



WHITSUNDAY CONSERVATION COUNCIL

Caring for the future is in our nature

Email: admin@whitsundayconservation.org.au

www.whitsundayconservation.org.au

Contact: Secretary 0407 207 441

Committee Secretary
Transport and Resources Committee
Parliament House
George Street
Brisbane Qld 4000

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Email: trc@parliament.qld.gov.au

RE: SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE ECONOMIC AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORK FOR QUEENSLAND'S ISLAND RESORTS

SUMMARY:

The terms of reference of this Inquiry appear to be framed around the assumption that the resorts would be thriving if it weren't for Government regulation. We respectfully submit that the reasons for failure are due to a complex mix of other factors. Government support for development and refurbishment of resorts cannot make them survive if the markets, climate change and logistical difficulties dictate otherwise.

There is no question that the appeal of tropical island resorts is a powerful drawcard in tourism.

Unfortunately, the same glamorous appeal can cloud people's judgement when they assess the practical and financial viability of these ventures. Island resorts are extremely costly to build and run, and even more costly to repair and refurbish or demolish and remove. They are also at the whims of nature and climate change when it comes to the endurance of their natural attractions.

The bigger the resort, the bigger the problem when it is hit by disasters such as cyclones, or financial failure.

Historically, the failure to require a bond, or sufficient bond, for site restoration after abandonment, has led to the many ruined resorts on Queensland islands.

Climate change has meant increased severity of cyclones and consequently more costly insurance premiums, excesses, and repairs. In the present era the larger resorts are frequently owned and run by far-away corporates, either elsewhere in Australia, or more often overseas, who have the financial ability to take on such high risks but do not always understand the local circumstances. As a result they are generally run as any other hotel property. Distant corporate ownership does not encourage interaction with the Traditional Owners or local community, or taking an interest in the local environment.

Far-away marketing teams dictate priorities which usually ignore local flavour and ape other destinations anywhere from the Riviera to the Caribbean. Stewardship of the environment is a lower priority than greenwashing in their marketing.

The end result is a generic 'island resort' which could be anywhere. In an effort to then differentiate their products the tendency is to build bigger and flashier and add more 'stars', however this leaves them vulnerable to the changeable whims of fashion. It also results in a bigger and more expensive mess to deal with when they fail.

In our submissions we will discuss the following points:

- Attracting new and return visitors to Queensland & the Great Barrier Reef: authenticity is the key, gimmicks and marketing are no substitute.
- Most island resorts depend heavily upon the surrounding natural environment to attract their customers, making them vulnerable to forces outside of their control, such as climate change.
- Island resorts are expensive to run and maintain: they require constant reinvestment to survive; many absentee owners fail to do this.
- Large resorts have very high (& expensive) energy and water requirements, which are costly for those dependant on diesel generators.
- Island resorts are vulnerable to cyclones and storm tides, even more so as extreme weather has intensified under climate change.
- Bigger is not better; it can mean higher repair and removal costs than anyone is prepared to stump up.
- Island resorts are expensive to develop and even more expensive to refurbish/ rehabilitate, this cost is often left to taxpayers.
- To be sustainable we must define a tourism carrying capacity for the Whitsunday Plan of Management Area or we will love this playground to death.
- Examples are also presented to illustrate how these issues have played out for a number of Whitsunday Island Resorts and one mainland resort.

ATTRACTING NEW AND RETURN VISITORS TO QUEENSLAND & THE GREAT BARRIER REEF: AUTHENTICITY IS THE KEY

Tourism and Events Queensland Annual Consumer Demand Project surveys international visitors about the most important values that attract them to visit Queensland. Due to Covid-19, the last one was in 2019.

They surveyed visitors from China, Germany, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, UK, USA and Hong Kong. Across these main groups of international visitors, 48.9% rated 'world class natural beauty and wildlife' as one of their 'top 5 importance factors' in choosing Queensland. To put this into perspective, 54.58% of these visitors rated 'a safe and secure destination' as a 'top 5 importance factor' for choosing Queensland. This suggests that the unique, undisturbed natural environment is a very important drawcard for international visitors to Queensland; almost as important as safety. <https://teq.queensland.com/research-and-insights/international-research/international-market-research/consumer-demand-project>

The existing resorts on the Whitsunday Islands generally started as small scale, locally owned and run enterprises on old grazing leases, in many cases on islands that were at least in part National Parks.

