



# ***COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND SERVICES COMMITTEE***

**Members present:**

Mr A Tantari MP—Chair  
Mr SA Bennett MP  
Mr MC Berkman MP  
Ms CL Lui MP  
Dr MA Robinson MP  
Mr RCJ Skelton MP

**Staff present:**

Ms L Pretty—Committee Secretary  
Dr A Lilley—Assistant Committee Secretary

## ***PUBLIC BRIEFING—INQUIRY INTO THE CONSIDERATION OF AUDITOR-GENERAL REPORT 12: 2022-23, GROWING ECOTOURISM IN QUEENSLAND***

### **TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS**

**Monday, 15 April 2024**

**Brisbane**

## MONDAY, 15 APRIL 2024

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### The committee met at 10.00 am.

**CHAIR:** I declare open this public briefing for the Community Support and Services Committee's inquiry into the consideration of Auditor-General *Report 12: 2022-23, Growing ecotourism in Queensland*. My name is Adrian Tantari. I am the member for Hervey Bay and chair of the committee. I would like to respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which we meet today and pay our respects to elders past and present. We are very fortunate to live in a country with two of the oldest continuing cultures in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people whose lands, winds and waters we all share. With me here today are: Mr Stephen Bennett MP, the member for Burnett and deputy chair; Mr Michael Berkman MP, the member for Maiwar; Ms Cynthia Lui MP, the member for Cook; Dr Mark Robinson MP, the member for Oodgeroo; and Mr Rob Skelton MP, the member for Nicklin.

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### **BROWN, Mr Darren, Assistant Auditor-General, Queensland Audit Office**

### **WORRALL, Mr Brendan, Auditor-General, Queensland Audit Office**

**CHAIR:** I now welcome participants from the Queensland Audit Office. I invite you to make a brief opening statement after which committee members will have some questions for you.

**Mr Worrall:** Thank you for the opportunity to address you this morning on *Growing ecotourism in Queensland*. This report was tabled in May last year. Queensland is blessed with world-class natural and cultural assets. The Queensland government's vision is to partner with traditional owners of the land to make Queensland a world leader in ecotourism, while conserving natural and cultural assets. In this audit, we examined whether the state's tourism and environmental entities are effectively developing sustainable ecotourism in Queensland.

These entities face a difficult challenge between protecting the natural and cultural environment and deriving economic benefit for Queenslanders. Historically the balance has tended to lean in favour of conserving protected areas such as national and conservation parks, with relatively few ecotourism proposals progressing to development and operation stage. The entities in the tourism industry do work together to overcome these challenges; however, their success to date has been limited. From 2013 to the date we tabled our report, the department of environment and science—now called the Department of Environment, Science and Innovation, DESI—approved three ecotourism facilities in national parks, with two more in development.

The approval process and delivery of these developments was lengthy, complex and costly. Broader success is considerably hampered by the departments not proactively clarifying the government's policy, priorities and tolerances for ecotourism developments both within and outside protected areas. Successive governments have had different views on how to approach ecotourism. Legislation has changed, ecotourism has been defined differently and policies have differed on commercial activities and infrastructure development.

The absence of a statewide policy on ecotourism means that it is difficult to measure the development of ecotourism outside Queensland's protected areas. All this has resulted in processes for identifying and planning ecotourism opportunities that are vague and poorly defined. Processes for approving ecotourism facilities on protected areas are complex and onerous for proponents to navigate. Meanwhile, the demand for nature-based experiences from both domestic and international

visitors has continued to evolve and increase. Greater government guidance and support would help industry make informed decisions, it would help proponents navigate the various legislative and approval processes and it would enhance traditional owner engagement.

The Towards Tourism 2032: Transforming Queensland's visitor economy future strategy, launched in November 2022, includes a greater focus on and some actions in developing ecotourism and nature-based tourism. It recognises the opportunity for First Nations tourism to showcase and enrich cultural experiences for visitors and deliver economic opportunities for traditional owners and Indigenous communities and businesses. The strategy falls short on providing the clarity of government policy, priority and risk appetite that is needed to stimulate greater ecotourism investment and benefits. In the interim, the Department of Tourism and Sport and the Department of Environment, Science and Innovation could provide more support to proponents to navigate the system. They could do more to leverage many other first-class natural areas that are outside of the protected areas.

