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‘Planning for Sustainable Development Solutions’

PLANNING FOR TOURISM IN DOUGLAS SHIRE

‘Planning for Sustainable Tourism’

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INTRODUCTION

“My parents used to have a house at Mermaid Beach. It was fantastic going there when we were kids. Of course, we never go to the Gold Coast now, all the glitz and high-rise.”

“We always went fishing around the back of Hope Island. No one ever used to go there; I had a couple of places where a flat head was guaranteed. That’s where Sanctuary Cove is now”.

“We went to Bali before it got commercial”.

Well, that’s progress! (so the saying goes).

It seems that as the population of a region grows, and as tourist numbers increase, there are changes in the physical and experiential qualities of the places we most like to visit, that tend to alter that very character that made it attractive in the first place. There is a shift towards more developed, formal, sophisticated forms of recreation and accommodation, and the vestiges of naturalness and informality disappear.

This paper poses the question whether, especially in places that are highly valued for their natural qualities, it is inevitable that the low-key recreational experience must disappear, as visitor pressure increases. The paper examines the issues of this kind faced Douglas shire, in North Queensland, in planning to deal with massive projected increases in visitor numbers, in a natural environment whose experiential qualities are sensitive to change.

2.0 BACKGROUND TO DOUGLAS SHIRE PLANNING FOR TOURISM

- 2.1 Douglas Shire, located to the north of the Cairns urban area, forms part of the Cairns destination region. The Cairns area contains the largest concentration of tourism services and facilities and is the main transport hub serving the region. The Cairns region offers a range of tourism resources, which is important to the growth and development of both domestic and international tourism in Queensland and Australia. Douglas Shire possesses the significant tourism attributes, namely the World Heritage listed rainforests and proximity to the Barrier Reef, which are largely responsible for the attraction of domestic and international visitors to the Cairns region.
- 2.2 The economic base of Douglas Shire, up until 1980, was the sugar industry. Since then, a number of factors have combined, to lead to the development of a substantial and rapidly-growing tourism industry. Most important of these have been:-
- (i) increasing awareness of the unique values of the wet tropical forests (reflected in their designation as a World Heritage Area);
 - (ii) the opportunity to visit the Great Barrier Reef from Port Douglas;
 - (iii) the development of Cairns International Airport; and
 - (iv) development of accommodation at Port Douglas, and also in the Cairns urban region, one hour's drive away.
- 2.3 The attractions of the Shire are not only the wet tropical natural environment (especially the area north of the Daintree River) but also the marvellous scenery, including the coastal drive from Cairns to Port Douglas, the canefields and hillsides travelling north from Port Douglas

to the Daintree River, and the beauty of Port Douglas itself. The wilderness experiences available north of the Daintree River are a particularly important feature.

The values of these attributes are threatened by increasing levels of visitation and development pressure.

2.4 The Douglas Shire Council in 1991 embarked upon a new phase of strategic planning and detailed planning, designed to balance the sometimes competing needs of nature conservation, conservation of character, protection of the sugar industry, catering for tourism, and urban development. While large areas of the Shire are Crown land included in the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area, the coastal plain, where development pressure is focused, is mostly freehold.

3.0 METHODOLOGY OF PLANNING FOR TOURISM

3.1 The output of the major planning exercise that the Douglas Shire Council is engaged in at present, is a series of new statutory planning documents, prepared under the Local Government (Planning and Environment) Act, 1990. The documents that will be produced, to form the new planning scheme are:

- a strategic plan;
- development control plans for (1) Port Douglas
 - (2) Mossman
 - (3) Daintree-Bloomfield
 - (4) Wonga, Newell and Cooya;

- a zoning scheme; and
- planning provisions and regulatory maps.

A background volume of planning studies, and planning policies will support the planning scheme.

