

Cr. Ann Bunnell & Greg Bruce, Townsville City Council

Summary

Townsville and surrounding regions offer a distinctive experience along the Queensland Coast.

Townsville is where the tropical savannas meet the coast, and is both the southern gateway to the Wet Tropics (Cromarty, Mt Elliot and Paluma) and at the City's Strand foreshore abuts the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.

In response to this Townsville City Council has been progressively implementing a community based "Townsville Ecotourism Strategy – 2000".

This strategy supports developing ecotourism opportunities for business; fostering regional cooperation and partnership; and has included development of the Council's innovative, dynamic web based Townsville Regional Natural Assets Database and State of Environment Report 2003 (www.soe-townsville.org/ecotourism/).

Introduction

Townsville is Queensland's largest regional city and with its neighbouring City of Thuringowa is home to over 158,531 people and covers a combined area of around 4000 sq km. The environment here is unlike any other in Queensland and has a regional diversity of natural environments and ecosystems at our doorstep. Townsville is where the inland tropical savannas meet the east coast of Australia creating an environment locally known as the Coastal Dry Tropics. Our area has coastal mountains, wetlands and a diverse marine environment consisting of fringing coral reefs, mangroves, seagrass beds, and tropical islands. Townsville is effectively the southern gateway to the wet tropics. To this extent we offer a distinctive experience along the coast of Queensland and even in Australia.

Regional merging environments include:

1. Monsoonal-influenced tropical savannas and wetlands;
2. Wet Tropics Rainforests including World Heritage (from Mt Elliot to Paluma);
3. Extensive areas of RAMSAR listed wetlands at Bowling Green Bay (57,900 ha),
4. World Heritage marine and coastal environments of the Great Barrier Reef lagoon, from fringing coral reefs and islands of Cleveland-Halifax Bay to seagrass beds, mangroves and estuaries.

At the local level, many other areas of Townsville provide great opportunities for undertaking ecotourism activities and developing "experiential" learnscapes:

5. Townsville Town Common Conservation Park (3300 hectares of remnant tropical savanna hills; monsoon vine forests and woodlands, and wetlands – fresh and marine);
6. Rocky escarpments, semi-deciduous woodlands, and savanna hills of Mt Stuart and Mt Elliot (with it's rainforest slopes and mountain tops);
7. Internationally and nationally significant coastal wetlands from South Bank to Cungulla;
8. Nationally listed wetland and important aquatic habitat of Ross Lake (dam);
9. World Heritage terrestrial and marine environments of Magnetic Island; and
10. Nearby access to Palm Islands, Great Barrier Reef, and wreck of the SS Yongala – one of the best eco-dive sites in the world in terms of wildlife.

In addition within 30 minutes drive of the CBD are three easily reachable areas with wilderness designation or regional and national quality. They include:

- a. High Range Wilderness Area (80,000 hectares) – eastern end which includes Mt Flagstone State Forest and numerous peaks and valleys;
- b. Mt Elliot Wilderness Area (31,000 hectares), and
- c. Paluma Ranges and Mt Zero area including Mt Spec National Park.

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Townsville has, in response to this, undertaken a variety of activities to promote ecotourism in our region, commencing with the development of a community-based *Townsville Ecotourism Strategy 2000*. Over the past five years, Townsville has been progressively implementing the strategy. This has included developing and promoting opportunities for business and fostering cooperation across the North Queensland region in collaboration with Townsville Enterprise Ltd. (TEL – the regional tourism organisation (RTO) and economic development body) and other local governments.

It also included developing the notion of the “Townsville Experience” with our own distinctive culture, people, history, architecture, and not least environment. The redeveloped Strand Foreshore has become in many ways an icon to this particular aspect of promoting the “Townsville Experience” and features not only great facilities and friendly people but environmental art, interpretation, protection of natural environments (sea turtle & dugong habitat) and scenic views to the World Heritage waters of Cleveland Bay and Magnetic Island – creating our own sense of place.

Other environments where this “nexus of experience” is being facilitated include the Ross River Parkway and Magnetic Island. Future environments include the Ross Lake (Dam) and Cungulla-Clevedon and Mt Elliot “Cromarty” wetlands and National Park.

