

Reef Tourism and Wetlands

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I'm an employed representative of the marine tourism industry and would like to thank you for the invitation to voice the requirements of that industry for the future of wetlands: it's all about economic and environmental sustainability. Recently, the majority of operators in north Queensland initiated the [Reef Tourism] 2005 project. It researched the economic, environmental and management issues surrounding our industry and trialled development options in all of those spheres. Our interest in wetlands is that we make our living by giving visitors the opportunity to experience the natural environment. Internationally, many competing reef experiences are coming on the market. The strength of our product is the reputation of the Great Barrier Reef not only as the largest reef system but also as the most pristine. There's no doubt about it, we have the most pristine reef system inch for inch in the world. I'm not a scientist so I can't state in scientific terminology the cause or link between wetlands and reefs but I've lived on boats for many years in what we used to call swamps and I've seen the role played by those wetlands as the nursery for the fish and as a filter between the land and the sea.

A large number of the world's reefs are going down the tube. It has to do with population pressures and lack of understanding of the impacts on reefs. We're lucky in north Queensland, our population is not at all level with other countries and our scientists are reputed to lead the world in understanding the reef environment, so we probably should listen to them. Let's not re-invent wheels as it's a waste of time. Recent surveys that have been undertaken with visitors show that 70% of the tourists stated that their primary reason for visiting the north is to experience the Great Barrier Reef. Our economic development in the north, in Cairns in particular, is inextricably linked with protecting that reef. If we lose it we can kiss goodbye to half the employment for a lot of your kids. We must ensure that the environmental integrity of that reef is maintained or basically you can kiss goodbye to reef tourism, you can kiss goodbye to probably the largest harbour development in the north.

One of the tasks undertaken by the Reef Tourism project (there are about 17 tasks) was to address our environmental concerns and to research ways to help develop integrated development processes between the relevant land based agencies so as to provide for effective management of the impact of onshore development and land based infrastructure. I think it's accepted that all the water that's on the land (all the chemicals) ends up in the sea. Our findings from several consultants, a lot of industry consultation and a lot of consultation with natural resource management is that a combined and sustained intergovernmental and community approach is required. So I'm really pleased to see that representatives from all the different groups that effect this are here today.

The recommendations that came from that task were that the marine tourism industry will need to continue to be able to state its case to influence the agricultural and scientific developers and government departments to ensure commitment and resources are directed to help those people upstream of us who can impact on the marine environment, and to find workable solutions which allow economics and environment to coexist. I was a farmer many years ago. I am not going to change things on my farm unless in the long term it's beneficial. That's something that's been pointed out today. At the end of the day I can pay my tax, I can pay my bills every month. We've got to have a solution that is economically viable for those people who we are trying get to change their practices.

In the invitation to attend this speaker-based conference, it said in no uncertain terms to stick to the guidelines. I've spoken of marine tourism interests and issues in protecting the wetlands.

As to the future commitment and willingness of the marine tourism industry to cooperate with other interests, please take as a given that the steering committee that employs me is made up of the largest operators through to the smallest operators in north Queensland, and the fact that we have three executive officers from the marine tourism industry statewide, two of the heads of regional associations in marine tourism industry are here today. This is crucial to what we do. We believe that a combined approach between those who make their livelihood around the wetlands, those who are tasked with the management of natural resources, the local community are going to produce a sustainable outcome.