WET TROPICS SUSTAINABLE TOURISM PLAN 2021–2031

Acknowledgements

The Wet Tropics Sustainable Tourism Plan 2021–2031 (the Plan) was developed through a consultative process led by the Wet Tropics Management Authority (the Authority). The Authority particularly thanks those who attended project workshops and contributed to discussions, meetings and provided comment on the draft documents. The Authority gratefully acknowledges the Australian Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment in providing funding for the Plan through the Australian Heritage Grants program, and Isobar Communications Pty Ltd for their in-kind contributions.

The Authority respectfully acknowledges the participation and involvement of Indigenous people including Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, their contributions to the Plan and their Country that this Plan speaks to. The Plan has been informed by the knowledge held and shared by Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples and their Elders past, present and emerging.

The Authority acknowledges that the involvement of key partners in the implementation of the Plan is subject to further and ongoing consultation and revision over the life of the Plan.

Disclaimer

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WET TROPICS MANAGEMENT AUTHORITY

Australian Government
Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment

Mount Hypipamee crater | Jirrbal Country | Tourism and Events Queensland

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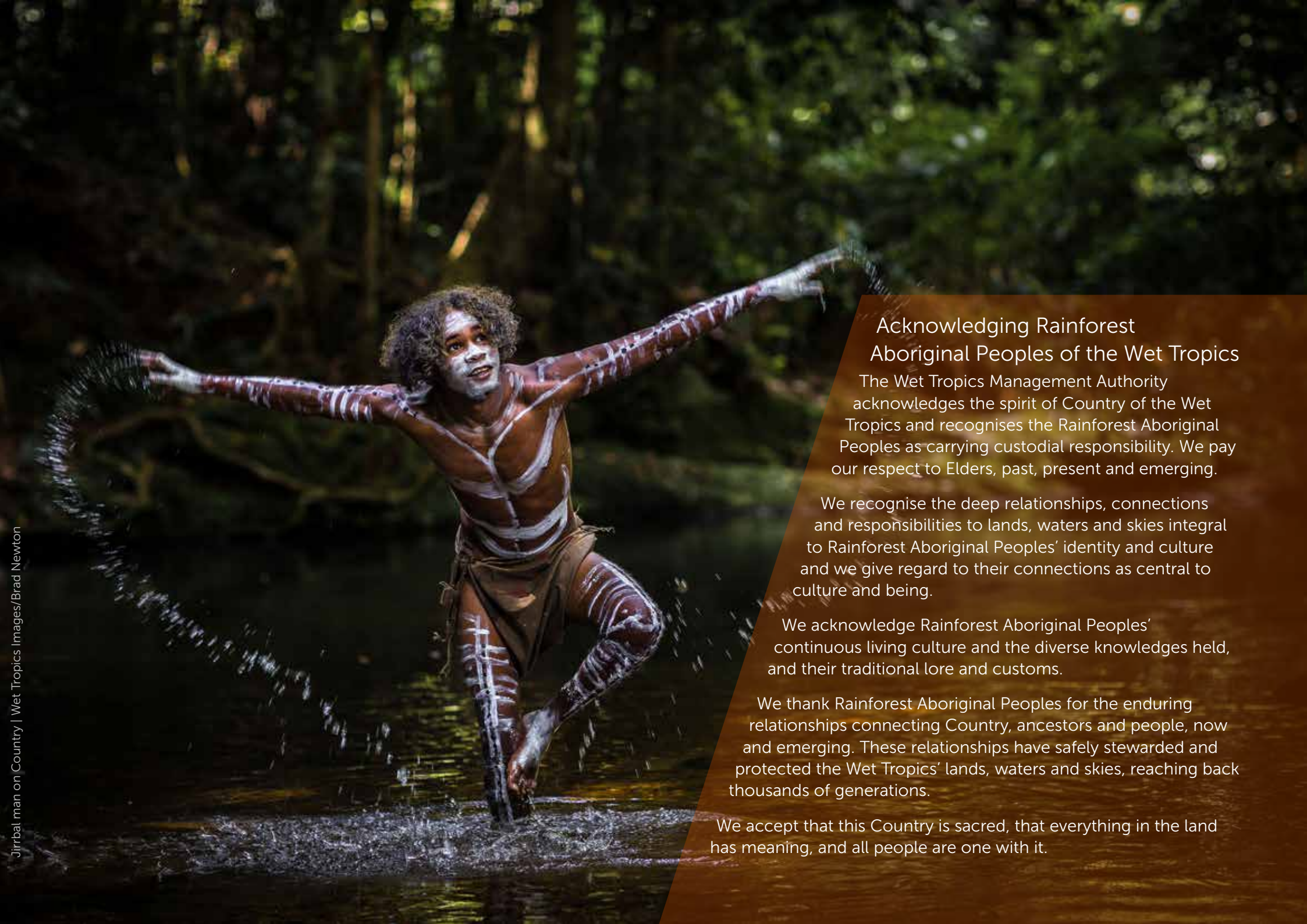
Cover image: North Johnstone River | Mamu Country | Wet Tropics Images/Steven Nowakowski



Jirrbal man on Country | Wet Tropics Images/Brad Newton

Acknowledging Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples of the Wet Tropics

The Wet Tropics Management Authority acknowledges the spirit of Country of the Wet Tropics and recognises the Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples as carrying custodial responsibility. We pay our respect to Elders, past, present and emerging.

We recognise the deep relationships, connections and responsibilities to lands, waters and skies integral to Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples' identity and culture and we give regard to their connections as central to culture and being.

We acknowledge Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples' continuous living culture and the diverse knowledges held, and their traditional lore and customs.

We thank Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples for the enduring relationships connecting Country, ancestors and people, now and emerging. These relationships have safely stewarded and protected the Wet Tropics' lands, waters and skies, reaching back thousands of generations.

We accept that this Country is sacred, that everything in the land has meaning, and all people are one with it.

Dedication

This Plan is dedicated to the late Mr John Courtenay, a highly respected pioneer of the Queensland tourism industry and a Wet Tropics Management Authority Board Director from 2015–2020. John, an enthusiastic champion of this Plan, brought to the Board his vast experience and knowledge, and an inspiration for a sustainable and viable tourism industry that underpins the economy of the region. He was a strong advocate for nature-based tourism and the Outstanding Universal Value of the world's oldest continuously surviving tropical rainforest. His passion and his wise counsel are reflected in this Plan and will continue to guide us into the future.

A true pioneer and gentleman of the north.

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Message from the Chair

Tourism is the economic engine of our region. Underpinning tourism are our two internationally significant World Heritage Areas—the rainforest and the reef.

The health of our natural assets and prosperity of our communities are inseparable and right now our World Heritage Areas are facing a multiplicity of issues.

The Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area—the world's oldest continuously surviving tropical rainforest; home to and Country of one of the world's oldest living and evolving cultures—has been scientifically rated as the second most irreplaceable World Heritage Area on Earth. That is more than special... and a big responsibility.

Right now, there are challenges: from a changing climate, species in decline and pest incursions to the impacts of a global pandemic.

Although we may value the Wet Tropics for different reasons—its ancient, living culture, its exceptional natural beauty, its species that occur nowhere else, its amazing recreational opportunities, or its importance to livelihoods—together we can work toward a sustainable future.

Under the primary goal of the World Heritage Convention, the Wet Tropics Management Authority implements Australia's duty to protect, conserve, present, rehabilitate and transmit the Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area to future generations. A key part of that is the communities' (both local and global) ability to experience, enjoy, appreciate and continue to protect its Outstanding Universal Value.

Our Wet Tropics Sustainable Tourism Plan brings together ideas about how we use tourism, culture, science, and the incredible asset that is our World Heritage Area to ensure a resilient, well presented, and protected future, and for presenting experiences appropriate to an internationally acclaimed World Heritage Area, and a world-class tourism destination.

I invite you to be a part of that future.

Leslie Shirreffs PSM

The Wet Tropics Sustainable Tourism Plan 2021–2031 provides a platform from which we can all work together to turn visitors into advocates, protect and conserve our natural and cultural assets, and move towards a sustainable and resilient future.

Jourama Falls | Nywaigi Country | Tourism and Events Queensland

Executive summary

The Wet Tropics Sustainable Tourism Plan 2021–2031 (the Plan) is a strategic framework that brings together Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, the tourism industry, the conservation sector, and partner agencies to develop a sustainable and resilient future for tourism in the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area (the Area).

The Plan builds on existing management practices already working towards sustainable tourism. Through a consultative process, an intent statement emerged in the form of a visitor promise:

Visitors experience the Wet Tropics and its outstanding natural and cultural values through making genuine and mutually beneficial connections with nature, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples and our inspiring storytellers, becoming advocates for the place and leaving enriched.

The Plan aims to deliver the visitor promise through six key goals:

- Respect for Country and people
- Rainforest Aboriginal tourism aspirations
- Building awareness through consistent messaging and branding
- Increased community involvement and advocacy
- Well-trained, professional tour guides
- Collaborative visitor management

Key to delivering this Plan is building effective partnerships at all levels increasing community involvement, embracing sustainable best practices, and implementing effective management.

The Plan's goals, strategies and actions provide a clear line of sight towards what we aim to achieve over the next ten years. A five-year review will ensure the Plan remains relevant and practical and that key actions are delivered.

Definitions

Country

When spelled with a capital 'C' refers to the traditional lands of Traditional Custodians.

Outstanding Universal Value

To be considered of Outstanding Universal Value, a property needs to meet one or more of ten criteria, meet conditions of integrity, and have an adequate system of protection and management to safeguard its future. This is summarised in a Statement of Outstanding Universal Value prepared by the State Party to the World Heritage Convention (Australia) and approved by the World Heritage Committee.

Protected area

For the purposes of this Plan, 'protected areas' within the Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area refer specifically to protected areas under the *Nature Conservation Act 1992* and State Forests and Timber Reserves under the *Forestry Act 1959*. However, it is noted that this term generally means a geographical space recognised, dedicated and managed to achieve long-term conservation of nature e.g. national parks, wilderness areas and community conserved areas.[1]

Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples

The term Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples is used by the Authority to refer specifically to the Traditional Custodians of the Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area, and includes at least 20 tribal groups and 8 language groups—currently more than 20,000 people.[2, 3] However, the Authority recognises that Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples may identify themselves at local, state, national and international scale using a diversity of terms. These include but are not limited to: clan groups, tribal groups, language groups, Bama, Traditional Custodians, Traditional Owners, First Nations Peoples, First Peoples, Native Title holders and common law holders.

The Area

The Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area (also referred to as the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area) as listed under the World Heritage Convention and managed under the *Wet Tropics World Heritage Protection and Management Act 1993*.

Traditional Custodians

The specific group of Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples who have cultural responsibility for a particular area.

Wet Tropics

Wet Tropics bioregion (1,849,725ha) inclusive of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area (894,490ha).

Acronyms

ATSIP	Department of Seniors, Disability Services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships
DTIS	Department of Tourism, Innovation and Sport
GBRMPA	Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority
IUCN	International Union for the Conservation of Nature
LTO	Local tourism organisation
NRM	Natural resource management
QPWS&P	Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service and Partnerships (a division of Department of Environment Science)
QTIC	Queensland Tourism Industry Council
TA	Tourism Australia
TEL	Townsville Enterprise Limited
TEQ	Tourism and Events Queensland
TTNQ	Tourism Tropical North Queensland

Little Crystal Creek | Nywaigi Country

About the Wet Tropics

The Wet Tropics World Heritage Area
Rainforest Aboriginal Country

Wet Tropics World Heritage Area facts

- WORLD HERITAGE LISTED 1988 FOR NATURAL VALUES
- ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR AUSTRALIAN DESTINATIONS 5 MILLION VISITORS YEARLY
- ESTIMATED ANNUAL ECONOMIC VALUE TO THE COMMUNITY $5.2 BILLION
- HOME TO 3,300+ PLANT SPECIES INCLUDING 700+ ENDEMIC SPECIES
- HOME TO 700+ VERTIBRATE ANIMALS INCLUDING ≥ 88 ENDEMIC SPECIES
- ENCOMPASSES ALMOST 900,000 HECTARES OF TROPICAL FOREST
- NATIONAL PARK PROTECTS >87% OF THE AREA NP
- HOME TO APPROX. 30% OF AUSTRALIA' S MARSUPIAL SPECIES & 48% OF BAT SPECIES
- HOME TO APPROX. 40% OF AUSTRALIA'S BIRD SPECIES & 60% OF BUTTERFLY SPECIES
- NATIONAL HERITAGE LISTED 2012 FOR ABORIGINAL CULTURAL VALUES

DISCLAIMER: THIS MAP IS FOR ILLUSTRATION PURPOSES ONLY – FOR MORE DETAILED INFORMATION ABOUT NATIVE TITLE DETERMINED AREAS SEE THE NATIVE TITLE TRIBUNAL WEBSITE nntt.maps.arcgis.com. REGISTERED NATIVE TITLE BODIES CORPORATE AND REPRESENTATIVE ORGANISATIONS CONTACTS ARE INCLUDED AS AN INITIAL POINT OF CONTACT. THIS IS NOT AN EXHAUSTIVE LIST OF RAINFOREST ABORIGINAL ORGANISATIONS IN THE WET TROPICS.

The Wet Tropics World Heritage Area

The Wet Tropics World Heritage Area (the Area) is home to the world's oldest continuously surviving tropical rainforest. At 130 million years old, it is twice as old as the Amazon. It is also home to one of the world's oldest living and evolving cultures—Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples have lived continuously in the rainforest environment for many thousands of years, and this is the only place in Australia where Aboriginal people have permanently inhabited a tropical rainforest environment. Before European settlement, the Wet Tropics rainforests were one of the most populated areas of Australia.

Listed as the second most irreplaceable natural World Heritage site on Earth by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the Wet Tropics sits in the top 0.1% of the most important protected areas in the world.[4]

World Heritage listing

The Area received its World Heritage listing for all four natural criteria in 1988. The four natural criteria for which the Area is listed are:

- natural phenomena or beauty
- major stages of Earth's history
- significant ecological and biological processes
- significant natural habitat for biodiversity

National Heritage listing

In May 2007, the Wet Tropics of Queensland was added to the National Heritage List. On 9 November 2012, the Area's Indigenous heritage values were included as part of that listing. This recognises that Rainforest Aboriginal heritage is unique to the Wet Tropics and is a remarkable and continuous Indigenous connection with a tropical rainforest environment.

The distinctiveness of the traditions and technical innovation and expertise needed to process and prepare toxic plants as food and the use of fire was also recognised as an outstanding heritage value to the nation and are now protected for future generations under national environmental law.

Adult male southern cassowary with a juvenile | Tourism and Events Queensland

Living museum

The Wet Tropics World Heritage Area contains the oldest continuously-surviving rainforests on Earth, dating back millions of years to the ancient forests of Gondwana. These rainforests contain significant living records of the evolutionary history of marsupials and songbirds. They are home to an incredible array of animal species.

The major stages of the development of terrestrial flora—from the very first land plants to highly evolved flowering plants—are evidenced here, both in fossil form and existing plant communities. The Wet Tropics contains 16 of the Earth's 28 primitive flowering plant lineages, and some plants (such as *Idiospermum australiense*) have stood in these rainforests since the time when dinosaurs roamed.

Idiospermum australiense

Theatre of life

Significant ongoing ecological, biological and geological processes have led to the unique environment we enjoy today in the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area. Rainforests, tall open forests, rivers and wetland areas provide habitat for an incredible range of plants and animals. Many of these plants and animals are endemic, meaning they are found nowhere else on Earth. This, along with the area's large number of threatened species and their distinct habitats, contributes to the Wet Tropics' high score of irreplaceability.

Musky rat-kangaroo | Wet Tropics Images/ Mike Trenerry

Breathtaking beauty

The Wet Tropics World Heritage Area provides a rich visual mosaic of unparalleled scenery. From breathtaking mountains and peaks to volcanic crater lakes and a diverse array of rivers, streams, swimming holes and awe-inspiring waterfalls, the Wet Tropics offers an abundance of natural wonders to see and experience.

The Wet Tropics' natural beauty coupled with its unique plants and animals draw visitors from around the globe. There are diverse ways people can experience the Wet Tropics natural and cultural values, including walking and hiking, mountain biking, bird watching, kayaking and swimming.

Josephine Falls | Ngadjon-Jii Country Tourism Tropical North Queensland

Tropical haven

The Wet Tropics World Heritage Area protects an extraordinary degree of biological diversity, providing refuge for many isolated populations of plants and animals.

There is a high proportion of threatened species, which relates to their evolution in the Wet Tropics as well as loss of habitat and changes to water and fire regimes. Threatened species are those that may be vulnerable to extinction in the wild due to low populations, highly restricted distributions and habitats, or continued threatening processes.

Some of the Wet Tropics' threatened species are iconic animals (such as the southern cassowary and Lumholtz's tree-kangaroo) however most are little known, particularly the plants, frogs and invertebrates.

Golden bowerbird

A living cultural landscape

Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples are the Traditional Custodians of the Wet Tropics and surrounding areas. They have unique cultural responsibilities, rights and interests in this rich cultural landscape.

As well as providing food, shelter and medicine, the ancient forests of the wet tropics are essential to traditional identity, spirituality and social order. Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples continue to maintain their connection to Country, which remains crucial to their evolving cultural identity. The sharing of stories through language, art and cultural performance plays an important part in this.

Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples of the Wet Tropics are extraordinarily diverse and represent at least 20 tribal groups and 8 language groups—currently more than 20,000 people hold ongoing traditional connections to land in the Area.[2, 3]

Toxic plant processing
Wet Tropics Images/Steven Nowakowski

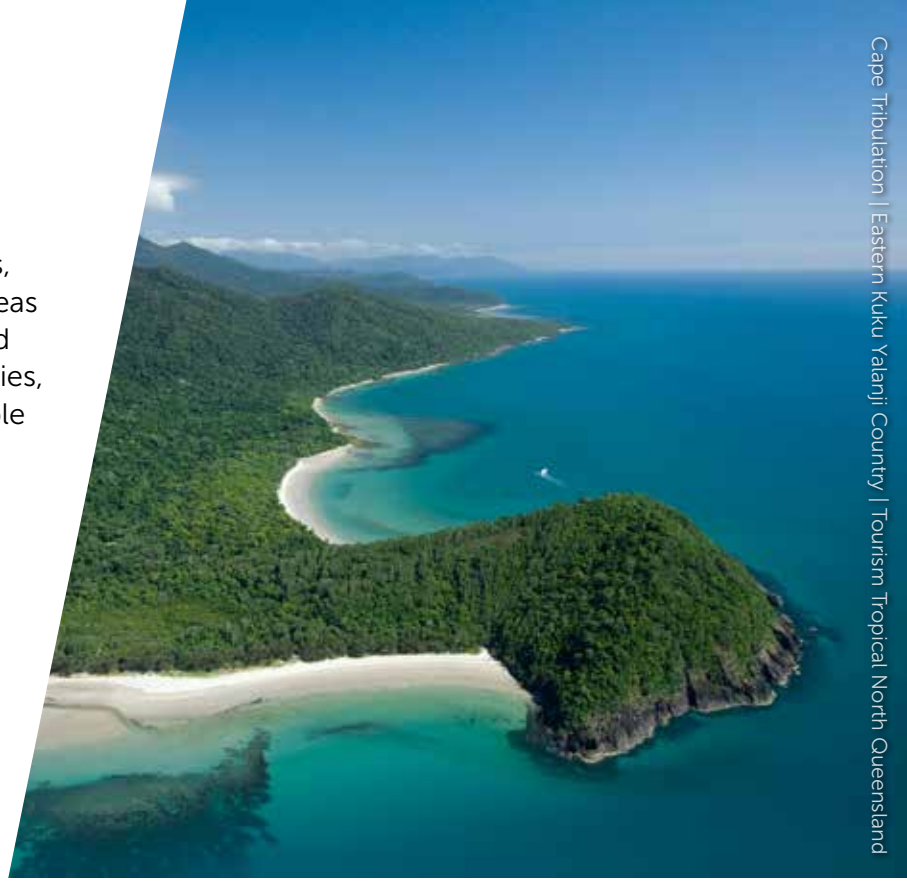
Regions of the Wet Tropics

The Wet Tropics encompasses many unique regions, all with their own distinct communities, landscapes and attractions and it's the only place in the world where two World Heritage Areas exist side by side—the Great Barrier Reef and Wet Tropics. The connection between land and sea Country has always been recognised by Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples through their stories, songlines and traditional lores and customs. This makes the Area an exceptional and desirable destination offering a breadth of world class natural and cultural experiences.

Northern Wet Tropics

The region from Port Douglas to Cooktown offers a range of attractions including a magnificent coastal drive, spectacular rainforest and a taste of the rugged and remote landscape of Cape York Peninsula. North of Palm Cove, the highway hugs the undulating coastline as it winds its way toward Port Douglas, making for spectacular views. Visitors are treated to rugged mountain backdrops with breathtaking coastal vistas. The Daintree is renowned as a place where the rainforest meets the reef, and is home to many unique species of wildlife with ancient lineages.

Mossman Gorge Centre, the Daintree Discovery Centre, and the many walking tracks and lookouts are popular attractions.



Cape Tribulation | Eastern Kuku Yalanji Country | Tourism Tropical North Queensland

Tablelands Wet Tropics

Also referred to as the Cairns Highlands, including the Atherton and Evelyn tablelands, this region offers a variety of landscapes with its mosaic patterns of rainforest fragments, eucalypt woodlands, unique volcanic craters, lakes, waterfalls, lush forests and mountains. The climate is much cooler here offering respite to visitors as they enjoy the rainforest.