In the early development of Island Resorts in Queensland, the natural environment was probably the major drawcard as the infrastructure and facilities were minimal. As they grew, built more facilities and the expectations of visitors changed, larger hotel/tourism companies gradually took over. See *'No Swank Here?' Todd Barr Studies in North Queensland History No.15, Department of Tourism and James Cook University, 1990.*

This eventually led to many of the Island Resorts being run by large travel companies such as Ansett, and then various, often internationally owned hotel chains. One result of this evolution is a tendency towards rather homogenous offerings with little relation to, or interest in, the local environment. The track record shows that large hotel companies generally have not participated in the local community; islands resorts have been notoriously stingy in donating to charities such as the CQ Rescue service, or VMR Marine Rescue, despite the fact that these services get many of their clientele from the resorts. They have shown little commitment to the destination; they change properties regularly, employ few local people and had little interest in stewardship of, or interpretation of the local natural environment experienced by their visitors.

The Great Barrier Reef(GBR) does not need much help to attract tourists, it is internationally known as a bucket-list destination. Of course it has to still be alive; depredations from climate-change related heat waves, more intense cyclones and water pollution threaten to destroy this jewel in Queensland's crown.

The same survey also found that across the 12 countries of origin surveyed, 25% of visitors rated 'friendly and open citizens, local hospitality' in their 'top 5 importance factors. Visitors hoping to meet 'locals' would have been disappointed at the island resorts run by large hotel companies. The vast majority of the staff at these resorts pre-Covid-19 were overseas nationals on working visas or sponsorships or transient workers from other parts of Australia who turn over rapidly and so have limited time to gain any local knowledge beyond the ferry timetable.

The Tourism and Events Queensland surveys found that 'good food, wine, local cuisine and produce' was in the 'top 5 importance factors' for 23.83% of visitors across the twelve countries surveyed. The large resorts run by hotel companies generally did not offer much in the way of local produce or cuisine; in their restaurants you were most likely to find imported frozen seafood, and imported fruit and vegetables, despite the fabulous local produce available to island resorts from Bowen's agriculture, aquaculture and fisheries industries.

The built environment and landscaping of these resorts usually tries to ape somewhere else, for example Tuscan-style villas, or some sort of generic 'South Pacific' style with coconut palms etc. Trying to be a local version of another place is doomed to fail; the Whitsundays will never do Tuscan better than Tuscany and we will never be more Hawaiian than Hawaii itself. These attempts to imitate other places rapidly become jaded and unfashionable, and many resorts in the Whitsundays who have followed the strategy of imitation have fallen out of fashion and into disuse and decay, for example Lindeman Island Club Med, Brampton Island Resort, Club Crocodile Long Island, South Molle Island.

The design of the built environment of these resorts is generally Bessa-block boxes of various sizes and shapes which are totally dependent on air-conditioning to be habitable and have no distinctive features except that they all stick out like a sore thumb in the landscape. The landscaping at these resorts generally consists of bland, generic 'tropical gardens' that have introduced numerous exotic invasive species to the islands. Innovative designs which suit the local climate and conditions and which embrace the local environment would age much more gracefully than those which follow the latest fashion.

If the Whitsunday Island resorts are to thrive into the future, they need to embrace the real Whitsunday sense of place. Feature the local native plants and associated wildlife in the landscaping. Design the built environment to be sympathetic to the local surroundings and also to be resilient and adapted to realities of climate change and extreme weather events. Decorate with art by local artists. Serve local food where possible and employ locals. Induct staff so that they have an understanding of the local environment and can add depth to the visitor's experience by giving them information about the local flora, fauna and physical environment. Give back to the local community and environment by supporting/ working with local charities and causes. This is a far more authentic and long-lasting strategy.

No-one will ever do the Whitsundays better than we can!

WHITSUNDAY RESORT CASE STUDIES:

There are 11 island resorts in the Whitsundays: Brampton Island, Lindeman Island, Hamilton Island, Long Island (3 resorts), Hook Island, Daydream Island, South Molle Island and Hayman Island.