The recommendations in our report should assist entities in developing sustainable ecotourism in Queensland. The committee would benefit from hearing from the entities themselves regarding their progress in the recommendations, particularly given 12 months has elapsed since the report was tabled. We welcome any questions that the committee may have.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Worrall.

**Mr BENNETT:** Are there any specific examples of the complexities of projects on protected estates and freehold land from the audit process that could provide? You spoke about the complexity of lengthy periods and you have mentioned traditional owners a number of times—not only in your report but also this morning. Are there any specific examples from the audit process that the committee would benefit from hearing about?

**Mr Worrall:** I would say yes to both of those questions. I might ask Darren to talk more about examples you mentioned of a lengthy process that did not come to fruition.

**Mr Brown:** The complexities largely come about not only through the navigation of the multiple legislative requirements both at a Commonwealth and state level but also through local government planning requirements and so forth. The difficulty is in proponents knowing what processes they need to go through. We have made recommendations to entities to provide clear guidance around what will be involved both on-park and off-park so that the proponents can make informed decisions about whether the business proposition stacks up for them in terms of an on-park, off-park or adjacent-to-park proposal.

We found that the departments had not worked with proponents on the need to engage and partner with traditional owners to obtain the approvals that are required, as well as the environmental approvals—they are the areas that took quite a bit of work. Some of the Commonwealth approvals were a bit more difficult for proponents to navigate. Again, state government departments could provide better assistance in helping proponents liaise with Commonwealth agencies around the requirements.

**Mr BENNETT:** Are we seeing the state referral agency process succeed? My understanding is that if you are a proponent you go to state development and they help you to navigate the complexities of all the state agencies that you encounter—is that not working well?

**Mr Brown:** It is not working as well as it could. Firstly, the up-front information proponents need is: what are the likely time frames that will be required? Predominantly what we heard from a lot of proponents was 'quick decisions'. If something is not viable or will involve a protracted process, they need to be informed about that so they can then make informed decisions about whether it is commercially viable for them to continue with that process—what the potential costs involved are for them—and build that into their business case and update their business case as they are progressing.

**Mr Worrall:** I realise we have not properly answered your question because you were asking for examples of ones that did not progress. In the report at figure 5C we list 30 potential projects in relation to ecotourism. Twenty were in protected areas, four were in non-protected areas and six were in both protected and non-protected areas. In that table there were seven in total that were not progressed where they were denied by government and there were another six that were actually withdrawn by the proponents. Thirteen out of 30 did not go ahead. Some were voluntarily withdrawn and some were denied. The rest were either approved or were still in progress. I am trying to gain details of those that were withdrawn.

**Mr BENNETT:** In trying to resolve these problems, was there one particular area, agency or interest group that frustrated the process more than any other?

**Mr Worrall:** I might answer that and Darren can jump in. The two main entities we are really talking about here are the department of tourism and the department of environment, and they both have different remits. One is trying to foster an industry around tourism and one is trying to protect the natural and cultural environment so you would expect there would be some inherent, I would not say, tensions but differing objectives. I do not think one was necessarily being obstinate or anything like that. Like Darren said, it is a complex area to navigate, particularly if they are in the protected areas. There are multiple layers of approvals that you might need for local government, state entities and sometimes even Commonwealth entities.

**Mr BENNETT:** Yes, indeed.

**Mr Worrall:** I think the bit that is missing for proponents is: what is the best way to navigate that without having to reinvent the wheel?

**Mr Brown:** We did see that both departments were really keen to work together to progress these proposals, but there are complex legislative frameworks that need to be navigated, with good reason in terms of protecting the environment. It is a complex area for them to navigate but they do work together. They do try to coordinate. That coordination could be improved, though, particularly around clarity of the government's risk appetite for certain activities. Naturally, on-park is where the biggest barriers for proponents are in terms of the various legislative frameworks.

