Queensland Eco and Sustainable Tourism

Improving access, promoting best practice, providing opportunities

Great state. Great opportunity.
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Queenslanders are blessed with more than 12.5 million hectares of national parks and other protected areas. These areas—including five World Heritage listed areas, more than any other state or territory—conserve a diverse array of species and ecosystems, and our rich Indigenous cultural heritage.

With 51 million visits each year by Australians alone, Queensland's national parks and protected areas have a big role to play in ecotourism—one that will help us regain the mantle of number one ecotourism destination in Australia.

Our greatest competitive advantage is our unique natural environment and ability to enrich visitors’ experiences. Recognition of this advantage is the first step in making Queensland a world leader in ecotourism by 2020.

Over recent years Queensland’s tourism industry has been operating in a difficult environment. The Queensland Government has been working together with industry on ways to boost business certainty, support sustainable business outcomes through flexible arrangements, recognise and reward best practice tourism operators, and ensure long-term benefits by managing national parks effectively. The Queensland Eco and Sustainable Tourism (QuEST) policy responds to these concerns and provides a framework that will improve access, provide new opportunities and promote best practice.

Under the QuEST policy, we will streamline current approval processes and remove red tape and restrictions, making it easier for both business and government.

The policy will provide greater business certainty through long-term commercial agreements, with an extended 15-year term. Together with longer-term agreements, introducing quarterly financial returns and online access will save tourism tourism operators time and money.

The long-term, transferable commercial agreements and flexible sharing arrangements between authorised tourism operators available through QuEST support opportunities for growth and innovation.

In addition, the QuEST policy will not only require mandatory, minimum standard eco-certification for tourism operators, but it will also provide incentives for those tourism operators who exceed minimum standards—raising the bar for Queensland ecotourism.

All of these combined will help Queensland tourism compete in a global market. It is value for money and world-class experiences that will set us apart from our competitors, and QuEST actively encourages tourism operators to innovate and develop ideas to showcase our national parks.

I believe that QuEST will help to realise the aspirations the tourism industry has held for many years. These promised changes will enable Queensland’s ecotourism industry to become a major contributor to the state’s economy and act as a catalyst for strengthening a world-class ecotourism industry in Queensland.

Steve Dickson MP
Minister for National Parks, Recreation, Sport and Racing
Queensland’s protected areas are a major tourism drawcard. The iconic nature of our national parks and marine parks, including five World Heritage areas—more than any other state—provides a strong competitive advantage in both domestic and international markets.

Each year there are in excess of 51 million visits by Australians to Queensland’s national parks, marine parks and forest.1 These parks and forests are also a key driver for international visitation.2 The number of visitors to many national parks rivals that of other well-known tourist attractions and highlights the need for these areas to be effectively managed so that the unique natural values and quality of the visitor experience is maximised.

As part of the DestinationQ blueprint, a growth target has been set for the tourism industry to double overnight visitor expenditure to $30 billion by 2020. Tourism has many synergies with other sectors of the economy, particularly in regional Queensland. It supports the preservation and presentation of environmental values, and contributes to the vibrancy and liveability of regional areas.

The Queensland Government is developing a 20-year plan for the state’s tourism industry, positioning it to meet future challenges and opportunities. Ecotourism is a key part of this and will play an important role in meeting the 2020 growth target.

At the DestinationQ event in 2012, the industry identified an urgent need to develop new ecotourism products that showcase Queensland’s natural assets and to remove red tape for tourism operators. As part of the DestinationQ Partnership Agreement, the Department of National Parks, Recreation, Sport and Racing (NPRSR) is committed to increasing ecotourism opportunities in our national parks. A number of key initiatives have already been achieved, including:

- the release of the draft Queensland Ecotourism Plan 2013–2020 for consultation in May 2013
- the review of the Nature Conservation Act 1992 providing for ecotourism facilities leases to ensure secure tenure for private investment in ecotourism facilities on national park and other protected areas
- permit streamlining and the reduction of permit types by 50%
- release of an expression of interest for sustainable ecotourism investment initiatives on State lands, including national parks and State lands adjacent to national parks, in June 2013. Industry now has a channel to progress new and innovative ecotourism facility proposals for consideration.

In addition to the need for new and innovative ecotourism products, the tourism industry also indicated concerns around the framework for managing tours in national parks. As an action in the DestinationQ Partnership Agreement, NPRSR was tasked with fine-tuning policy to address capacity, latency, and process and administration, including incentivising ecotourism certification.

