YEAR 1 IPR RECOMMENDATIONS REPORT

Site:	Hervey Bay, Australia
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Reporting Period:	October 2019 – October 2020

BACKGROUND (from IRP recommendation letter)

The Independent Review Panel (IRP) noted the following outstanding elements to Hervey Bay application:

1. There is clear evidence of a spectacular recovery in the population of humpback whales which migrate along the east coast of Australia. This is a rare modern day conservation success story. Hervey Bay has played an important role in this recovery.
2. Hervey Bay is an extremely important nursery ground for humpback whales. It serves as a key resting, nursing and nurturing location for cow-calf pairs .
3. The Hervey Bay community has embraced “their” whales and the pride and sense of connection local residents and businesses feel with regard to whales is clear to see throughout the town.
4. Hervey Bay has developed a range of key events, celebrations and strategies to maximise the profile, opportunity and care for whales.
5. The formal protection of marine and nearby island and coastal ecosystems is clear.
6. There are efforts to ensure that the interactions associated with whales are informed by long-term research and researchers.
7. There is a strong legislative framework protecting cetaceans in Hervey Bay and more widely in Australia, and this nation has been a global advocate for the conservation of marine mammals and, especially at the IWC, a leader in the argument for the ongoing and extended protection of whales globally.
8. Finally, there is clear “heritage” in that Hervey Bay has been globally recognised as a significant whale ‘destination’ for over three decades.

The judges have identified two recommendations to be completed by the end of Year 1 WHS certified status (now Year 2, 11th October 2021) regarding:

1. Swimming with whales
2. Economic and environmental balance

RESULTS

1. Swimming with whales

BACKGROUND OF RECOMMENDATION

Permission for swim-with-whales activities has recently been granted in the Hervey Bay region at a time when there is mounting evidence that the activity disturbs cetaceans elsewhere. In particular, Platypus Bay as a nursery ground may be sensitive to this activity.

RECOMMENDATION

Ongoing research to assess the impact of any swim with programmes must be prioritised, with results feeding in to future management strategies. It is understood that the Pacific Whale Foundation are currently undertaking this research. We request any early results as soon as they are available and preferably before the end of Year 1 WHS certified status.

ACTIONS TAKEN TO FULFIL IRP RECOMMENDATIONS

Swim with research project is ongoing and all being well in relation to future COVID impacts, I understand the field component should be completed around September. We expect to receive the preliminary report on swim-with research carried out in Hervey Bay by Dr Kate Sprogis.

IRP COMMENTS AND FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

[For the IRP to fill]

2. Economic and environmental balance

BACKGROUND OF RECOMMENDATION

Hervey Bay has continued to see humpback whales as a key source of economic revenue for the region and has sought to promote and allow for a range of growth as a key priority, without investing significantly in conservation and sustainability initiatives, education and research. On-site research has largely been undertaken by non-profit organisations, such as Pacific Whale Foundation and the Oceania Project.

RECOMMENDATION

As a priority, the Hervey Bay Steering Committee (or other coordinating body) should seek to develop a more integrated approach to research, conservation, and educational initiatives, and to encourage projects that improve the economic, social and environmental sustainability of the WHS. The Committee should consider the value of dedicated research and citizen science opportunities, and further opportunities to engage with academic institutions and community groups. Mechanisms should be put in place to encourage ongoing reduction of environmental impacts in order to enhance the social and educational benefits from watching cetaceans (criterion 1.5).

Before the end of Year 1 WHS certified status, the Steering Committee (or other coordinating body) will provide a draft action plan with measurable goals to achieve objectives agreed as the highest priority. Noting that there is potential to engage and involve the developing community-based action group being led by Dr Kathy Townsend to engage stakeholders in monitoring sustainable environmental issues across the total Great Sandy Marine Park and K'gari Fraser Island.

The judges also noted for consideration that the Hervey Bay Steering Committee might consider the establishment of a whale museum/education/visitor centre, a model that has worked really well elsewhere (e.g. Friday Harbor, San Juan Islands, Maui, Hawaii; Rarotonga, Cook Islands etc.). Such a place can become an important base for research, education, advocacy and also be a key visitor attraction for the area. It also can be staffed largely by volunteers and thereby engage the local community to become whale docents/naturalists and ambassadors. The local university (USC) in Hervey Bay could also be a key partner with student placements/internships helping with research, education and outreach.

ACTIONS TAKEN TO FULFIL IRP RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a very strong research component which is out of scope for our organisation as a tourism marketing body but we remain keen to play a co-ordinating role with industry and academia. Discussions have been held with Dr Kathy Townsend from the University of the Sunshine Coast about a broad research project, including cetaceans, and we have also been working with the Fraser Coast Regional Council in seeking grant funding to build a whale interpretative centre and

2. Economic and environmental balance

research facility at Urangan Harbour, potentially for use by under graduate and post graduate students and scientists. Discussions I have had personally with the Queensland Government officials have also been very positive and the council is working on draft plans as a precursor to seeking funding.

- We are working with the University of the Sunshine Coast on setting up a steering committee with the support of Dr Kathy Townsend – first planning meeting in the week of 14 December 2020. Fraser Coast Tourism & Events will provide secretariat services and we are seeking to set up a steering group driven by conservation/research/education/community/industry sectors. It is important we provide the right framing for the organisation and ensure it is broader than commercial whale watching interests. Drs Wally and Trish Franklin have moved to Hervey Bay from Byron Bay and are keen to play a role.

- We are also working with the USC regarding the launch of a 2021 research project on Hervey Bay whale numbers, to be undertaken by a USC PhD student. The university has acquired a boat for this research and is also investigating the potential to use drones. FCTE will play a liaising role with industry regarding the provision of in-kind support.

- We will be briefing the Hervey Bay Whale Fleet on the 4th December 2020 of our plans in partnership with the university and seeking the fleet's support.

- We are also working closely with both the Queensland Government and the Fraser Coast Regional Council, seeking government funding for a major whale interpretative centre to be built at the Urangan Harbour ($500k planning funds sought) to develop a year-year tourism and educational facility which would also provide space for university post graduate research being carried out by USC students.

- FCTE was able to hold the "Paddle Out for Whales" on 2 August 2020 celebrating the return of the whales and Hervey Bay's special relationship as a whale stop-over site. This was the first post-COVID event held in the region. However, all other events, parades and festivals celebrating cetaceans were cancelled this year because of COVID-19. We hope to be in a position to relaunch the cetacean celebration program in 2021.

IRP COMMENTS AND FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

[For the IRP to fill]

ADITIONAL INFORMATION (OPTIONAL)
Because of the pandemic, we have not been able to capitalise on our WHS status. However, Hervey Bay and the Fraser Coast is very keen maintain our accreditation and the Fraser Coast Regional Council Mayor George Seymour has made this a personal priority for the next 12 months. It has been a very challenging year here on the tourism front with the industry heavily impacted and a smaller FCTE team working across many areas to help operators maintain financial viability. We will have more detail on the points raised above, but you can expect our Year 1 report to be quite succinct. Because of the total loss of revenue during the shutdown and the anticipated slow recovery (most tourism products are currently operating at below 50% capacity), there is a limited capability for the industry here to focus on more than financial survival in the short term. FCTE is working extremely hard on behalf of industry to attract Queensland domestic tourists to the region, which has taken most of our focus as an organisation.

IRP ADITIONAL COMMENTS (OPTIONAL)
[For the IRP to fill]