The stunning crater lakes, Millaa Millaa Falls, the elusive Lumholtz's tree-kangaroo, and majestic fig trees are some of the highlights of this region.

Curtain Fig Tree | Tablelands Yidinji Country | Tourism Tropical North Queensland

Davies Creek Falls | Buluwai Country
Tourism and Events Queensland

Cairns and Kuranda

Flowing streams, waterfalls and gorges etch their way through thick lush rainforest surrounding the tropical city of Cairns, offering a variety of natural and cultural experiences. This tourism hub offers easy access to stunning beaches and spectacular rainforest-cloaked mountains.

Kuranda is a busy tourist village and a popular day trip from Cairns. There are many unique offerings from the markets and wildlife attractions to the spectacular natural environment surrounding the village. Din Din (Barron Falls) and the sheer gorge are highlights, especially in the wet season when the river is in flood.

Tourist attractions include the Skyrail Rainforest Cableway and Kuranda Scenic Railway, Din Din (Barron Falls), the Douglas Track walking trail and Davies Creek.

Walshs Pyramid | Dulabed Malanbarra Yidinji and Wanyurr Majay Country
Tourism Tropical North Queensland

Central Wet Tropics and Cassowary Coast

This region contains the largest parcel of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area and includes Queensland's two highest mountains—the mist-shrouded Bartle Frere and Bellenden Ker. The lush green coastline, that includes the well-known tourist destination of Mission Beach, is the wettest in Australia receiving as much as four metres of rain each year. Many visit the area in order to spot the elusive southern cassowary.

The Mamu Tropical Skywalk, white-water rapids of the Tully River and picturesque Cardwell Spa Pool are popular attractions.

Cloudy Creek walk | Nywaigi Country
Tourism and Events Queensland

Southern Wet Tropics

The southern parts of the Wet Tropics include the rugged Paluma and Seaview ranges which loom above the farming communities on the coastal plain. This is the dry end of the tropics. The forests here are different to those in the north and feature magnificent stands of tall eucalypt forest and dry tropical open woodlands typify this region.

Townsville is the southern gateway to the World Heritage Area. This region features Paluma, also known as the village in the mist, and Wallaman Falls—Australia's highest single-drop waterfall.

The Wet Tropics Management Authority

The Wet Tropics Management Authority (the Authority) was established in 1992 to fulfil Australia's international obligations to protect, conserve, present, rehabilitate and pass on the World Heritage Area to future generations. This is achieved through the administration of Queensland's Wet Tropics legislation and the setting of policies and procedures which govern activities and land use.

Funded by both the Australian and Queensland governments, the Authority manages the Area collaboratively with a range of government agencies, land managers and landholders, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, research organisations, local governments, the tourism industry, the conservation sector and community groups.

The Authority's main functions are to:

- develop and implement management plans, policies and programs
- administer funding arrangements
- promote, research, and monitor the state of the Wet Tropics
- enter into cooperative management agreements and other arrangements with landholders and Aboriginal people
- develop community education programs
- promote the Wet Tropics locally, nationally, and internationally.

Through the Wet Tropics Management Plan 1998 (the Management Plan), the Authority manages development activity in the Area (including tourism infrastructure), primarily through a zoning and permit system. The Management Plan regulates activities that may have an impact on World Heritage values and integrity. This determines what sort of infrastructure and activities can take place—if any—and where.

Southern cassowary at Cape Tribulation | Eastern Kuku Yalanji Country | Tourism Tropical North Queensland

Sharing knowledge | Eastern Kuku Yalanji Country

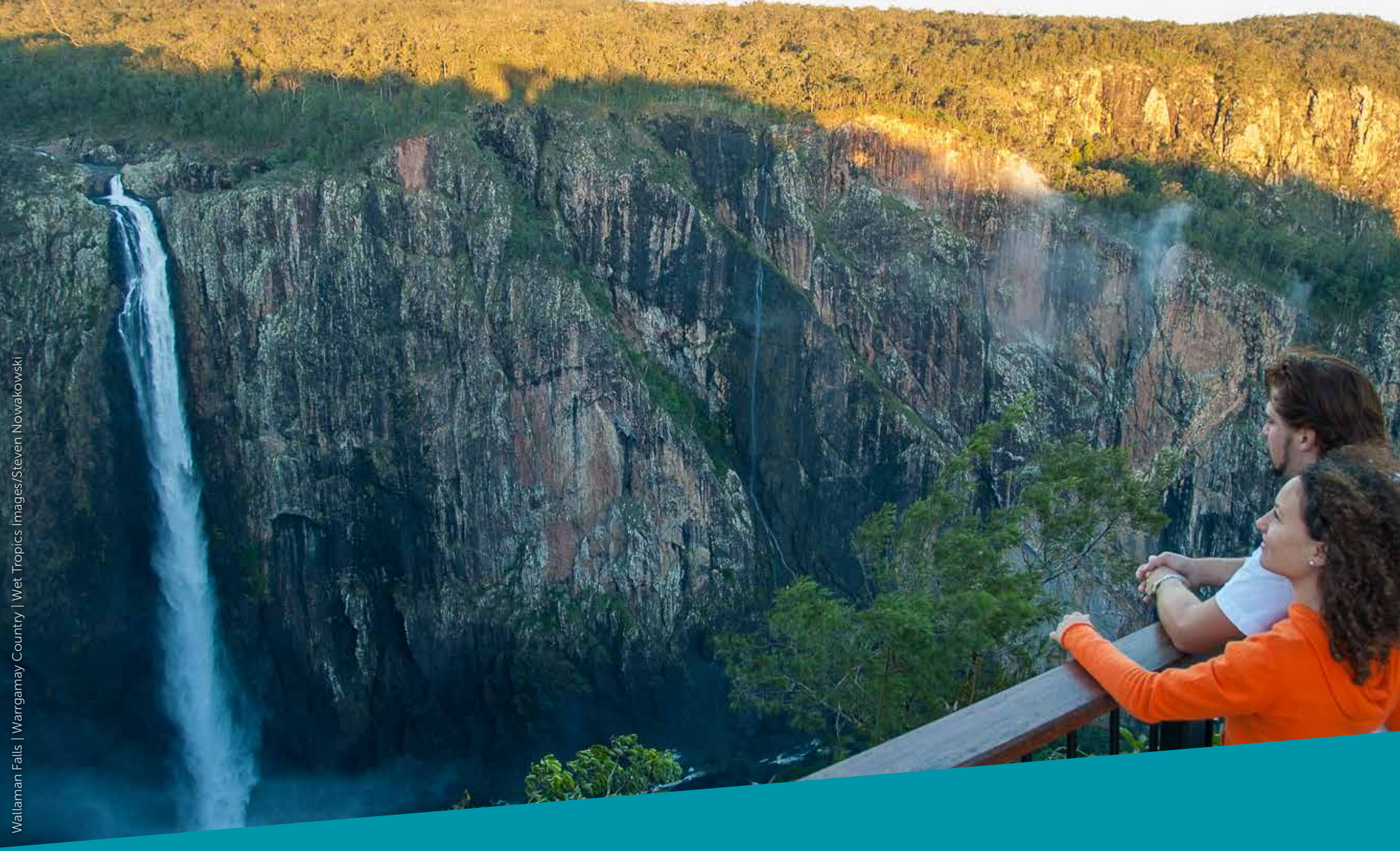
The Authority's role in tourism

One of the Authority's obligations under the World Heritage Convention is to present the values of the Area, which are globally significant and for the Area to have a function in the life of the community. The Area's World Heritage status warrants concerted efforts to provide the highest quality standards in presentation, including a diversity of experiences to allow residents and visitors the ability to enjoy and appreciate the Area. This needs to be balanced with ensuring that activities are ecologically sustainable, maintaining World Heritage values and integrity.

The best way to achieve excellence in World Heritage presentation is by working with our partners in government, the tourism industry, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples and the conservation sector to stimulate sustainable tourism solutions in our communities.

This collaborative approach will:

- identify new ways to provide opportunities for people to better appreciate and understand the World Heritage values of the Area
- motivate and inspire the community and agencies to make a deeper connection with the Area and take an ongoing interest in its care and protection
- strengthen relationships to create opportunities for Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples to deliver distinctive Indigenous experiences across the Wet Tropics
- ensure there are complementary facilities and experiences across the different Wet Tropics regions, encouraging broader visitor dispersal and a deeper Wet Tropics experience.



Wallaman Falls | Warrgamay Country | Wet Tropics Images/Steven Nowakowski

Tourism in the Wet Tropics

An established industry

The Wet Tropics World Heritage Area (the Area) is renowned for its scenic natural beauty, land and seascapes and incredible biodiversity. It has a well-established tourism industry that offers a vast range of experiences. There are many ways for locals and visitors alike to engage with the World Heritage Area and surrounds—there are more than 150 managed walks and more than 200 managed visitor sites in the Area alone, as well as numerous commercial tourism products.

Tourism and recreation bring significant environmental, social, cultural and economic benefits to the Wet Tropics community. In the year ending December 2019, Tropical North Queensland (TNQ) and Townsville saw $4.4 billion in expenditure from visitors staying one night or longer and a total of 4.4 million visitors of which 77% were domestic and 23% international visitors respectively.[6]

More than 87% of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area (the Area) is managed as national parks, conservation parks, state forests and forest reserves.[7] The national parks in TNQ and Townsville regions receive 536,000 visits annually from domestic overnight visitors alone,[8] highlighting the importance of the Area's role in not only tourism but the lives of those who live nearby.

At the end of December 2019, the three-year trend for overnight visitation to TNQ and Townsville regions was positive.[9] The region has been one of the most affected in Australia by the global pandemic. While there have been ongoing impacts on international tourism with the closing of borders, domestic tourism has experienced both highs and lows. Anecdotal evidence suggests increased use of national parks as an important recreational resource during this time. The recovery trajectory for the tourism sector remains uncertain. The pandemic has highlighted the need for adaptation and resilience.

Historically, the region is mostly dependent on aviation access for international and interstate visitation. However, self-drive, cruise and backpacker markets are also important. Influential channels for destination discovery include word of mouth, travel distribution networks, social networks, destination marketing campaigns, online travel agents, and review sites.

The benefits of tourism in TNQ and Townsville regions are well demonstrated by local sentiment: more than 90% of residents view tourism positively.[10]

The Wet Tropics World Heritage Area and tourism industry both face future challenges however everyone including Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, the conservation sector and the tourism industry can play a role in turning visitors into advocates, moving towards a more sustainable and resilient future.

Little Mulgrave River | Dulabed Malanbarra Yidinji Country

The changing tourism landscape

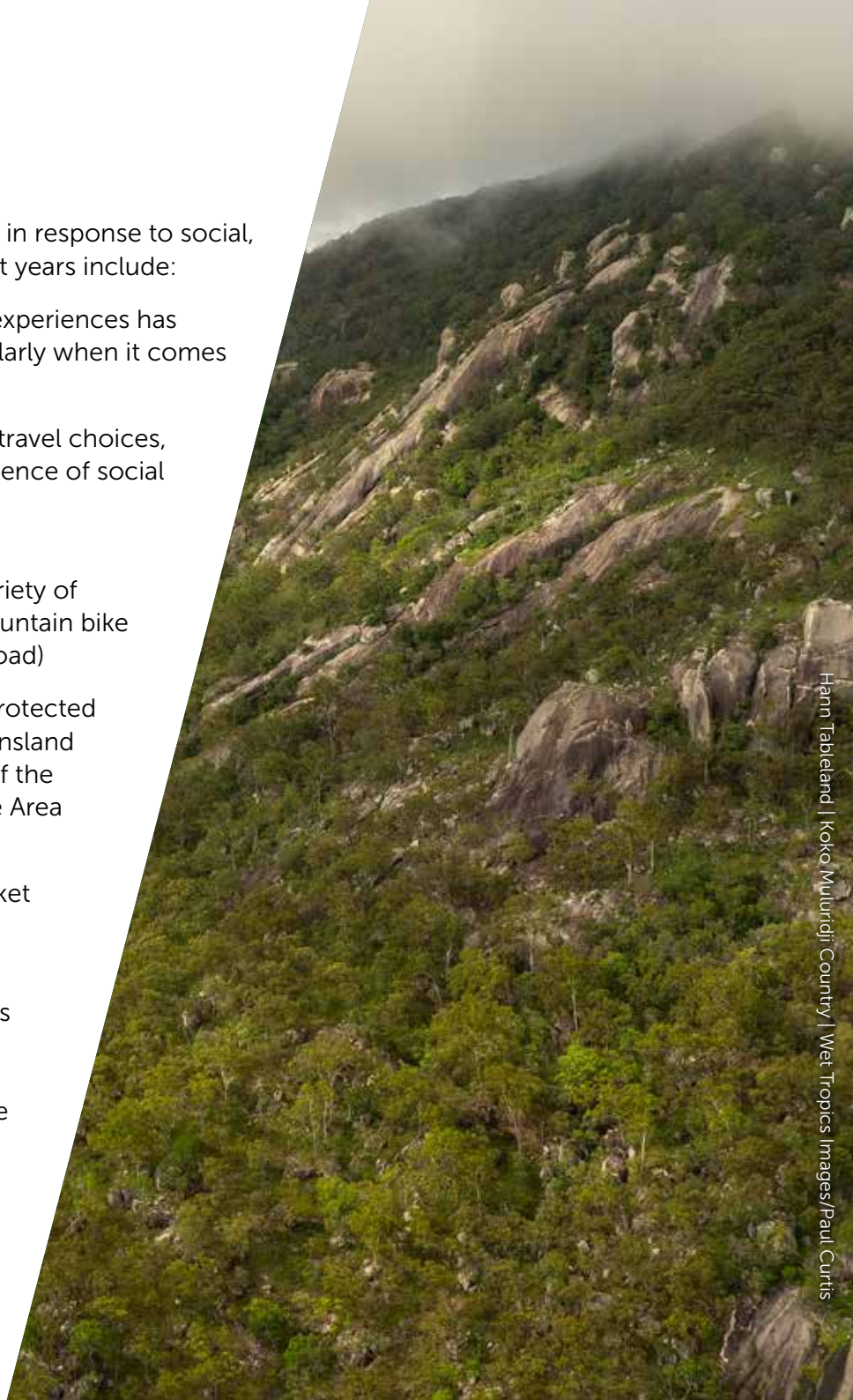
While the Area has a well-established tourism industry, it continues to evolve and adapt in response to social, economic and environmental influences. Factors that have significantly shifted in recent years include:

- visitor expectation—demand for sustainable, environmentally-friendly products and experiences has grown as has the desire for authentic connection and transformational travel, particularly when it comes to cultural tourism
- access to information—technological innovation has transformed how visitors make travel choices, such as online booking platforms, apps and travel blogs along with the powerful influence of social media (where site promotion can result in an unpredictable increase in demand)
- access and facilities—there are more ways to enjoy the Area with the addition of a variety of elevated walkways and viewing platforms, an increase in bike trails and dedicated mountain bike parks, and improved road access (e.g. the sealing of the Daintree—Cape Tribulation road)
- land interests—since 2000, the percentage of the World Heritage Area managed as protected area estate has increased from around 30% to more than 87% as a result of the Queensland Government's forest transfer process. In the same period and with the introduction of the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth), Aboriginal Land interests now cover more than 87% of the Area including three Indigenous Protected Areas.

The tourism landscape will continue to change in response to external factors and market forces, but the industry, the market and local communities all aspire to a robust and sustainable tourism industry.

There are many factors that need to be considered if future tourism in the Wet Tropics is to be truly sustainable. The Authority has an important role to play in championing and elevating the importance, and the appeal, of sustainable tourism through our voice of advocacy and education. All our activities support our vision of being the most desirable and sustainable destination in Australia.

The Wet Tropics Sustainable Tourism Plan focusses on what we—the Authority and all partners along with the community at large—can do to ensure tourism in the Wet Tropics is sustainable, best-practice and fitting for a globally significant place.



Hann Tableland | Koko Muluridji Country | Wet Tropics Images/Paul Curtis

The Blencoe Falls region is Girramay, Warrungnu and Jirrbal Country | Wet Tropics Images/Paul Chantrill

Sustainable tourism: a plan for the Wet Tropics

What is sustainable tourism?

Sustainable tourism is a powerful force that can drive conservation outcomes and build capacity for a better-protected planet. Sustainable tourism is tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, cultural, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities.[11]

Significant opportunities to design, plan and take advantage of a shifting landscape and the growing appetite for sustainable tourism experiences in natural places exist and will continue to emerge. The Wet Tropics is well positioned to ensure that with careful and collaborative management and planning, its communities and landscapes will benefit from sustainable tourism. With climate change posing a significant threat to the Area, building a sustainable future is more critical than ever.

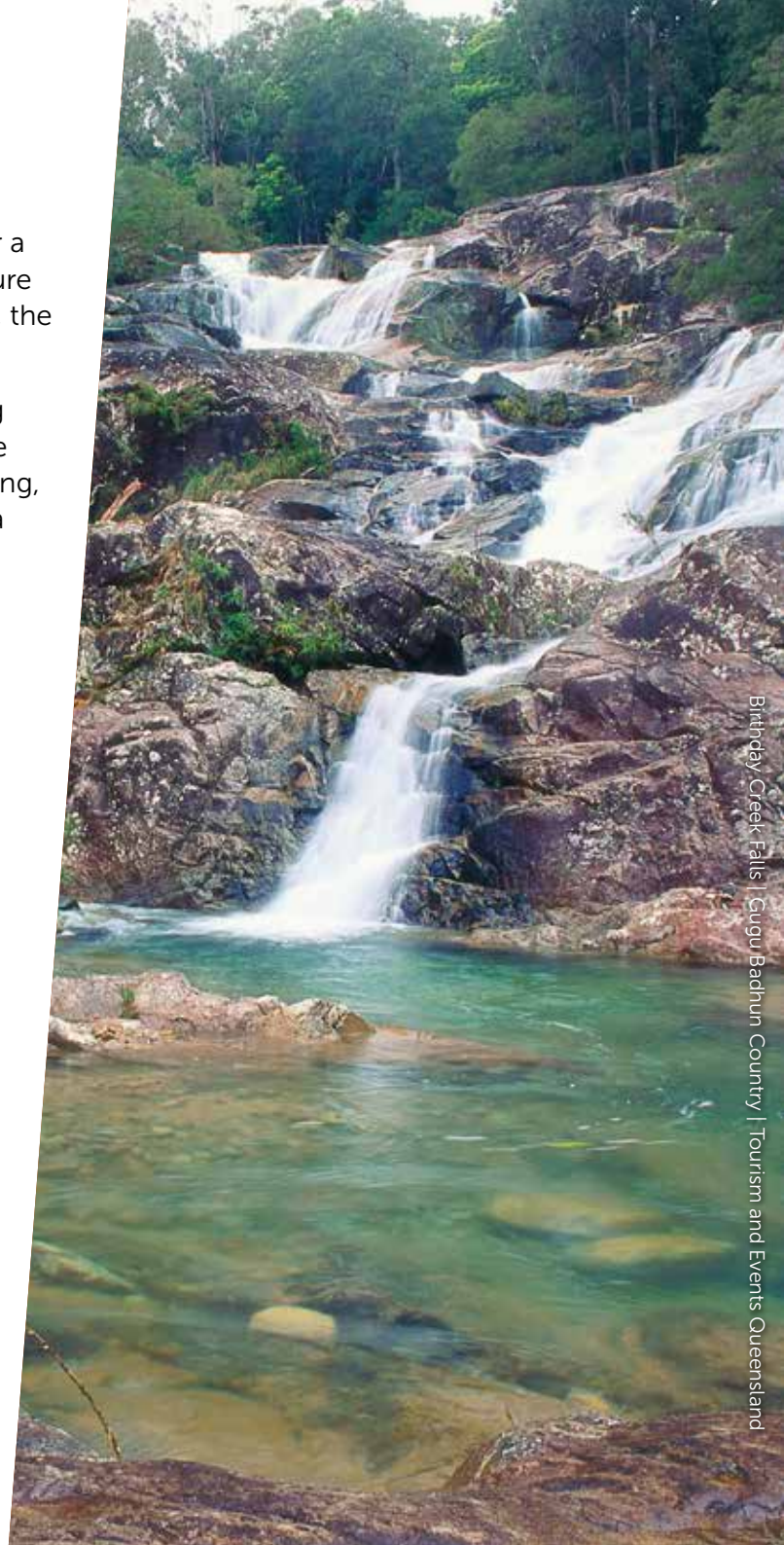
Working together with Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, industry and other partners, the Wet Tropics Management Authority (the Authority) is committed to supporting sustainable tourism for all in and around the Wet Tropics region, including opportunities for Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples to work in tourism on Country.

IUCN best practice guidelines

While tourism and conservation have a complementary relationship, it is important to acknowledge that all tourism has an impact. Landscape degradation, biodiversity loss and pollution are some of the more severe consequences of inadequate visitor management practices in protected areas across the globe. For this reason, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) provides comprehensive guidelines for tourism and visitor management in protected areas.