Townsville Ecotourism Strategy, 2000 - implementing a community/business-based approach

The *Queensland Ecotourism Plan (2003-2008)* encourages key stakeholders to work together to contribute towards the development of a sustainable ecotourism industry including the development opportunities for partnership between public and private sectors, and involving community. Townsville City Council (TCC) encourages efforts in contributing significantly to supporting these developments.

The *Townsville Ecotourism Strategy 2000* builds on the recommended roles of local government in facilitating Ecotourism opportunities and involving community as specified in the earlier *Queensland Ecotourism Plan (1997)* and updated (2003-2008) and provides a response relevant for the Townsville municipality and community. The Strategy was originally developed from two community consultation sessions where 58 stakeholders attended, representing a broad cross section of the community, including academics, researchers, ecotourism operators, local government, Tourism Queensland and Townsville Enterprise Ltd.

The strongest recommendations which emerged were to encourage TCC to:

- Facilitate ecotourism locally,
- Cooperate regionally,
- Develop private and public partnerships, and
- Stakeholder interest “clusters” in support of the development of Ecotourism activities and infrastructure.

Townsville Ecotourism Strategy (2000) definition of Ecotourism:

“Ecotourism is nature and cultural based tourism that involves education and interpretation of the “Townsville Experience” which includes the diverse natural, multi-cultural and historic landscapes of our unique region. Ecotourism has the potential to create an economic vehicle to manage these assets to be ecologically sustainable.

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A local ecotourism vision statement was developed in the Strategy and further conveys the strategic directions for the development of Ecotourism in Townsville.

Vision of Ecotourism Townsville

“To ensure an ecologically sustainable and economically viable ecotourism industry in the Townsville region. Where the rich natural diversity, cultural heritage, and unique lifestyle are so valued by the entire community, that they are proactive in its management and conservation for future generations”

“Ecotourism represents the pre-eminent form of tourism in the region and **engage, educates and delights our visitors**”.

Significant outcomes arising from the Townsville Ecotourism Strategy have included:

- Working regionally with stakeholders and community to develop effective partnerships, business opportunities, networks and visions for the future of ecotourism in Townsville & region;
- Implementing interpretative eco-learnsapes on the ground and across the city;
- Upgrades of facilities and walking tracks both locally and regionally;
- Emergence of local and regional eco-catchment tours for promoting environmental awareness, ownership and integration,
- Developing two dynamic and interactive regional ecotourism resources (hosted and maintained by TCC):
 1. Townsville Regional Natural Assets Database (officially launched in 2004) www.townsville.qld.gov.au/nad/, and
 2. State of Environment Report 2003 (www.soe-townsville.org/ecotourism/)

Ecotourism operators in the region have increased in the past five years from 1 or 2 to 9, perhaps in response to the growing number of ecotourism options, ideas and integration of community across the region.

Appendix 1 gives correlated examples of implemented actions relating to Catalytic Actions detailed in the Townsville Ecotourism Strategy (2000).

Through the implementation and development of the Townsville Ecotourism Strategy, the following three themes have emerged and help encapsulate our local rationale and provide direction for the future:

1. Ecotourism – Economy, Environment and Future
2. Environmental Education and Experience, and
3. Regional and Local Partnerships and Opportunities.

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Ecotourism – Economy, Environment and Future

Townsville City Council has, for a long time, been committed to providing quality recreational opportunities for our citizens and visitors. This is seen as vital to maintaining a prosperous, vibrant, tropical city and region where people enjoy living, working and visiting (from Corporate Plan & Council Policy).

In this regard ecotourism is seen as making an important contribution to both the local and regional economy, by providing opportunities for employment through meeting the growing expectations of tourists (local, domestic and international) for experiences which include interaction with the natural environment and provision of quality information.

This direction is synergistic with national perspectives on future of tourism both in competitive advantage and the identified growth markets. The Conference Communiqué of the 4th National Conference on Tourism Futures (2005) articulates that Ecotourism was a top opportunity for growth.