Other planning activity being undertaken concurrently, or to follow, will (hopefully) complement the efforts of the statutory planning process; this includes:-

- (a) planning for the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area, conducted primarily by the Wet Tropics Management Agency;
- (b) preparation of vegetation protection measures and signs control policy/by-law provisions;
- (c) application of the Recreation Area Management Act to the area north of the Daintree River.

3.2 The format for a planning scheme allowed by the Local Government (Planning and Environment) Act is sufficiently flexible to permit the various component documents to be tailored to meet the needs of a particular situation. In this case, planning for the future tourism industry in Douglas Shire will employ a combination of:-

- expressed strategy and policy found primarily in the strategic plan, development control plans and planning studies volume; and
- purpose-built development control mechanisms and prescriptions located in the zoning scheme, planning provisions and regulatory maps.

3.3 There is a high awareness in Douglas Shire of the need to protect the Shire's natural and scenic resources, as the basis of the tourism industry. The brief to the Shire's planning consultants emphasises these priorities. The approach taken by the consultants has been to base the planning studies and plan-making process on an analysis of the resources and needs of the tourism industry, and a concept of a sustainable future tourism industry, along with studies and strategies of a more conventional kind (economics and land use of the sugar industry, urban development needs, nature conservation values, etc.).

3.4 Relevant features of the plan-making process included:

- (i) initial briefings with Council;
- (ii) analysis of national, state, regional and local tourism data (Bureau of Tourism Research, Australian Tourism Commission targets, Queensland Tourist and Travel Corporation, Cairns Port Authority, PATA, Brannock Humphreys resource and accommodation surveys and demand projections);
- (iii) one series of workshops with local community groups;
- (iv) one series of public meetings;
- (v) interviews with tourism industry representatives (industry organisation representatives, local operators, local developers);
- (vi) half-day focus group involving representatives of the Shire, QTTC, Cairns Port Authority, Wet Tropics Management Agency, DEH, local and regional tourism organisations, some local operators and the consultants.

3.5 The result has been a product structured in the following way:-

- (a) Planning Studies

- 1.0 Characteristics of the Existing Tourism Industry
- 2.0 Future Development of the Tourism Industry
- 3.0 Tourism Development Strategy for Douglas Shire (refer Appendix A)

(b) Strategic Plan

- (1) Tourism Objectives and Implementation Criteria
- (2) Objectives and Implementation Criteria included within those for particular Preferred Dominant Land Use categories (e.g. Protection Areas, Urban Areas, Rural Areas)

(c) Development Control Plans

- (1) Planning Studies that analyse tourism issues for particular areas and articulate strategies
- (2) Development control provisions that address particular tourism development issues, including identification of tourism development areas, tourism theses to be pursued, and prescription of development criteria

(d) Zoning Scheme, Regulatory Maps, Planning Provisions

- (1) Zoning Scheme structured to protect tourism values (nature conservation, scenic protection)
- (2) Regulatory maps prescribing densities and tourism areas within urban settlements
- (3) Regulatory Maps used as basis for prescribing tourism development themes and standards in particular areas of the Shire.

4.0 TOURISM RESOURCES

The tourism industry in the Cairns region is based predominantly on the attractions of the natural environment, namely the reef and the rainforest and the unique recreational and sightseeing opportunities it offers. Douglas Shire contains significant natural resources responsible for tourism growth, including World Heritage listed rainforests, and its close proximity to the Great Barrier Reef. The development of the tourism products in the Cairns region has gained momentum over the last 10 years due to a strong marketing push to both domestic and international markets. This has created interest in the destination which has in turn stimulated development of secondary attractions, accommodation and other infrastructure development in Douglas Shire. Recent growth in the accommodation sector, particularly the Port Douglas Mirage and the Raddison Royal Palms has resulted in these accommodations becoming attractions, rather than just support facilities, for international and domestic visitors.