To ensure IUCN best practice guidelines are met, tourism in the Wet Tropics should:

- contribute environmental, social, cultural and economic value
- tailor best practice standards to the Area's unique situation
- focus on providing quality visitor experiences
- build a conservation ethic amongst visitors
- acknowledge, monitor and analyse negative impacts, such as overuse
- ensure benefits flow equitably to Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, local communities and tour operators.



Birthday Creek Falls | Gugu Badhun Country | Tourism and Events Queensland

Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, the conservation sector, local communities, the tourism industry and government agencies working together is paramount for future resilience and sustainability.

About the Plan

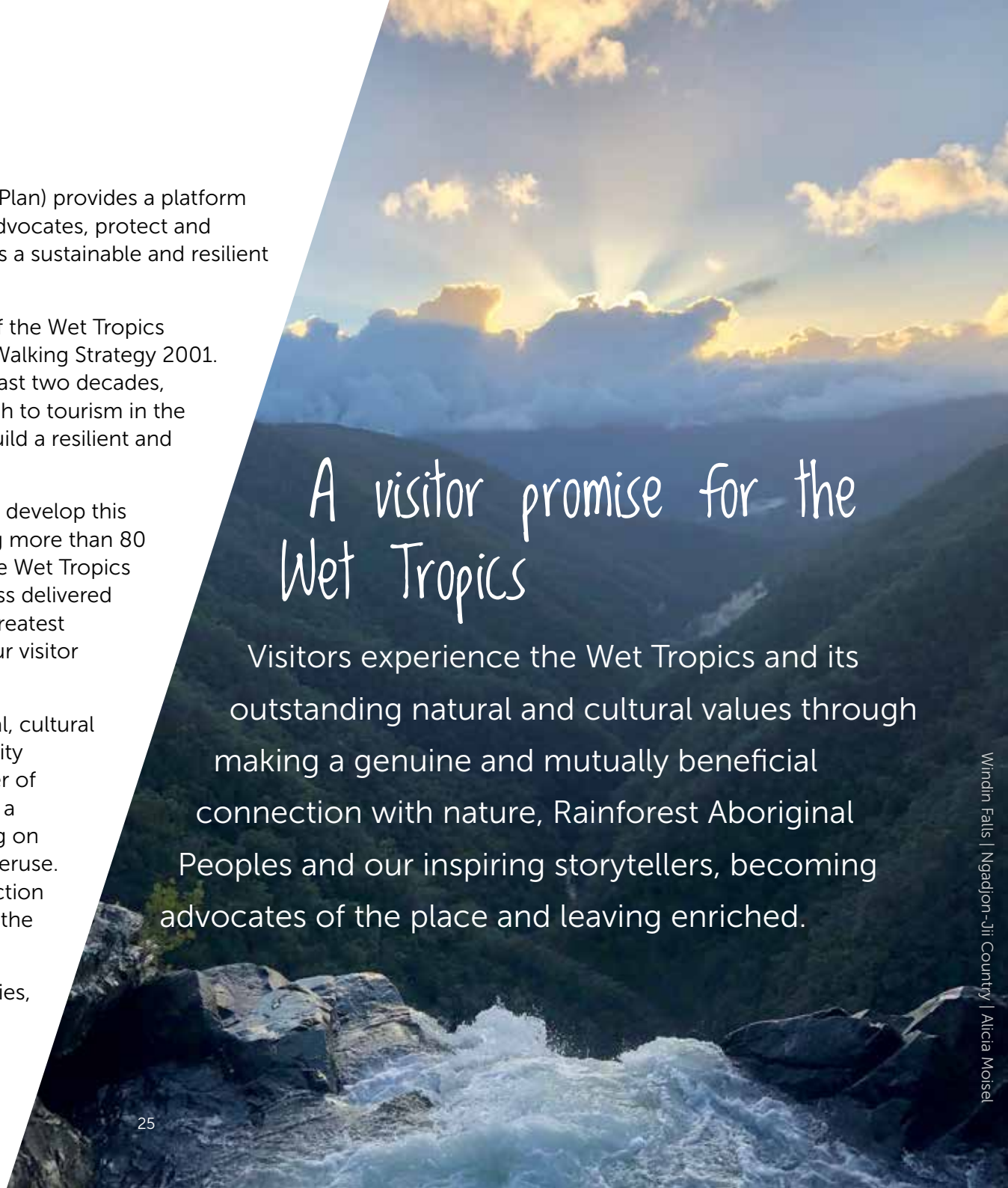
The Wet Tropics Sustainable Tourism Plan 2021–2031 (the Plan) provides a platform from which we can all work together to turn visitors into advocates, protect and conserve our natural and cultural assets, and move towards a sustainable and resilient future.

The Plan was informed by and builds on the foundations of the Wet Tropics Nature Based Tourism Strategy 2000 and the Wet Tropics Walking Strategy 2001. Recognising the changing landscape of tourism over the past two decades, the Plan takes a contemporary and more inclusive approach to tourism in the Area focussing on actions required to affect change and build a resilient and sustainable industry.

The Authority led a comprehensive consultative process to develop this plan, engaging with more than 150 individuals representing more than 80 organisations including significant consultation through the Wet Tropics Management Authority Board and key partners. This process delivered a wealth of insights and clear direction on where there is greatest opportunity to combine collective efforts and deliver on our visitor promise for the Wet Tropics.

Although tourism brings considerable environmental, social, cultural and economic benefits to the region, historically the majority of visitor volume has been concentrated on a small number of well-established and well-known locations. The Plan takes a regional approach to future tourism development, focusing on encouraging user dispersal and minimising potential for overuse. Enhancing visitor experience and building a deeper connection between Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples and tourism across the region are also priorities within the Plan.

The consultation process identified a number of key priorities, which have informed the development of this Plan.



Windin Falls | Ngadjon-Jii Country | Alicia Moisel

Goals of the Plan

Through collaborative management and community participation, the Authority believes the Plan can deliver many positive economic, social and environmental outcomes for the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area, its residents and visitors.

While protecting and conserving the Area's World Heritage values, we aim to deliver on the visitor promise through six key goals, outlined in this Plan along with actions and strategies to achieve these:

Respect for Country and people

Establishing respect for Country as an integral part of the Wet Tropics experience

Rainforest Aboriginal tourism aspirations

Supporting Traditional Custodians to achieve their aspirations for tourism on Country

Building awareness through consistent messaging and branding

Improving access to consistent information about the Wet Tropics and its distinct regions

Increased community involvement and advocacy

Optimising community participation and connection with the Area and its World Heritage values

Well-trained, professional tour guides

Creating enhanced, personal and connected visitor experiences through well-trained professional, tour guides

Collaborative visitor management

Adopting a collaborative, informed and consistent approach to planning, experience delivery and sustainable best practice.

Aligning the Plan

The Wet Tropics Sustainable Tourism Plan aligns with:

- The Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area Regional Agreement 2005
- The Wet Tropics Management Authority's Wet Tropics Strategic Plan 2020–2030
- The Wet Tropics Management Authority's Accept, Act, Adapt: Climate Adaptation Plan for the Wet Tropics 2020–2030
- The Department of Environment and Science's Gurra Gurra Framework 2020–2026
- The Department of Environment and Science's Queensland Protected Area Strategy 2020–2030
- Tourism and Events Queensland's Nature-based Tourism Strategy 2021–2024
- The Queensland Tourism Industry Council's First Nations Tourism Plan 2020–2025
- The Queensland Government Reconciliation Action Plan 2018–2021.

Jirrbal Country | Wet Tropics Images/Brad Newton

Goal 1

Establish respect for Country as an integral part of the Wet Tropics experience

Respect for Country and people

Rainforest Aboriginal Country

The Wet Tropics World Heritage Area (the Area) is a profound biocultural landscape that Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples hold various custodial responsibilities for and rights to. As an industry that operates on and accrues benefits based on this landscape, the tourism industry can support these responsibilities and rights.

Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples' land interests—including Native Title interests—cover more than 87% of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area. There are currently more than 20 Registered Native Title Bodies Corporate (RNTBC) operating within and adjacent to the Area in addition to a number of other Native Title claimant groups that are still working through their Native Title processes.

Overlapping Rainforest Aboriginal land interests in the Area include the following:

- 5.9% Native Title (exclusive)
- 54.4% Native Title (non-exclusive)
- 59.8% Indigenous Land Use Agreements
- 29.2% Indigenous Protected Area.[12]

Respect and relationships

Respect for Country and its people, including traditional custodial relationships, is key to developing successful, authentic cultural experiences as it builds relationships and trust between Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, tourism operators and visitors alike.

In practice, respect for Country means acknowledging the spirit of the Country and Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples' custodial responsibilities and establishing agreed and accountable ways of working on and experiencing Country together.

To embed a deep and localised respect for Country requires a systematic approach to implementing best practice standards by the tourism industry and all stakeholders across the Area's diverse localities. This means the tourism industry (including tourism bodies, operators and individuals) committing to reconciliation action, and Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples (through their legal entities and/or respective governance structures) communicating protocols to clarify the rules of engagement.

Ways of showing respect for Country:

- Understanding the diversity of Rainforest Aboriginal groups across the Wet Tropics.
- Practicing Acknowledgement of Country, Welcome to Country and follow cultural protocols.
- Obtaining cultural and intellectual authority to talk about Country—and respecting intellectual property rights.
- Obtaining the cultural awareness to work on Country in an appropriate way.
- Valuing Country through equitable benefit sharing.
- Protecting Country, especially sacred sites, from visitor impacts.

Walkabout Cultural Adventures | Kuku Yalanji Country | Tourism and Events Queensland

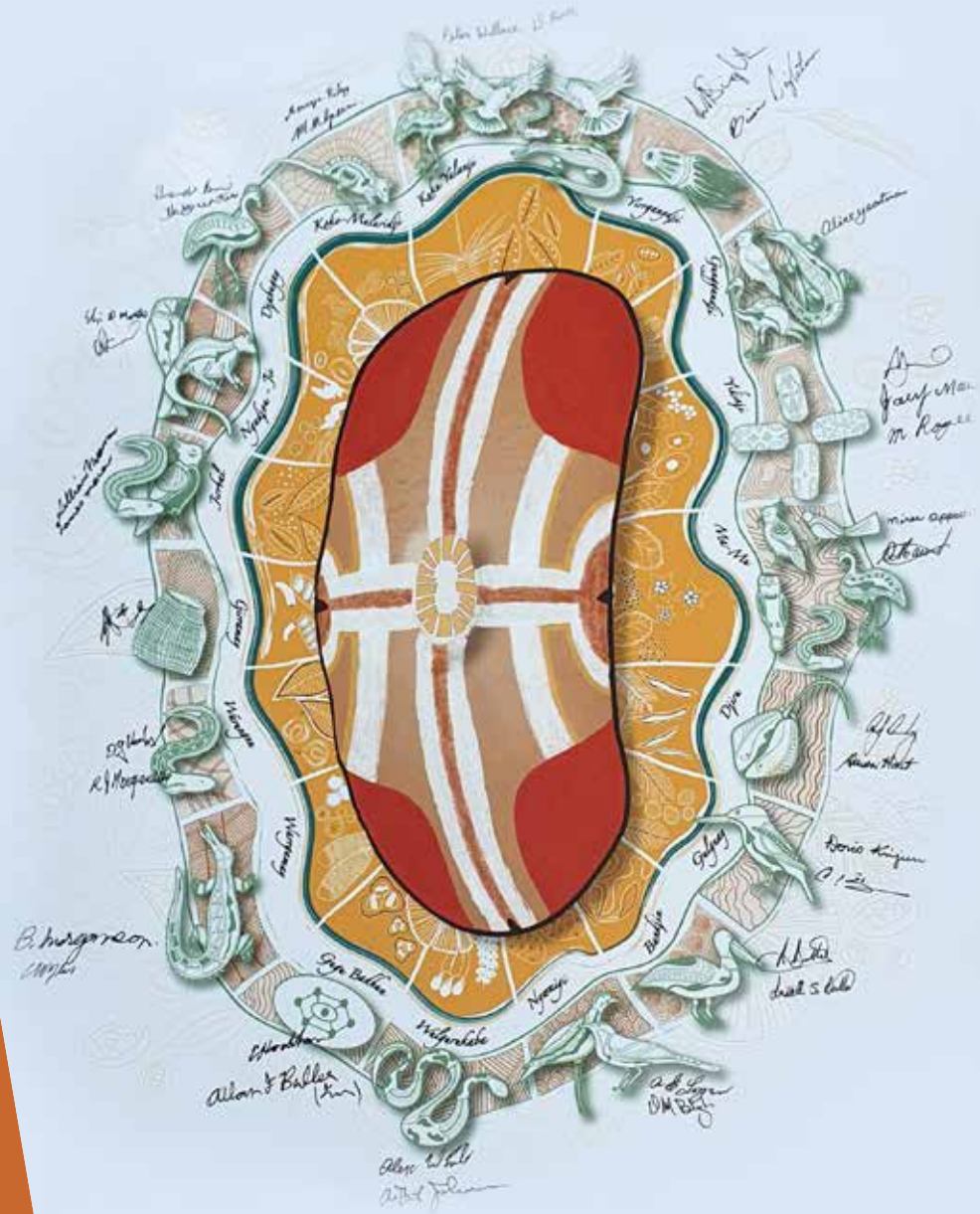
A rights-based approach

Numerous legislative, organisational, and best-practice standards protect and promote Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples' responsibilities, rights and interests. These all help to form agreed ways of working together from local to international levels. Underpinning this is the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC). The Queensland *Human Rights Act 2019* also affirms that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' cultural rights are human rights, and all Queensland public entities—including the Wet Tropics Management Authority (the Authority)—are obligated to protect and maintain these rights.

The Wet Tropics World Heritage Protection and Management Act 1993 and Wet Tropics Management Plan 1998 set out requirements for the Authority to perform its functions, as far as practicable, with regard to the Aboriginal Tradition of Aboriginal people; and to liaise, and cooperate with, Aboriginal people particularly concerned with the land in the Area.

The Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area Regional Agreement 2005 (The Regional Agreement) provides a framework for the increased participation of Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples in the management of the Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area. The central principles of the Agreement are to recognise Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples' rights and interests and to afford them the opportunity to define and negotiate their own priorities, needs and aspirations for management of the Wet Tropics.

The Authority are supporting a Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples-led approach to refresh the Regional Agreement and contemporise it to reflect current aspirations and priorities for Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples.



The Regional Agreement artwork signifies the historical agreement in 2005 between 18 Rainforest Aboriginal tribal groups and the Australian and Queensland governments to cooperatively manage the Wet Tropics area. Central to the artwork is a rainforest ceremonial fighting shield symbolising Rainforest Aboriginal customary lore and Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples coming together as 'one voice'. Surrounding the shield are traditional foods and medicinal resources that represent customary use of the Wet Tropics area. The outer artwork is made up of tribal totems that represent the cultural identity and the spiritual connection that each Rainforest Aboriginal tribal group has with their Country.

Cultural protocols

Cultural protocols are adopted guidelines when working on Country that respect Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples' lores and customs. These protocols may, for example, set out rules of engagement and notification requirements when accessing Country, provide limits on the types of activities and behaviours that may/may not be supported at a given site, or provide opportunities to work with Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples to enrich a tourism experience and increase understanding and awareness of the cultural values and significance of an area.

While on the decline, culturally inappropriate behaviours continue to be practiced across the tourism sector such as accessing culturally sensitive areas without prior approval or permissions, sharing of stories without cultural authority, the removal of souvenirs (e.g stones, leaves, sand and flowers), sharing imagery of culturally sensitive landscapes and imitation of cultural performance and art. It is vital that the maintenance and strengthening of Indigenous cultural expression and conservation is supported at all levels.[13]

To ensure traditional lore and customs are upheld, some Rainforest Aboriginal groups have developed cultural protocols and codes of practice. These locally developed protocols encourage governments, industries and businesses to work respectfully with Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples. These codes may include site accessibility (such as restrictions around women's/men's sites, or significant sites), and can also protect cultural intellectual property (including stories, cultural performance and art). Some of these codes are formalised while others may not be documented, however Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples continue to practice traditional lores and customs across the region. It is recommended that the tourism industry and individual operators make enquiries with the appropriate Traditional Custodians for the area they operate in to ensure cultural protocols are followed.

Education, training and certification programs can also support tourism operators to increase their cultural awareness and encourage the tourism industry to operate in ways that respect Indigenous cultural heritage and recognise the continuing connection and cultural responsibilities Traditional Custodians still hold with and for Country.

CASE STUDY

Eastern Kuku Yalanji Rainforest Bama Madja Code of Practice: The Madja Code©

The Madja Code is a framework that promotes effective engagement for accessing the Country of Eastern Kuku Yalanji Bama. It sets out protocols and principles, rights and processes for consultation, negotiation and agreement making while protecting Eastern Kuku Yalanji intellectual property rights through the process of free, prior and informed consent.

The Madja Code is underpinned by the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the AIATSIS Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies. It was developed as part of the Cape York Peninsula Aboriginal Land (CYPAL) Tenure Resolution Program by Chrissy Grant as an Eastern Kuku Yalanji woman.

©Chrissy Grant, Eastern Kuku Yalanji Rainforest Bama Madja Code of Practice: 'THE MADJA CODE', developed for the Eastern Kuku Yalanji Bama for the Joint management arrangements for their national parks (CYPAL) in Cape York, June 2020.

Permits for commercial activities on Country

The Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area Regional Agreement 2005 includes the development of a cultural protocol for Commercial Activity Permits to facilitate effective consultation and involvement of relevant Traditional Custodians for operators seeking to access Country.

The Authority will work with QPWS&P, the tourism industry and Rainforest Aboriginal groups to trial and implement a cultural protocol for Commercial Activity Permits (administered by QPWS&P) in the Wet Tropics. This protocol will aim to ensure any people/organisations undertaking commercial activities in the Wet Tropics engage with the appropriate Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples from the outset. It will support a shift to culturally appropriate behaviour and greater opportunities for Traditional Custodian participation in tourism activities on Country.

A commercial tourism protocol can link to existing locally developed codes and protocols (e.g. The Madja Code) supporting FPIC principles and a rights-based approach.

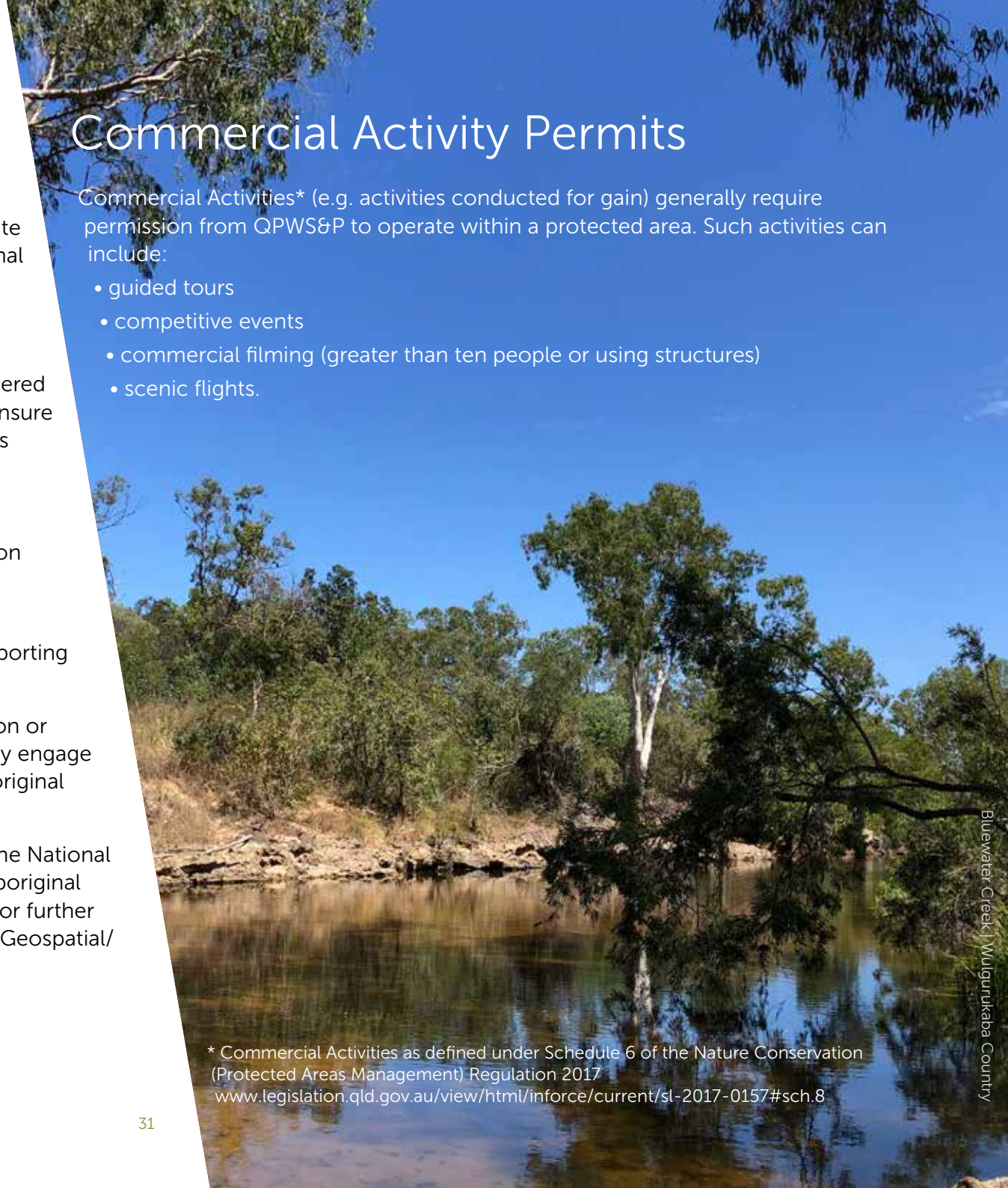
The Authority encourages all tourism operators operating on or interested in conducting activities on Country to proactively engage with the Traditional Custodians and relevant Rainforest Aboriginal groups.