There is also the mainland resort of Laguna Quays which has been included as it also sheds light on the issues. Of these, 4 are currently closed and in a state of ruin, while the Hook Island Resort site (the smallest) has been remediated with the financial assistance of the Queensland Government and has approval in place to redevelop. There are too many to include them all, so the following are presented as examples of the historical and current problems that they face.

Case study 1: LINDEMAN ISLAND

The Island was mostly National Park with a small resort lease until the Queensland Government tried to revoke two-thirds of it for an East-West Airlines resort in 1986 as part of a larger Government scheme to increase competition in the airline industry and reduce air fares.

After massive, state-wide public protest the plan was amended to revoking 'just part' of the National Park to accommodate a golf course next to the rebuilt resort. This was later taken over by the international 'Club Med' franchise who operated it until cyclone Ului damaged and closed it in 2011. It was then sold in 2012 to Chinese owned White Horse, who has also applied to revoke 37 hectares of National Park to build no less than 3 resorts, and to use another 10 hectares of the park for 'glamping' facilities. Despite the willingness of the Government to accommodate the wishes of the developer, the resort has been largely unmaintained since 2012 and is in a state of decay.

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Case study 1: Lindeman Island: *continues*

The main 'constraint affecting economic development' of Lindeman Island has been its relative remoteness. It is unsuitable for large-scale mass tourism developments such as the 3 resorts currently proposed. The island is a 10 nautical mile (nm) trip from Hamilton Island airport and 22 nm from the nearest mainland port: Shute Harbour. The only other alternative is the now-derelict and unusable marina at Laguna Quays, at 24.97nm one-way, which would be well over 1 hour for a barge and probably over 45 minutes by ferry due to the extremely shallow, exposed nature of Repulse Bay which offers no protection from south easterly winds. This means that resupplying the island by barge requires at least an hour's journey. Visitors travelling by ferry travel faster, but it is still roughly 1 hour from Shute Harbour and about 40 minutes from Hamilton Island. Add to this the relatively exposed aspect of most of the journey, and ferry passengers who travelled this route in the prevailing trade winds were routinely sick. Many chose the expensive flight in a helicopter or light aircraft just to avoid the boat trip. That is probably why the Laguna Quays option was never tried, although it was open when the resort was operational. The unavoidable result of the practical realities is that such resorts are tremendously expensive to build, maintain, re-build and operate.

Allowing a resort such as the Lindeman Island Resort to then become completely derelict, potentially requiring full removal of all buildings, causes more financial, environmental and practical problems. For example, the demolition waste from Lindeman Island Resort has the potential to fill the local landfill, necessitating development of a new landfill for the local community, using tax/ ratepayers funds. The sheer amount of time and labour involved in demolition and transportation of the rubble mean that it will cost an enormous amount before the first brick is laid for the new resort. These problems plus the likely presence of hazards such as asbestos mean that there is a great deal of outlay required just to clean up the site before anything is built. Infrastructure such as power, water and sewage deteriorates rapidly in the tropical marine environment and much will need to be replaced. Expanding the footprint of the one resort to the proposed three will amplify the costs when the inevitable category 4 cyclone comes and renders it uninhabitable again.

Case Study 2: BRAMPTON ISLAND

Another case study is Brampton Island Resort, which is also on a National Park Island off Mackay. The island is spectacularly beautiful, has diverse recreational opportunities, and like Lindeman it has a golf course, airstrip and extensive walking trails. Like Lindeman, in its heyday it was very successful. This resort is around 20.5nm journey by sea from Mackay Harbour, crossing about 45 minutes of shallow, exposed and uncomfortable waters in any moderate south-easterly wind (the most common weather conditions). Despite this it was very successfully run by the local McLean family, who also owned Roylen Cruises, operating a fleet of large vessels which transferred guests to the island and took people on day and overnight cruises. After Roylen's closed the resort was taken over by TAA, then P&O, and finally Voyages group who sold it to the owners of Choice Petroleum in 2011.

The current owners closed it for 'redevelopment' to a '5 ½ star' exclusive fly-in fly-out resort, (the airstrip is only suitable for helicopters or light aircraft) and it has been decaying ever since. The buildings have now been allowed to decay to such a degree that again, refurbishment or rebuilding will be very expensive, with long barge trips needed to transport materials and workers. Barge access is also limited by the very large tidal range in this area.

