

MICHAELMAS CAY TOURIST OPERATORS' CODE OF CONDUCT

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PREFACE

This Code of Conduct includes a list of guidelines designed to assist tour operators accessing Michaelmas Cay in the wise use and conservation of one of the most important seabird rookeries within the World Heritage listed Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

The Code has been prepared through consultation with many people including tour operators themselves, managers from the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA), Queensland Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), consultants and others. It is hoped that the spirit of cooperation engendered during the formation of this Code will continue as the guidelines are put into practice.

It is recognised that the long term economic viability of reef operators depend very much on their activities promoting and safeguarding the long term ecological sustainability of Michaelmas Cay.

The aim of this Code is to achieve this balance.

INTRODUCTION

Michaelmas Cay is a national park comprising a small coral cay located on Michaelmas Reef, 40 km northeast of Cairns and is the home to thousands of ground nesting seabirds.

Four species of seabirds regularly nest on Michaelmas Cay, and over 16 species visit the cay throughout the year. As many as 30,000 birds can be present at any one time. It is a unique nesting site, being the southern limit of Sooty Tern breeding, and the northernmost breeding limit for the Crested Tern. Nowhere else are these particular seabirds found breeding together in such vast numbers in an area readily accessible to visitors. Michaelmas Cay is ranked as not only the most important seabird rookery within the local Cairns region, but also one of the seven most important nesting colonies in the entire GBR.

The reef surrounding the Cay is spectacular, being especially renowned for its abundance of large, spectacular Giant Clams. The corals themselves are healthy and colourful, showing very little damage caused by either natural forces (eg recent cyclones) or man-made forces (eg anchor or diver damage). COT damage has been minimised through the sustained efforts of the marine tourism industry.

The Reef Tourism Industry acknowledges the need to minimise human interference while conducting environmentally sensitive tourism at Michaelmas Cay and Reef.

This Code of Conduct ensures that operators operate in accordance with Best Environmental Practices to present the unique values of Michaelmas Cay to visitors in the least intrusive manner. The Code complements Government regulations controlling access to the Cay. Whilst developed by Industry, the Code is endorsed by the Queensland Environmental Protection Agency and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority.

INDUSTRY CODE OF CONDUCT

Things we voluntarily do

The Michaelmas Cay Tourist Operators' Code of Conduct comprises a list of guidelines and voluntary practices which complement Government regulations.

NUMBER OF VISITORS: Limit of 50 people on the cay at any given time (between all operators) to minimise disturbance to birds.

STAGGERED VISITATION: Operators should stagger their visitation and activities to stay within the limit of 50 visitors. This will also enhance visitors' experience.

PASSENGER BRIEFING: All passengers must be given a briefing prior to arrival which clearly outlines the restrictions on behaviour and movement while on the cay and in the water. This interpretive and safety briefing for visitors is essential to provide an understanding and appreciation of the values and sensitivity of Michaelmas Cay and the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.

TRAINED GUIDES: Interpretive Guides, trained in reef and island ecology, should be available to visitors on the cay to assist in interpreting all aspects of the cay and surrounding reef – from bird behaviour to cay and reef formation.

'LOW IMPACT' VESSELS: Vessels used to ferry visitors to and from the cay should be 'low impact' - minimising noise, wake, sediment disturbance.

HORNS, etc.: There is to be no sounding of boat horns, loud whistles, etc. which cause disturbance of the birds

RESEARCH & MONITORING: Operators and their staff should seek to encourage and participate in reef monitoring programs, including self-monitoring programs (i.e. COT Survey, Eye on the Reef Logbook).

BEST ENVIRONMENTAL PRACTICES: Michaelmas Cay Operators will adopt Best Environmental Practices for land and water activities. These Practices have been developed by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, the Queensland Environmental Protection Agency and the Marine Tourism Industry.

SELF-MANAGEMENT: Michaelmas Cay operators will work together to ensure that everyone operates in accordance with the Code of Conduct. Breaches of the regulations governing access to the Cay will be reported to the Queensland Environmental Protection Agency.

ANNUAL REVIEW: Michaelmas Cay operators and Management Agencies will collectively review the success of the Code of Conduct if new issues arise or it is requested by any of the signatories. Adjustment will be made if necessary to ensure that the natural values of the Cay are conserved.

VESSEL MOORINGS: Operators are restricted to using their own approved moorings only, unless written permission is obtained from another operator allowing shared access.

BEST ENVIRONMENTAL PRACTICES (BEP's)

SEABIRD WATCHING

- Avoid walking near or across roosting or nesting seabird colonies.
- Keep group size to less than 25 people.
- Don't approach seabirds to the point where they move from their nests or young, become stressed or take flight.
- If seabirds exhibit stressful behaviour overhead, (e.g. raucous calling or swooping) leave the area immediately and take care where you walk so as to avoid stepping on well camouflaged eggs and chicks.
- To observe birds, be quiet, avoid rapid or sudden movements, crouch down when approaching.
- At no time attempt to touch birds, their chicks or eggs
- Take particular care during late afternoon, early evening, hottest time of the day and in wet/cold weather when eggs or young chicks are in their nests.
- Take the time to learn about the habits and needs of seabirds

SNORKELLING

- Where possible practice snorkelling techniques away from live coral.
- Be aware of where your fins are at all times and control fin kicks, especially in shallow water.
- Avoid touching anything with fins, and be aware of stirring up sediment.
- Do not rest or stand on coral. If you must stand up make sure its on sand.
- Where available, use rest stations. These should be located adjacent to Coral or sensitive areas.
- Observe animals rather than touch them. Handling some animals can be dangerous.
- Do not chase or attempt to ride or grab free-swimming animals. Avoid blocking their path.
- Do not poke or prod any plants or animals.
- If you pick up anything underwater, living or dead, always return it to exactly the same position.
- Take the time to learn about the underwater environment.