In response, NPRSR has consulted with permitted tourism operators in key areas. There is broad support for a range of key principles from the existing policy that provide for business certainty, reduced administration, best practice tourism operations and management of sites so that activities are ecologically, economically and socially sustainable. The Queensland Eco and Sustainable Tourism (QuEST) initiative continues essential existing policy and also incorporates new policy to increase ecotourism opportunities in national parks, streamline management and incentivise best practice operations.

1 Newspoll, Department of National Parks, Recreation, Sport and Racing 2012
2 Tourism Research Australia 2011
What is the Queensland Eco and Sustainable Tourism (QuEST) policy?

QuEST replaces the previous Tourism in Protected Areas policy and continues existing essential policy elements. In addition it incorporates new policy to improve access and provide new opportunities in national parks for ecotourism operators; reduce administration and streamline processes; support authorised tourism operators; and promote best practice tourism experiences.

QuEST provides:
- business certainty
- best practice standards
- support for authorised tourism operators
- opportunities for growth
- streamlined administration.

How does QuEST differ from the previous permit system?

QuEST provides an efficient, industry-focused system that promotes best practice. The essential differences between QuEST and the previous permit system include:
- one agreement for multiple activities across multiple areas which can be obtained through one application process
- flexibility for the agreement, in part or whole, to be transferred if a business is sold
- increased term of authority from three to 15 years
- one renewal at the 10-year mark, rather than a renewal every three years, reducing the renewal requirements four fold
- quarterly returns rather than monthly
- minimum standards of eco-certification and incentives to promote higher standards.

How will QuEST be implemented?

QuEST provides a contemporary tourism management policy for Queensland’s national parks. Initially, QuEST will be implemented as the highest priority for tourism operators conducting guided tours in the state’s most popular national parks and protected areas including:
- Fraser Island Recreation Area
- Moreton Island Recreation Area
- Whitsunday Islands Area
- Daintree National Park
- Cooloola Recreation Area.

QuEST may also be implemented for tourism operations in other areas as appropriate.

The Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS), a division of NPRSR, will manage the implementation of QuEST. QPWS will communicate directly with all permitted tourism operators in these locations to advise of scheduled dates for implementation. Figure 1 (p.7) provides an overview of this process. Detailed information for existing permitted operators is available in the Advice to tourism operators authorised by a commercial activity permit in QuEST location fact sheet available at www.nprsr.qld.gov.au.
What does this mean for tourism operators currently authorised under a commercial activity permit in areas identified for QuEST?

All tour operators conducting tours in locations identified for QuEST implementation will be required to be authorised under a commercial activity agreement.

Tourism operators who hold a commercial activity permit can choose to apply for a new agreement when their location transitions to QuEST arrangements or when their current permit expires. Applications made prior to the expiry of a current permit will not incur an application fee.

If an existing operator chooses not to take up an agreement, they may continue operations only until expiry of their current permit.

What does QuEST mean for currently authorised tourism operators under a commercial activity agreement?

The introduction of QuEST will affect existing commercial activity agreement holders who conduct guided tours. The following will apply:

- all agreement holders conducting guided tours must have commenced application for eco-certification within 12 months of the release of QuEST
- all agreement holders conducting guided tours must have finalised eco-certification within 18 months of the release of QuEST
- capacity review will be applied five years after the release of QuEST or on renewal of the agreement, whichever is earlier
- all agreement holders are required to comply with QuEST subcontracting requirements.

What fees will tourism operators pay under QuEST?

Fees under agreements will be based on passengers actually carried and paid in arrears. Fees will be set at a level equivalent with fees specified under regulation relevant for the location. With a view to achieve a consistent fee structure across tourism activities, a review of fees will be undertaken.

Did you know...

There are over 600 authorised tourism operators undertaking guided tours within Queensland’s national parks, marine parks and forests.
Who will require an agreement?

Any business entity, organisation or individual undertaking an identified commercial activity—for example, a guided tour—in the specified locations must hold an agreement.

A commercial activity is defined as an activity conducted for gain. For more information on commercial activities, visit the department’s website at www.nprs.qld.gov.au.

Can agreements be transferred?

Yes. The holder of an agreement may apply to transfer either the whole capacity, or part of the capacity, authorised in an agreement to another business operator. For example, in circumstances where there is a change in business ownership, the buyer must meet all legislative and policy requirements to operate on protected estate.

Why are best practice standards important?

Positioning Queensland as a world leader in ecotourism requires excellence in product delivery, operations and services. Industry has indicated over many years that best practice standards are essential in achieving this ambition. At DestinationQ in 2012, industry reconfirmed the importance of this for the future of ecotourism in particular.

In recognition of their unique natural values, the Queensland Ecotourism Plan 2013–2020 proposes that compulsory minimum ecotourism standards apply for tourism operators in national parks and protected areas. Feedback on the plan has supported this proposal.