The major attractions to Douglas Shire, the reef and the rainforest, provide the primary drawing power to the area; however a range of secondary attractions has developed, resulting in visitors increasing their length of stay in the region. Three categories of tourism attractions are identified in Douglas Shire:-

- (i) Great Barrier Reef. The Great Barrier Reef is a major attraction that draws both domestic and international visitors to the Cairns region. Douglas Shire is in close proximity to the opportunities offered by the reef, with a number of daytrips running out of Port Douglas.

- (ii) Rainforests. A large proportion of the Shire, particularly north of the Daintree River is covered by wet tropical rainforests included in World Heritage listings. These rainforest areas offer significant opportunities for sightseeing and

exploration of the natural environment. The quality of this attraction is gaining recognition worldwide and is likely to continue to be a major drawcard to the region.

- (iii) Built Attractions. Port Douglas has developed in recent years as a sophisticated resort town; it presents as an attractive tropical urban environment in a singular coastal setting. The integrated resort development of Port Douglas Mirage is a destination resort and is one of the main built attractions in Douglas Shire. Other built attractions of a secondary nature, located mainly in Port Douglas, include museums and environmental displays.

In addition, the spectacular scenery, especially as observed on the coastal sections of the Captain Cook Highway between Buchan Point and Port Douglas, travelling through the canefields between Port Douglas and the Daintree River, provide a marvellous setting for the tourist's arrival and subsequent experience in the Shire. The sugar industry not only contributes to the scenic attractions of the Shire, but also functions reinforcing the different tourism emphasis.

Various parts of the Shire have different tourism focus; most notably; opportunities offered and experiences gained by tourists are quite different north and south of the Daintree River. The Daintree River is the geographic division between two different forms and levels of tourism development. The river, and the absence of a bridge over it, represents a barrier to free movement between the two parts of the Shire, further reinforcing the different tourism emphasis.

The Shire's more developed tourism infrastructure is contained within that part of the Shire to the south of the river with Port Douglas being the focus of this activity. Port Douglas contains the highest order of tourism services and facilities in the Shire including a range of accommodation, services, infrastructure and secondary attractions. Port Douglas functions as a resort

destination, as a dormitory centre and as staging point for daytrippers on reef and rainforest excursions.

5.0 PROJECTIONS FOR TOURISM GROWTH

- 5.1 The most significant factor in the future growth of tourism in Douglas Shire is in the growth in international tourism. This growth will be likely to occur because of the location of Cairns Airport, intercepting travel from Australia's international growth markets (Asian), coinciding with the presence of highly attractive qualities, access to the wet tropical forests and the Great Barrier Reef.
- 5.2 Based on the Bureau of Tourism Research (BTR) projections of tourism growth for Australia, the medium projections of Table 5.1 apply for the Cairns Region and Douglas Shire. Based on Australian Tourism Commission targets for international arrivals, and moderate domestic growth, the high projections of Table 5.1 have been derived for the Cairns Region and Douglas Shire.

TABLE 5.1 – PROJECTED VISITOR NIGHTS – CAIRNS REGION AND DOUGLAS SHIRE

	1989			2005		
	('000 Visitor Nights)			(000 Visitor Nights)		
	Domestic	International	Total	Domestic	International	Total
Medium Projection						
Cairns Region	4,894	2,702	7,596	11,940	16,250	28,180

Douglas Shire			551			1,970
High Projection						
Cairns Region	4,894	2,702	7,596	11,940	34,200	46,100
Douglas Shire			551			3,230

Based on these projection of visitation increase, the medium demand projection for accommodation in Douglas shire, to 2005, is for an extra 1,190 hotel or motel rooms (a twofold increase), 350 self-contained units and 700 hostel beds. The high demand projection is for an extra 2,600 hotel and motel rooms (a 350 percent increase), 850 self-contained units and 1,470 extra hostel beds.

5.3 The projections of daytrippers visitation involve even greater proportional growth. Under the medium scenario, the number of day trippers to Douglas Shire per year is expected to grow from 767,000 to 5.0 million in 2005.

Under the high projection, daytripper numbers increase approximately tenfold, from 767,000 in 1989 to 7.4 million in 2005.

