

URBAN NATURE-YOUTH ECOTOURISM FORUM II Report

Yesterday we got together in Reef HQ Aquarium to learn and share experiences about ecotourism and continue our work on the Youth Ecotourism Charter.

We were welcomed by Cr Jenny Hill and a Dive show where we learnt about coral reefs and how important they are for ecotourism in our region.

Then we learnt about ecotourism in our city.

1.

Townsville has more than **150,000 inhabitants** and is spread over **4000 km²**.

As you might know already, it is located in the North-Eastern coast of Australia, in the region that is called the 'Dry tropics' because we have 300 days of sunshine per year!

In our region we are very lucky with the picture-perfect weather, but also because we are blessed with beautiful areas such as the Great Barrier Reef, rainforest, savanna grassland, beautiful wetlands and beaches and amazing islands.

We have World Heritage Areas, internationally significant wetlands and vibrant indigenous communities. Look!

PICTURES

In addition there is plenty of wildlife! In Magnetic Island there are many koalas, and around Townsville we often see cute wallabies hopping around. We have all sorts of parrots and colourful birds, crocodiles, geckos, possums, echidnas, marine animals such as turtles, sharks and whales, and even rare and endangered species such as platypus.

PICTURES

So this is a great place to live and grow up!

And also a great place to visit and we think it has a great potential for ecotourism.

2.

There is already some tourism in Townsville, but it is not as popular as Cairns, a city 400km north of Townsville.

People here visit Magnetic Island, beaches like the Strand or Billabong Sanctuary, a place where you can interact with native wildlife such as kangaroos, koalas and wombats.

PICTURES

Around Townsville they can see the protected Hinchinbrook Island- look how beautiful it is! And they can refresh themselves in nearby waterfalls.

PICTURES

Nature tourism around Townsville is the main form of tourism so far.

3.

How about ecotourism?

We learnt yesterday that ecotourism is about protecting our natural areas through sustainable business that is beneficial for the entire community.

Ecotourism has three dimensions, just like sustainable development:

- Business (Economy)
- Community and Culture (Social) and
- Environment.

4.

In Townsville and region there are a number of ecotourism operators. Almost all of us have been to Billabong Sanctuary, and there are also ecotourism operators that can bring tourists to the Great Barrier Reef or to see the coral reef around Magnetic Island. Other operators organize tours to visit the most beautiful places around Townsville.

5. and 6.

Although this is fairly new, Townsville's community, including young people like us, is getting involved in ecotourism.

We as students are able to learn and live ecotourism through Forums and Catchment tours. Conservation community groups such as Conservation Volunteers Australia also have their say in ecotourism development.

And if ecotourism develops in our city, it will benefit the whole community!

7.

But at the moment there are a few issues faced by ecotourism in our city. The main issues are destruction of habitat for urban development, environmentally-unfriendly urban design, and uncontrolled urban development.

Another problem is the use of four-wheel-drives in Townsville city and more generally, pollution and littering. This creates health issues such as allergies and respiratory diseases.

Noises, and social disruptions, mainly due to conflicting land use, are further issues for ecotourism development.

Main challenges include biodiversity loss, traffic jam, and seasonality of peak and off peak tourism seasons.

8.

Yesterday we worked on improving the Youth Ecotourism Charter and we virtually visited ecotourism destinations around the world. We even visited some places in France and Brazil!

When we see that, we can realize how lucky we are here in Townsville; we have so many varied ecosystems and wildlife, traditional owners and cultural heritage, and more and more tourists who wish to get an eco-experience.

9.

During the Forum yesterday one of our activities was to create an ecotourism venture. We played various stakeholders (e.g. government representatives, wildlife carers, tourism operators, traditional owners and community groups) to create an ecotourism venture on an imaginary island.

We came up with lots of ideas and learnt how important it was to communicate and work hand in hand with other stakeholders.

Some of our ideas were to:

- Promote and sell traditional artefacts ;
- restrict the number of private boats allowed to moor on the port;
- create breeding programs and sites for endangered animals and set up emergency services for injured animals;
- only allow low-impact tourism activities such as rock-climbing, bungee jumping, snorkelling and diving, kayaks tours, diving, birdwatching..

- implement and fund research centres in biodiversity hotspots or areas of significant environmental and cultural values;
- train and employ local and indigenous people to become eco-tour guides
- regulate the amount of visitors (for example through pre-registration)
- implement marine green zones around the island to ban commercial fishing
- Create a local Architectural Code with strict rules on sustainable design, especially for eco-lodges and tourist resorts.

This is just some examples but we had many more suggestions and ideas for the island!

We are learning more and more about our “Urban Nature”, described as “Ecology for the living city”!

So now can you tell us about YOUR Urban Nature and your experience in ecotourism???