Best practice ecotourism standards support delivery of world class experiences and encourage the protection of the natural and cultural environment. Industry certification programs provide effective standards. Many tour operators working within national parks and other protected areas are already eco-certified and demonstrate a commitment to best-practice business operations and minimal impact on the natural environment.

The requirement for all tourism operators authorised under long-term agreements to be eco-certified demonstrates the importance of these ambitions. It sends a strong message to the market that tourism operators in national parks are best practice, providing a competitive positioning for Queensland as a leading ecotourism destination.

Did you know...

Operators can now conduct business online with QPWS at www.business.qld.gov.au.
Benefits of QuEST

Business certainty
Creating successful and best-practice tourism businesses requires the ability to plan ahead, innovate and diversify products to respond to changing market demands and invest in high quality service delivery.

An authority to access national parks that creates a long-term planning horizon and a certain investment environment is important in assisting tourism operators to deliver high quality services and operations.

QuEST contributes to this aim by providing access to commercial activity agreements that:

- increase the term of access from three years up to 15 years
- enable transfer of capacity issued under the authority either in part or whole
- enable transfer of an agreement in the event of the sale of a business.

Best practice standards
The quality and diversity of Queensland’s natural environment is increasingly recognised as the foundation of the state’s competitive tourism advantage.

Certification programs, and specifically eco-certification programs, identify standards that contribute to the quality and sustainability of these experiences. When an operator is eco-certified visitors are assured of their commitment to sustainable environmental practices, best business practice and high quality nature-based experiences. There is widespread industry support for minimum compulsory standards.

QuEST will continue existing policy whereby all tourism operators authorised under commercial activity agreements will be required to apply for NPRSR-endorsed eco-certification within 12 months of entering into agreements, and eco-certification must be attained within 18 months of entering the agreement. Tourism operators will be required to maintain this for the life of the agreement.

Queensland has a long history of eco-certified tourism operators and many have achieved standards well in excess of base certification levels. The tourism industry has indicated strong support for incentives to be provided to tourism operators who invest in practices that exceed minimum standards. This includes tourism operators investing in training and employing guides in best practice interpretation.

As such, QuEST will provide incentives to tourism operators who attain eco-certification standards in excess of the minimum specified by NPRSR. Incentives will include priority access to visitor sites and profile in marketing efforts.

Eco-certification is a key strategy in the Queensland Ecotourism Plan 2013–2020 and it is anticipated that this policy may be enhanced through feedback to the plan.

More information on the eco-certification schemes recognised by NPRSR is available at www.nprsr.qld.gov.au.

Did you know...
Nearly half a million people camped in Queensland’s parks in 2012.
Support for authorised tourism operators

QuEST provides a fairer and more efficient means of managing authorised tourism operations on national parks. Many tourism operators invest substantially in their business to provide a high quality experience for visitors to Queensland. This has flow-on economic, social and environmental benefits for regional areas and the wider Queensland community. Tourism is recognised as one of the key economic contributors to the state’s economy and research indicates that the spend associated with visitors to national parks in Queensland is significant.\(^1\)

It is important to provide a management framework that is efficient, transparent and supports growth and innovation in high quality authorised tourism operations in national parks and other protected areas.

It is widely recognised that Queensland cannot compete on price in the current global tourism market. Queensland must differentiate its tourism experiences on value for money and by providing high quality experiences for visitors.

Tourism operators conducting unauthorised tourism activities in national parks can erode the value and reputation of authorised operations.

Effective compliance of tourism on national park is an essential strategy to support authorised tourism operators. NPRSR has been working with industry over a number of years to strategically target issues of concern in relation to unauthorised tourism operations on park. This has resulted in a number of successful enforcement actions.

QuEST will continue to work with industry in providing a compliance program that targets issues of concern to industry.

NPRSR recognises that tourism operators are regularly on park at sites of most concern from a tourism perspective—and act as ‘eyes and ears’ when it comes to compliance. The information that these tourism operators, and the industry as a whole, provide to NPRSR about issues of concern on park will continue to be an essential element of QuEST.

These combined efforts represent ‘best use’ of the available NPRSR compliance resources to achieve maximum results that support authorised tourism operators.

Often peaks in tourism demand are experienced due to seasonality, events or tourism campaigns that promote visitation. Tourism operators need to be able to respond quickly and with certainty to meet these requirements. This can be catered for by ‘sharing’ of capacity between existing authorised tourism operators. This practice already occurs in a number of locations and will continue to be supported under QuEST.

