

# STRATEGIC OUTLINE

A state-of-the-art Reef Discovery Centre to educate, inspire and experience our region's unique stories, past, present and future.



An exciting  
PROJECT  
of the



WHITSUNDAY  
CONSERVATION  
COUNCIL

*Caring for the future is in our nature.*

# WHITSUNDAYS HEART OF THE REEF DISCOVERY CENTRE



## VISION

A mainland-based world class activity centre for the entertainment and education of tourists and visitors and students from primary school through to the tertiary sector specific to our exceptional marine environment.



## BACKGROUND

There has been clear support for a Reef Discovery Centre for many years from the Whitsunday community, Whitsunday Regional Council, Tourism Whitsundays, and Tourism Events Queensland, and this has been articulated in several plans for the region:

- \* Tourism Opportunity Plan 2012 – 2016
- \* Queensland Ecotourism Plan 2013 – 2020
- \* Whitsundays Destination Tourism Plan 2019 – 2024

This proposal aligns with the Whitsunday Regional Council Economic Development Strategic objectives: “a blueprint for regional prosperity”

## WHAT?

The Whitsundays Heart of the Reef Discovery Centre (the Centre) would be state-of-the-art facility with digital and real exhibits aimed at excellence in interpretation – drawing on science, research, and storytelling to give visitors an enriching experience about the Great Barrier Reef and our aquatic residents.

The Centre would inspire, educate and showcase our natural wonders with a mainland facility as an excellent wet weather alternative for tourists to our region.

This tourism/research base centre would not replicate existing offerings such as Reef HQ, Cairns Aquarium, nor the Living Reef exhibit at Daydream Island.

Rather, it would seek to entertain and educate: a giant storyboard with aquariums, interpretation rooms and interactive experiences to better understand the largest living organism to be seen from outer space.

The Centre would incorporate our marine environment and include cultural topics such as the region's First Nation history including the seafaring Ngaro Traditional Owners as well as showcasing environmental achievements: i.e Turtle Rescue; Eco Barge and the Whitsunday Climate Change Innovation Hub. It would provide an educational and informative stepping off point before visitors enter the Marine Park.

The Centre would include an overview of our underwater sculpture trail and other forms of art which engage with the reef- from iconic images through to our indigenous cave paintings. It would act as a base for volunteer tourism and citizen science where visitors and locals become involved with marine projects while injecting funds into the economy by donating time and paying to help activities already in place to conserve the reef. Research partners such as: GBRMPA; AIMS; JCU; UQ would have a local base and showcase their leading research projects. Research vessels regularly use Shute Harbour as a departure point for their activities.

This proposed infrastructure investment would catapult the region into a growing ecotourism space, providing an educational experience for primary, secondary and tertiary students as well as tourists – local, national and international.

In short, it would be a facility that does not exist anywhere else in Queensland, the state with more than eight million hectares of marine park, fish habitat areas encompassing world-class national and conservation parks, marine reserves and five World Heritage areas.





## WHY NOW?

Such a centre would respond to a greatly increased national and international demand for eco-tourism activities as well as engaging tourists in conservation activities helping them to become involved in conserving our reef.

The Centre would also provide a stepping-stone into growing a strong volunteer tourism base for the region attracting paid visitors who could take part in educational activities such as coral seeding; removal of predators such as COT and Drupella; and monitoring important data from sites as well as contributing to removal of marine debris.

The Centre would recognise the following themes documented in many other previous tourism plans:

- Offer an iconic experience, target a balanced portfolio of markets.
- Deliver quality, great service and innovation.
- Build strong partnerships with governments (Federal, State, and local) and private industry as well as the university and education sector.
- Create employment and training in the Higher Education Sector.
- Grow investment in the region with timely infrastructure, publicly or privately funded to enable tourism growth and visitor access.
- Preserve our nature and culture
- Provide educational and interpretation features recognised by the World Tourism Organisation in defining ecotourism.
- Minimise negative impacts on the natural and socio-cultural environment and encourage active preservation of such an environment.