**Mr BENNETT:** Could I clarify if you saw those two key departments working together at the startup level? I would have thought a proponent should be able to turn up to SARA and at least receive some guidance. Did you uncover evidence that that process is there for proponents?

**Mr Brown:** We found it is a little bit fragmented. For example, as we were doing the audit the department of environment and science were in the process of drafting their ecotourism plan for on-park. There is no equivalent for off-park and there is no process or clear guidance around off-park or adjacent park-to-park proposals. That makes it hard for a proponent to say, 'Okay, if I going to do this proposal, what are the pros and cons of on-park versus adjacent-to-park versus off-park and how do I then balance that out in terms of viability from a business perspective and all of the barriers?'

**Mr SKELTON:** You have identified a key thing: the department of environment not having criteria for different situations. Would it be helpful for the two departments to have some sort of liaison arrangement where they sit together and step people through the process and advise them along the way? You mentioned the initial thing will get up and running and then there is a whole bunch of machinery-of-government legislation that needs to be navigated. Would it be beneficial to have a group of people from both departments who specifically work through that?

**Mr Brown:** I will just clarify that the Department of Environment, Science and Innovation is responsible for on-park. They regulate that and, to some degree, adjacent. In terms of off-park, that is more the Department of Tourism and Sport. There is automatically that disconnect or distinction and that requires them to work together. Figure 5A on page 17 of the report shows the two-stage process. They have developed an implementation framework which should provide some assistance. A little bit more is needed, particularly in terms of ongoing support throughout the process and liaison with the Commonwealth government. It needs to be said that at some stages some of the delays may be at the proponent's end where they are trying to get consultants to seek environmental approvals, what they need in order to get those environmental approvals and so forth, but again that comes down to better informing the proponents what is going to be needed at various stages throughout the process.

**Mr Worrall:** If I may, Chair, I have that information for you. I mentioned table 5C and I said there were six proposals that were withdrawn by the proponents. Four were in protected areas and two were in non-protected areas. In 2015 in protected areas there was Welford National Park and Currawinya National Park. That was the adaptive re-use of homesteads for eco accommodation at Currawinya National Park. Outback Aussie Tours was the proponent for Welford National Park. That was not progressed. I might add that I went to Currawinya National Park a couple of years ago and saw those homesteads. They are not accommodation places.

There were two in 2018: Davies Creek National Park and Dinden National Park. That again was eco accommodation and glamping opposite Davies Creek Mountain Bike Park. The proposal included nature-based activities such as interpretive walks and spotlight tours. Again, that was not progressed. That was eco accommodation and glamping. Also in 2018 there was South Molle Island Whitsunday National Park, eco accommodation and glamping out at the existing QWPS&P—I am not sure what that is—and Sandy Bay campground with some deluxe tents and standard tents, so again eco accommodation and glamping. That was not progressed. Then there was another glamping one in 2019 which was Byfield glamping. The proponent considered revising their proposal following departmental feedback, but again they withdrew. They were the four in protected areas.

Of the two in 2017 that were in non-protected areas, another one was in the Whitsundays, Lindeman Islands National Park, which was eco accommodation and glamping, 'extend existing resort accommodation options by offering glamping tents within the national park'. That did not progress; the proponent withdrew. The other one was in 2018, which was adjacent to and through parts of the Barron Gorge National Park. The project included the establishment of an adventure circuit, cultural heritage interpretation, outdoor lift and zip-line—otherwise known as an adventure circuit—and that did not progress. The proponent withdrew. The last two were outside protected areas and the first four were in protected areas.

**Dr ROBINSON:** Your report might be a little wider in terms of places, but back when Kate Jones was the minister she famously committed to 400 ecotourism jobs on North Stradbroke Island as part of the phasing out of ultimately 300 sand mining jobs. I am still looking for evidence of any of those jobs having been created. I just wondered whether, in that ecotourism sphere or any of your work in terms of performance audits on North Stradbroke Island—I know that you conducted one—you may have something useful for us in that space as to why and how we can improve things.