Publicly available data such as via Queensland Globe and the National Native Title Tribunal can help identify relevant Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples for a given area. The Authority may be contacted for further advice where necessary—see www.nntt.gov.au/assistance/Geospatial/Pages/NTV.aspx.

Commercial Activity Permits

Commercial Activities* (e.g. activities conducted for gain) generally require permission from QPWS&P to operate within a protected area. Such activities can include:

- guided tours
- competitive events
- commercial filming (greater than ten people or using structures)
- scenic flights.



Bluewater Creek | Wulgurukaba Country

* Commercial Activities as defined under Schedule 6 of the Nature Conservation (Protected Areas Management) Regulation 2017 www.legislation.qld.gov.au/view/html/inforce/current/sl-2017-0157#sch.8

CASE STUDY

Cassowary Coast entry statements

Djiru, Girramay, Gulngay and Mamu Country | Central Wet Tropics and Cassowary Coast region

The Cassowary Coast Regional Council's regional and major town entry statements project has been developed in collaboration with Mamu Aboriginal Corporation RNTBC, Girringun Aboriginal Corporation (Girringun Aboriginal Art Centre), and the Department of Transport and Main Roads.

The colourful and architectural entry statements celebrate local Traditional Owners through artwork and acknowledgement of Country while highlighting the region's two World Heritage areas—the Wet Tropics and the Great Barrier Reef. The project also reflects the Cassowary Coast's two major agricultural exports and pays homage to the region's significant tropical art deco buildings. The signs will be placed in Djiru Country (Mission Beach), Girramay Country (Cardwell), Gulngay Country (Tully), and Mamu Country (Innisfail).

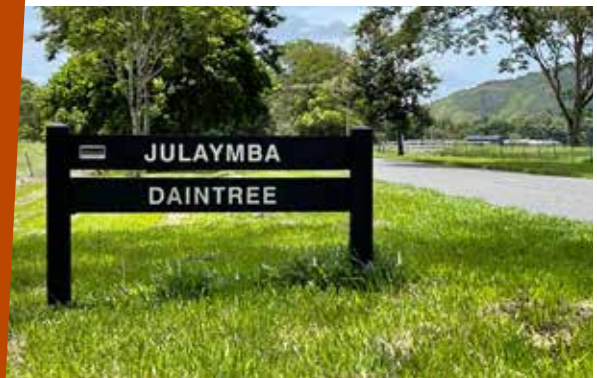
Cassowary Coast Regional Council

Douglas Shire's Indigenous language signage

Eastern Kuku Yalanji Country | Northern Wet Tropics region

The innovative Indigenous Language Signage project came about through a partnership between Douglas Shire Council and Jabalbina Yalanji Aboriginal Corporation and involved the design and installation of a range of bi-lingual place signage featuring Kuku Yalanji language.

The Indigenous Language Signage Committee, which featured six members representing a specific area of the Shire they are connected to, visited the region identifying sites and place names for 25 locations in Eastern Kuku Yalanji Country. A map was prepared for further consultation amongst the community of Kuku Yalanji Elders and Traditional Owners. Further signs have been developed including Welcome to Country and town entry signs, featuring artwork from local artists.



Douglas Shire Council

Establish respect for Country as an integral part of the Wet Tropics experience

Strategies	Actions
Increase awareness and respect for Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples' custodial responsibilities and connections	1.1 Increase cultural awareness across the tourism sector through education, training and certification Our key partners: Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, QTIC, TTNQ, TEL
	1.2 Work with partners to embed Acknowledgement of Country as a minimum standard across the tourism industry Our key partners: Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, tourism industry
	1.3 Work with Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples to proactively communicate issues and impacts around use of culturally sensitive sites and culturally inappropriate behaviours Our key partners: Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, QPWS&P, TTNQ, tourism industry
Establish locally developed codes of conduct across the Wet Tropics	1.4 Trial and implement a cultural protocol for Commercial Activity Permits in the Wet Tropics as set out in the Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area Regional Agreement 2005 Our key partners: Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, QPWS&P, tour operators
	1.5 Support Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples to establish their own specific codes of conduct to protect culturally significant sites and prevent culturally inappropriate behaviours Our key partners: Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, QPWS&P

Walkabout Cultural Adventures | Kuku Yalanji Country | Tourism and Events Queensland

Goal 2

Supporting Traditional Custodians to achieve their aspirations for tourism on Country

Rainforest Aboriginal tourism aspirations

Butuwai Elder Willie Brim at Clohesy River Fig Tree | Butuwai Country | Wet Tropics Images/Steven Nowakowski

Enriching the visitor experience through authentic cultural connections

Across Australia, demand for authentic and meaningful Indigenous cultural experiences is growing in international and domestic tourist markets. The number of international tourists participating in an Indigenous tourism activity increased at least 40% from 2013 to 2019.[14] Research also indicates domestic Australian tourists spend more and travel for longer when choosing to experience Indigenous cultures.[15]

Tropical North Queensland currently ranks fourth as the most frequently visited destination for domestic tourists to experience First Nations cultures behind Lasseter/Uluru (NT), Litchfield/Kakadu/Arnhem (NT), and Australia's North West (WA).[16]

The Wet Tropics tourism industry is well-placed to support and partner with interested Rainforest Aboriginal groups to sustain existing cultural experiences while also aiming to develop other culturally appropriate products to meet consumer demand trends.

Multi-faceted outcomes

Tourism can deliver many benefits to Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples—social, emotional and economic—while also enhancing the visitor experience and Wet Tropics tourism offerings.

Through collaborative management, Traditional Custodians play an increasing role in deciding what tourism takes place on their Country and how they participate, whilst providing a way to ensure their custodial responsibilities are recognised, respected and upheld.

Tourism can allow the sharing of culture in appropriate ways and enable visitors to respect and care for Country. Many employment opportunities to work on Country can arise from tourism including tour guiding, protected area management, Indigenous ranger programs, hospitality, the arts, technology and other sectors.

QTIC is currently establishing a Queensland-focused First Nations tourism peak body to support First Nations-owned businesses to realise their aspirations in tourism. Delivery and implementation of the this Plan and its actions will be undertaken through a codesign process with Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples.

The Authority is committed to ongoing collaboration with Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples to realise their tourism aspirations.

Mossman Gorge | Eastern Kuku Yalanji Country | Business Events Cairns & Great Barrier Reef

CASE STUDY

Mossman Gorge Centre

Eastern Kuku Yalanji Country | Northern Wet Tropics region

The Mossman Gorge Centre is a world-class ecotourism visitor and interpretive centre located at the entrance to Mossman Gorge. The centre is operated by Voyages Indigenous Tourism Australia in collaboration with the local Kuku Yalanji people. Voyages Australia is a subsidiary of the Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation (ILSC) which is a Corporate Commonwealth entity that assists Indigenous Australians with land acquisition and land management to achieve economic, environmental, social and cultural benefits. The ILSC funded and constructed the Mossman Gorge Centre complex to provide sustainable economic development, employment and training opportunities for Indigenous people in the area.

For decades, visitors to the Gorge would travel through the Mossman Gorge community to access the national park. Traffic was increasing as were site-based impacts, leading to site degradation, overcrowding, decreasing visitor satisfaction, inadequate revenue for site management and minimal benefits to the community. Government agencies and the Mossman Gorge community worked together to conceptualise a measure that was both protective to Country and empowering to the local community.

Establishing the centre enabled the gorge access road to be closed for public use. Instead, visitors access the gorge via a low-emission shuttle bus service between the centre and the gorge, minimising the environmental impacts of tourist traffic to the site.

The centre also provides facilities for promoting understanding and appreciation of the Rainforest Aboriginal cultural values including through guided tours, interpretive signage, use of traditional language, sustainable economic development, employment and a range of training opportunities for Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples.

Enhancing the visitor experience

There are increasing opportunities for Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples to be more involved in tourism by working with commercial operators undergoing tourism activities on Country, or land managers such as QPWS&P. Engaging with Traditional Custodians can enhance the visitor experience and build respect for Country and custodial relationships it can also identify how cultural integrity may be impacted or enhanced by visitor participation in a mainstream product or experience.

Involvement of Traditional Custodians should be based on each group's specific aspirations and could be at many levels, from Welcome to Country and/or guided walks, to developing enterprises that provide visitor facilities and services. The development of new technologies offers many alternative opportunities for Traditional Custodians to present and share Country and culture, such as through augmented reality experiences.

Rainforest Aboriginal tourism product development

The rise in demand for authentic Indigenous cultural tourism experiences provides opportunities for Traditional Custodians across the Wet Tropics to develop and deliver their own tourism products on their Country, providing employment while strengthening connections to Country and empowering people to share their culture in a way they feel is appropriate.

Any product development must be driven by and in line with the aspirations of the relevant Traditional Custodian group while meeting visitor demand for experiences. Products may be widely varied, from Indigenous owned and operated tour or accommodation services to visitor centres, art galleries, cafes, or digital products that aid visitors in connecting with Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples' culture.

Building and maintaining ongoing meaningful, relationships between Traditional Custodians and the broader tourism industry is critical, as is ensuring the provision of resourcing to build capacity for all, from early concepts through to the development and delivery phases of a product lifecycle. Long-term viability of products can be increased through identifying opportunities for mentoring (individual and business) or access to funding such as grants, or simply by seeking out and utilising products and services offered by Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples wherever possible.

Bagu on Cardwell foreshore looking to Hinchinbrook Island | Girramay and Bandjin Country

CASE STUDY

Mandingalbay Yidinji Aboriginal Corporation

Mandingalbay Yidinji Country | Cairns and Kuranda region

Through integrating science and culture, the Mandingalbay Yidinji people have developed a business framework to generate a sustainable socioeconomic return for the future of their Country, people and culture.

The Mandingalbay Yidinji Aboriginal Corporation (MYAC), in collaboration with its agent company Djunbunji Ltd, operates a commercial tourism business called Mandingalbay Ancient Indigenous Tours which is certified by Ecotourism Australia (both through ECO and Respecting Our Culture programs). They have established a collection of cultural tours including the Deadly Dinner, which offers an on Country cultural dining experience, and have also developed the Mandingalbay Yidinji Eco Cultural Tourism Infrastructure Project—following years of planning and securing funding through a variety of sources including the Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation and Australian and Queensland governments, stage one of the project was completed in mid-2021.

The project includes a variety of facilities supporting tourism and environmental research—tours, self-guided activities and accommodation and also events, training courses and research programs. A key element is a 1.1km boardwalk featuring three 33m-tall observation towers. Other infrastructure includes an interpretative centre, food and beverage facilities, retail and seminar/conference spaces, administrative spaces and environmental research facilities. The project will result in workforce training and development opportunities for Mandingalbay Yidinji people. The Mandingalbay Yidinji Eco Cultural Tourism Infrastructure Project is entirely led and operated by the Mandingalbay Yidinji people, being a social development initiative aimed at creating revenue.

"What the Mandingalbay Yidinji people need are opportunities that allow them to become part of the tourism industry and this Plan will provide an inclusive framework to facilitate this. We need to develop an intergenerational cultural economy, such as what we are doing with Mandingalbay Ancient Indigenous Tours. This eco cultural business has been created and run by our community, for our community and will create long term, ongoing opportunities for us while enriching the lives of everyone who comes to this amazing part of the world."

Dale Mundraby—Mandingalbay Yidinji Traditional Owner

Mandingalbay Ancient Indigenous Tours

Mandingalbay Ancient Indigenous Tours

Mandingalbay Ancient Indigenous Tours

Supporting Traditional Custodians to achieve their aspirations for tourism on Country

Strategies	Actions
Facilitate and promote stronger relationships between Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, government and the tourism industry	2.1 Support increased representation of Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples in tourism bodies and tourism policy development Our key partners: Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, TEL, TEQ, TTNQ
Support Traditional Owner-led tourism initiatives, products and services	2.2 Support inter-agency coordination to assist Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples to identify concepts and opportunities for potential tourism initiatives Our key partners: ATSIP, DTIS, QPWS&P, QTIC, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, TEQ, TTNQ
	2.3 Support inter-agency coordination of funding for Rainforest Aboriginal tourism product concepts, development and sustained delivery Our key partners: ATSIP, DTIS, QTIC, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, TEQ, TTNQ
	2.4 Prioritise the procurement of local Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples' products and services Our key partners: local government, Queensland Government, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, tourism industry

Babinda Boulders – Wanyurr Majay Country | Tourism and Events Queensland

Goal 3

Improve access to consistent information about the Wet Tropics and its distinct regions

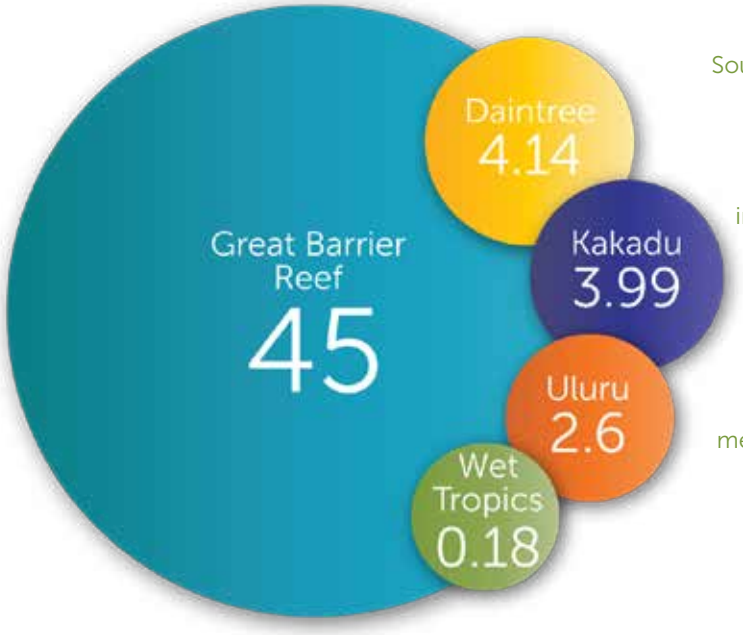
Building awareness through consistent messaging and branding

The Wet Tropics 'identity'

There is a strong desire to build awareness of the Wet Tropics and its significant and diverse natural and cultural values. Tourism marketing bodies have identified the need to leverage the World Heritage Area brand to maximise domestic and international marketing potential of Queensland's five World Heritage Areas (including the Wet Tropics) and promote Queensland's nature-based tourism experiences.[17]

Despite its global significance, public awareness of the Wet Tropics internationally and nationally is low. A comparison of Google Trends search demand for popular nature-based tourist destinations supports this. Comparatively, the Daintree is much more recognised and the Great Barrier Reef well eclipses other destinations.

Figure 2: Comparison of average domestic Google search demands for key tourist destinations 2015–2020



Source: Google Trends

*Average search demand numbers represent search interest for the given region and time averaged over five years. A value of 50 is the average peak popularity for the term. A value of 25 means that the term is half as popular.

Raising the profile of the Area has the potential to generate positive environmental, social, cultural and economic impacts. Communications efforts should not only build an appreciation for the Area but increase knowledge of how to protect it, respect cultural diversity, lift awareness of lesser-known places and regions of the Area, and highlight conservation efforts.

Storytelling that explores the connections with the neighbouring Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area also represents opportunity—the unique instance of two side-by-side World Heritage Areas provides double incentive for visitors and is often marketed as such, but the evolutionary and ongoing linkages between the two sites are rarely promoted.

Strong, simple and consistent messaging will improve the effectiveness of communications efforts. The Authority will collaborate with partners to unify core messaging and build consistency across channels and within destination marketing campaigns.

A virtual knowledge hub

There is a plethora of information available about the Wet Tropics, informed through ongoing research and new discoveries. Using our existing science and traditional knowledge and external experts, the Authority will develop and actively maintain a virtual knowledge hub to provide a single source of evidence-based knowledge and promote the natural and cultural values of the Area. This will be a digital platform, able to be easily accessed and updated.

A virtual knowledge hub providing current and correct information about the Wet Tropics, its values and its attractions will not only be beneficial to the tourism industry (including regional, state and national tourism organisations' destination marketing and brand development), but also education sectors and the scientific community.

Strategic and innovative interpretation

Contemporary interpretation is multifaceted, with both on-ground and digital delivery methods enhancing the visitor experience. Physical signage remains important for both orientating visitors and presenting the natural and cultural values of the Area. Consistent, high-quality signage that identifies the Area's World Heritage status and natural and cultural values should complement the setting without detracting from natural values.

Signage is becoming increasingly interactive, providing a gateway to digital storytelling through the inclusion of interactive features such as the use of QR codes linking to videos or audio buttons sharing stories narrated by Traditional Custodians.

Digital storytelling is a door to a new level of innovative presentation and interpretation. New technologies like apps including augmented reality can engage visitors and greatly enhance their experience by offering a virtual 'face-to-face' interaction, giving more in-depth information, or by increasing accessibility for persons with impaired mobility or other physical limitations.

These technologies provide a way to respond to visitor demand for instant access to current information, and are quicker, easier and more economic to update than physical signage. In the long term, digital innovations are a sustainable and cost-effective method of interpretation.

To help build a recognisable Wet Tropics 'identity' and enhance presentation values of visitor sites across the Area, the Authority will trial and implement a presentation framework for the Wet Tropics with guidelines for partner agencies, local government and the tourism industry. The scope of the framework will be broad and embedded within partner agencies' existing planning processes and procedures. The framework will consider all aspects of presentation including signage, infrastructure and innovative interpretation, elevating the Wet Tropics brand to a world-class standard.

The framework will address visual and aesthetic elements as well as core consistent messaging and include World Heritage branding and culturally appropriate content that celebrates Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples culture and history (e.g. Welcome to Country, Traditional Custodian group name/s, place names—aspects that have already been incorporated in many places across the Wet Tropics).

Wet Tropics interpretive displays at the Cairns Aquarium
Gimuy Walubarra Yidinji and Yirrganydji Country | Cairns Aquarium

Malanda Falls Visitor Centre incorporates a mixture of new technology and hands-on tactile elements | Ngadjon-Jii Country

CASE STUDY

MyRanger App

Yugambeh Country | Springbrook National Park, Brisbane region

The MyRanger app, developed by the Department of Environment and Science, offers mobile-optimised delivery of vital national park information straight into the hands of visitors. By offering pre-visitation downloads, MyRanger isn't reliant on internet connectivity on site. It can deliver mapping data (walking trails, visitor facilities) and park safety messages while also providing virtual ranger guided tours. MyRanger capitalises on digital technologies such as augmented reality to enrich the visitor experience, such as by bringing vulnerable species to life. The backend management system enables the department to cost effectively publish information to the mobile app for any park across Queensland.

Queensland Government

Visitor touchpoints

A visitor touchpoint is any way that visitors can access information about the Wet Tropics, whether it be person-to-person, on a website, an app, via signage or any other form of communication. Visitor touchpoints should deliver consistent messaging about the Wet Tropics through both the information itself and the look and style of the delivery, strengthening the Wet Tropics 'identity'.

The virtual knowledge hub will be a key visitor touchpoint which will feed into many other touchpoints such as operator websites and tourism body marketing. Other opportunities that will be investigated are apps that can be supported by the virtual knowledge hub.

The geographical size of the Wet Tropics means that there are many physical access points and many potential touchpoint locations, such as information signage at strategic points throughout the Wet Tropics. Visitor information and interpretive centres across the Area are important visitor touchpoints providing opportunities for visitors to contribute to and engage with the World Heritage Area and its values. The Authority will ensure current, relevant information is available in these centres—this includes through continued access to the Wet Tropics Ambassador Program for staff and volunteers.

Building awareness through consistent messaging and branding

Improve access to consistent information about the Wet Tropics and its distinct regions

Strategies	Actions
Provide a platform to house, distribute and maintain a single source of evidence-based knowledge for Wet Tropics information	3.1 Create and actively maintain a knowledge hub that includes values, challenges and initiatives, and make available to industry and partners Our key partners: QPWS&P, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, TEQ, TTNQ, universities
Support unified efforts to build awareness of the Area's World Heritage status, unique regions and values	3.2 Establish and drive consistent messages through communications channels Our key partners: local government, QPWS&P, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, TA, TEL, TEQ, TTNQ
	3.3 Continue to support destination marketing organisations with marketing and campaign activity through access to products and information Our key partners: LTOs, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, TA, TEL, TEQ, TTNQ
Enhance and elevate presentation standards across the Wet Tropics to promote World Heritage status	3.4 Trial and implement a presentation framework for the Wet Tropics to create a sense of identity for the Area and build consistency Our key partners: local government, QPWS&P, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, TA, TEL, TTNQ
	3.5 Work with partners implementing future projects to co-develop minimum requirements for interpretive touchpoints Our key partners: local government, LTOs, QPWS&P, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, TA, TEL, TTNQ

The Wet Tropics Management Authority's Cassowary Awards celebrate and support outstanding contributions to conservation and presentation of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area

Goal 4

Optimise community participation and connection with the Area and its World Heritage values

Increased community involvement and advocacy

An involved community

Across the whole of the Wet Tropics, individuals and groups are actively involved in caring for their community, through tree planting, wildlife rescue and rehabilitation, natural resource management and a raft of other projects. There are many opportunities for the broader community to become advocates for the Area and its Outstanding Universal Value. Both the local community and visitors can play a key role in the future of sustainable tourism and delivery of conservation priorities in the Wet Tropics.

