

We would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the many lands across Queensland, and pay our respects to Elders – past, present and emerging and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

This has always been, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

TOURISM IN PUBLIC PROTECTED AREAS POLICY – OCTOBER 2024

Purpose

To outline the Queensland Tourism and Conservation Alliance’s (QTCA) policy position on tourism in public protected areas.

A public protected area is defined in [Queensland’s Protected Area Strategy 2020–2030](#) as —

- a) a national park; or
- b) a conservation park; or
- c) a resources reserve.

Type	Type Code	Number	Area (ha)	% of Protected Areas	% of QLD
Conservation Park	CP	236	89,070	0.58	0.05
National Park	NP	274	7,019,544	45.95	4.06
National Park (Scientific)	NS	9	52,622	0.34	0.03
National Park Aboriginal	NPA	32	2,331,860	15.27	1.35
Resources Reserve	RSR	44	231,124	1.51	0.13
Total		595	9,724,220	64	5.6

Source: [CAPAD Database 2022](#)

Policy Statement

QTCA recognises that there is increasing demand for access to public protected areas for a range of uses, including tourism. Appropriate tourism facilities and activities in public protected areas can cater to this demand and broaden the range of people who connect with, and become more appreciative of natural and cultural values, leading to broader community support for protected areas. This can represent a benefit to protected areas, regional communities and the tourism industry.

With ever-increasing pressures on public protected areas, any associated tourism facilities and/or activities within public protected areas must align with leading practice to avoid degradation of the local values and visitor experience. Tourism facilities and activities in public protected areas should have minimal impact and be carefully monitored to ensure that:

- Appreciation of natural and cultural values is central to the activity and actively promoted;
- The integrity of the public protected area is maintained;
- Public enjoyment of the public protected area is not infringed; and
- Tourism businesses meet international best practice sustainability standards which means minimum negative impact on the environment and maximum positive impact on communities and culture and are independently audited.

Tourism facilities and activities that are out of scale, not sympathetic to their natural surroundings, or not primarily focused on appreciation of protected area values can all cause detrimental impacts and/or place undue demands on limited protected area management resources and should not be supported. QTCA supports the true principles of “ecotourism” in public protected areas, which is tourism that is ecologically sustainable and primarily focused on experiencing an area in a way that fosters understanding, appreciation and conservation of the area and its natural and cultural values.

QTCA believes that when managed responsibly, tourism can contribute positively to conservation efforts by promoting awareness, monitoring and even facilitating restoration. Additionally, tourism businesses can play a vital role in supporting cleanup efforts and maintaining public protected area facilities where management capacity is limited, as shown by efforts from adventure tourism operators on K’gari after 2022 South East Queensland flooding.

To support these broader goals, there is an ongoing need for trained and certified interpretive staff to deliver high-quality interpretation of public protected area values. Tour operators in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park can serve as an exemplar, where the world-leading High Standard Tour Operator program demonstrates the potential for a balanced coexistence between tourism and conservation, offering a scalable model for other regions.

Sufficient revenue should be raised from tourism activities in public protected areas to meaningfully contribute to the maintenance of local infrastructure (e.g. nearby trails, lookouts, amenities), as well as improvement of the local environment (via restoration, revegetation, weed management etc.).

As of June 2024, Queensland’s protected area estate is only about half the 17% target committed to by the Queensland Government. The expansion of tourism in public protected areas should be considered in the context of realistically funded management and long-term commitment to strategic growth of the protected area estate.

Principles

QTCA endorses the following six principles in respect of tourism and public protected areas.

- 1) Private tourism facilities and associated service infrastructure should be located outside of public protected areas wherever possible, to avoid any actual (or perceived) “privatisation” of public protected areas. This is often referred to as the ‘adjacency principle’. QTCA acknowledges that some private tourism facilities already exist in public protected areas and accepts that those facilities may be retained

while such facilities are authorised and compliant with those authorisations. Any expansion of such facilities, however, should be considered as per any new private tourism facility.

- 2) Private tourism facilities and associated service infrastructure should only be considered within public protected areas where the following criteria apply:
 - a) The Queensland Government is not in a position to supply a public tourism facility.
 - b) No external alternative exists to support genuine tourism demand in the public protected area.
 - c) The Traditional Owners are the proponents or one of the proponents of the tourism facility.
 - d) The tourism facility is:
 - i) subject to normal assessment under existing state and federal legislation;
 - ii) envisioned by the relevant management plan or management statement;
 - iii) in alignment with the relevant destination management plan;
 - iv) developed through prior consultation with local communities, traditional owners and other key public protected area stakeholders;
 - v) sensitively designed, with a minimalist footprint, to be in harmony with the surrounding landscape;
 - vi) temporary in nature or suitable for easy removal;
 - vii) located in cleared or degraded areas, avoiding locations that intrude on scenic vistas and natural landscapes experienced by other visitors;
 - viii) secured by a bond or bank guarantee, to cover any necessary remedial measures;
 - ix) monitored on an annual basis for compliance purposes and to determine any necessary remedial measures;
 - x) supported by minimal, low-impact service infrastructure, with servicing of such facilities restricted to limited periods to minimise disturbance to wildlife and visitor experience; and
 - xi) supported by an appropriate maintenance plan for the proposed life of the facility.
- 3) Private tourism facilities in public protected areas should only be operated by reputable and certified third parties/concessionaires under fixed-term leases or licences, which do not convey any proprietary rights to those facilities or lease areas after expiry. Any such proprietary rights should revert to the State at that time.
- 4) Private tourism activities in public protected areas should be:
 - a) Ecologically sustainable and nature-based, primarily focused on experiencing an area in a way that fosters understanding, appreciation and conservation of the area and its natural and cultural values. High impact activities should not be supported or endorsed in public protected areas;
 - b) Subject to prior impact assessment, with compliance as a condition of permit and/or commercial activity agreement approvals and renewals to ensure natural, cultural and social values are properly protected;
 - c) Accompanied by high quality interpretation of protected area values and the values of the Traditional Owners; and
 - d) Delivered by tourism operators holding current accreditation certifications recognised by the Queensland Government, to bolster capability and sustainability of businesses and contribute to enhanced visitor education and appreciation.
- 5) Revenue generated for the Queensland Government from private tourism facilities and/or activities in public protected areas should be publicly reported and directed to protected area management, preferably in the protected area where the revenue was generated.
- 6) Visitor numbers through tourism in public protected areas should be carefully monitored, consistent with either the management plan or best practice. Capping visitor numbers is an essential management tool in some areas and will need to be undertaken on a location-by-location basis, to sustain ecological resilience and a high-quality visitor experience.

QTCA also advocates for the improvement of information-sharing mechanisms and collaboration between

government, protected area management, tourism operators, and Traditional Owners through the following actions:

- The establishment of regional 'roundtables', with the aim of bringing Traditional Owners and tourism operators together to proactively support protected area management and build positive relationships and trust; and
- Enhanced communication between protected area management, destination management organisations, local councils, and tourism operators to effectively manage visitor dispersal, integrating tools like on-ground information, signposting, digital/website updates, and regular updates for permit holders.