This perception aligns well, both with the competitive advantages identified in the communiqué (including pristine beauty, unique experience, culture & friendly people) and the same assets and advantages seen in our local area. International tourists with an interest in environment & visiting natural areas (Ecotourists) were in 2003 recorded as being almost double the number of non-ecotourists, and stayed twice as long and subsequently spending much more per trip (source: BTR International Visitor Survey, 2003).

This also ties in well Council's directions for a Sustainable Townsville and with the call of the communiqué for consideration of the sustainability of tourism per se and is consistent with one of the key elements of the Queensland Ecotourism Plan (2003-2008) calling for ecotourism to be a lead for trialling new sustainability measures and technologies.

Environmental Education and Experiences

Locally ecotours; environmental and eco-attractions (Reef HQ and Billabong Sanctuary – both Nationally Accredited ecotourism attractions); along with the development of eco-learning landscapes (interpretative facilities and centres sited throughout the city and including the Strand); and provision of on-line environmental information (TCC State of Environment – SOE & Regional Natural Assets Database - NAD) are seen as key aspects of ensuring our region and city are seen as sustainable and attractive place to visit and stay. These ecotours, eco-attractions, and eco-learnsapes are seen as important opportunities to educate and involve locals and visitors with our environment, backed up by on-line and “place linked” ecological and landscape information (SOE & NAD) and assist our own community to find our own ‘sense of place’. They also provide opportunities for people to become involved as volunteers or even start their own business providing ecotours and attractions (and this is happening – see Ecotourism Operators and Attractions below).

Again the Conference communiqué (Tourism Futures Conference, 2005) reinforces this perspective – *“A shift is happening in the way we engage with our communities, people want to find a ‘meaning of place’ and tourism has an important role and opportunity for community capacity building”* (Tourism Futures Conference communiqué 2005).

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Regional and Local Partnerships and Opportunities

Townsville has a strong commitment to the development of a vibrant ecotourism industry by creating networks and fostering partnerships throughout the region. This is well demonstrated by Council's ongoing contributions and support to working closely with eco-tour operators, local business, Townsville Enterprise Ltd. and other Local Governments regionally and by participating fully in TEL's Ecotourism Sub-Committee (Tourism Advisory Committee). Key objectives of the committee were to hold eco-tours across the region visiting Local Government and community initiatives in establishing and promoting ecotourism, including interpretative signage, attractions, and tours.

Arguably these ecotours have played a significant role in breaking down some of the barriers which may have existed historically, between our various communities, thus enabling participants (including volunteers, Councillors, and Local Government staff) to see that we are essentially all part of one integrated region. There are now underway across the region, many integrated and collaborative nature-based tourism projects which demonstrate the effect of this.

Townsville Ecotourism_Networks - fostering regional cooperation and partnership

An initial attempt at a stakeholder "interest" cluster with an eye on ecotourism opportunities was the development by Townsville Enterprise (TEL), with support of community and Local Government, of a Birdwatching Sub-committee of TEL's Tourism Advisory Committee (TAC). This sub-committee subsequently developed into a broader Ecotourism Sub-committee and is now looking even more broadly to sustainable tourism.

One of Council's senior staff members (Manager Environmental Management) has been Chair of Ecotourism Sub-Committee of Townsville Enterprise (TEL) for past three years. A key objective of the committee has been to foster and develop regional partnerships within the sub-committee in order that the region works together and obtains resources and support appropriate to needs.

Key projects and outcomes achieved in partnership with TEL, tour operators and each participating Local Government has been:

1. Ecotours to various Local Government areas promoting initiatives, integration, awareness and partnership (Townsville, Burdekin, Magnetic Island, Hinchinbrook, & Thuringowa);
2. Networking and sharing information on local eco-tourism initiatives such as attractions (e.g. walking tracks) and interpretative facilities;
3. Mapping of ecotourism attractions and potential sites and maps; and
4. Producing web pages on ecotourism sites by each Local Government across the region and uploading on TEL web site.

Future initiatives include exploring Green Globe style marketing/promotion certification, encouraging Ecotourism Accreditation, and widening role to include becoming a network cluster of the emerging Centre of Excellence in Tropical Design (Sustainability & Innovation) for North Queensland (a founding partnership between Townsville City Council, City of Thuringowa, Queensland Department of Public Works, & James Cook University – Townsville Campus).