Community groups

The Wet Tropics has an incredible wealth of community groups, mostly supported by committed long-term volunteers. These organisations contribute expertise, skills and labour to a variety of activities, making community groups a vital and substantial partner in conservation. They participate in projects ranging from field studies and tree plantings, to injured wildlife rescues and monitoring programs and are strong advocates for conservation.

The Authority recognises the incredibly valuable contribution these organisations and their volunteers make and will continue to support their activities. Working with these groups to raise their profiles through awareness of the work they do and the value they provide to the World Heritage Area has many benefits—increasing their capabilities by attracting more volunteers, creating greater awareness of the Area and its World Heritage status, and tangible environmental outcomes. Sharing of stories of stewardship can also provide visitors the chance to interact with these conservation efforts at their own initiative, particularly for operators without active engagement.

There are real opportunities for tourism to aid the work of community groups through direct participation or voluntary levies, such as dedicating a proportion of profits or incorporating a donation into tour pricing. The Authority aims to facilitate connectivity of tourism businesses and community groups to build these relationships as the outcomes offer benefits to all parties as well as to the World Heritage Area.

Tree planting at Misty Mountain Nature Reserve | Jirrbal Country

Bat guide with a little red flying-fox, Tolga Bat Hospital Jirrbal Country | The guide is a rabies-vaccinated bat carer using minimal personal protective equipment as she is holding a quiet, hand-reared orphan for tourists to meet

Creating Ambassadors

The Wet Tropics Ambassador Program invites participants to build their knowledge and become advocates of the World Heritage Area. A condensed version of the more comprehensive Wet Tropics Tour Guide Program (see page 50), the Ambassador Program introduces participants to the Area's Outstanding Universal Value, its cultural values, the Area's unique species, and visitor experiences.

The Authority works in partnership with Savannah Guides to deliver this program to participants from the tourism industry and Wet Tropics' communities, including local governments. Since adapting the program for online delivery, it has become more accessible for people across the region, as well as nationally and internationally.

The Authority will further develop the Ambassador Program through targeted delivery, reaching out to specific groups that can actively share their knowledge with others. We aim to add value to the program by supporting a connected community of Ambassadors, and identifying innovative ways for them to engage with one another and expand their knowledge. This will provide opportunities for Ambassadors to have deeper and ongoing voluntary involvement in sustainable tourism initiatives such as delivering visitor interpretation, assisting with site maintenance and connecting with existing conservation activities.

More information about the Wet Tropics Ambassador Program is available at savannah-guides.com.au.

Get involved

Explore ways to work with NRM organisations and local conservation groups:

- Learn more about local NRM groups.
- Learn more about connecting with community conservation groups.
- Citizen science project finder.

CASE STUDY

Yellow Crazy Ant Community Taskforce

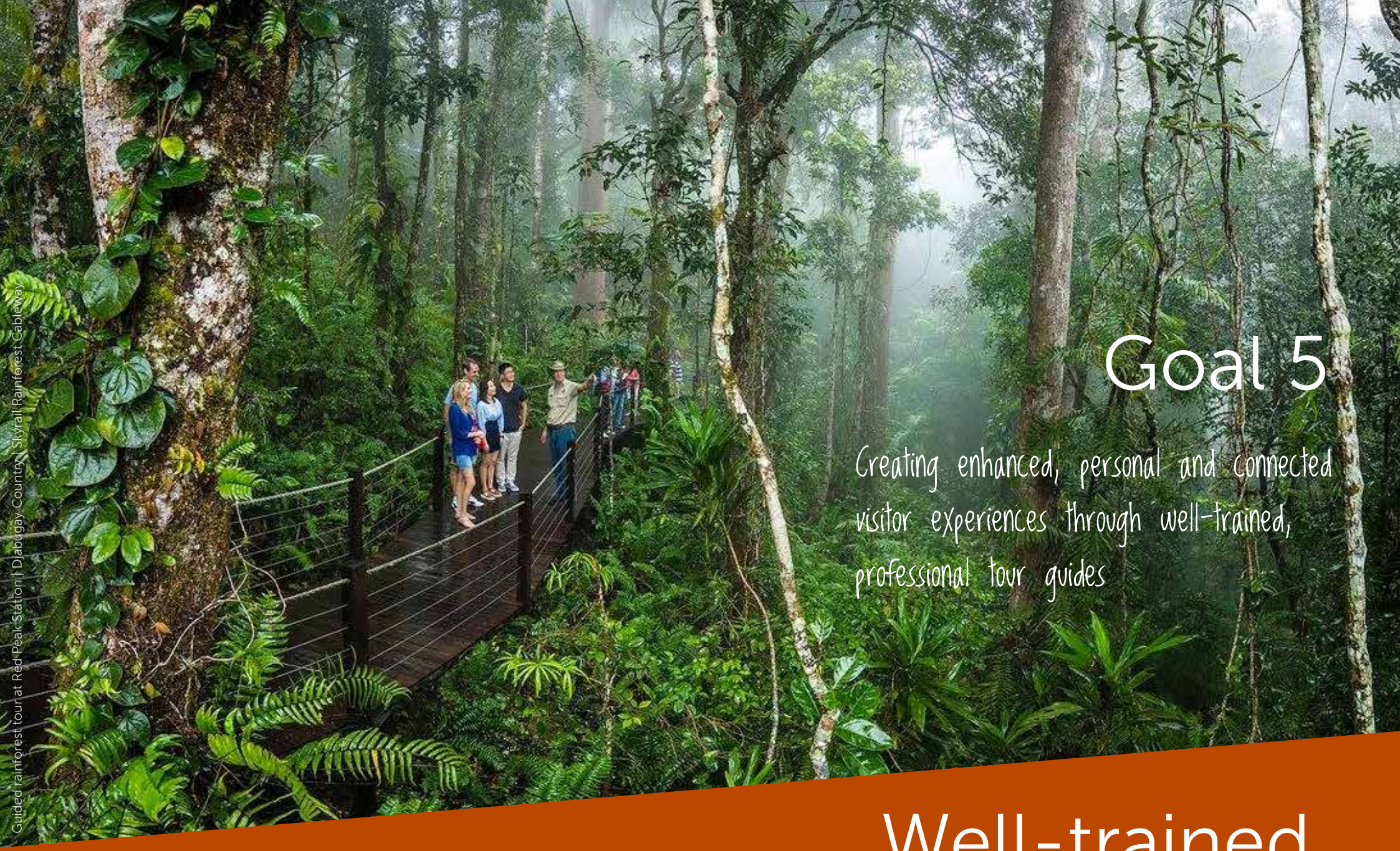
Djabugay Country | Cairns and Kuranda region

Managed by Kuranda Envirocare and supported by the Wet Tropics Management Authority, the Yellow Crazy Ant Community Taskforce is a united group of residents committed to the eradication of yellow crazy ants. They raise awareness of these invasive pests and their potential impacts on the World Heritage Area, as well as participating in field surveys.

Ciara Bridgland

Optimise community participation and connection with the Area and its World Heritage values

Strategies	Actions
Optimise community stewardship of the Area through participation and connection	4.1 Create opportunities to connect community groups and tourism businesses to identify pathways for new visitor experiences Our key partners: community groups, conservation sector, QTIC, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, tourism industry
Upscale Ambassador Program, engaging locals and the tourism industry	4.2 Continue to recruit Ambassadors from community and industry through targeted delivery Our key partners: local government, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, Savannah Guides Ltd, TEL, TTNQ
	4.3 Identify innovative ways to support Ambassadors to connect with each other and local sustainable tourism and interpretation initiatives Our key partners: local government, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, Savannah Guides Ltd, TEL, TTNQ



Guided rainforest tour at Red Peak Station | Djabugay Country, Skyrail Rainforest Cableway

Goal 5

Creating enhanced, personal and connected visitor experiences through well-trained, professional tour guides

Well-trained, professional tour guides

Guides enhance the experience

The value of professional tour guides in delivering high-quality visitor experiences is widely appreciated. There are many highly-skilled tour guides operating in the Wet Tropics, but across the industry consistency, quality, credibility and accessibility can be improved.

There is increasing demand by visitors for authentic and personal experiences. Well-trained, professional guides are integral to this, and can not only educate but also inspire, and encourage positive and permanent behaviour change.

The nature of the tourism industry in much of the Wet Tropics has historically been quite transient, with guides often traveling to work in other areas. Certification and targeted guide training (such as QTIC's micro-credentialing program) can enhance guide capacity, visitor experience and increase employment pathways.

Wet Tropics Tour Guide Program

The Authority's Wet Tropics Tour Guide Program, run in partnership with Savannah Guides, has been operating since 2012 and plays a vital role in developing guiding capacity in the Area. Historically, the program's guide schools have been held biannually and to date have delivered training to 350 participants and produced 70 certified guides. The Wet Tropics Tour Guide Program focuses on training guides specifically about guiding in the Wet Tropics, with a focus on the Outstanding Universal Value of the Area, methods of conducting low impact and sustainable tours, and how to work in a living cultural landscape.

Elevating this program and developing a sizeable pool of professional guides is an essential part of presenting the Wet Tropics and delivering world-class visitor experiences. Ensuring current and correct information about the natural and cultural values of the Area is available and accessible to all guides is critical. The consultation processes held while developing this Plan showed strong support for this approach.

Key to building and maintaining this pool of guides is industry recognition—employers and owner/operators must see value in the program and encourage their guides to become certified or prioritise employing guides who have already undertaken the training. At a minimum, operators should ensure guides have access to the virtual knowledge hub (once developed) and facilitate and support their participation in training programs.

The Authority will work with the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA), Tourism and Events Queensland (TEQ) and the tourism industry to evolve the existing Wet Tropics Tour Guide Program and leverage components of GBRMPA's Master Reef Guides program and other best-practice tour guiding programs.

Indigenous guides

As well as the demand for wholly Indigenous tourism experiences, there is a desire from the broader tourism industry for increased accessibility to Indigenous guides who can deliver experiences on Country and share their unique stories related to the locality's natural and cultural values.

The Authority will support interested Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples to develop, conduct and undertake local Indigenous guide training programs, and continue to support their involvement with all Wet Tropics Tour Guide Program training through both participation and delivery.

Sharing cultural knowledge | Gunggandji Country | Wet Tropics Images/Brad Newton

Creating enhanced, personal and connected visitor experiences through well-trained, professional tour guides

Strategies	Actions
Increase visibility, quality, trust and reach of guides across the Wet Tropics	5.1 Evolve the Wet Tropics Tour Guide Program Our key partners: GBRMPA, QPWS&P, QTIC, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, TEQ, tourism industry
Encourage and support an increase of locally trained Indigenous tour guides	5.2 Encourage, support and/or partner with Indigenous tour guide training programs Our key partners: ATSIP, QPWS&P, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, TTNQ

Managing Gunggandji Country | Wet Tropics Images/Brad Newton

Goal 6

Adopt a collaborative, informed and consistent approach to planning, experience delivery and sustainable best practice

Collaborative visitor management

Managing visitor use

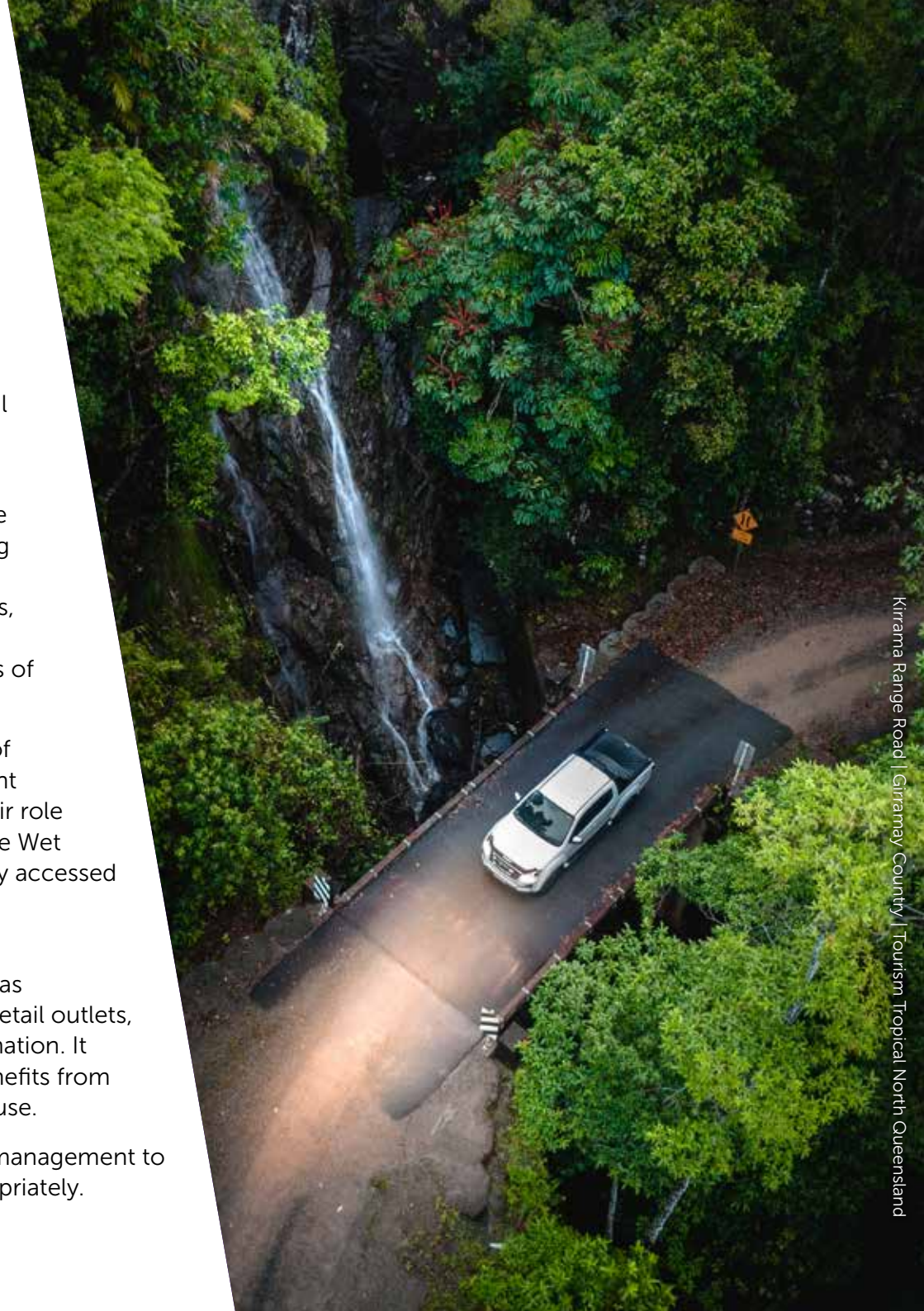
With complex tenure and management responsibilities for land in and around the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area (the Area), a collaborative approach to tourism is required. This must consider user needs, potential negative impacts of visitor use, and asset upgrade and maintenance requirements to ensure that visitor experiences are sustainable and do not detract from conservation outcomes. Cooperation between the Wet Tropics Management Authority (the Authority), QPWS&P, local councils, local communities, the tourism industry, the conservation sector and Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples is essential.

Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples' management of the landscape has shaped the Wet Tropics region over thousands of years. Traditional practices and looking after Country are important custodial responsibilities. Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples continue to manage Country through land and sea ranger programs, Indigenous Protected Areas and Cooperative Management Agreements, aligning with the principles and guidelines established under the Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area Regional Agreement 2005.

As Aboriginal land interests increase across the Wet Tropics so will the role of Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples in protected area management and subsequent visitor management. Empowering Traditional Custodians and respecting their role in managing Country is an important part of ensuring tourism activities in the Wet Tropics are sustainable—cultural sites must be promoted, protected and only accessed where appropriate.

The Authority's approach to area management takes in a broader view that incorporates adjacent areas, rather than just the World Heritage Area alone, as attractions, accommodation, transport arrival hubs, food and drink outlets, retail outlets, museums and galleries are also relevant to the Wet Tropics as a visitor destination. It is recognised that land management, whether in protected areas or not, benefits from understanding the size, scope, nature and distribution of visitors and visitor use.

Awareness of how visitor use is changing is essential to planning for future management to ensure the Area's World Heritage values are conserved and presented appropriately.



Kirrama Range Road | Girramay Country | Tourism Tropical North Queensland

Planning and regulation in the Wet Tropics

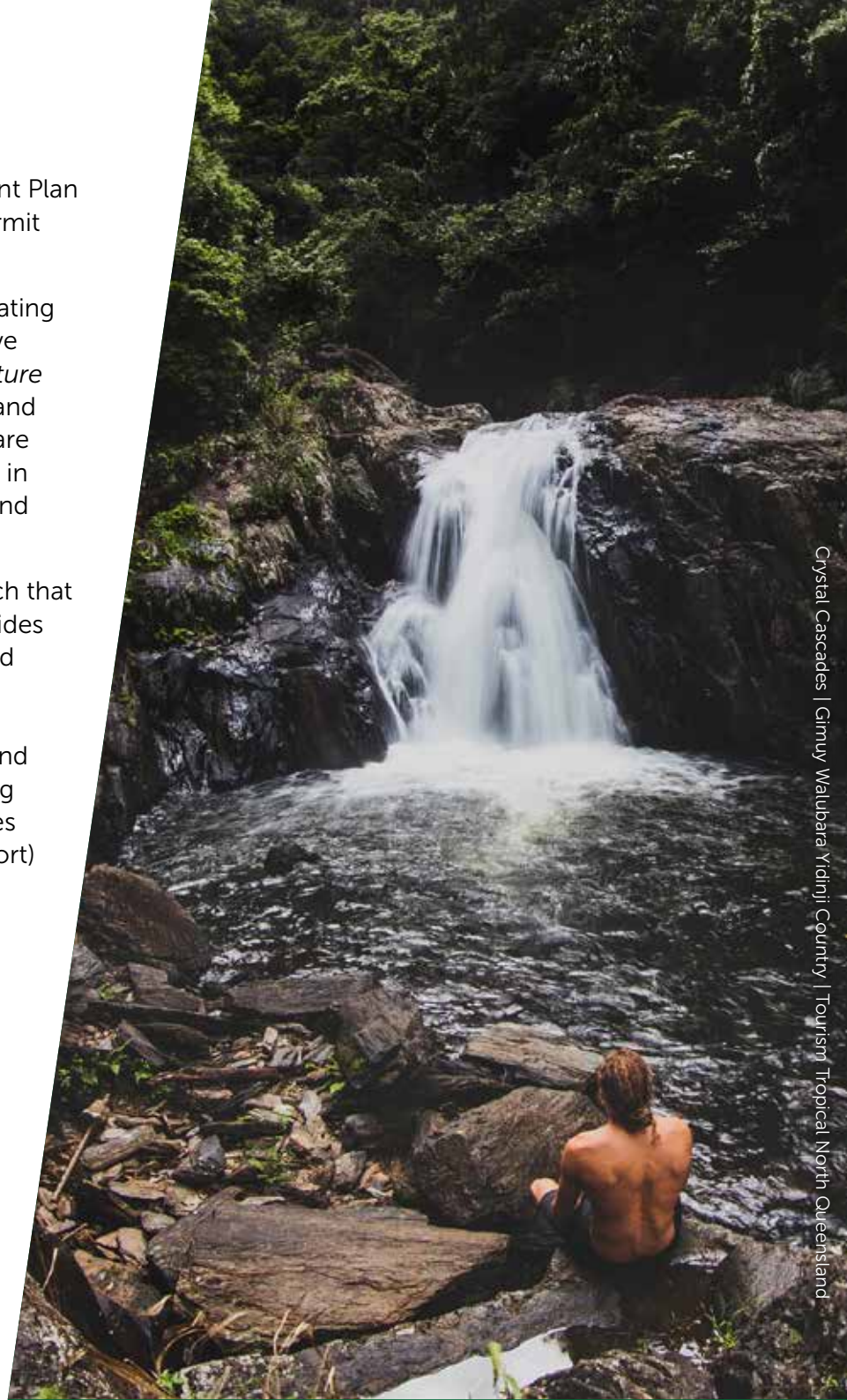
The Authority regulates tourism development activity under the Wet Tropics Management Plan 1998 (the Management Plan) (see page 55), which outlines development zoning and permit requirements.

QPWS&P manage more than 87% of the Area and implement a permission system regulating commercial activities (e.g. activities conducted for gain such as guided tours, competitive events etc) including day-use and camping by commercial tour operators under the *Nature Conservation Act 1992* (NCA) and *Forestry Act 1959*. Policies, management statements and management plans may further limit and/or guide use at specific sites to ensure values are maintained and impacts managed, where existing and/or historic use may have resulted in impacts such as site degradation or crowding. This may include limits on numbers, on and off-peak access periods, and restrictions on new or additional access.