**Mr Worrall:** North Stradbroke Island was not part of this report, and I am pretty sure there was no ecotourism proponent that would have had to navigate through the two departments. That has been confirmed. In terms of any other work, there is some other work which is on my website where a matter was referred by yourself. I will have a report to parliament by the end of this financial year in relation to that. It does not specifically focus on ecotourism, I might add. It is more around processes around the granting of moneys and things like that across a number of different state entities, as you alluded to in relation to sand mining withdrawing and tourism replacing jobs.

**Dr ROBINSON:** Particularly in terms of North Stradbroke Island I get questions from many of the very good Quandamooka elders. Some identify themselves as part of QYAC, the government's prescribed body corporate through the legislation, and others are frustrated by some of the processes. They come to me with projects or they come with investors who want to do things, and when someone makes a start or starts to approach government it does not shape up into something. There has been a lot of frustration in that space for the last nearly nine years. How do we improve on that performance? I know your report talks about different stakeholders and traditional owners. In some cases you have traditional owners who want to drive something, but certain individuals may be closer to government than others and are not willing to back it. We have those issues on North Stradbroke Island. We are trying to resolve them so we can go forward. Do you have any advice in your report?

**Mr Worrall:** It would come back to the recommendations in the report. There needs to be some transparent pathways for proponents to navigate through the various government entities. It would help greatly if there is a given process for proponents to navigate through the various pathways and there is transparency around that.

**Dr ROBINSON:** Going back to your first answer, are there any particular ecotourism projects on North Stradbroke Island that the government is driving or is a significant partner in that you are aware of?

**Mr Worrall:** I do not have that information at the moment.

**Ms LUI:** Mr Worrall, thank you for your summary of projects delivered here in Queensland. My question is more specific to the time frame. We have spoken about the processes and the challenges with getting projects delivered. Can you make a statement on the time frame that it takes to deliver the projects that we have already delivered, and could you possibly share your insights about whether or not this would impact future projects for the state?

**Mr Worrall:** I might start by talking about a case study that we had in the report. There is a time line at figure 5B, case study 1, the Scenic Rim Trail project. I will not go through the time line in detail, but that started in September 2013 when the Queensland government called for expression of interest submissions to deliver ecotourism facilities. Commercial operations started in June 2020, so that one took seven years.

**Ms LUI:** There is one project I can think of off the top of my head in my electorate. I am just wondering whether or not this would have an impact on future projects, also taking on board the member for Oodgeroo's comments around proposals that are brought forward and not advanced.

**Mr Worrall:** I can speak to what we are really trying to message in the report: there is no clear pathway for proponents. If there was, that would facilitate progressing these things hopefully more quickly but also the proponents being fully aware of what that pathway is up-front. They need to have transparency around what the time lines might be, what processes they will need to do and what sort

of approval processes they need to do so they are going into it with their eyes wide open. With some of that lacking, some of it may be a bit of a discovery as they embark on this tour. I do not know if we have any other data on the length of any of the other projects.

**Mr Brown:** I think there was another one. I cannot recall which one it was, but that was around six years as well. Bearing in mind that we have looked from 2013 to the point in time we conducted the audit, there had not been much done in terms of ecotourism development in Queensland up to that point. Now that a couple of these projects have progressed, albeit very slowly and costly, we would expect that the department would be learning from that process and improving that process as well as industry and the proponents also learning from that process.

Our key point is that government takes a whole-of-government approach and partners with industry and traditional owners to navigate that system in the most efficient and effective way possible. For example, when we started the audit we went to the agencies and asked for a definition of ecotourism. We could not get a consistent definition of ecotourism from the parties that were involved in the audit, so that in itself indicated to us that clarity is needed around what ecotourism is and how you get these proposals up and running, particularly in a complex environment where you are trying to balance the protection of the environment with the economic benefits that come with ecotourism. Our audit was not off to a good start.