A small number of circumstances have developed over time resulting in authorised tourism operators subcontracting capacity to unauthorised tourism operators. This practice presents challenges for industry because it potentially creates a situation where access to national parks is determined independently of government. It also presents challenges for NPRSR because it results in a lack of transparency in management and compliance arrangements.

The issue of subcontracting of capacity to unauthorised tourism operators has been a contentious issue for industry for some time. QuEST provides a clear and consistent policy with respect to subcontracting as well as a flexible approach to support authorised tourism operators.

\(^1\) Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Centre 2008

Did you know...

Moreton Bay Marine Park is the most popular park in Queensland, attracting 12.4 million domestic visits.
QuEST does not provide for subcontracting by authorised tourism operators to unauthorised tourism operators. NPRSR recognises that this may require an adjustment of business arrangements for a number of tourism operators. An 18-month transition period will be provided, within which all subcontracting to unauthorised tourism operators will be required to cease. Figure 1 provides an overview of this process.

Opportunities for growth

A key benefit of QuEST is to provide opportunities for growth. In some national parks the tourism opportunity has been constrained by latent or unused capacity that often exceeds what the location can sustain. QuEST will develop the long-term vision for Queensland’s unique protected areas informed by advice from industry. Importantly it provides a model for managing latent capacity to make available the full tourism opportunity.

A key tool in the implementation of QuEST is to identify a level of activity in locations that is ecologically, economically and socially sustainable. This will provide a foundation for tourism in national parks to develop and diversify in a way that complements the natural environment. Unique natural values, including landscape, wildlife, and cultural and heritage values are fundamental to tourism attraction, and carefully managing these is paramount in developing the vision for the area.

To achieve this QuEST considers how the site is currently being used and the effects of this activity; the natural restrictions of the area; existing park infrastructure; and complementary and competing opportunities available in the wider region. QuEST will take into account tourism trends, anticipated future growth, and desirable new opportunities that will strengthen the product offering.

National parks are popular recreational venues for many Queensland communities. This activity is an important consideration in identifying desired ecological, economic and social outcomes.

The move to QuEST will require a review of existing permit allocations and some allocations may need to be reduced to achieve desirable ecological, economic and social outcomes. New allocations within sustainable levels will be issued in commercial activity agreements.

A key issue that QuEST will address is latent or unused capacity. Latent capacity exists where permits are not being used to their full potential. At some locations issued capacity exceeds what the location can sustain. QuEST will focus on the availability and effective use of the full commercial opportunity at a site.

With this in mind, the historical use of existing tourism operators will be used in deciding future allocations. New site allocations will be determined by the operator’s highest annual use for a year—within the year to be nominated by the operator. The new allocation will include a margin for growth. All allocations will be within sustainable levels. All existing tourism operators have been legally required to submit returns for operations and this data will be the basis for new allocations. The data will be collated by NPRSR and then verified with the operator. Refer to www.nprsr.qld.gov.au for detailed information.

Figure 1.
Tourism demand naturally occurs in highs and lows. Basing new allocations on the highest annual use, including a margin for growth, for a nominated year takes this into account. The aim of this process is to account for factors such as peak demands and seasonal variations, address latent capacity and allow scope for business growth within sustainable limits.

Once existing operator’s transition to commercial activity agreements, site capacities will be reviewed and, subject to prevailing market conditions, there may be commercial capacity available for offer to the market. An open expression of interest process will be used to offer available capacity to the market no earlier than 12 months post the transition of all existing tourism operators to agreements. With a view to fostering high quality ecotourism products that strengthen the existing product offering for the destination, applicants will be required to demonstrate that the proposed tourism product complements existing product, has commercial viability, and the applicant has demonstrated experience, skill and financial backing to support the proposal.

Managing allocations and use over the longer term is important in ensuring that visitation remains at sustainable levels and that the full commercial capacity at a site is available for use. Every five years NPRSR will review operator use, and allocations will be re-issued based on the percentage of highest annual use in the previous five years, including potential for growth. If capacity is available within sustainable limits it may be offered to the market through an open expression of interest process to create opportunities for growth and diversification.

Streamlined administration

QuEST continues existing policy that provides a more efficient and streamlined system for tourism operators and NPRSR. Reduced cost and administrative benefits include:

- reducing renewal requirements four fold. Currently permits are renewed every three years, whereas under agreements one renewal will be available at the 10-year mark in a 15-year term
- quarterly reporting on returns and daily passenger fees, instead of monthly reporting
- online access forms and payment facilities.

NPRS’R is committed to continuous improvement in the processes and regulation associated with administering tourism permissions for national parks and welcomes industry feedback.

For more information on the Queensland Eco and Sustainable Tourism policy and other initiatives to benefit tourism go to www.nprsr.qld.gov.au.