6.0 ISSUES FOR PLANNING FOR TOURISM

6.1 One fundamental challenge for planning for tourism in the Shire is to determine whether the projected growth in tourism demand can or should be met, given the physical impact on the environment, and changes in the nature of experience of the area, that would result. The well worn notions of environmental 'carrying capacity' immediately spring to mind, with the more determinative criterion likely to be acceptable impact on the quality of the tourist experience, rather than damage to the bio-physical environment, although the latter is certainly also an issue, especially in some localities.

Whether or not an absolute limit to growth is imposed, the second fundamental challenge is to plan or manage growth in the tourism industry, so that achievement of an appropriate set of objectives is maximised.

6.2 The objectives adopted, in relation to the relevant tourism planning issues, are encapsulated in the following stated goal:

“To promote the development of a range of tourism facilities and services to meet existing and future tourist needs whilst protecting the intrinsic and distinct qualities which are significant to the Shires’ tourist appeal”

The objectives are:

Functional Objectives

- (a) With any limits imposed to promote better achievement of other objectives, to accommodate adequate and efficient provision of tourism plant and infrastructure so as to meet the needs of various tourist markets effectively.
- (b) To promote an efficient and co-ordinated pattern of tourism development which ensures tourist convenience and accessibility.
- (c) To encourage the development of tourism product depth and diversity, to a degree such that the clarity of the tourist image is not compromised.

Quality Objectives

- (d) To foster a distinct and attractive tourist image, based primarily on the Shire's natural attractions, and to encourage development that consolidates and promotes that image.
- (e) To protect and enhance the Shire's valuable tourism resources, especially its natural attractions.
- (f) To protect the scenic qualities of the shire which make it attractive to tourists.
- (g) To conserve and enhance the quality and character of tourist experiences in the various parts of the Shire.
- (h) To encourage tourism development which is consistent with and sensitive to the nature of tourism sought in each particular part of the Shire.

Impact Objective

- (i) To preclude as far as possible adverse impacts on the natural, social, cultural and economic environment of the Shire.

6.3 It is possible to identify at least five issues that need to be addressed in the planning strategy.

- (1) At present, north of the Daintree River, the visiting experience tends to be one of remoteness and the domination of wild, tropical forest. In some places the rainforest meets the sea. There is considerable pressure to allow more development of tourist accommodation and facilities, to cater for demand to visit this area. There are issues related to direct impacts on the natural environment. However a more sensitive issue is the likelihood that further development, even if carefully designed in terms of

siting, architecture and ecological impact, will compromise the quality of low-key visitor experiences.

- (2) The scenery south of the Daintree River is also of the highest order; north of Port Douglas, this is related to an 'undeveloped' natural and agricultural landscape. There are pressures to develop tourist accommodation, tourist facilities and housing in this landscape, which will tend to detract from visual quality and undermine the viability of the sugar industry.
- (3) There are disadvantages in concentrating tourist accommodation and facilities, in a limited number of locations (predominantly in Port Douglas), from the points of view of reducing impact on the landscape, promoting convenience of tourists to tourism infrastructure, acquiring clarity of destination image, reducing impact on the sugar industry, promoting product depth, and reducing negative impacts of tourism on residential communities.
- (4) Given that the basis of tourism in Douglas Shire is the appreciation and exploration of a dominant, natural landscape, and that the value of that quality is relatively vulnerable to change, and given the competing needs of the sugar industry for land that is suitable for tourism development, it may be desirable to attempt to cater in Douglas Shire only for a limited range of potential tourism markets, and allow other demands to be met in other parts of the Cairns Region that are more suitable, and/or less sensitive to change. Such an approach may also promote a clearer destination image. From an economic point of view, benefits flowing from early development thereby foregone may be relatively quickly replaced, given the high pressures for growth, and economic prospects in general may benefit from a more carefully managed tourism image.

