

Report on a page

Ecotourism is *ecologically sustainable* tourism, with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas, that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation, and conservation. Blessed with world-class natural and cultural assets, Queensland has competitive advantage over many other locations. The Queensland Government's vision is to capitalise on this natural advantage and make Queensland a world leader in ecotourism, while conserving its natural and cultural assets and partnering with Traditional Owners of the land. We examined the effectiveness of the state's tourism and environmental entities in developing sustainable ecotourism in Queensland.

Direction for growing ecotourism

In November 2022, the Department of Tourism, Innovation and Sport released a broader tourism strategy, *Towards Tourism 2032 – Transforming Queensland's visitor economy future*, which recognises the opportunity for the state to lead the world in sustainable tourism and ecotourism experiences. It has specific actions for developing the ecotourism sector. But the Queensland Government has no statewide policy on ecotourism that clearly defines how the state's tourism and environmental entities will work towards its vision, inhibiting ecotourism planning and coordination. Recognising the often competing roles and priorities of responsible entities, there is a need to establish a definition of ecotourism and what it means to the state – both within and outside Queensland's protected areas. The entities have also not developed a clear roadmap to direct how they will act to achieve the state's ecotourism vision.

Planning and coordinating ecotourism

Clarity of policy, definition, and action is necessary for the entities and the tourism industry to effectively plan and coordinate managing the difficult balance between conservation and ecotourism. The tourism industry needs clarity and certainty to enable it to make informed commercial decisions and develop viable initiatives, which will not only benefit the industry but also contribute to growing the state's economy.

A statewide policy on ecotourism will allow entities to align ecotourism-related strategies and plans with government's ecotourism priorities, and identify differences in priorities and tolerances for developments in and outside protected areas. Strategies and plans should include investment priorities for government funding, and clear goals and measurable success indicators to monitor and report progress.

Identifying ecotourism opportunities

Until recently, identifying ecotourism opportunities was reactive and unstructured. No ecotourism investment strategy meant state investment has been based on limited understanding of development priorities. A Tourism Infrastructure Development Framework is being prepared, under which the state will identify and assess tourism infrastructure projects and initiatives. In conjunction with a statewide policy, the framework should provide more rigour and direction.

Managing ecotourism in protected areas

The Department of Environment and Science has a robust process for assessing and approving proposals in protected areas ('on park' developments). Its processes reflect state and Commonwealth environmental and planning legislative requirements. Consultation with Traditional Owners is an integral part of any ecotourism facilities proposal in protected areas. Industry feedback is that the process is lengthy and complex, and often costly. Greater government guidance and support would assist industry in making informed decisions. It would assist proponents in navigating the various legislative and approval processes and enhance their ability to partner with Traditional Owners.