The Values-Based Management Framework (VBMF) is an adaptive management approach that is based on international best-practice for protected area management. The VBMF provides QPWS&P a cyclic process for identifying key values, assessing management priorities and evaluating the effectiveness of management effort on QPWS&P managed areas. Visitor key values are social values that recognise significant visitor experiences. The quality of these experiences are regularly assessed through a 'health check' of the sites, facilities and services that are associated with each experience, to determine if the experience is being maintained or improved, and if not, to adjust management as necessary. Visitor strategies developed under the VBMF determine the appropriate level of service (management effort) for managing and maintaining visitor sites and assets.

Ecotourism facilities on national parks within the Area are subject to the Department of Environment and Science's Ecotourism Facilities on National Parks Implementation Framework 2020 and the Best Practice Ecotourism Development Guidelines—these assist proponents to conceptualise and develop ecotourism facilities and experiences that are in the public interest, are ecologically sustainable and ensure, to the greatest possible extent, the preservation of the land's natural condition and protection of its cultural values and resources.

Eleven local governments have land in the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area (some with as much as 80% of their tenure in the Area) and regulate tourism through council by-laws and planning schemes. Many either have or are developing plans relevant to tourism in their governance area.



Crystal Cascades | Gimuy Walubara Yidinji Country | Tourism Tropical North Queensland

The Wet Tropics Management Plan

The Authority manages tourism development activity under the statutory Wet Tropics Management Plan 1998 (the Management Plan). The Management Plan outlines development zoning and permit requirements and was updated in September 2020 following an extensive review over a three-year period.

The Management Plan protects the Area by regulating activities which may have an impact on World Heritage values and integrity. It does this primarily through a zoning and permit system. Regulated activities are those which may affect ecosystems, vegetation, soils, waterways and scenic values.

The Management Plan divides the Area into three zones, with the primary management purpose of all zones being to protect and conserve the World Heritage values and integrity of the land within them.

Zones A and B manage the protection and continued rehabilitation of the Area and the management purpose allows for visitor access to parts of the land. The development of limited visitor infrastructure can be permitted in these areas where appropriate.

Examples of limited visitor infrastructure include walking and cycling tracks, and any associated infrastructure such as (discretely located) boardwalks, camping platforms, toilet facilities, information boards (e.g. interpretative signs) and small-scale viewing platforms (lookouts).

Zone C is the zone that accommodates community services infrastructure and developed visitor infrastructure in cases where the impacts on the values of the Area can be avoided or minimised.

The management purpose of zone C clarifies that visitor infrastructure must be built and maintained in a way that:

(a) is ecologically sustainable; and

(b) is sensitively integrated into the surrounding landscape; and

(c) enhances visitors' understanding and appreciation of the natural and cultural heritage of the Area.

Developed visitor infrastructure includes limited visitor infrastructure plus larger scale infrastructure including campgrounds and tourist accommodation built and maintained consistently with the management purposes of zone C. For more detail about limited and developed visitor infrastructure visit wettropics.gov.au.

Any proposed development will be assessed in accordance with the Management Plan—the Authority will consider any likely impacts on the World Heritage values and integrity of the Area, assess for consistency with Aboriginal tradition and community viewpoints as well as other relevant matters. It is advisable to talk to the Authority at an early stage of developing a proposal to ensure matters are thoroughly considered. As well as authentic consultation with Traditional Custodians and any other land managers, any proposal will require a strong case demonstrating environmental soundness, long term sustainability of the project and other factors such as safety considerations.

The implementation of regulations and zoning ensure that tourism activities conducted in the Area are consistent with management objectives and obligations to protect, conserve, present, rehabilitate and transmit the Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area to future generations. People who are interested in establishing tourism activities within the Wet Tropics will need to consider requirements under the Wet Tropics Management Plan 1998 and other relevant legislation such as the *Nature Conservation Act 1992*. The types of authorities that may be required to conduct tourism activities in the Area include permits, agreements, and leases.

Managing for sustainable tourism

Working collaboratively with Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples and other land managers, the Authority will ensure delivery of the visitor promise developed for this Plan through key strategies for sustainable tourism in the Wet Tropics (in alignment with the Wet Tropics Strategic Plan 2020–2030 and the Accept, Act, Adapt: Climate Adaptation Plan for the Wet Tropics 2020–2030).

Culturally appropriate tourism on Country

To ensure tourism activities on Country are culturally appropriate, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples must be involved in management of protected areas and decisions around site access and use. The wishes of Traditional Owners regarding significant and/or sensitive sites must be respected and where access is inappropriate should not take place. This respect must be built through education and implemented by management policies.

Rafting on the Tully River | Jirrbal Country
Wet Tropics Images/Steven Nowakowski

Data collection and insight gathering

Sustainable tourism development must consider quality of visitor experience and consumer demand. Better understanding of visitor needs, experiences and impacts in relation to the Area is valuable in informing management decisions.

The Authority will work to gather qualitative and quantitative insights and establish baselines that will assist in future planning. The intention is to allow operators, visitors, citizen scientists and other stakeholders to participate, contributing to monitoring, research and planning efforts.

Current and future revenue

Costs to manage impacts from visitor use and to provide and maintain infrastructure to support tourism activities (such as trails and facilities) are high and limited cost recovery options exists.

While nominal regulated fees apply on protected areas, they are not reflective of the value of the experience, associated management costs or equivalent user pays fees interstate and internationally. Furthermore, there is no current user-pays system for free and independent travellers (with the exception of camping).

Market-based financing mechanisms can provide the funds for world class and sustainable visitor experiences, improving facilities, safety, presentation values and enhanced data and insight gathering.

Investing in visitor management produces significant benefits to the local and wider regional communities and economy. For every $1.00 spent on national park visitor management in Queensland each year, on average, $6.30 in economic benefits are generated.[18]

The Authority will work with partners to propose a user-pays model/s to ensure benefits remain local to support or enhance initiatives or activities.

World-class visitor facilities

The Authority aims to encourage the sustainable use of the great variety of visitor facilities across the Wet Tropics, capitalising on opportunities to enhance or repurpose existing facilities (particularly those not being used or operating under capacity) rather than encouraging new developments. Where new facilities are needed, consideration to protection of natural and cultural values must be priority. These facilities should be world class and reflective of the Area's World Heritage status.

Where sites are being underutilised or not maintained sufficiently, evaluation should occur to determine what sites should remain, be repurposed or closed and rehabilitated.

Mitigating visitor impacts

Overuse, inappropriate or unlawful use can quickly damage a site and impact the natural and cultural values of the Area—protection of those assets is a priority. Such impacts detract from the visitor experience through loss of opportunities for solitude and connection with nature, insufficient amenities, safety issues and antisocial behaviour. Managing to maintain sustainable levels of use is essential to avoid risks including the degradation of remote and high-value sites.

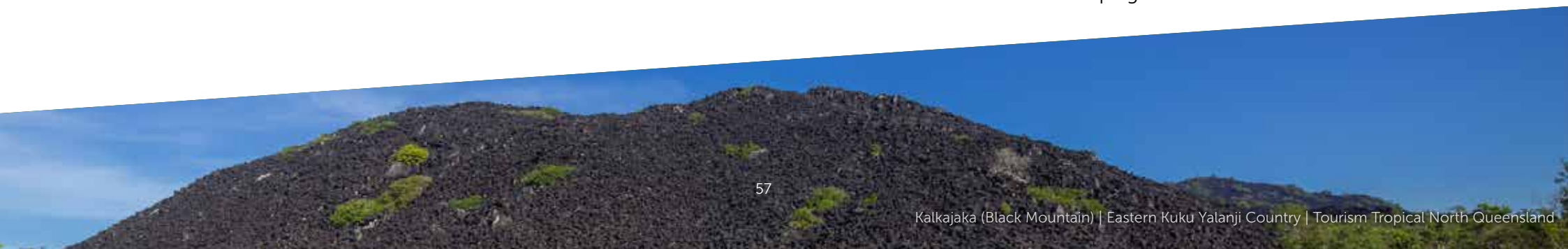
The active assessment and management of sites being used inappropriately, unlawfully or over their capacity is essential. Managing existing and future visitor impacts requires proactive, holistic and informed planning as well as the provision of mechanisms and resources to allow for efficient response to emerging issues. Collaboration with key stakeholders including land managers and Traditional Custodians is critical to ensuring the Area is managed sustainably.

Approaches to sustainable site management may include:

- seasonal closures
- restricting hours of operation, access and carparks
- limiting group size and length of stay
- applying entrance fees
- rotating site usage and encouraging visitor dispersal
- requiring or encouraging the use of guides
- physical barriers and designated pathways/roads
- regulatory signage, compliance and enforcement.

Regulation and compliance provides a legal mechanism to ensure impacts on values are mitigated by promoting voluntary compliance whilst deterring and taking action against unlawful behaviour through implementation of penalties and other available mechanisms. Regulatory notices and designation of restricted access areas (under relevant legislation) for safety, environmental or cultural purposes are important tools for land managers particularly at high risk or high visitation sites.

Joint, targetted and strategic compliance can ensure that regulated activities are adhered to such as permit conditions (e.g major infrastructure, commercial activities, camping and events) and specific offences (e.g fires, vandalism, fossicking and dogs). The Authority will work with partners on targeted compliance programs across the Area, incorporating additional training of Traditional Custodians, enhanced educational awareness and campaigns.



Kalkajaka (Black Mountain) | Eastern Kuku Yalanji Country | Tourism Tropical North Queensland

Rapidly increasing demand—the impacts of social media

In some cases, overuse can occur through rapid increases in visitor volume driven by the sharing of content across social media platforms and online travel blogs. Enticed by photos of sites and the desire to have the experience themselves, travellers can find locations easily using smartphones and tools such as Google maps and Strava. This reduces barriers to access that once existed, creating additional challenges for site management, sustainable and culturally appropriate visitation, and visitor safety.

One such example is Windin Falls (Ngadjon-Jii Country) with local rangers observing an increase in visitors to the site of more than 300% in 2021, purely from word of mouth and inspirational images posted on social media.

Such a rapid increase puts immediate pressure on a site and its assets, impacting natural and cultural values (e.g. hardening of paths, creation of short cuts, damage to vegetation, interactions with wildlife, accessing culturally sensitive areas), management effort and public safety (e.g. traffic/car parking, walkers getting lost, track diversion, toileting, consumption of untreated water). This increased pressure then often flows on to organisations such as emergency services.

Davies Creek—Buluwai Country | Wet Tropics Images/Steven Nowakowski

Best practice and resilience building

Planning for climate change

Climate change poses a significant threat to our natural systems, cultures, communities and economies and has the potential to impact on the Wet Tropics as a desirable destination and subsequent visitor experiences. The Authority has developed the Accept, Act, Adapt: Climate Adaptation Plan for the Wet Tropics 2020–2030 to guide management action in response to climate change in the Area. The Climate Adaptation Plan engages a community of practice to support adaptation to climate change over the next decade.

Collaborative management should aim to link tourism into many of these objectives and actions through participatory scenario planning and protecting ecosystems and species at immediate risk. The tourism industry can play a valuable role in creating meaningful conversations around climate change and providing visitors opportunities to participate in research and monitoring for adaptive management (e.g. citizen science). The Authority can work with the conservation sector and the tourism industry in leading the conversation, providing education on climate impacts and opportunities to respond and adapt based on the best available science.

Eco certification programs

Within the tourism industry, certification programs have been developed to help distinguish genuine sustainable tourism businesses through the setting of standards and independent verification. Currently, the most recognised certification bodies in Australia are EarthCheck and Ecotourism Australia. Another is Climate Active—a program supported by the Australian Government that certifies businesses and organisations that have reached 'carbon neutrality'.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) offers incentives for ecotourism certified operators who qualify to become a recognised high standard tourism operator: they can be eligible to apply for a 20-year permit for a certified tourism product. QPWS&P have requirements for eco certification for operators at two key visitor sites (Natural Bridge, Springbrook National Park and parts of K'Gari (Fraser Island), Great Sandy National Park). Eco certification must be maintained for the life of the agreement.

The Authority will work with QPWS&P, tourism bodies and operators to investigate possible incentives for operators in the Wet Tropics going above standard requirements.

Sustainable destinations

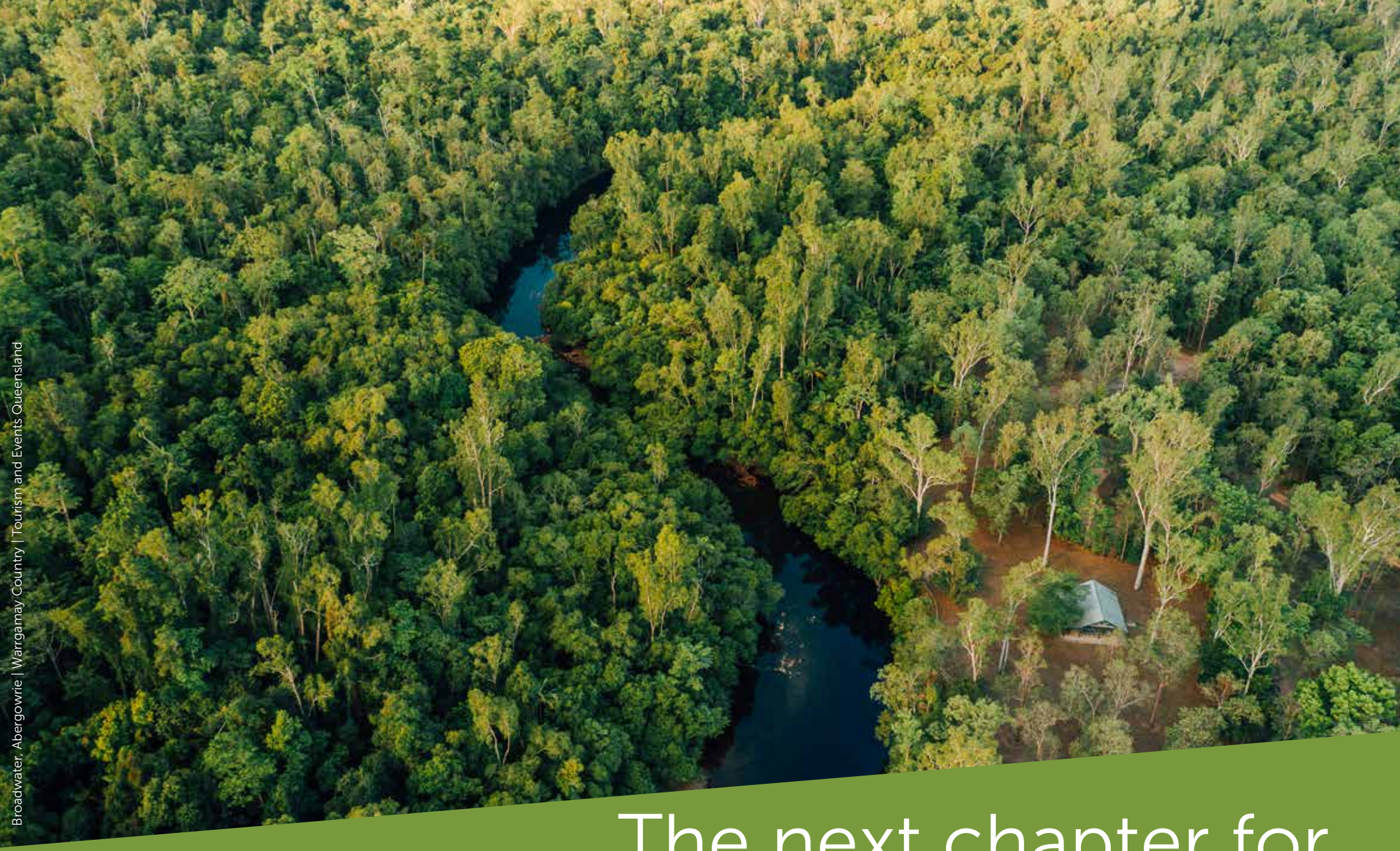
Sustainable destination certification can be a powerful marketing tool for a region, as well as for individual operators. A number of organisations have been accredited by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council to certify destinations, including EarthCheck and Ecotourism Australia. Local councils are often the bodies that take on responsibility for destination certification. In 2019, the Douglas Shire became the first destination in the world to achieve Ecotourism Australia's Ecotourism Destination certification—more than 80% of the shire sits in the Wet Topics World Heritage Area. The Cassowary Coast and Townsville regions are also actively seeking certification.

The Authority will support and encourage efforts to become certified as sustainable destinations by local governments and other bodies in the Wet Tropics.

Collaborative visitor management

Adopt a collaborative, informed and consistent approach to planning, experience delivery and sustainable best practice

Strategies	Actions
Increase partnerships with Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples to manage protected areas	6.1 Support ongoing transition to Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples leading protected area management and tourism on Country Our key partners: local government, Queensland Government, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, tourism industry
Support a region-wide approach to long-term sustainable tourism	6.2 Implement a robust and transparent permit and zoning system under relevant legislation to ensure World Heritage values are maintained Our key partners: DTIS, local government, QPWS&P
	6.3 Implement an enhanced strategic approach to address priority compliance issues across the World Heritage Area Our key partners: local government, QPWS&P, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples
	6.4 Progress enhancement of existing facilities and ensure new facilities are world-class, utilised appropriately and present the values of the Wet Tropics Our key partners: local government, QPWS&P
Develop and implement data collection standards to inform collaborative visitor management and experience planning	6.5 Complete needs analyses on visitor experience, visitor impacts and usage levels Our key partners: QPWS&P, TEQ, TTNQ, universities
	6.6 Investigate and implement scalable and efficient options for ongoing data collection to inform management decisions Our key partners: QPWS&P, tourism operators, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, TTNQ, TEL, universities
Pursue options to introduce transparent and equitable user-pays cost recovery method/s	6.7 Work with partners to propose a user pays model or models that ensure benefits remain local Our key partners: local government, Queensland Government (Treasury), QPWS&P, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, TEL, TEQ, TTNQ
Increase adoption of best practice standards and build resilience	6.8 Investigate options for incentives to eco-certified operators Our key partners: LTOs, QPWS&P, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, tourism operators
	6.9 Support transformative initiatives across sectors to build resilience, including to climate change Our key partners: community groups, local government, QPWS&P



Broadwater, Abergowrie | Warrgamay Country | Tourism and Events Queensland

The next chapter for tourism in the Wet Tropics

Our sustainable future

The Wet Tropics World Heritage Area (the Area) is rich in natural and cultural assets, which will continue to attract visitors—the tourism industry will continue to develop as tourism's post-pandemic recovery progresses. It is critical that this be in a sustainable way. Incorporating meaningful engagement with nature and cultures has proven to be an effective drawcard in developing awareness of destinations, and the visitor aspiration to experience these.

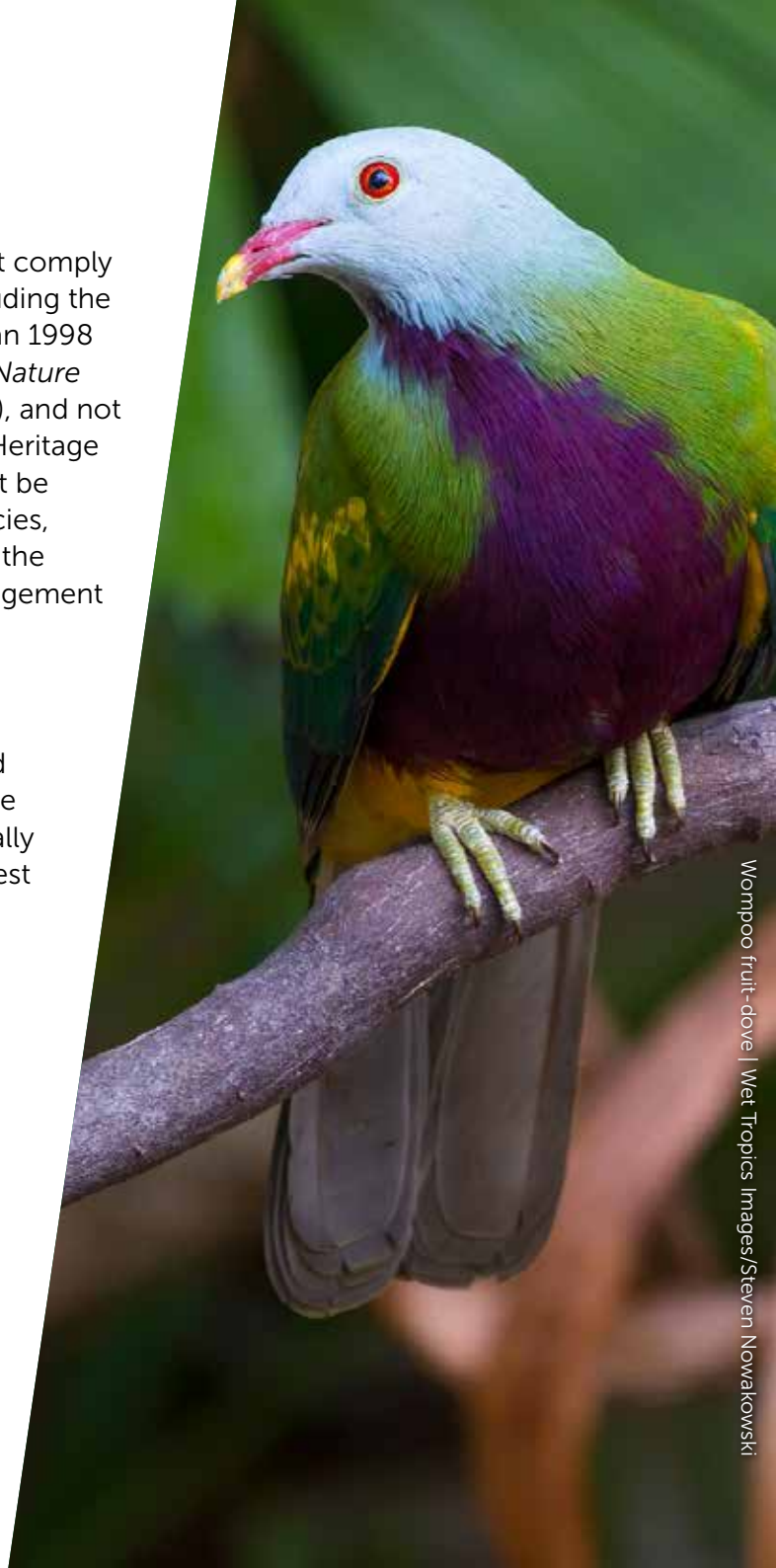
To encourage the diversification and sustainable growth of tourism within the Wet Tropics region, the Wet Tropics Management Authority (the Authority) will work with partner agencies and industry to identify future opportunities and monitor potential risks.