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Case Study 2: BRAMPTON ISLAND: *continues*

Sea level rise has also affected Brampton resort: the existing deep-water jetty is the main access for guests to the resort, from there they boarded a tramway which took them to the resort itself. The tramway is now regularly inundated by spring high tides and has corroded away. The resort pool was constructed to give a 'horizon pool' effect, however high spring tides now regularly flood across the pool deck, lifting bricks and filling the pool with sand and debris.

Like Lindeman, the walking tracks were largely built by Queensland Parks & Wildlife Service QPWS but were also for the benefit of the resort, with a joint maintenance deal struck with QPWS. Once the resort was closed, maintenance of the walking tracks stopped. Since then the manpower and resources of the Mackay Region QPWS have been so reduced that they would probably be unable to maintain them even if they could get there.

With the lack of maintenance of the resort area, the many environmental weeds in the resort gardens have now escaped to fill most of the area around the resort, Singapore Daisy has crossed the walking track from the airport and spread up into the National Park and Rhoeo, Sisal and Agaves have spread along the old tramway. It will be a big and costly job to control them as they will persist for many years.

Once again, the economic viability of building and maintaining a large permanent resort here is questionable. The cost of restoring such a resort after a cyclone like Cyclone Debbie is clearly hard to justify for the potential returns, otherwise it would have been reopened (we cannot blame Covid-19 as it closed in 2011). The safety of the houseguests in the instance of a high category cyclone also has to be considered; (like Lindeman) evacuation either by air or sea would be difficult, possibly even dangerous, and the question then arises: where could they all be safely housed?

Case study 3: LAGUNA QUAYS RESORT

Although not on an island, the story of Laguna Quays is an example of what happens when people get carried away with the glamour of a resort proposal without thinking through the details.

Laguna Quays is located on the aptly named Midge Point, a windswept prominence at the edge of wild and beautiful Repulse Bay, North of Mackay. The original proposal was for a 'designed community' of a type that was fashionable at the time. It was to start with the 5-star resort, sports complex, marina and golf course, completed in 1992, to be followed by a staged real estate development which would eventually have a school, shopping centre, hospital etc.

The Japanese developer had perhaps not done their homework: the Japanese tourists who were supposed to arrive in droves never eventuated. Japanese visitors are notoriously time-poor and want to fly direct to their destination. Having to fly to Cairns and then connect to either Hamilton Island, Mackay or Proserpine Airports presented no quick easy options and cost too much of their time. The golf course was spectacular and award-winning, nonetheless the first stage of the resort was in receivership by 1995, \$200 million in debt.

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Case study 3: LAGUNA QUAYS RESORT: *continues*

The new owner attempted to build an international airport on the site, but failed to get approval for it and finally parts of the property were seized by the Council due to unpaid rates. In 2012 it closed. In 2013 a Chinese developer bought it, with promises to redevelop. Cyclone Ului in 2010 damaged the buildings and destroyed the marina. The marina was never a convincing proposition: anyone who has crossed Repulse Bay by boat will agree that it is aptly named. Accessing Laguna Quays by sea was always going to be slow, difficult and uncomfortable. Now in 2022 the ornate and impressive resort buildings and amenities are being eaten away by termites and only a few privately owned residences are in use, the owners still waiting for someone to clean up the mess and build all of the facilities that they were promised.

The success stories

Case study 5: HAYMAN ISLAND

Hayman Island is one of the 'success stories', at least in that it is still operating. Whether it is profitable is questionable when you look at the huge expenditure required to keep it going. Since 1970 it has been severely damaged by tropical cyclones Ada, Celeste, Ului, Yasi & Anthony and finally Debbie. TC Ada demolished the resort and TC Ului and Debbie also did significant damage. Repairs after most of the cyclones required closures of months to 2 years after Debbie.

Since Ansett sold the resort in 1998, it has changed hands 4 times and had an estimated \$223.9 million spent on repairs, refurbishments and new infrastructure and buildings, based upon media reports and the current owner's website. At least part of the repairs after Cyclone Debbie were assisted by the \$25 million Great Barrier Reef Island Resorts Rejuvenation Fund.

Despite this huge expenditure it still remains wholly dependent on costly diesel generators for power.

