

1 April 2009

Management of tourist flights in the vicinity of Magnetic Island

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority's (GBRMPA) goal is to provide for the long-term protection, ecologically sustainable use, understanding and enjoyment of the Great Barrier Reef through the care and development of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

Aircraft (fixed wing or helicopter) tours of the Great Barrier Reef are a popular way for visitors to experience the breath-taking nature of the Reef and its size and magnificence. These tours may be conducted reef-wide and vary from scenic flights only to those involving actual landings in the Marine Park.

This Position Statement advises how the GBRMPA will manage permitted aircraft tourist programs operating in the vicinity of Magnetic Island in order to best achieve all elements of its goal.

Magnetic Island

Magnetic Island is a continental island, eight kilometres off shore from the city of Townsville in north Queensland. It has a resident population of approximately 3000 people and is an important regional tourism destination. Magnetic Island and its adjacent waters are within the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. The adjacent waters also form part of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (Commonwealth) and/or the Great Barrier Reef Coast Marine Park (State). There are fringing coral reefs in many of the bays, extensive mangrove communities and seagrass beds. Threatened species such as dugongs, whales and turtles are regularly sighted around the Island.

As well as supporting a small marine tourism industry, the Island waters are very popular for recreational use – both by local residents and visitors from Townsville as well as neighbouring communities. There is also a range of other activities in the wider area, including commercial fishing, research, shipping and defence training.

Aircraft use in the vicinity of Magnetic Island

As at the date of this Position Statement, there are approximately 35 permits allowing aircraft to operate in the vicinity of Magnetic Island, some of which allow scenic flights only while others allow both scenic flights and landings. However, most of these permits are for access to broad areas of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, are not Townsville based operations and have never accessed areas in the vicinity of Magnetic Island. Other than operations that have specifically requested more regular access, the permitted frequency of operations is no more than two times in any seven day period at a location.

The GBRMPA has become aware of a number of issues regarding aircraft that have conducted regular operations in the vicinity of Magnetic Island. There have also been several reviews, both internal as well as external, of GBRMPA decisions that have assisted in the understanding of the various impacts of aircraft in this area. One such review was conducted under the *Administrative Appeals Tribunal Act 1975* (AAT 2007a, b). The Administrative Appeals Tribunal was concerned about the safety of the aircraft's operation and the noise impact of the aircraft's operation on people and made several rulings which imposed/required additional or altered permit conditions on a regular aircraft operational permit in the vicinity of Magnetic Island. In light of the improved understanding of the impacts of aircraft in this area, the following strategies for management of tourist flights in the vicinity of Magnetic Island will be considered.

Management strategies for tourist flights in the vicinity of Magnetic Island (management strategies)

The following management strategies have been prepared to provide a consistent application of the issues identified by the AAT:

1. Aircraft are to operate only between the hours of 9.00 am and 5.00 pm each day;
2. Aircraft activities are to be limited to six days out of every seven day period;

3. Aircraft activities are to be limited to a maximum of eight flights on any one day; and
4. Aircraft are not to operate at a vertical height of less than 1500 feet in the vicinity of Magnetic Island unless, notwithstanding the fact that it is aware of this condition, but for emergency or other extraordinary reasons, air traffic control requires the aircraft to fly within the 1000 metre zone or for the purposes of landing and/or take-off at permitted locations.

While the management strategies are proposed to apply as permit conditions to all future and existing permitted aircraft tourist operations in the vicinity of Magnetic Island, all applications for permission to conduct tourist flights in the vicinity of Magnetic Island will be assessed on a case by case basis and consistent with the requirements of the *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Regulations 1983*, particularly Regulation 74(5).

Future applications

As from 1 April 2009, any applications for new permissions to conduct aircraft operations, or for increased aircraft operations and/or applications that are not consistent with the management strategies, may be publicly advertised with an invitation for interested persons to make comment. Any comments received will be taken into account prior to a decision on the application.

Definitions

'in the vicinity of' means those waters and land between the high water mark on the coastline and a line every point of which is a distance of 1000 metres seaward from that high water mark.

References

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