vessels and tourist vessels due to their close proximity to the shipping channel. The islands are a regular stop for cruising yachts heading to and from Lizard Island. Exact levels of recreational use by locals and sailors are unknown.

There are ten current commercial activity permits allowing access to the national park. These permits would allow for a total number of up to 150 persons to access the islands at any one time. However, actual use levels are low to non-existent most of the time.

Private and commercial camping is permitted on some of the islands but use levels are also very low.

The islands, due to their size and fragility, would be unsuitable for more than a small number of visitors without suffering adversely from the impacts. They are most suited to those who wish to birdwatch, snorkel on the adjacent reefs and generally engage in minimal-impact, nature-based activities in a natural, undeveloped setting.

3. Management strategies

3.1 Native plants

Current situation

Plant communities on the Turtle Group are thought to have a high integrity, free from weeds and human disturbance.

Desired outcomes

- High integrity of islands' vegetation communities is maintained.

Proposed policies, guidelines and actions

- Undertake routine monitoring of vegetation to identify any weed incursions and impacts of visitor use.

3.2 Native animals

Current situation

Relatively large breeding colonies of pied imperial-pigeon occur from October to March. Other nesting species include beach stone-curlew, bridled tern, crested tern, roseate tern and black-naped tern. Migrant waders also use the islands.

Desired outcomes

- Bird populations remain viable.
- Human disturbance during the breeding season is minimised.

Proposed policies, guidelines and actions

- Undertake routine monitoring of bird populations, especially during breeding season.

3.3 Introduced plants and animals

Current situation

There are no known weed problems on the islands.

Desired outcomes

- Islands are free from exotic species.

Proposed policies, guidelines and actions

- Undertake routine monitoring of island vegetation to identify any non-endemic flora or fauna.
- Visitors will be advised to check their clothing and equipment for weeds and grasses before landing.

3.4 Fire management

Current situation

Fires are currently permitted. Wildfire has the potential to significantly alter island vegetation communities.

Desired outcomes

- Incidence of wildfire is minimised.

Proposed policies, guidelines and actions

- Fires are prohibited. Visitors will need to provide own fuel/gas stoves.

3.5 Landscape, soil and catchment protection

Current situation

The islands have high scenic and aesthetic values. There is no evidence of human activity on the islands when viewed from the beach and sea. Condition of fringing reef has not been assessed.

Desired outcomes

- The high scenic and natural values of the islands are maintained.
- Activities which may significantly degrade the landscape or physical integrity of the islands and reefs do not occur.

Proposed policies, guidelines and actions

- Tracks within vegetated areas discouraged.
- Permanent infrastructure, other than management related facilities, not generally supported.

3.6 Cultural heritage

Current situation

Turtle Group and reef are part of the traditional 'sea country' of the Guugu Yimidhirr people from Hopevale. No cultural heritage assessment has been undertaken to determine the Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and European cultural heritage values. The waters and reefs around the islands are still the focus of traditional use of natural resources.

Desired outcomes

- The cultural and heritage values of the islands are recognised and presented where appropriate.
- Traditional use of the islands continues.

Proposed policies, guidelines and actions

- Document the cultural and heritage values of the islands.
- Traditional custodians involved in the management of the islands, including active involvement of community Rangers.

3.7 Recreational and tourism

Current situation

Waters adjacent to Turtle Group provide a fair-weather anchorage regularly used by recreational and commercial fishing vessels and tourist vessels.

Camping is permitted on islands (a), (b) and (f) of the Group for up to 30 persons for a maximum of 14 days. Use levels are very low. There are no facilities or water on the islands.

Marine park permit holders can access the islands on an infrequent basis - on average twice per week at present.

The ten commercial activity permits would allow for total access by up to 150 persons at any one time. However, actual use levels are extremely low.

Overall, recreational use levels are unknown although they are thought to be very low.

Desired outcomes

- Access to the anchorage is maintained.
- Visitor impact on island biota is minimised.
- Impact of visitation levels on the experience of fellow users is minimised.

Proposed policies, guidelines and actions**Day use**

- Only small-scale commercial operations (15 or less persons) will be considered. Operations must be compatible with desired use setting and visitor experience.

Camping

- Commercial and private camping will be permitted on Islands (a), (b) and (f) only.
 - Maximum group size will be 10 persons.
 - Maximum total number of 20 campers at any one time on island (a) and 10 campers on islands (b) and (f).
 - Maximum length of stay at any campsite is 14 nights.
- No permanent facilities permitted.
- Seaplane, helicopter or hovercraft access not generally permitted.

3.8 Education and interpretation

Current situation

No visitor information sheet is available. Marine Park Zone maps are available.

Desired outcomes

- Visitor information is readily available.

Proposed policies, guidelines and actions

- Copies of management plan to be available through fishing clubs, marine outlets, local service stations and to be made available at the Cooktown harbour.

3.9 Complementary management of adjoining areas

Current situation

Great Barrier Reef Marine Park - the adjacent marine park is managed under the provisions of the *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975*.

Queensland Marine Park - Department of Environment and Science intends to manage the national park islands to low water in a consistent manner. This management plan sets the policy for the management of Queensland Marine Park in the surrounding intertidal areas.

Desired outcomes

- The national park and adjacent marine park are managed under their respective legislation in a co-ordinated and complementary manner.
- The national park islands will be managed to low water in a manner consistent with the management of the national park.

Proposed policies, guidelines and actions

- Encourage ongoing liaison within Department of Environment and Science, and between Department of Environment and Science and other agencies, to promote co-ordinated and complementary management, particularly with regard to:
 - development and revision of policies and zoning and management plans
 - visitor management and permit issue arrangements; and
 - public contact and information.
- In particular, encourage the development of interim management guidelines for the adjacent marine park to apply until a management plan is developed for that area. These guidelines should provide a level of protection at least equivalent to that provided in the Cairns Area Plan of Management.