Case study 6: HAMILTON ISLAND

Hamilton Island has operated successfully and even survived Covid-19. This is not a sign that we should build more Hamilton Island-style enterprises; but it has been able to uniquely position itself as an 'events' destination, with Race Week, Outriggers, the Marathon, conferences, and the Golf Course on Dent Island etc.

It has Australian owners who know their product and their market well and have made connections with the local community. It has also diversified its income by developing a lot of real estate. It is now more like a small town, with permanent residents, a school, marina and domestic airport. As it has an undersea power cable it is not dependant on diesel fuel. It also has access to water on Dent Island and so is not totally dependent on using expensive reverse osmosis for water. It still spends approximately \$16 million a year on infrastructure and utilities. It had a near-death experience when a fire destroyed much of the resort in 1985 and although it was rebuilt, it went into receivership in 1992. The Oatley family have owned it since 2003 and have re-invested significantly into the attractions and infrastructure. Part of Hamilton Island's success has to be attributed to canny management and a high profile, enhanced by the major events and its striking appearance. Love it or loathe it, you can't fail to notice it.

FROM THE CASES ABOVE SOME COMMON PROBLEMS EMERGE:

1: Most island resorts depend upon the surrounding natural environment to attract their customers.

As the impacts of climate change and poor water quality bite, the island resorts of the Whitsundays are increasingly at a disadvantage compared to many other island destinations. For resorts on the GBR, coral and colourful fish are the recognised drawcards underwater. It is possible to stay at islands like Lizard, Heron, and Lady Elliot (or name the Asian holiday destination) and walk in off the beach to snorkel over coral reefs in clear, calm water.

While it cannot be denied that the Whitsunday islands are surrounded by world-class scenery, flora and fauna, the island resorts have been primarily located where it was safe and easy to disembark passengers from boats; this has not necessarily been where the best fringing coral reefs are located. Add to that chronic poor water quality and repeated extreme weather events capped off with cyclone Ului and then Debbie, only Hayman Island and Hook Island Resort are close to good snorkelling and diving locations. Even when Blue Pearl Bay on Hayman had live coral, before cyclone Debbie, a boat trip was still needed to get there. Lindeman Island still has some sea-weedy fringing reef, however it also has poor visibility and strong currents a lot of the time. Brampton Island's fringing reefs were once a big attraction, now they have all but succumbed to a phase shift to seaweeds, due to long-term poor water quality. Daydream, South Molle and Long Islands have lost whatever fringing reef they had and are unlikely to see it return due to poor water quality and algal dominance. Hamilton Islands' best fringing reef was reputedly the one that was excavated to form the resort marina.

For those who want to see corals and fish in the Whitsundays, a boat trip is an unavoidable extra cost.

Arguably the most attractive and interesting vegetation on the islands is the dry rainforest, which stands to suffer from increasing heat waves and failed wet seasons making the rainforest more stressed and flammable.

Add to that the fact that the climate is warming, and heatwaves are becoming frequent and prolonged in summer, and that most of our visitors come from cooler climates, the hot sunny weather starts to make the Whitsundays look less enticing to anyone who wants to be more active than just lying by the pool.

2: Island resorts are expensive to run and maintain: they require constant reinvestment to survive

As the older resorts became run-down, unfashionable and expensive to run, some are sold down the food chain to companies who simply take profits but do not reinvest in the island infrastructure. Eventually something expensive fails and then they close, frequently after they have been damaged by a cyclone.

After Cyclone Debbie in 2017, South Molle Island and Happy Bay (Club Crocodile) Long Island both closed permanently due to severe damage, including loss of both resorts' jettys. Resorts that had been maintained (Daydream Island, Hayman Island, and Hamilton Island) or whose owners had deeper pockets, eventually reopened after around a year of major repairs. Cyclone damage can be exacerbated by a historical lack of maintenance/ poor condition prior to the event, for example;

2: Island resorts are expensive to run and maintain: they require constant reinvestment to survive.
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South Molle Island had been running on a shoestring with very little investment and barely open for many years before Cyclone Debbie tore it apart. It was sold as-is in 2019 to the Chinese owners of Daydream Island Resort. With the main access jetty destroyed, and debris including asbestos from the buildings spread far and wide in the cyclone, the Queensland Government had to assist the new owner to reconstruct the jetty and clean up the hazards on the site to allow public access to the National Park walking trails.