**Mr BERKMAN:** I very much appreciate you both being here this morning. I am interested in the role of the cardinal principle in the Nature Conservation Act and the way it deals with ecotourism. There have obviously been some pretty significant changes to the Nature Conservation Act over the last decade and a bit. The cardinal principle remains, and that is the management objective which requires that parks are managed to provide, to the greatest extent possible, for the permanent preservation of the area's natural condition and protection of the area's cultural resources and values. I may well have missed it, but I did not see the cardinal principle addressed specifically in the QAO report. Is this something that was taken into account specifically in QAO's work?

**Mr Brown:** In terms of the report, we addressed the legislation in a very broad sense, but the starting point of any audit is understanding what the legislative objectives are around the particular area that we are auditing. That was clearly one of the first things that we needed to understand so we know whether the government agencies are actually working in accordance with what the legislative requirements are. Then we look at how does that then translate to the processes on the ground that the public sector have put in place to try to deliver on those legislative objectives. That is where we have found there are some gaps, particularly in terms of that balancing act. It was quite clear that the departments and industry were operating from a point of view that they told us that it is to no-one's benefit if the environment is degraded because then the proponents themselves have less of a product to promote and deliver on, but it is still a difficult balancing act to achieve.

**Mr BERKMAN:** Further to that, I know there are certainly lots of folks who hold the view that any on-park development is fundamentally and immutably inconsistent with the cardinal principle. Does QAO have any reflections on that concern and how that is reflected in both your report and also the processes?

**Mr Worrall:** As Darren said, we have looked at the legislation and we have looked at the mechanisms that the government entities have used to apply the legislation, as opposed to commenting on the merits of the legislation. I probably would not want to go down that path.

**Mr Brown:** Our recommendation there is that government clarifies its position around that. It is not within our mandate to comment on policy positions, but what we found is a lack of clarity around what that policy position actually is.

**Mr BERKMAN:** I appreciate that. Sorry, I did not mean to ask you questions that you are not able to answer. If I can try to reframe it another way. In your view, in regards to the kind of certainty that proponents need to guide those initial decisions around ecotourism developments, is it fair to say that one option could be just a clear demarcation around on-park developments and could clarity simply be provided by saying, 'We will not have built infrastructure as a component of the in-park developments'? Is that a feasible way forward?

**Mr Worrall:** I think part of the problem that we talk about in the report is this on-park/off-park. We would say there are probably missed opportunities in the off-park area because—

**Mr SKELTON:** It is a lot harder on-park.

**Mr Worrall:** It is potentially not harder; it is potentially easier, I suspect, if you are doing development off-park rather than on-park, but there is not really any clarity about the pathways. It seems to get missed because, as Darren mentioned earlier, the department of environment would

generally only get involved in on-park. The other one is less catered for, I think, in terms of government agencies working together, including local government. If there was more off-park development, that would take pressure off the on-park. I do not know if you have ever been to Carnarvon National Park. There is a camping ground in the national park just as you enter, but it is only open during the school holidays; it is not open any other time. There is a creek that has a number of platypus in it, and I suspect that is probably why. As soon as you go outside of the park, only within a couple of kilometres, there is a variety of different offerings in terms of accommodation and a little bit of infrastructure. I do not know the genesis of how all those things have happened, but, to me, that is a good balance that people can go there, they can stay outside the park, but they can visit the park on a day-to-day basis.

**Mr Brown:** That is generally considered to be adjacent to park, where the facilities and the infrastructure is created outside the protected area, and that is as opposed to being a purely off-park development. All the infrastructure is off park, but the activities occur on the park.

**Mr BERKMAN:** That is very helpful, thank you.

**Ms LUI:** Mr Worrall, given the challenges with delivering ecotourism in Queensland, your report states that clearer leadership of ecotourism is needed. You found that oversight tends to be administered only at an entity level and that this has led to limited visibility across government on how ecotourism development is progressing. Could you speak to the suggestion that a statewide policy position on ecotourism would provide greater clarity on who is responsible for what and would provide a framework to guide government entities and help them align the individual ecotourism-related strategies and plans?

