

**Senate Environment, Communication, Information Technology and the
Arts Committee**

***Inquiry into Australia's national parks, conservation reserves
and marine protected areas***

A Submission by

Queensland Tourism Industry Council (QTIC)

On behalf of its extensive membership, the Queensland Tourism Industry Council (QTIC) maintains an active interest in all matters relating to protected area management, funding, research and access for tourism operators. Amongst other relevant activities, QTIC is represented on the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority's (GRMPA's) *Tourism and Recreation Reef Advisory Committee* (TRRAC), the Wet Tropics Management Authority's (WTMA's) *Tourism Industry Liaison Committee* and has been playing a key role in the discussions of the *Tourism in Protected Areas* (TIPA) initiative of Queensland's Environmental Protection Agency. A brief profile of QTIC is attached.

Based on our experience and with reference to the interests of tourism operators, QTIC would like to provide the following comments on the above inquiry, structured on the Terms of Reference:

The funding and resources available to meet the objectives of Australia's national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas, with particular reference to:

a. the values and objectives of Australia's national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas;

- While the overall objectives may not have changed over the years, the growing demands of the community not only to achieve sustainable biodiversity outcomes but also to provide for appropriate community access for visitation, interpretation and display will require more detailed clarity in the objectives. The objectives may also need to be revisited in view of specific threats to some if not all national parks from climate change and water quality deterioration.
- A clear articulation of objectives and their separation from specific management measures would benefit the discussion. In other words, a more flexible and innovative approach to visitor management and funding may provide greater opportunities to achieve the objectives. Occasionally in public debate, there appears to be a confusion of objectives and management tools, for example, limiting visitation is not in itself an objective and should not be considered as such.

b. whether governments are providing sufficient resources to meet those objectives and their management requirements;

- Generally it would seem that with growing threats to biodiversity and increased visitor demand for managed sites, funding from both Commonwealth and state agencies has not kept pace. State funding in Queensland, as a separate issue, is insufficient to provide adequate resources for state owned and managed parks. Jointly managed areas and those under Commonwealth jurisdiction are also suffering from either diminishing funding or from fluctuating funding allocations. The latter is making it very difficult for management agencies to plan and take a strategic approach to management.
- In 2003-04 National Heritage Trust – World Heritage Management Funding nationally has been reduced to less than half of funding levels achieved in 1997-98. This is placing severe constraints on high profile Queensland sites, particularly in the Wet Tropics, Fraser Island and CERRA areas. The first two of those areas particularly, are facing serious infrastructure and management issues which are potentially threatening the obligations under the Commonwealth's World Heritage agreements, which provide both for conservation and presentation objectives.

- Commonwealth funding for Fraser Island in particular has been severely reduced and does no longer provide for sound management in an environment that is experiencing very high visitor demand. The effects of reduced management effectiveness is beginning to manifest itself in the deterioration of track and other infrastructure and is leading to visitor dissatisfaction.

c. any threats to the objectives and management of our national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas;

- As indicated above, one of the greatest threats to management is the inadequate funding base for most protected areas, with the possible exception of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. The latter benefits from a sizeable contribution to its management from the Environmental Management Charge (EMC), remitted by commercial tourism operators. No funding is obtained from any other Reef visitors or other users. This latter issue should be revisited.
- The potential threat from climate change is likely to require enhanced efforts to provide response and mitigation measures. The research support for such issues from the Commonwealth through the newly established Marine and Tropical Science Research Facility (MTSRF) is recognised and welcome. Possible implementation of enhanced management measures, and their funding, need to be considered as a matter of urgency in both the Barrier Reef marine park and in the Wet Tropics area.
- Lack of sufficient funding is affecting the provision and maintenance of adequate and safe visitor infrastructure. Particularly with heightened awareness of and risk from public liability, this is posing a risk to the objectives of protected area presentation and visitation. Facilities, tracks and other infrastructure are at risk of being closed, as has already happened in several Queensland parks.

c. the responsibilities of governments with regard to the creation and management of national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas, with particular reference to long-term plans;

- Given the funding constraints and given the increased management needs, it is imperative to investigate all options to achieve optimal outcomes. Specifically, management regimes of sites must include all users or visitors in an equitable and appropriate manner. This is important not only from a funding perspective but also from an impact management perspective. Management and access provision must be

based on actual impacts rather than simplistic capacity setting, based on commercial visitor numbers.

- Similarly, long term management options to be considered should also include funding and infrastructure partnerships with private sector organisations. Again, the best outcomes in terms of park objectives, should guide such analysis rather than preconceived notions about the private sector involvement in the provision of park services.
- In that context the current and potential contributions of commercial tourism operators must be appropriately acknowledged, for example in terms of maintenance to visitor infrastructure, site monitoring, research support and providing public access to sites (ie the Barrier Reef).
- As the main facilitators of economic benefits and jobs for regional communities from national park activities, tourism operators need to be closely involved in long-term planning, with appropriate lead times provided for any changes. The Commonwealth's own estimates suggest that around 50,000 jobs are directly dependant on visitation to the Great Barrier Reef.

e. the record of governments with regard to the creation and management of national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas, with particular reference to long-term plans.

- Aside from the relevant comments above, one key requirement for optimal outcomes is the efficient and effective coordination of Commonwealth and state governments' efforts. With limited resources this is all the more imperative.
- The arrangements and funding provisions for the Wet Tropics Management Authority (WTMA) have at times not been the best example of Commonwealth – state cooperation. Inevitably the uncertainty over funding and disputes over expenditure allocation cause uncertainty in the organisation and affect operational efficiency. Tourism operators and the community have little sympathy for inter-government/agency disputes and expect all agencies to act in the interest of the park and its management. Meanwhile WTMA itself is working well with the tourism industry and is actively engaging with operators and stakeholders on a range of initiatives from research to park management.

- Cooperation appears to have worked more smoothly in recent years in the context of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority has managed very effectively to repair a damaged relationship with the tourism industry over the last 5-6 years. Through meaningful engagement with the operators and other stakeholders a climate of trust has been established that now allows for better cooperative strategic planning and management.

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