It is worth remembering that the original timber jetty had been built by the Proserpine Council in 1961 and was sold to the resort's owners for a peppercorn sum in the late 1990s when it needed major repairs. The repairs that were done were minimal and it was not a surprise to anyone that it failed in cyclone Debbie. The still-damaged buildings remain in place. Remembering that this island is just 30 minutes boat ride from the major ports and has a great network of walking trails and one of the best and biggest resort anchorages in the region for visiting yachts, the fact that it is still in ruins says a lot about the cost of rebuilding such resorts.

3: Large resorts have very high (& expensive) energy and water requirements

The large island resorts in the Whitsundays have been largely resistant to innovations such as renewable energy, which once installed, would have helped make the resorts cheaper to run.

Larger resorts closer to the mainland have established undersea power cables and water pipelines (Daydream Island, South Molle Island, Happy Bay Long Island, Hamilton Island) don't have this problem, but the infrastructure is expensive to build and maintain.

The more remote/smaller ones cannot do this, e.g. Lindeman Island, Brampton Island, Hook Island. They have to desalinate & treat water (none of the islands have sufficient reliable natural water supply) and sewage, and run all of the home comforts that people expect, using diesel generators, running on expensive barged-in fuel. Despite this, they have all failed to take advantage of the opportunities offered in recent years by Governments to subsidise stand-alone renewable power projects and reduce their dependence on fossil fuels. The reason for this is not clear. However there may be a clue in the response of one resort's managers when the island's school children applied to put a Government funded solar system on the roof of the island's school: the kids were told no, because it would spoil the aesthetic appeal of the resort!

4: Island resorts are vulnerable to cyclones and storm tides

Climate change has seen cyclone intensity increase and this has shown up the vulnerabilities of some island resorts. The remoteness and costs of transport on top of the costs of the repairs themselves have seen the closure of resorts for extensive periods (months to a year) for repairs after cyclone damage. In 1970 Cyclone Ada (category 3) severely damaged all of the Whitsunday Island resorts; at Hayman all vessels were lost and three staff killed.

In 1992 Cyclone Celeste (category 2) damaged Hayman Island. In 2010 Cyclone Ului caused major damage at all of the resorts. In 2017 Cyclone Debbie severely damaged all the resorts and led to the closure of South Molle Island and Happy Bay Long Island.

4: Island resorts are vulnerable to cyclones and storm tides: *continues*

After Cyclone Debbie only Hamilton Island remained partially operational, with all of the others closed for around a year to rebuild. With climate change continuing unabated, owners of island resorts face increasing insurance premiums and steeper damage bills if climate change continues unabated. Sea-level rise has also caused problems, putting infrastructure at risk, such as that mentioned previously affecting the resort access and pool at Brampton Island.

Prior to cyclone Debbie, some resort guests were evacuated to the mainland by the last ferry and then stranded with no transport or accommodation as the buses, taxis and hotels had all shut down. Community members and Council staff had to scramble to find transport and shelter for these people as the cyclone advanced. After cyclone Debbie about 3000 people (staff and guests) were stranded on the Whitsunday Island resorts, some without water or power. They had to be resupplied by Navy ship and eventually evacuated. This took some time as all the resorts had damage to their jetties and marinas.

Queensland Island resorts have not ceased to operate for want of Government support.

Apart from the reported \$55 Million that the Queensland Government tipped in to help resorts recover from Cyclone Debbie, there has been a long history in Queensland of political willingness to ignore conservation and protection of the natural environment in order to facilitate resort developments on islands. This has extended to repeatedly handing over 'bits' of National Park Islands to encourage 'bigger and flashier' resort developments. In recent years millions have been handed out in the form of 'recovery' grants after various disasters, both 'natural' and financial. Despite the largess handed out, island resorts have nonetheless fallen into disuse and disrepair.