**Mr Worrall:** The 2032 tourism strategy that we refer to in the report is a general tourism strategy. It is not specifically targeting ecotourism. Even though ecotourism is mentioned in that strategy, it is not really an ecotourism strategy. Then within the entities, the department of environment has its own ecotourism strategy targeting on-park activities, I think it is. Then I think the departments of tourism and environment have some other strategy position. Again, there is no one coherent strategy document and guidelines that brings all of that together as a proponent, whether it is on park, off park or a combination of on and off park. They are the things that would enhance the progress of these things, including engagement with traditional owners and any other associated industry, particularly if it is off park.

**Mr BENNETT:** I was going to ask you about all the strategies that are floating around, but the member for Cook has ticked off on that. Out of your report, I understand there is an interagency at an officer level that have created a working group to try to define this. You also mentioned, Mr Brown, what ecotourism is which I think is their first agenda item, which is from correspondence we only got last month. Has that particular working group been in touch with the AO's office in relation to your report?

**Mr Worrall:** Not that I am aware of.

**Mr Brown:** Not since the audit. No, we have not had any further follow-up.

**Mr SKELTON:** Mr Worrall and Mr Brown, I think you have answered my question, but I recently toured in Tasmania and I think they do ecotourism very well. Mr Worrall, you mentioned they have the off-park facilities quite adjacent to the parks. I had the pleasure of experiencing Cradle Mountain and the Wild Rivers national park, and that is exactly how it works in Tasmania. Would it be beneficial for us as a government to look at Tasmania as an example in regards to ecotourism? I think they do it very well and get that balance.

**Mr Worrall:** I would say if you are trying to develop something, it is always good to try to learn from others, wherever they are. If they are doing it well, that would make a lot of sense; see what they are doing and identify any gaps in terms of what we are or are not doing.

**Mr BERKMAN:** Do you imagine any of the machinery of government changes we have seen since the audit impact on the report's findings or the processes to get those recommendations implemented?

**Mr Worrall:** Potentially not directly. There have been changes, as you noted, whereas I think innovation used to be part of the Department of Tourism and Sport, if I am not mistaken. On the surface, I would say probably not, in relation to the last one or two machinery of government changes. In relation to this matter, I would say probably not.

**Mr BERKMAN:** I have had a particular interest in the proposal within the Coolooloa National Park for some time now. Do you any specific observations about that proposal—both the concerns around the proposal itself and what additional clarity is needed to resolve the very clear tension between segments of the community and traditional owners in that context? I am interested in any of your reflections on that.

**Mr Brown:** Not that particular proposal specifically. I think one of the key elements in terms of the engagement with traditional owners is that approach of partnering with the owners, and that really needs to be something that is there from the outset of the proposal and built into how viable this particular project is. Again, that is where we say that the government department should have the knowledge and experience to help navigate that with proponents around what engagement is needed, how they partner rather than just consult with traditional owners. That was certainly an area where the department of environment and science were very focused, in the discussions I had with them, around the concept that it is not a matter of engaging with First Nations people; it is a matter of partnering with the traditional owners.

**Mr BERKMAN:** Obviously there is complexity involved around consultation with or partnering with traditional owner groups. There can often be a great diversity of views within those groups, and ensuring you are dealing with a genuinely representative body is a complex challenge, to put it lightly, I suppose.

**Mr Brown:** Yes.

**Mr BERKMAN:** A lot of that does obviously flow from the federal native title frameworks and the way that cultural heritage protections in Queensland are fed from those processes. Do you have any reflections on that and whether and how those processes might need to be refined to ensure meaningful and comprehensive partnerships rather than perhaps running the risk of a more narrow subset of traditional owner groups actually being involved in the processes?