In addition the principles and objectives for promoting ecotourism in Townsville and region tie in with the development of Townsville's own Healthy Cities Plan and

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Sustainable Townsville Program. The Healthy City Plan includes facilitating social capacity building and integrating health, welfare, environment/tourism and culture as a way of reinforcing the idea of linking and integrating community, business, prosperity and environment (sustainability).

The Sustainable Townsville Program consists of all sustainability programs and initiatives (environmental, economic and including Healthy City Plan & Ecotourism Strategy) which compliments the objectives of the Healthy City Plan. Thus integrating all aspects of sustainability and providing a further foundation for facilitating ecotourism industry development.

Townsville Enterprise has now taken up the ambit and is facilitating integrated regional ecotourism initiatives such as the Regional Birdwatching Cluster (& bird watching feasibility study) and further ecotourism opportunities associated with the “Discover Tropical Queensland Loop” project. Townsville City Council and other regional Councils are contributing financially to these projects and providing information and resource support.

Environmental Protection, Facilities and Interpretative Learnscapes

Townsville as a City has a record for environmental protection going back to its municipal response to over clearing of trees on Castle Hill and setting aside the Town Common for pasturage. Environmental protection of landscapes and conservation assets was seen as another of the key outcomes in the Townsville Ecotourism Strategy. To this end many small ecological and landscape areas under Council's administration are being turned into environmental areas and offer places for current and future ecotourism facilities and interpretative displays (or eco-learnscapes).

Castle Hill is now a reserve managed for environmental protection and has been subject of intensive walking track upgrades and development of scenic viewing platforms. An accompanying walking track interpretative brochure has been produced.

The setting aside of a significant portion of the city developable area in the Town Common for nature conservation has ultimately left a legacy of tropical savanna covered hills and peaks, lowland woodlands, estuarine habitats and freshwater-marine wetlands immediately adjacent the urban area. The area includes the very scenic Many Peaks Range with open grasslands, semi-deciduous vine thickets (monsoon forests), and scenic views to the tropical islands of Halifax and Cleveland Bays.

The Town Common has a stunningly scenic and interesting walking track system, with easy access from three-four directions. Tracks and access are from both around coast from two sides, through the lowland dune and wetlands, and over the top of Mt Marlow from both north and south. These walking tracks are not yet well used and offer great potential for the future. There are very impressive coastal views of Palm Island, Magnetic Island and Great Barrier Reef lagoon and associated marine environments adjacent the park.

Mountainous Magnetic Island with over half its area in National Park and most of the rest protected natural landscapes has an extensive and even more well-used natural and protected area walking track system. The sense and feel of Magnetic Island, including the walking tracks are different yet complimentary to the Town Common Conservation Park. They offer some of the most dramatic scenic views which are readily accessible to tourists, including Hoop Pine and boulder-cladded cliffs. There are remote beaches, vegetated lowlands, mountains, and offshore fringing coral reefs and marine habitats.

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In order to promote these habitats and opportunities TCC has invested with matching Commonwealth funding support in the award winning Nelly Bay Habitat Interpretative Facilities (and associated SOE web pages). This facility is now used extensively by local tour guides and has proved an invaluable facility. The centre has become an important eco-learnscape with interpretation, views of habitats, and the linkages between them.

Building on the Nelly Bay Interpretative Facilities is the TCC-TEL and community partnership to establish the Magnetic Island Interpretative Trail. This trail exemplifies private-public partnership in all ways. The interpretative trail consists of series of signage across the island, themed for Landscape Ecology; Flora & Fauna; historical-cultural; and National Parks. Three of the themes were developed in full partnership with the community; two of them between TCC and community (Landscape Ecology and Flora & Fauna).

The themed signs are dispersed throughout all the bays on the island (habited and uninhabited) and provide an excellent opportunity to assist people to know more about the “Sense of Place” of Magnetic Island. They give relevance to the landscapes and ecology by incorporating illustrated maps.

Other examples of Council providing interpretative signage, walking track, and viewing platform experiences for visitors include Mt Stuart lookout and Ross River Parkway.