5: Bigger is not better

With their high development and maintenance costs, and their vulnerability to damage and loss of trade due to economic shocks, wars or pandemics, large island resorts have to be either very clever or very lucky, or both, to persist over the long term. In the past no thought was given to the possibility of failure, with the result that the public purse has either had to pick up the bill for remediation of sites, or leave them in ruins in very public view. The tendency of resort hotels to try to 'outbuild' each other in their attempts to keep ahead of the market results in a lot of buildings and infrastructure to be cleaned up when they are abandoned. The high cost of removing the ruins prohibits new developments and the public ends up having to chip in to get it done. This cycle needs to stop and new island resort developments must demonstrate that there is a practical and affordable plan for removal and remediation and a bond must be secured and held by the Government to fund it, should the resort be closed in the future.

6: Island resorts are expensive to develop and even more expensive to refurbish/ rehabilitate

The huge cost of demolition and removal of extensive buildings from a relatively remote location by sea makes it cheaper for a developer to build a new 'greenfields' resort on an unspoiled site rather than refurbish or rebuild an existing resort. This also provides a clean slate for whatever their marketing department and current fashions may see as desirable. Pressure to open up new, undeveloped islands should be resisted as it simply compounds the problem.

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6: Island resorts are expensive to develop and even more expensive to refurbish/ rehabilitate:
continues

Island resorts have already contributed to so much loss of National Park land and National Park values. Historically the Queensland Government has agreed numerous times to deals which trade National Park land away for resort developments (e.g. Lindeman Island). Even where the resorts are kept to their side of the National Park boundary, island biosecurity was never part of the lease agreements.

Consequently, there have been introductions of numerous environmental weeds from resort gardens into National Park and at least one serious introduced pest brought to an island, in the form of Yellow Crazy Ants on Hamilton Island. Islands which have networks of walking trails that facilitate the spread of weeds from resort grounds right along the track network carried on people's clothes, bikes and shoes. Many of these weed species have subsequently been spread to surrounding undeveloped National Park Islands by visitors, cyclones and floating on the tide. Island National Parks are arks for our flora and fauna, preserved from the weed incursions that have degraded habitats on the mainland. Developments on Island National Parks must include biosecurity conditions such as requirements for equipment hygiene and use of local native species in landscaping to avoid further weed incursions.

Our Island arks should not be chopped up by more walking and mountain biking trails: they are our last undisturbed examples of many of these habitats and we will regret their degradation in the future.

To be sustainable we must define a tourism carrying capacity for the Whitsunday Plan of Management Area

Pre-Covid-19, the Whitsundays had over 600,000 visitors and 10% growth in visitation (Tourism Queensland 2019). This is a huge number of people concentrated in a very small piece of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. This has led to increased investment in facilities for visitors in order to allow access and manage impacts upon the Island National Parks and the visitor experience. There has been huge investment in establishment and maintenance/rebuilding of walking tracks, visitor amenities, public moorings and Reef Protection Markers.

The islands are reaching their tourist carrying capacity; there are a limited number of attractions and they are all heavily visited.

Moorings are hard to get, and there is aggressive competition for them at popular sites between bareboats, tour operators and private boats which has been exacerbated by the effective loss of some fringing reefs to cyclone Debbie. The moorings are starting to limit anchoring opportunities, forcing vessels to either crowd into the remaining space, risking incidents between vessels or between vessels and nearby reefs. Or they go looking elsewhere, usually at the end of the day in bad light. It is not unusual to see boats racing for a mooring, or 'doing the rounds' asking if anyone is leaving, in the hope of getting a spot. The sheer numbers of boats and people impact upon the natural values of the place that they have come to see. Large numbers of boats, helicopters, planes & jetskis disturb the wildlife and diminish the experience for visitors.

The challenge for the future will be to define and set a carrying capacity for the Whitsunday Plan of Management Area before we kill the golden goose by loving it to death. The bareboat industry saw this back in the 1990s and set its own limits on the number of vessels in the fleet in order to ensure a quality visitor experience. It would appear that they still think this was the right decision. For the sake of the natural environment of the Whitsundays this needs to be done for the whole Plan of Management Area.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF ISLAND RESORTS

Historical impacts still exist and even the modern resorts still have an impact on the surrounding protected areas:

- litter, clothing and equipment, especially fishing gear, lost from visiting boats and beach visitors posing hazards to marine life
- boats travelling close to shore, with consequent increases in impacts upon marine life, including disturbance of feeding patterns and boat strikes
- increased numbers of large power boats, jetskis, helicopters and light aircraft transiting & adding to noise pollution
- at night excessive lighting around resorts and on larger vessels threatens the ability of marine turtles to nest successfully and their loom spoils the starry skies for other visitors
- island golf courses and manicured gardens are a source of pesticides, herbicides and nutrients that harm corals and seagrasses
- environmental weeds invade National Parks after being introduced through resort gardens
- biosecurity risks to island ecosystems through transportation of environmental weeds and introduced pests with imported building materials, landscaping products and on people e.g. Yellow Crazy Ants at Hamilton Island Resort

Enable appropriate development that supports strong social, environmental, economic, and cultural outcomes

‘Appropriate development’ should be defined as development that:

- Is sustainable both environmentally and economically over the long term
- Includes consultation with and promotes the aspirations of Traditional Owners
- Improves the conservation estate by re-building on existing resort footprints and not new ‘greenfields’ sites (Government assistance may be required to clean up old sites, but this should never be allowed to happen again)
- Adds to the conservation estate by committing to maintain and restore/add to natural vegetation areas within the resort footprint (with local-provenance native plants) and not to plant introduced species on the islands
- Commits to strict biosecurity procedures to minimise the risk of introducing new pests and diseases to the islands
- Is not dependant on complex ownership structures which foster disputes, buck-passing and legal stalemates over who is finally responsible when things go wrong.
- Has sufficient funds bonded to ensure that sites are fully restored if abandoned and do not leave this cost to the taxpayers
- Is close enough to the nearest port to have a safe and feasible evacuation plan in the event of a major disaster, without straining local resources and emergency services
- Financially supports the local CQ Rescue service, as they contribute many of their customers
- Is built to withstand and mitigate predicted climate change effects
- Is built to harmonise with and not impose itself upon the natural environment
- Is designed to have minimal impact upon the site to keep the costs of site rehabilitation affordable

‘Appropriate development’ should be defined as development that: *continues*

- Is designed to enable affordable removal should it be abandoned or destroyed in the future
- Value adds to the local environment and community by engaging with the local community in environmental projects such as removal of weed and pest species
- Employs members of the local community and sources supplies locally
- Supports the use of sustainable products, minimises the use of pesticides, herbicides and fertilisers, practices waste reduction and recycling in its operations

**To ensure the environmental and economic sustainability of island resorts;
the Queensland Government policy should be:**

- A visitor carrying capacity should be defined for the Whitsunday Plan of Management Area (WPOM) to guarantee a quality visitor experience and protect the islands from over development and overcrowding
- An environmental education program should be provided by all resorts which educates both staff and guests about the Whitsundays and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park: every resort should employ at least one Master Reef Guide
- no new ‘greenfields’ sites should be developed on National Park Islands
- new developments should be restricted to the existing footprint of existing resorts: no more land swaps, sales or giveaways from National Parks
- as part of approval for new build resorts or refurbishment of old ones, there should be an agreed, fully costed and funded, legally binding plan for the repair/ removal of the structures should they become damaged or abandoned
- climate change impacts must be incorporated into designs: heatwave resilience, water sensitive design, resistance to cyclone damage, future-proofing for storm surge and sea level rise must also be realistically addressed at the approval stage: sufficient bond must be required for rehabilitation of the site should the resort be no longer viable.
- Pro-active plans for managing environmental weeds, litter and hazardous waste should be a requirement of every lease on National Park Islands
- The size of the resort, in terms of numbers of beds and area of buildings, should be capped with reference to the defined carrying capacity of the Whitsunday POM area at full occupancy
- Resort guest capacity in remote locations (more than 15 nm from the nearest port) should be determined by their ability to safely shelter staff and guests or evacuate them to a safe place in the event of a high category cyclone.
- Where Cyclone plans for remote resorts propose to shelter people in place they must be able to be self-sufficient for at least one week in the event of a major cyclone, due to the high likelihood of supply lines being cut off.
- Remote resorts (more than 15 nm from a major port) size must be required to lodge sufficient bond to cover the costs of rehabilitation of the site in the event of a total loss.
- Extension of the footprint of remote resorts with more structures must be dependant on the lodgement of sufficient funds into a bond to cover the cost that they will add to the rehabilitation of the site.