**Mr Brown:** Yes. I think it comes back to what the Auditor-General was saying earlier around learning from past experiences in terms of other projects in other areas, in other jurisdictions such as the Commonwealth. There is a lot of engagement across various aspects of government service delivery around how you partner with First Nations people. We need to be learning from that. I think the government agencies here in relation to ecotourism need to be drawing on that expertise and knowledge which has been built up.

**Mr BENNETT:** We talked today about the Commonwealth and the state. Were there any reflections on local government involving planning schemes or other things that came across your remit when you were doing the audit that you would like to share with the committee?

**Mr Worrall:** I think local government has a vested interest in this as well because even though they may not control the protected areas, they have a say in what happens outside those protected areas. If there is suddenly a higher movement of people or there are activities happening outside the protected areas, they obviously have their own processes that will need to be followed. Again, it probably comes back to what I said earlier: the various levels of governments will need to work together. From a proponent's point of view, knowing what that navigation looks like would be a good thing.

**Mr Brown:** Where local government comes more so into play is in those off-park and adjacent-to-park situations. To this point, the vast majority of proposals that have progressed have largely been focused around that on-park aspect. It is likely that local government will become more involved in projects moving forward. Again, this will be where the Department of Environment, Science and Innovation and the Department of Tourism and Sport will need to make sure they are engaging with local government and the industry to help industry navigate through those planning approvals and processes. The difficulty is where a proponent is required to engage with one agency, whether it be local government or one department, and then for the next process has to engage with another process because then the process becomes very linear and that drags out the time lines and complexities and the potential for them to get conflicting guidance or information from different bodies.

**CHAIR:** Mr Worrall, congratulations on your report. I think it is excellent you have raised these issues. I have noted that the entities you audited have responded to your recommendations. In particular, as the deputy chair mentioned earlier, the government has established an ecotourism cross-agency working group which hopefully will be providing a statewide policy position on ecotourism by the second quarter of 2024-25. I say well done; you have gotten that recommendation through. In terms of the other recommendations, in particular around the protected areas and so forth, I understand DESI will be working on that as well. Similarly, I see that the working group has stated that it has identified the streamlining of planning and development, as you have identified, as one of the key areas of priority for ecotourism and have also established a planning and regulation working group under the Queensland government's tourism interdepartmental committee. Do you think that suite of committees and groups that have been put into place could unlock a lot of the issues that you have raised within your report?



**Mr Worrall:** It is a good question you raise. I think in theory absolutely. If you have followed some of my other reports where there have been cross-entity committees where we have drilled down to their activities and attendance and things like that, you will have seen there is a risk that they become less effective over time, particularly where decision-makers are appointed to the committee and the decision-makers do not turn up. The committees end up being committees of proxy attendees. Then things tend to slow down and become less effective with fewer actions coming out of those.

If I come back to what I said, I think in theory those things could and should work. However, it depends on who is on the committee and whether they actually turn up, have a program of work they are going to work their way through, have actions and hold themselves accountable.

**CHAIR:** Do you propose in that situation there should be some sort of incumbency upon those departments to ensure that the decision-makers are always at those meetings?

**Mr Worrall:** I am just talking generally here. I am not really sure of the make-up of this particular committee, but quite often those decision-makers are chief executives like directors-general et cetera. These people are busy people and get pulled in all sorts of directions. My observations in a number of reports is that over time the decision-makers do not get to the meetings as often as they should. Once you get a history of proxies attending, the committees become less effective in terms of what they were set up to achieve. They are less effective in terms of any actions they need to take.

**Mr BENNETT:** This might sound a bit obscure. For the committee's benefit in relation to your inquiry, I am more interested in flora and fauna issues that may have been raised and the pressures from things such as dingos or platypus, which was raised earlier. There may be some unique flora and fauna that was brought to your attention during the ecotourism audit.

**Mr Brown:** There was nothing raised specifically during this audit. We have undertaken a previous audit on invasive species and we have undertaken audits on threatened species. We have covered those areas, particularly in relation to protected lands as well. There were no specific cases that were brought to our attention where they were particular issues.