Future approaches to tourism product development in the Wet Tropics should:

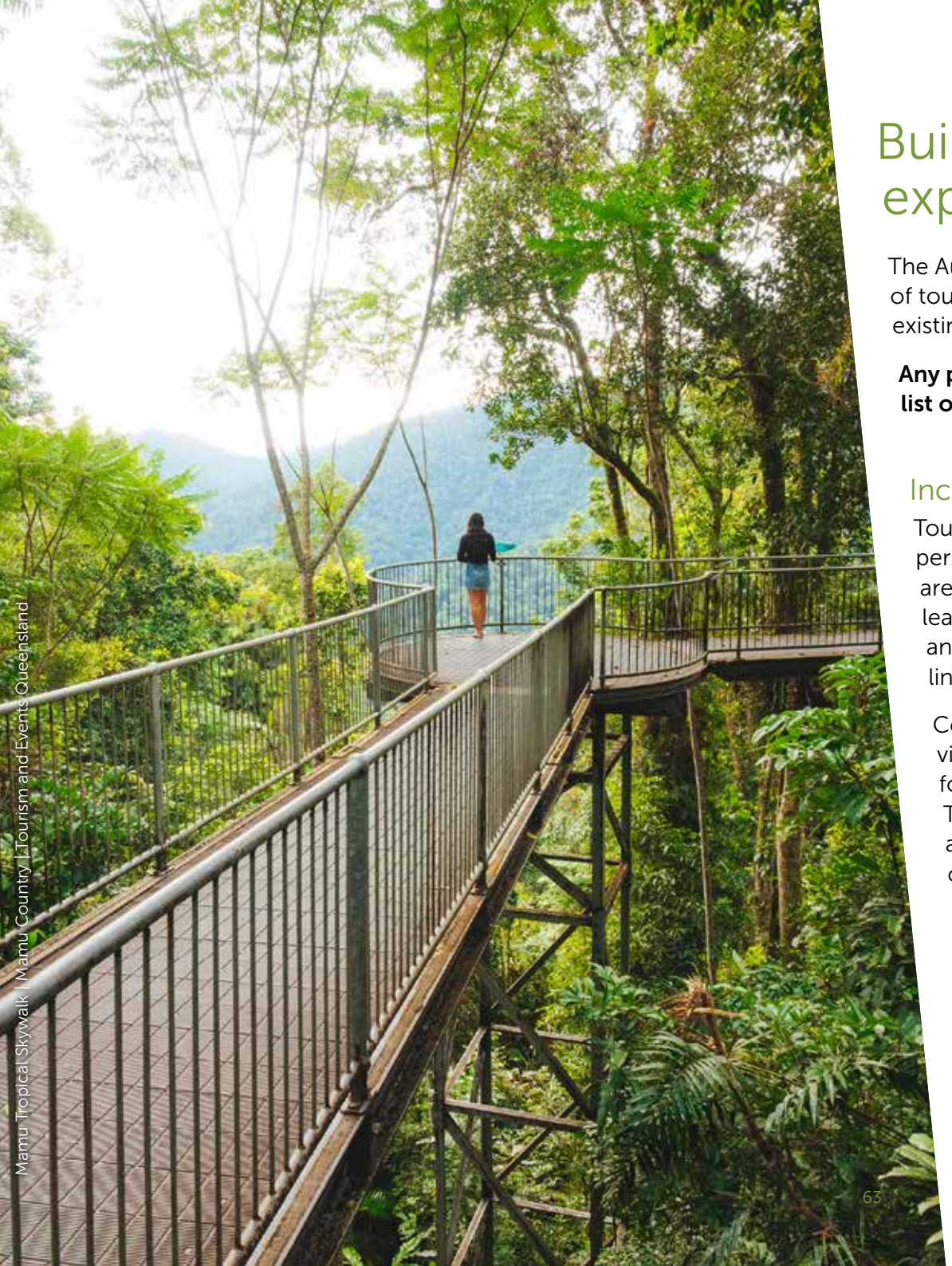
- use or repurpose existing facilities, particularly those not being used or operating under capacity
- incorporate natural and cultural components, highlighting the Outstanding Universal Value of the Area
- prioritise inclusion of local culture and promote respect for Country and custodian responsibilities
- encourage stewardship for and appreciation of protected areas
- appeal to specific and dedicated special interest groups and expand on any current offerings
- be best practice, meeting world-class standards with regards to construction and delivery
- ensure diversity of experience across the entire Wet Tropics.

Proposed new activities must comply with relevant legislation including the Wet Tropics Management Plan 1998 (the Management Plan) and *Nature Conservation Act 1992* (NCA), and not adversely impact the World Heritage values of the Area. They must be consistent with relevant policies, plans and guidelines such as the QPWS&P Values Based Management Framework.

Provisions under both the Management Plan and the NCA ensure that all approved ecotourism facilities are in the public interest, environmentally sustainable and, to the greatest possible extent, preserve the land's natural condition and protect its cultural resources and natural values.



Wompoo fruit-dove | Wet Tropics Images/Steven Nowakowski



Mamu Tropical Skywalk | Mamu Country | Tourism and Events Queensland

Building on the Wet Tropics experience

The Authority aims to encourage the diversification and sustainable growth of tourism experiences within the Wet Tropics Region, while enhancing existing experiences.

Any potential opportunities identified in this Plan do not form a definitive list or exclude proposals for other opportunities.

Inclusiveness

Tourism in the Wet Tropics should be inclusive and accessible to all persons. Inclusive tourism can also facilitate experiences for those who are neurodiverse, experience physical or cognitive disabilities or other learning differences. It can provide affirming experiences for LGBTQI+ and gender-diverse travellers, and assist people with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Considering inclusivity in the planning, development and delivery of visitor sites and tourism products and services provides opportunities for all people to learn, appreciate, enjoy and experience the Wet Tropics and its values. This may include use of inclusive language and imagery, accessibility of sites and structures, inclusive transport options, use of tactile indicators (such as braille or tactile maps), bilingual signage or incorporating audio options activated through touch or via QR codes.

Technological innovation provides an opportunity for greater inclusivity and is increasingly being implemented to enhance access and experience delivery through innovative design, augmented reality and mobile applications. Providing educational opportunities for tour guides and other operators is another effective method for ensuring inclusiveness.

Voluntourism and citizen science programs

There is a trend around the world for participatory tourism, where visitors can make a voluntary contribution to the protection of the destination. These experiences enable visitors to learn about the region's diverse values, challenges and solutions, and enhance the visitor experience, providing a deeper connection to local nature and culture. There is already strong voluntary community involvement in the Wet Tropics, and significant opportunity exists for integrating tourism with these activities. Supporting programs that integrate with tourism experiences can include educational/academic expeditions, voluntourism and citizen science.

Some examples include visitor participation in:

- onsite clean-ups and restoration
- revegetation/establishment of wildlife habitat
- survey data that contributes to research or impact monitoring
- contributing a portion of their travel costs to support identified projects.

There are a number of successful, long-term monitoring programs on the Great Barrier Reef, such as GBRMPA's Eye on the Reef which enables visitors to collect information about reef health, marine animals and incidents. Data logged through the free Eye on the Reef app then provides valuable information for informing management. A similar land-based program that engages visitors, commercial operators and the broader community would be an important tool in understanding the impact of climate change, recording species locations and population levels, and monitoring the overall health the Wet Tropics. Tourism operators participating in such a program would have a point of difference when marketing their product/s.

The Authority will assist in identifying genuine opportunities and data collection standards that will allow operators and visitors to contribute to a region-wide collaborative effort. We will work with partners including natural resource management bodies to implement the Authority's Accept, Act, Adapt: Climate Change Adaptation Plan for the Wet Tropics 2020–2030 and invest in ecological support programs such as revegetation to maintain biodiversity.

CASE STUDY

The Great Reef Census

Citizens of the Great Barrier Reef

The Great Reef Census in 2020 was a mass participation survey event that brought together tourism boats, private vessels, superyachts and research ships with a mission to capture thousands of survey images across the Great Barrier Reef (GBR).

Scientists, divers, tourists and vessel skippers ventured into the far corners of the GBR, capturing more than 13,000 images. These were then uploaded to the Great Reef Census platform, allowing citizen scientists from around the world to contribute to data analysis efforts

A key goal of the project is to identify 'key source reefs'—reefs which release large numbers of larvae during the annual mass spawning and play an important role in helping neighbouring reefs recover from damage. The data gathered and analysed through the Great Reef Census helps locate these sources of coral recovery and assists scientists and managers to better target resources, drive more impactful projects in-water and, ultimately, advance conservation outcomes for the Reef.

Harriet Spark/Grumpy Turtle Creative

Events

Events can highlight the natural and cultural values of the Area and introduce travellers to new tourism experiences offered at the event destination. They can provide unique insights and experiences for visitors allowing for a more personal exposure to life and culture in the region. Specific events, particularly those with an international audience, can draw travellers to destinations they may not have normally visited where they then participate in tourism experiences.

The Wet Tropics region and surrounds enjoys a diverse range of major regional and local events, ranging from music and culture to sports and even citizen science. High-profile events in the Area have included the Red Bull Defiance Adventure Race, Great Barrier Reef Marathon, World Mountain Bike Championships, and World Rafting Championships.

There are opportunities to create new one-off or annual events that highlight the region's natural and cultural stories. Events could be stand-alone or look to leverage national or global days of significance, the audiences of existing major regional events, or special interest groups such as photographers. Examples might include photo competitions, a bird week, or BioBlitz events (which can also provide valuable data collection opportunities).

It is important to ensure events do not adversely impact on the Outstanding Universal Value of the Area and are respectful of the relevant Traditional Custodians on whose Country the events take place—events must be appropriate for the site, offer benefit to the community and obtain any required permits.

Mamu Country | Cairns and Far North Environment Centre (CAFNEC)

CASE STUDY

Far North Wilderness Bike Tour

Rainforest Aboriginal Country | Varying locations across the Wet Tropics

First run in 2001, the annual Far North Wilderness Bike Tour is coordinated by a team of enthusiastic and dedicated volunteers to raise awareness and funds for the Cairns and Far North Environment Centre (CAFNEC). It is a multi-day cycling event with a different route each year to showcase the beauty and diversity of Wet Tropics. CAFNEC is a not-for-profit incorporated association that acts as conservation council for the region from Cardwell north to Torres Strait and from the east coast to the Gulf of Carpentaria—money raised by the Far North Wilderness Bike Tour has assisted CAFNEC to undertake a large variety of environmental conservation projects.

Mission Beach Community Cassowary Festival

Djiru Country | Central Wet Tropics and Cassowary Coast region

The annual Mission Beach Community Cassowary Festival is a 'celebration of nature' showcasing talent and creativity through art, music and science. The focus is on ecologically sustainable tourism and wildlife protection. It features guest speakers, live music, competitions and performances alongside stalls from groups or individuals working with the natural environment, particularly wildlife, sharing knowledge about the work they do. Local businesses join in the festivities by holding their own themed events over several days leading up to and following the main festival day. The colourful creative event includes the spectacular 'Drumming of Cassowaries' parade featuring life size cassowary and wildlife sculptures.

Liz Gallie

CASE STUDY

2019 IRF World Rafting Championships

Gulngay and Jirrbal Country | Central Wet Tropics and Cassowary Coast region

Held over 8 days in May 2019, at least 49 teams from 19 different countries (over 300 of the world's best rafters) competed in the World Rafting Championships on the Tully River. This annual event is held at premier rafting locations and provided a great opportunity to market the Wet Tropics and surrounds, offering broad economic benefit.

The hugely successful event was organised with the help of the Galu Traditional Owner Working Group—comprised of Gulngay and Jirrbal Traditional Owners—that was assembled specifically to provide guidance and make key decisions on how the event would run.

The Galu Traditional Owner Working Group ensured their culture was woven into the event. Vistitors were welcomed to Country and learnt about the creation story of the Tully River—the Water Story—which was depicted on shirts and hats specially designed for the event, providing a way to share traditional stories about the Tully River with an international audience.

The event also featured Aboriginal-guided walking tours and official markets—many Traditional Owners stallholders showcased culture through art including paintings and jewellery, while Girringun Aboriginal Corporation displayed native plants grown in their nursery, taking donations to contribute to restoration works.

The intimate involvement of the Gulngay and Jirrbal people provided an in-depth, personal level to the experience had by the athletes and support teams that visited the region.

World Rafting Championships event shirts/Water Story | Gulngay and Jirrbal Country

Innovative Rainforest Aboriginal tourism development

With a tourism industry that is increasingly seeking authentic experiences, the extraordinary diversity of Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples' across the Wet Tropics provides many opportunities to both enhance established Rainforest Aboriginal tourism products and/or identify and grow new products.

Personal face-to-face engagement with Traditional Custodians will always be a sought-after experience for visitors to the Wet Tropics, especially opportunities for going out on Country.

Digital innovations such as augmented reality present a growing range of opportunities to share Rainforest Aboriginal culture by making it more accessible for visitors, while also capturing and preserving it for future generations. This can benefit Traditional Custodian groups as well as the wider community through the sharing of stories, art, cultural performance, culinary techniques and other practices.

Technologies such as 3D mapping can be a valuable tool to share and interpret Country by providing virtual access to places that are inaccessible (e.g. due to weather conditions, disability or time constraints). Similarly, technologies like photogrammetry can produce models of important cultural items, preserving them and allowing them to be viewed by visitors (as deemed appropriate by the relevant Traditional Custodians). Photogrammetry was used to document the Western Yalanji dendroglyph (tree carving) in 2019—only twenty-three individual rainforest carved trees have been recorded, all in remote parts of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area which are rarely visited but are of significance to the Traditional Custodians.

Mandingalbay Yidinji People's 3D map of Country

Each Traditional Custodian group will have their own aspirations for tourism, and this will guide the development of any products and services.

CASE STUDY

AppOriginee

There are a growing number of organisations that specifically support and promote Indigenous tourism experiences in Australia. AppOriginee is a specialist online booking platform built to showcase and promote 100% Indigenous owned and run businesses, making it easy for visitors to connect with products that are authentic both within the Wet Tropics and across Australia.

As well as more established operators, AppOriginee also promotes smaller businesses that may not have their own websites and booking facilities. Businesses featured offer a variety of products such as Welcome to Country, Aboriginal art workshops, cultural corporate training, boat tours and guided walks.

Developed in 2014 by Gimuy Walubara Yidinji man GudjuGudju Fourmile and his partner Jenny Lynch in response to the growth in demand for cultural tourism, AppOriginee won a number of competitions that helped to shape the platform and secure funding for its development.

Their ultimate aim is to immerse visitors into the natural wonders of the Australian landscape by enhancing travel experiences on Country through Indigenous experiences, be it in face-to-face encounters or culture and traditions via portable device.

CASE STUDY

Girringun Art Centre

Girramay Country | Central Wet Tropics and Cassowary Coast region

Located in Cardwell, Girringun Art Centre represents artists from nine Traditional Owner groups: the Nywaigi, Gugu Badhan, Warrgamay, Warungnu, Bandjin, Girramay, Gulngay, Jirrbal and Djiru Peoples.

Established in 2008, the centre is open to the public and home to multi award-winning artists and craftsmen. A living functioning art centre, it is not unusual to see weavers, painters, potters, textile artists and makers of traditional objects in the workshop developing new work and honing their craft. All art is developed and presented in a culturally sensitive way.

In 2021, Girringun Art Centre launched their online gallery: Virtual Girringun. Developed in part as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Virtual Girringun showcases and delivers authentic Rainforest Aboriginal art to the world via a digital platform. Current exhibits are presented in 3D format so the viewer can navigate the physical gallery. Each artwork has clickable links which offer information about its story and artist. The gallery also features videos outlining many of the types of art presented, and links to the full Girringun Art Centre catalogue.

This community-led innovation is expanding the reach of local artists and growing economic opportunities. With staff having undergone significant training in cutting-edge virtual reality technologies, Girringun Art Centre is able to share knowledge and capabilities with other Indigenous art centres and businesses.

Girringun Art Centre | Girramay Country

Sustainable development

The Authority leads and coordinates management of the Area in accordance with its legislative responsibilities, but are not a landholder. QPWS&P, local government authorities and other landholders have responsibility for the development, operation and maintenance of infrastructure within the Area. Any party interested in development proposals within the Area should contact the Authority and relevant land managers for advice. Early engagement will clarify if proposals are allowed or appropriate under relevant legislation, and if so, what modifications may be required. Early engagement will result in more streamlined planning and approval processes and ultimately more sustainable trails. The Wangetti Trail (page 72) is an example of where early engagement has led to successful new trail development.

Any potential opportunities identified in this Plan do not form a definitive list or exclude proposals for other opportunities.

Changing visitor expectations and needs create a potential for new sustainable tourism experiences, so understanding visitor use at sites is essential. Camping is an example of an activity that has changed over time and as modes shift some camping areas could be restructured to suit demand. This can reduce inappropriate use, lessen impacts on natural values, and improve visitor satisfaction.

In some instances, underutilised sites may be able to be reimagined to suit new purposes, or may present opportunities for education or interpretation e.g. educational signage or interactive displays that allow for a deeper connection with the Area.

The establishment of appropriate cultural information and interpretation at visitor sites that support local Traditional Custodian groups' aspirations offers an opportunity for future experience development.

OPPORTUNITY

Eastern Kuku Yalanjiwarra Culture and Tourism Hub and Visitor Centre

Eastern Kuku Yalanji Country | Northern Wet Tropics region

This proposed project will involve the construction of a culture and tourism hub and visitor centre in Daintree National Park. The project is funded by the Queensland and Australian Governments through the COVID-19 Relief and Recovery funding for conservation, tourism and infrastructure upgrades at National and World Heritage places. The visitor centre will present the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area through a cultural lens, creating a new visitor experience in a high-profile park supporting local employment, small business development and local industry partnerships.

CASE STUDY

The Bump Track

Yirrganydji Country | Cairns and Kuranda region

The Bump Track in Mowbray National Park was blazed in 1877 as a road connecting Port Douglas and the Hodgkinson Goldfield. It remained the only road out of Port Douglas until the coast road to Cairns was completed in 1933.

Today, the Bump Track is a multi-use track popular with walkers and mountain bikers. There are currently 10 tour operators with commercial activity permits for both guided walks and cycling purposes. It is well-used, receiving a total of more than 3600 visitors in the first six months of 2021, and features in organised mountain bike events—the Triple-R (or RRR) and the annual four-day Reef-to-Reef mountain bike race.

Jeffrey Connors, Queensland Government

Walks and trails

Many visitor experiences in the Wet Tropics rely on the Area's network of walks and trails. Experiences include walking, trail running, hiking, mountain biking, and guided tours. All provide ways for visitors and locals to engage with the Area's natural values.

Walks and trails that offer a range of experiences across a variety of lengths and grades in each region is key to a diverse Wet Tropics network. A range of features and themes along walks and trails in the Wet Tropics is also essential—examples include natural features, human connection, or significant species or ecosystems. This diversity ensures the needs and expectations of visitors are met, satisfying the demand for a wide range of experiences, and maximises people's understanding and appreciation of all aspects of the Wet Tropics.

Diversity should be considered within each region and across the entire Wet Tropics—each region should offer a variety of options for visitors e.g. short, easy walks as well as longer, more difficult trails.

Walking the Wet Tropics

More than 190 walks currently exist in the Wet Tropics region, with more than 66% being either graded tracks, pathways or roads—the rest are rough tracks or marked routes. There are short, half-day, full-day and multi-day options in a variety of difficulty levels, offering options for visitors with differing needs.

Some of these existing walks could be upgraded to offer a point of difference. Across the Wet Tropics, strategic use of themes linking regions could encourage visitor dispersal to lesser-used sites.

Multi-use trails

Walking and mountain biking have seen increased domestic demand over recent years, and a number of walks or old roads have transitioned to multi-use trails, accessible to both walkers and mountain bike riders.

CASE STUDY

Kuranda to Barron Falls walk

Djabugay Country | Cairns and Kuranda region

Mareeba Shire Council set out to connect the Kuranda township with Barron Falls by using sections of existing trails. The Barron Falls walking track provides a link between Jumrum Creek Conservation Park and Barron Gorge National Park, alleviating previous foot traffic on Barron Falls Road.