The result is a growing series of integrated interpretative facilities and eco-learnscapes across the entire city, providing educational infrastructure for existing and future tour operators.

In addition complimentary interpretative brochures have been produced for these environments as well as for other important eco-locations such as Cungulla and Bowling Green Bay wetlands.

The Strand Wind Turbine interpretative learnscape on the Strand boulevard walkway promotes and activity demonstrates renewable energy in public places and highlights the emerging role and opportunity of integrating other aspects of sustainability into environmental tourism.

The Strand itself is featured with environmental interpretation, mainly as artworks and includes featuring past and present habitats of the area (including symbolically returning lost wetlands to prominent public parks. The wetland and creek is marked out with meandering rockwork, different grasses and planted out with large local native swamp Melaleucas). The Council has worked closely with community conservation groups (Seagrass-watch Townsville, and Indo-Pacific Sea Turtle Conservation Group) and has placed life-like artworks of a turtle and a dugong for public enjoyment.

Further Coastal Learnscapes are planned for neighbouring Rowes Bay, promoting marine habitats of mudflats and sponge gardens with their strange and colourful creatures. This is another example of a joint project with TCC working with researchers at James Cook University, local business, and community. The challenge will be in managing visitors in such fragile coastal environments. Environments not normally considered premier for ecotourism and visitation yet offering fascinating insights and experiences in weird marine animals. Virtual tours for both the Townsville Regional Natural Assets Database and State of Environment Report formats are under development. Viewing platforms and access are in planning and partly funded with interpretation planned with local Schools contributing.

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Other more traditional facilities developed include a bird hide at Serpentine Lagoon, and birdwatching-interpretative facility hide at Oak Valley. Future projects include interpretative information and learnscape developments for promoting and protecting some of our endangered yet characterful local fauna such Black-throated Finches and the Northern Quoll. Townsville is one of the few places that these animals are still plentiful, where elsewhere they are now either extinct or rare.

Complimentary to all these facilities and opportunities are a number of initiatives underway in neighbouring Councils, especially City of Thuringowa and Shires of Burdekin and Hinchinbrook.

Townsville Ecotourism Operators and Opportunities

Townsville has a growing number of eco-tour operators, some with National Ecotourism Accreditation, others not. Billabong Sanctuary was the first eco-accredited attraction locally and is highly successful wildlife park with excellent interpretative facilities and educational staff. Reef HQ – the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area display and aquarium, has recently attained Ecotourism Accreditation as an attraction (October 2005).

On Magnetic Island we now have three ecotour operators, with one (the newest) focusing on terrestrial natural attractions; two focusing on the sea – one on top of the sea (MI Sea Kayaks and holding the highest level of Eco-Tourism Accreditation), and one under the sea offering nature based diving or snorkelling interpretative guided tours of fringing coral reefs (with internationally renowned educational coral reef marine biologist – Dr Andy Lewis).

On the mainland there are four local and regional operators (Townsville Tropical Tours, Ironbark Tours and NQ River and Road Tours, Pop Sullivan Cruisers). Three of them being approved eco-tour operators for the Ross Dam (a large wetland classified as a nationally significant Wetland of National Importance). An ecotourism plan for the Ross Dam was created by NQ Water (regional water catchment authority), working with TEL and offers an opportunity for ecotourism as a premier business opportunity for Ross Lake.

Also in Townsville is a regional office of the Non-Government Organisation - Conservation Volunteers Australia (CVA) who effectively operate well managed local and regional ecotourism experiences for national and international visitors to Australia.

In addition, our own Environmental Management Services (unit) of Council provide local eco-catchment tours to locals, students, and national-international visitors. These tours are ecologically sustainable, nature based, conservation and education - interpretative tours. 2000 students from Townsville alone participated in 2004. These eco-catchment tours offer a complete experience for locals and visitors and form another emerging component of the “Townsville Experience”.

For example last year we (TCC) hosted as an adjunct part of the 4th National Tourism Futures Conference held in Townsville – eco-tours and presentations for 30 PhD Sustainable Tourism students from CRC Sustainable Tourism. This included two separate tours to Strand, Town Common and Rowes Bay wetlands, as well as to Magnetic Island and promoted ecotourism initiatives and attractions. This has had the added bonus of helping people to see the promise of Townsville and district.