**Mr BENNETT:** I was thinking about the chair's electorate where there are conflicting issues about animals on certain islands and ecotourism expanding. We have huge marine activity off the coast as well. Thank you. I was curious if that was something that was specifically raised.

**Dr ROBINSON:** Can you elaborate further on how this cross-involvement of different groups may work? For example, coming back to government—and I am using the example of North Stradbroke Island—we had the previous agency of government DERM that was supposed to drive a number of ecotourism projects. It did some planning work around it. It was then thought it was better to widen that to include other departments and bring them under DEEDI. Some of those projects were then meant to be taken up by DEEDI. What we actually found was frustration on the ground of local business entities and others, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who wanted to invest and be involved. They found it more frustrating to deal with a collaboration of agencies and deal with four or five ministers and departments. They found that bureaucracy actually slowed things down and a lot of them went away very frustrated. My question is: how do we not reinvent that wheel from where we are now? What are the better ways forward so we are not overly bureaucratic but there is sufficient cross-involvement of departments?

**Mr Worrall:** In the context of what we are talking about today it probably does come back to those recommendations for the proponents that there are clear pathways and points of engagement and it is known what the roles and responsibilities of the respective entities are so people are not walking the corridors of power, so to speak, trying to get to the right people they need to talk to. Without that being bureaucratic, I agree.

**Mr Brown:** Figure 3E in our report provides a summary of the primary roles and responsibilities of the three agencies that we audited. The primary role of the Department of Tourism and Sport—then tourism, innovation and sport—is to facilitate a strategic whole-of-government approach. That coordination role exists in theory, but something that is missing is some of those things that I mentioned earlier around that clarity of definition of what ecotourism is, that overarching strategy to bring all the components together so that there is a clear, coherent understanding across the agencies about what is needed, what the priorities are and how you are going to achieve them.

**Dr ROBINSON:** What place, for example, is there for departments like EDQ? What place is there for coordinator-generals? I have seen different iterations over my time here of empowering and disempowering coordinator-generals. How do we get that balance right in terms of how you bring in

economic models as well as being sensitive to environments that are critical and the sensitivities around working effectively with Indigenous communities? How do we bring in the economic development side appropriately?

**Mr Worrall:** Again, I think in terms of any pathway piece the government probably needs to outline its tolerances around these things in that it is trying to balance protecting natural and cultural environments versus economic development. If that was part of a pathway piece I think that would at least outline it for this topic we are talking about today.

**Mr Brown:** That whole-of-government coordination role is not just restricted to those three entities that are in the tourism industry. It is about coordinating all aspects of government that might be needed to assess those proposals, to gain the relevant approvals and that sort of thing. If that means coordinating with the Coordinator-General or bringing the Coordinator-General in on a particular proposal or whatever the case may be, that is really something that should be catered for within the overarching strategy, and that whole-of-government coordination role sits with the department.

**Mr BERKMAN:** Obviously it is not at all unusual for protected areas to have limits on visitor numbers for the purpose of the protection of the natural values. Oftentimes when we are talking about undeveloped parks estate, in my experience it is very much a first in, first served kind of thing: you sign up, you get your little permit and you go in. Has the QAO considered the implications for a quality of access where we have ecotourism built infrastructure that comes with sometimes a potentially significant price tag? Obviously that is going to limit accessibility of these protected areas for people who do not have the financial means to pay or to compete for those limited spots. Is that something that was considered?

**Mr Worrall:** No, it was not.

**Mr BERKMAN:** That is fine. Thank you.

**CHAIR:** There being no further questions, I thank you for your evidence here today. I would also like to take the opportunity on behalf of this committee and the public generally to thank the Auditor-General and wish you well in your future endeavours. I understand that you are coming to the end of your tenure.

**Mr Worrall:** In a few months, yes.

**CHAIR:** I want to thank you for your service to Queensland. Congratulations. I would also like to thank the Hansard reporters here today. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee's webpage in due course. I believe there are no questions on notice. With that, I declare this public briefing closed.

**The committee adjourned at 10.56 am.**