Starting from the Kuranda Information Centre, the trail traverses rainforest and urban areas. With many visitors to the village travelling via Kuranda Scenic Railway or Skyrail Rainforest Cableway, this walking trail offers the opportunity to easily and safely explore more of the area on foot.

Barron Falls walking track | Djabugay Country

Mountain bike parks and trails

Mountain biking takes place throughout the Area on dedicated and multi-use tracks, as well as gazetted roads. There are currently more than 90km of multi-use trails in the Wet Tropics as that allow mountain biking, and 3 dedicated mountain bike parks offering around 100km of trails ranging from easy to extreme—Atherton Forest Mountain Bike Park, Davies Creek Mountain Bike Park, and Smithfield Mountain Bike Park.

Where riding can be contained in dedicated mountain bike parks or on designated trails, the risk of adverse impacts including erosion, site degradation and the spread of weeds is decreased. Use of mountain bikes in other areas is difficult to manage and requires additional resourcing across a broad geographic area, often relying on collaborative partnerships between land managers and the mountain bike community.

OPPORTUNITY

Cardwell mountain bike trail network

Girramay Country | Central Wet Tropics and Cassowary Coast region

With a vision of becoming a world leading mountain bike destination, a community-led initiative involving Cassowary Coast Regional Council, the Kirrama Range Road Support Group Inc., Girramay Aboriginal Corporation and the Queensland Government is being developed for the Cardwell region.

An internationally renowned specialist agency, World Trail, have commenced a feasibility study for the trail network that includes 4km of mountain bike trails and trail-head facilities. The project aims to diversify the local economy and provide meaningful opportunities in accommodation, food and beverage, bike-economy as well as cultural, adventure and eco tours.

In developing new trails, best practice principles should be applied and trail alignment must consider potential for impacts on cultural and natural values, as well as potential safety risks common on multi-use tracks where there are mountain bikes moving at speed along-side walkers.

For consistency across the Wet Tropics, existing trails and any new trails should be classified in accordance with international standards such as the International Mountain Bicycling Association's trail difficulty rating system.

CASE STUDY

Smithfield Mountain Bike Park

Yirrganydji Country | Cairns and Kuranda region

Offering a network of more than 18km of trails that cater for beginner to advanced riders, the Smithfield Mountain Bike Park offers a variety of loops, allowing for a quick ride or a full day of exploration. This iconic rainforest trail network has been host to the UCI Mountain Bike World Cup and UCI World Mountain Bike Championships.

Located within Smithfield Conservation Park, maintenance of the trail network is community-driven and undertaken by the Cairns Mountain Bike Club through an agreement with QPWS&P.

Nearby businesses offer bike hire and shuttle services that transport riders to the beginning of downhill runs.

Tourism Tropical North Queensland

Yirrganydji Country | Tourism Tropical North Queensland

OPPORTUNITY

Wangetti Trail

Yirrganydji Country | Cairns and Kuranda region

Linking Palm Cove to Port Douglas, the $41.4M Wangetti Trail is being developed as part of the DTIS Ecotourism Trails Program in consultation with the Yirrganydji people and relevant Eastern Kuku Yalanji clan groups. Five camping nodes have been proposed along the trail, along with ecotourism accommodation offerings such as glamping or low-impact cabins. The multi-use hiking and mountain biking trail is 94km in length trail is due for staged opening from 2023. The key to the successful approval of the trail by the Authority was the early and ongoing engagement by DTIS which allowed the negotiation of design modifications to minimise impacts to the Area's values.

"The Wangetti Trail is one of the most important economic benefit projects for the Yirrganydji people and the Cairns Regional Claim in a generation. Yirrganydji Country, where the rainforest meets the reef, has been our home for thousands of years and we are excited to share our land with new visitors and educate them on our culture and significance of its place in our identity, our history and our future generations."

Jeanette Singleton, Chairperson, Yirrganydji Gurabana Aboriginal Corporation

Accommodation along trails

Facilities along overnight and remote long-distance trails are minimal—where appropriate, limited visitor infrastructure can both enhance the visitor experience and minimise site impacts.

While accommodation services are generally best placed adjacent to protected areas rather than within, some facilities may be considered appropriate along trails within the Area. All accommodation facilities and tourism infrastructure such as camping platforms, shelters and toilet facilities are subject to requirements under the Wet Tropics Management Plan 1998 (the Management Plan). The type of tourism infrastructure permitted on trails is dependent on the applicable management zone for the area and associated guidelines and consideration of feasible alternatives. The NCA provides for the development of privately-owned, low impact, purpose-built ecotourism infrastructure in line with the implementation framework for ecotourism facilities on national parks.

The implementation of regulations and zoning ensure that tourism activities conducted in the Area are consistent with management objectives and obligations to protect, conserve, present, rehabilitate and transmit the Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area to future generations.

Hikers on the Wangetti Trail. Department of Tourism, Innovation and Sport

Tourism industry initiatives

The tourism industry has a responsibility to play a demonstrable role in leading a shift to sustainable best practices, which are already actively implemented by many commercial operators. To date, a number of Wet Tropics operators have voluntarily gained sustainable or ecotourism certification.

Positive actions by operators such as removing the use of single-use plastics, choosing environmentally friendly and energy efficient products, reducing food and water waste, and sourcing from local supply chains are some ways in which tourism operators can reduce their impact, while also supporting the local economy. Some operators have chosen to transition toward net-zero emissions to address climate change threats, and specific climate action certification programs for tourism are also available. Implementing sustainable practices also presents a significant opportunity to build a competitive advantage to meet changing consumer demand.

Building a genuine sustainable ethos into daily operations in an authentic way offers a point of difference for businesses, and consequently the Wet Tropics as a destination. Increasingly, travellers seek to support sustainable practices by actively choosing tour operators and accommodation providers who are committed to sustainable practices such as maintaining eco-certification and dedicating a proportion of profits to environmental programs.

Communicating environmental challenges and solutions

The tourism industry has the opportunity to connect visitors with conservation in the Wet Tropics by providing clear communication about the unique values of the Area, the threats it faces and how visitors can become part of the solution. Raising awareness about the Area's many rare and endemic species and Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples stewardship of Country over thousands of years is a powerful way to create a connection between visitors and the Area's natural and cultural values. Building an increased understanding of the threats that face the Area—in particular, climate change—is also necessary to inspire immediate and longer-term conservation action.

CASE STUDY

Skyrail Rainforest Cableway

Djabugay Country | Cairns and Kuranda region

In 2018, Skyrail Rainforest Cableway—an EarthCheck Master Certified operator, Green Travel Leader and Climate Action Innovator—collaborated with the Authority to develop innovative displays for the Rainforest Discovery Zone at Red Peak Station and content for their interpretive app and audio guide. Staff training was also elevated to provide a holistic and informative visitor experience, using educational opportunities to raise awareness about the rainforest's importance and unique biodiversity. The level of visitor engagement, understanding and awareness of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area has significantly increased as a result.

In 2005, Skyrail demonstrated their commitment to contribute and make a difference with the establishment of the Skyrail Rainforest Foundation. The foundation's objective is 'the protection of tropical rainforests worldwide through sound management, understanding and appreciation through research and education'. To date, the foundation has distributed more than half a million dollars in funding to support research projects. Contributing positively and creating awareness of this fragile environment brings a sense of purpose and connection, encouraging visitors to travel for good.

Skyrail Rainforest Cableway

The impacts of climate change on tourism

Many tourism sites in the Area are threatened in some way by climate change including through:

- loss of animal species that draw visitors
- reduced access due to flooding and rising sea levels
- deteriorating aesthetic values as a consequence of increased severe weather events and invasive species
- reduced visitor comfort with rising temperatures and unpredictable weather patterns
- increased perceived risk of visiting destination due to extreme weather events.

Support will need to be provided to build the resilience of individuals and industries in the face of climate change in the region.

The Authority's Accept, Act, Adapt: Climate Adaptation Plan for the Wet Tropics 2020–2030 outlines opportunities for the tourism industry and visitors to be involved in planning and management objectives and actions.

Actions such as carbon sequestration programs and transition to zero emissions can support the shift to adaptive communities and industries in the Wet Tropics. The tourism industry could partner in regional initiatives to develop programs and visitors could actively participate by buying offsets and supporting businesses that are reducing emissions.

Herbert River ringtail possum | Wet Tropics Images/Mike Trenerry

Recommendations for tourism operators

The following recommendations aim to align tourism in the Wet Tropics with sustainable tourism principles, recognising that everyone can play a part in working towards delivering on the visitor promise of this Plan.

- Obtain eco certification such as EarthCheck or Ecotourism Australia.
- Provide transparent ways for visitors to contribute financially to conservation efforts (e.g. donation or percentage of tour cost goes to a foundation or local conservation group).
- Work toward zero emissions and zero waste business operations.
- Use skilled and accredited guides.
- Provide ongoing training and capacity development opportunities for guides (e.g. Wet Tropics Tour Guide and Ambassador programs).
- Incorporate Indigenous tour guides with connection to Country whenever possible.
- Identify and abide by any applicable Rainforest Aboriginal tourism strategies goals and objectives.
- Use the Wet Tropics knowledge hub (once available) and other resources such as TEQ's Wet Tropics Content Tool Kit when creating marketing content or designing interpretation.
- Contribute to the Wet Tropics data collection efforts.
- Integrate ways to educate visitors about the need for sustainable living into experiences.
- Adopt principles such as the Seven Leave No Trace principles. [19]
- Partner with local conservation and NRM groups to provide voluntourism and citizen science opportunities for visitors.
- Partner with regional event organisers to create event-specific products that highlight the natural and cultural values of the World Heritage Area.
- Use local Indigenous enterprises and supporting services with connection to Country where available.
- Establish relationships with Traditional Custodians of the areas where tours operate.
- Be proactive in learning about Rainforest Aboriginal culture and the Traditional Custodian groups in your area of operation, enhancing cultural competence and understanding.
- Adopt Traditional Custodians' local codes of practice/cultural protocols where they exist.
- Incorporate Acknowledgement of Country and authorised traditional cultural information in tourism products and services.

CASE STUDY

Tropic Wings electric bus

The CaPTA Group is implementing ways to reduce carbon emissions and deliver on their mission to create a sustainable and eco-friendly business.

In 2019, the company introduced a zero emissions Yutong E12 bus to its Tropic Wings Day Tour between Cairns and Kuranda. The bus is the first 100% electric bus to be used commercially in Queensland and could reduce CO_2 emission by up to 30 tonnes each year.

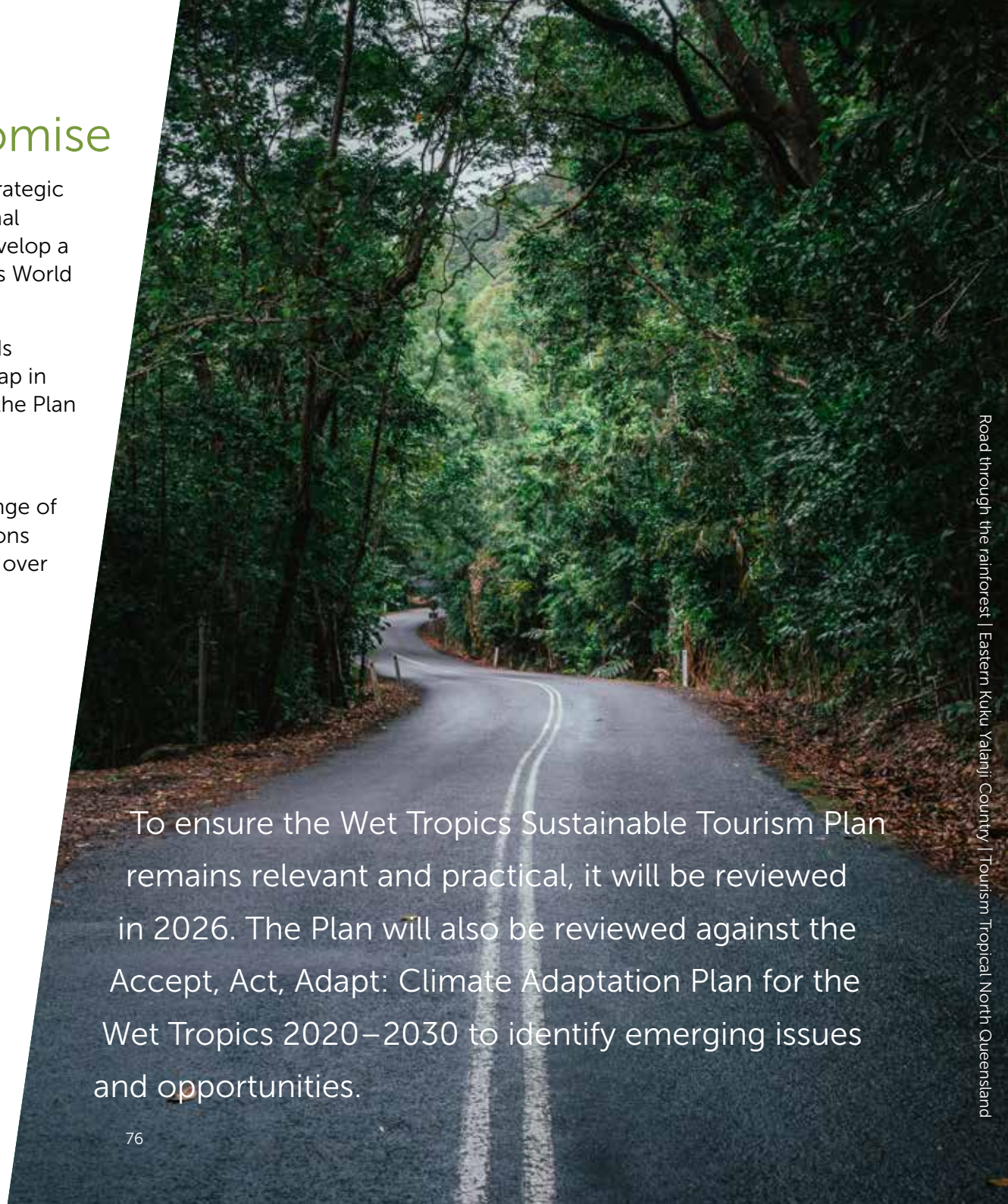
The CaPTA Group

Delivering on our visitor promise

The Wet Tropics Sustainable Tourism Plan 2021–2031 is a strategic framework that brings together partners, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, the tourism industry and conservation sector to develop a sustainable and resilient future for tourism in the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area.

The Plan's visitor promise creates a clear line of sight towards what we aim to achieve. The Authority will develop a roadmap in collaboration with partners to guide the implementation of the Plan and prioritise delivery of actions.

While the Wet Tropics Management Authority is primarily responsible for leading the implementation of the Plan, a range of other partners are also pivotal in ensuring the identified actions are delivered, goals are met, and the visitor promise realised over the next ten years.



To ensure the Wet Tropics Sustainable Tourism Plan remains relevant and practical, it will be reviewed in 2026. The Plan will also be reviewed against the Accept, Act, Adapt: Climate Adaptation Plan for the Wet Tropics 2020–2030 to identify emerging issues and opportunities.

Road through the rainforest | Eastern Kuku Yalanji Country | Tourism Tropical North Queensland

A male Victoria's riflebird | Wet Tropics Images/Kelvin Marshall

Summary of goals, strategies and actions

Goal 1: Respect for Country and people *Establish respect for Country as an integral part of the Wet Tropics experience*

Strategies	Actions
Increase awareness and respect for Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples' custodial responsibilities and connections	1.1 Increase cultural awareness across the tourism sector through education, training and certification Our key partners: Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, QTIC, TTNQ, TEL
	1.2 Work with partners to embed Acknowledgement of Country as a minimum standard across the tourism industry Our key partners: Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, tourism industry
	1.3 Work with Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples to proactively communicate issues and impacts around use of culturally sensitive sites and culturally inappropriate behaviours Our key partners: Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, QPWS&P, TTNQ, tourism industry
Establish locally developed codes of conduct across the Wet Tropics	1.4 Trial and implement a cultural protocol for Commercial Activity Permits in the Wet Tropics as set out in the Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area Regional Agreement 2005 Our key partners: Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, QPWS&P, tour operators
	1.5 Support Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples to establish their own specific codes of conduct to protect culturally significant sites and prevent culturally inappropriate behaviours Our key partners: Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, QPWS&P

Goal 2: Rainforest Aboriginal tourism aspirations *Supporting Traditional Custodians to achieve their aspirations for tourism on Country*

Strategies	Actions
Facilitate and promote stronger relationships between Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, government and the tourism industry	2.1 Support increased representation of Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples in tourism bodies and tourism policy development Our key partners: Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, TTNQ, TEQ, TEL
Support Traditional Owner-led tourism initiatives, products and services	2.2 Support inter-agency coordination to assist Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples to identify concepts and opportunities for potential tourism initiatives Our key partners: Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, ATSIP, DTIS, QPWS&P, QTIC, TEQ, TTNQ
	2.3 Support inter-agency coordination of funding for Rainforest Aboriginal tourism product concepts, development and sustained delivery Our key partners: Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, ATSIP, DTIS, QTIC, TEQ, TTNQ
	2.4 Prioritise the procurement of local Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples' products and services Our key partners: local government, Queensland Government, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, tourism industry

Goal 3: Building awareness through consistent messaging and branding *Improve access to consistent information about the Wet Tropics and its distinct regions*

Strategies	Actions
Provide a platform to house, distribute and maintain a single source of evidence-based knowledge for Wet Tropics information	3.1 Create and actively maintain a knowledge hub that includes values, challenges and initiatives, and make available to industry and partners Our key partners: QPWS&P, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, TEQ, TTNQ, universities
Support unified efforts to build awareness of the Area's World Heritage status, unique regions and values	3.2 Establish and drive consistent messages through communications channels Our key partners: local government, QPWS&P, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, TA, TEL, TEQ, TTNQ
	3.3 Continue to support destination marketing organisations with marketing and campaign activity through access to products and information Our key partners: LTOs, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, TA, TEL, TEQ, TTNQ
Enhance and elevate presentation standards across the Wet Tropics to promote World Heritage status	3.4 Trial and implement a presentation framework for the Wet Tropics to create a sense of identity for the Area and build consistency Our key partners: local government, QPWS&P, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, TA, TEL, TTNQ
	3.5 Work with partners implementing future projects to co-develop minimum requirements for interpretive touchpoints Our key partners: local government, LTOs, QPWS&P, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, TA, TEL, TTNQ

Goal 4: Increasing community involvement and advocacy *Optimise community participation and connection with the Area and its World Heritage values*

Strategies	Actions
Optimise community stewardship of the Area through participation and connection	4.1 Create opportunities to connect community groups and tourism businesses to identify pathways for new visitor experiences Our key partners: community groups, conservation sector, QTIC, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, tourism industry
Upscale Ambassador Program, engaging locals and the tourism industry	4.2 Continue to recruit Ambassadors from community and industry through targeted delivery Our key partners: local government, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, Savannah Guides Ltd, TEL, TTNQ
	4.3 Identify innovative ways to support Ambassadors to connect with each other and local sustainable tourism and interpretation initiatives Our key partners: local government, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, Savannah Guides Ltd, TEL, TTNQ

Goal 5: Well-trained, professional tour guides *Creating enhanced, personal and connected visitor experiences through well-trained, professional tour guides*

Strategies	Actions
Increase visibility, quality, trust and reach of guides across the Wet Tropics	5.1 Evolve the Wet Tropics Tour Guide Program Our key partners: GBRMPA, QPWS&P, QTIC, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, TEQ, tourism industry
Encourage and support an increase of locally trained Indigenous tour guides	5.2 Encourage, support and/or partner with Indigenous tour guide training programs Our key partners: ATSIP, QPWS&P, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, TTNQ

Goal 6: Collaborative visitor management *Adopt a collaborative, informed and consistent approach to planning, experience delivery and sustainable best practice*

Strategies	Actions
Increase partnerships with Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples to manage protected areas	6.1 Support ongoing transition to Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples leading protected area management and tourism on Country Our key partners: local government, Queensland Government, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, tourism industry
Support a region-wide approach to long-term sustainable tourism	6.2 Implement a robust and transparent permit and zoning system under relevant legislation to ensure World Heritage values are maintained Our key partners: DTIS, local government, QPWS&P
	6.3 Implement an enhanced strategic approach to address priority compliance issues across the World Heritage Area Our key partners: local government, QPWS&P, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples
	6.4 Progress enhancement of existing facilities and ensure new facilities are world-class, utilised appropriately and present the values of the Wet Tropics Our key partners: local government, QPWS&P
Develop and implement data collection standards to inform collaborative visitor management and experience planning	6.5 Complete needs analyses on visitor experience, visitor impacts and usage levels Our key partners: QPWS&P, TEQ, TTNQ, universities
	6.6 Investigate and implement scalable and efficient options for ongoing data collection to inform management decisions Our key partners: QPWS&P, tourism operators, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, TTNQ, TEL, universities
Pursue options to introduce transparent and equitable user-pays cost recovery method/s	6.7 Work with partners to propose a user pays model or models that ensure benefits remain local Our key partners: local government, Queensland Government (Treasury), QPWS&P, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, TEL, TEQ, TTNQ
Increase adoption of best practice standards and build resilience	6.8 Investigate options for incentives to eco-certified operators Our key partners: LTOs, QPWS&P, Rainforest Aboriginal Peoples, tourism operators
	6.9 Support transformative initiatives across sectors to build resilience, including to climate change Our key partners: community groups, local government, QPWS&P

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Blue quandong fruit on the forest floor