ANCHORING

- Carry the right gear - enough chain or chain and line to anchor in the appropriate depth.
- Always check the area before anchoring.
- Anchor in sand or mud away from live coral and be sure your chain is clear of coral
- Motor towards the anchor when hauling the anchor in.
- Where installed, use appropriate mooring.

SCUBA DIVING

- Ensure the proper weighting before entering the water and practice buoyancy control on entry away from coral.
- Have beginners remain over sand until they have mastered buoyancy control
- Do not rest or stand on coral. If you must stand up make sure its on sand.
- Avoid touching anything with fins, and be aware of stirring up sediment.
- Secure dragging equipment such as gauges that can catch on coral.
- Observe animals rather than touch them. Handling some animals can be dangerous.
- Do not chase or attempt to ride or grab free-swimming animals. Avoid blocking their path.
- Do not poke or prod any plants or animals.
- If you pick up anything underwater, living or dead, always return it to exactly the same position.
- Do not lean on coral for support when taking underwater photographs and avoid hovering over fragile coral stands.
- Take the time to learn about the underwater environment.

WASTE DISPOSAL

- If a vessel contains a holding tank, use pump ashore facilities for sewage disposal wherever possible.
- Where pump ashore facilities are not available, discharge sewage in open water well away from reefs, no less than 1 nautical mile from the reef (e.g. in a shipping channel).
- If a vessel does not contain a holding tank, visitors should use toilets before reaching and after leaving the reef, not at the reef.
- Use biodegradable toilet paper and phosphate-free cleaning products and minimise their entry into the marine environment wherever possible.
- Encourage visitors not to urinate in the water at the reef.
- Petroleum products in the bilge should be broken down with biodegradable detergents and pumped into vessel storage containers on board and disposed of at a recycling depot on shore.

FISH FEEDING

- Fish feeding requires special permission from the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and the Queensland Environmental Protection Agency and is a condition of individual operators permit.
- If you are feeding as part of a commercial tourism operation, fish feeding should be well supervised and conducted only by staff.
- Fish should not be fed directly by hand, but by broadcasting, food into the water.
- Snorkellers and divers should not be in the vicinity at the time of fish feeding.
- Feed fish only raw marine products (prawns or pilchards are preferred) or approved fish pellets.
- Feed fish no more than 1 kilogram of food per day per site on the reef

LEGISLATION OR VOLUNTARY CODE OF CONDUCT RESTRICTIONS

The applicable legislation applying to Michaelmas Cay and Reef is:

- *Nature Conservation Act 1992, Nature Conservation Regulation 1994*
- *Queensland Marine Parks Act 1982, Queensland Marine Parks Regulations 1990*
- *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975, Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Regulations 1983*
- *Cairns Area Plan of Management (as in force October 1999)*

RESTRICTED ACCESS AREA (Map 1)

There is no access allowed on Michaelmas Cay except within the accessible area bounded by the rope.

- The *vegetated area* of the cay is governed by the *Nature Conservation Act 1992*.
- The *beach*, between high water mark and low water mark, is governed by the *Queensland Marine Parks Act 1982*.

ACCESSIBLE AREA (Map 1)

Access to the cay is allowed only within the accessible area of the beach bounded by the rope. Boat access is only via the channel on the northern side. (via voluntary code)

- The Accessible Area is approximately 50m wide with the upper fence line placed at the 3m tide mark.
- This area will be re-surveyed at regular intervals by Queensland Parks & Wildlife Service and adjusted with regards to the changing shape of the cay.

ACCESS LIMITATIONS

Times: *Between 9.30 am and 3.00 pm daily*

This limits the time during which the birds are subjected to human disturbance (QMP Regs).

High Tides: *When High Tides reach the upper fence line, there is no cay access.*

The accessible area is set to minimise visitor disturbance of the nesting birds. No activities are allowed outside the accessible area, even on high tides.

Skippers and Marine Operation Managers should check tide tables in advance to determine these days, and visitors should be properly advised of the situation prior to arrival.

Bad Weather: *There is no alternative access point during rough seas.*

During northerly winds, beach access within the accessible area may be impossible due to the rough seas. If tender vessels can't land safely in the usual place, there is no other way to access the cay. (via voluntary code)

NOTE: *Under these restrictions it is estimated that Michaelmas Cay Operators may lose about 20 days of access a year. Most of these days are expected to fall between January and February. Boat-based activities must be developed to substitute for beach activities during these days.*

ACTIVITIES

Only "low key" activities, which do not disturb the birds, are allowed on or near the beach.

- Inappropriate activities include: ball games, kite flying, running, jumping, etc (QMP Regs). Motorised water sports (CAPOM), Fires are prohibited on the cay (NCA)

BEACH STRUCTURES

Large objects and structures (e.g. beach umbrellas) are not allowed on the beach (via voluntary code & QMP Regs).

VESSEL SPEEDS

Vessels must not exceed 6 knots within 1 nautical mile of the cay (CAPOM), or 4 knots in the boating access channel (Code).

FISHING

Fishing is prohibited in the green zone surrounding the cay (Zoning Plan).