# OTHER ECONOMIC BENEFITS FOR THE REGION

## JOB CREATION



- **CONSTRUCTION** (Cairns Aquarium is 3 level 10,000 sq m)

- **OPERATIONAL**

- Around 50-100 staff (Cairns Aquarium has 45 but plans to increase to 130 staff)
- Aquarium/Exhibit Staff
- Cafe/Restaurant food and retail Staff
- Research staff
- Volunteer co-ordinators



- Potential for privatising Food and retail - Aqualuna at the Cairns Aquarium has a 220-seat contemporary Italian restaurant, a 70,000-litre shark exhibit inside the restaurant. Tropical Treasures Gift Store stocks a variety of local goods.
- Front of House
- Management/administration

## TOURISM GROWTH



- Grow domestic and international visitor numbers by boosting the Whitsunday region as a key marine/coastal educational playground
- Encouraging longer stays in the region. Visitation – Cairns Aquarium forecasts 720,000 per annum.
- Drive innovation in ecotourism experiences; one of the key strategic directions in the Queensland Ecotourism Plan

## WHERE?



Shute Harbour has been mentioned on several previous proposals as a possible site.

- It is where many of the research vessels depart from
- It has virtually no tourist attractions
- It has access to the ocean

Stage 2 of the Shute Harbour development is noted as a key focus area in council's new corporate plan

## NEXT STEPS

Lobby for further support from potential partners.

Establish a Working Party from the partnerships to develop and implement an action plan and decide on how the centre might operate. This would include Whitsunday Regional Council, Whitsunday Climate Change Innovation Hub, Whitsunday Conservation Council, Tourism Whitsundays and others.

The working party would also seek funds for a feasibility study to confirm validity for State and Federal funding and engage and identify other stakeholders.

Commission an artist's impression.

Amanda Camm, State MP has given verbal support for this project.



## FUNDING

Potential sources of funding include:

- The Reef Trust
- Great Barrier Reef Foundation
- Federal Government Building Better Regions Fund
- State government Building Acceleration Fund
- University funding
- Private sector funding

## MARINE DISCOVERY CENTRES AROUND AUSTRALIA

### **South Australian Marine Discovery Centre**

This discovery centre is a beachfront 350 m<sup>2</sup> facility which includes four educational areas. The building was purchased by the Catholic School and has been established since 1997, made possible through funding from Coastcare, Fisheries Action Program, LandCare, KESAB and the Marine and Coastal Schools Program.

The Marine Discovery Centre now hosts more than 7000 students from 100 schools each year. It also provides school holiday programs, corporate team building days, professional development, monthly community days, private bookings and online education.

### **Reef HQ Townsville**

Reef HQ Aquarium is the world's largest living coral reef aquarium

\$40.1 million invested by Federal Government to create a 'world-class experience to drive economic growth through new investment and greater tourism spending'.

They recently received \$7.6 million as part of the Government's COVID19 Relief and Recovery Fund for the upgrade and maintenance to the animal life support systems.

Plus \$5.6 million for upgrades to exhibits and to refresh the visitor experience

### **Cairns Aquarium**

An aquarium dedicated exclusively to the habitats and species of tropical North Queensland. With over 16,000 animals and unique opportunities to move up close to some of the world's most fascinating, elusive or deadly creatures. The three-level, 7800 square metre aquarium was developed by entrepreneurs Daniel Leipnik and Andrew Preston at a cost of \$54 million and opened in September 2017.

They secured construction finance for the project including through a \$32 million fixed-term debt facility from specialist lender Gioldan Capital and a joint venture with prominent investment banker Mark Carnegie's private equity firm, M H Carnegie & Co and fixed income dealer FIIG Securities.

### **Sydney Institute of Marine Sciences (SIMS)**

World-leading marine science institute and the principal marine research facility in NSW. The Sydney Institute of Marine Science is a partnership between Macquarie University, the University of NSW, the University of Sydney and the University of Technology, Sydney. The partnership is enhanced by collaborations with several state and federal government departments and the Australian Museum. Educates primary and secondary students on issues such as Living a Life Less Plastic; Exploring our Blue Planet and also has virtual learning.

## OTHER MARINE DISCOVERY CENTRES

Woodbridge Tasmania Central Coast, Terrigal

Adelaide Beaches interactive experience for all ages to learn about marine life Ningaloo Visitor Centre (includes aquarium and function centre) nationally accredited

**IN CONCLUSION:** Whitsunday Conservation Council commends the establishment of a Whitsundays Heart of the Reef Discovery Centre in the Whitsunday region to place us firmly into the edu-tourism sector with an exciting project involving Whitsunday Regional Council and many other stakeholders to make this project, which has been on the backburner for too many years,

**NOT JUST AN IDEA, BUT A REALITY**

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