Townsville – Fostering Partnerships & Opportunities in Ecotourism

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Most recently TCC hosted an eco-catchment tour for “tourists” from Russia, Fiji and Thailand who were attending an international ocean conference in Townsville – Pacem in Maribus XXXI. These tours provide a holistic “experience” linking and integrating landscapes of our area. The “tourists” of this trip visited differing landscapes, observed stunning vistas, and had some of the world’s most impressive cliff top views over the entire city to Cleveland Bay and Magnetic Island – landscapes that many Townsvillian’s themselves are not yet familiar with.

Summary

Townsville boasts some great ecotourism environments, landscapes and Council has responded by developing an integrated suite of educational information, brochures, and facilities including some great on-line ecological information promoting our rich biodiversity and habitats. Like all communities with exceptional and distinctive environmental character our community places great importance on the conservation and preservation of it. With two of the world’s great environmental icons on our doorstep and even in our backyard – the Wet Tropics and Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Areas – we have an important responsibility to showcase them and provide opportunities for tourism business which melds with our own areas aspirations for a Sustainable Townsville and Health City. Townsville’s own distinct environments melding tropical wetlands, savannas, rainforests and marine environments offer an important vision for integrating community with a sustainable future. Council has sought to do this through partnerships and fostering regional cooperation.

APPENDIX 1

Townsville Ecotourism Strategy 2000

Objective 7 (Bio-geographic Diversity)

Catalytic Action 7 –

- Continue research/add data to local Natural Assets Registers –
 - Flora and fauna studies of region completed and an online database (www.soe-townsville/naturalassets/ established).
- incorporate habitat protection and bio-diversity outcomes on private and public lands:
 - Completed for Serpentine Lagoon (providing future opportunities to operators to negotiate access with landholders); Ross Lake; and numerous Council reserves including (Cungulla, Oak Valley, Rowes Bay wetland, and Nelly Bay Habitat).

Catalytic Action 8 (Marketing)

- Support Townsville Enterprise's and Magnetic Island Community and Commerce Association's efforts to expand their tourism promotions to include special interest and ecotourism products
 - TCC supported with funding and in-kind the development of an integrated set of Landscape Ecology and Flora/Fauna interpretative signage for Magnetic Island (Magnetic Island Interpretative & Walking Track Project – Commonwealth and TCC funded).
- Continue to support the establishment of an interactive data-base powered Internet Web Site for ecotourism...
 - Established the web based Internet Web Site for Ecotourism (INWSE) incorporating information on flora, fauna, ecology, landscapes, vegetation, locations/attractions, and tour operators/attractions (www.soe-townsville.org/naturalassets/)
 - In addition Townsville Enterprise supported the development of a set of ecotourism web pages for each Local Government based on eco-attraction and sites information provided by each municipality.
- Support joint funding submissions for the development of international and domestic niche environmental and cultural tourism markets
 - TEL has recently established a regional Birdwatching Cluster centred on Townsville and North Queensland region, with funding support of TCC and other regional Local Governments from Hinchinbrook to Burdekin.
 - TCC also has supported funding applications for Magnetic Island Interpretative and Walking Tracks Project and other natural area walking track projects by
 - Recently TCC has jointly co-funded in partnership with MICDA and QPWS the upgrade and reestablishment of a long-lost and pretty-scenic track from Nelly Bay to Geoffrey Bay. Although only short it is both an historic track (original route between the bays) and incredibly scenic and beautiful passing through monsoon forests and vine thickets.
- Develop quality on-line interpretative and interactive ecotourism booking options with tour operators
 - The online Natural Assets Database includes links to tour operators and places to stay (based on information provided to TCC by Townsville Enterprise).
 - The Townsville Council's web based State of Environment Report (2003 – www.soe-townsville.org) incorporates extensive interpretative information on sites as well as an Ecotourism Map with links to the

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designated sites on the map. It is planned for this map to be linked to the Townsville Enterprise Ltd. Ecotourism web site as a sub-link.