- (5) The arrival sequence of the trip to Port Douglas along the Captain Cook Highway is surely one of the most spectacular drives in Australia; it is mostly a two-lane road that winds along the coast, beside undeveloped forests, for the most part included in the World Heritage Area. The natural undeveloped quality of this route is threatened by tourism development pressure and the demand to widen the road.

7.0 THE RECOMMENDED APPROACH

- 7.1 An approach has been recommended by the consultants, that aims to balance the opportunities to develop tourist services and facilities, and thereby cater for a portion of projected demand, with the need to preserve and enhance the environmental assets that are the basis of Shire's appeal to tourists. The recommended approach is to be incorporated into all of the proposed documents of the planning scheme, in various ways. The approach contains the following features.

- (1) Tourism development should be heavily concentrated in a major node, Port Douglas, that will contain a wide range of accommodation, tourist services (for example, shopping, tours, personal services), entertainment, themed attractions and recreation facilities.
- (2) Most development of tourism accommodation and other services should be concentrated south of the Daintree River, so as to conserve north of the river for sightseeing and recreation opportunities offered by the natural environment. Any future development will be confined to two nodes, and be limited to accommodation and facilities which support tourists' exploration and

appreciation of the natural environment. Development of higher order services such as organised recreation facilities, which encourage visitors to stay or to stay longer, for purposes not associated with sightseeing of the natural environment, will not be permitted.

- (3) The sugar industry should be conserved.

- (4) Only forms of tourism development that are consistent with the dominant theme of exploration and appreciation of the natural environment, or local rural and/or historical themes, will be encouraged, especially outside Port Douglas; within the Port Douglas area, development consistent with these themes is also encouraged, to reinforce the clarity of the destination image, but other forms of recreation, consistent with the sophisticated resort character that has evolved, will also be permitted. While some golf courses are and will be developed in Port Douglas, apart from these, large resorts and golf courses will not be encouraged; there will be many such tourism opportunities elsewhere in the region

(-No golf courses north of the Daintree River!).

- (5) Tourism development in the Shire south of Port Douglas will be resisted, to maintain the undeveloped flavour of the approach by road from Cairns to Port Douglas, on the Captain Cook Highway.

- (6) Minor tourist facilities will be permitted in some other existing centres; Mossman, Cooya and Newell Beach are intended however to maintain a permanent residential character.

- (7) Part of Port Douglas is proposed to be protected for permanent residential occupation, and maintained free of tourism development.

- (8) Generally, no forms of tourism development will be permitted outside the identified tourism nodes. One or two other areas are proposed for development of limited accommodation and recreation facilities, but otherwise the balance of the Shire is intended to be conserved for rural purposes or nature protection. This is proposed primarily to maintain the undeveloped rural and natural qualities of the landscape which form the basis of its appreciation, to protect the sugar industry, to encourage clarity of the destination image, and to promote tourist convenience.

7.2 At this point, no decision has been made as to whether to seek to limit growth, in absolute terms. The approach recommended seeks rather to manage growth, through establishment of a framework that promoted suitable tourism development, and excludes development that does not contribute to appropriate development goals. The strategy is designed to facilitate appreciation and exploration of the natural and scenic qualities of the Shire, along with some other compatible experiences; however because of the relatively scarce land resources of the shire, along with some other compatible experiences; however because of the relatively scarce land resources of the Shire, and the valuable but vulnerable qualities of its landscape, not all potential forms of development can be accommodated. This approach makes appropriate use of the Shire's tourism resources, husbanding their potential so as to maximise sustainability. How far development can be allowed to proceed on this basis is a decision for the future.

The strategy, in the meantime, aims through town planning mechanisms, to conserve the natural, undeveloped attributes of the environment of Douglas Shire, while fostering suitable opportunities for visitation and economic growth; in this way, it is sought, to protect into the future, the attractive low-key qualities that underlie that visitor's experience, and upon which the Douglas Shire tourism industry is based.

**Brannock Humphreys is now known as Humphreys Reynolds Perkins Planning
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