



HEALTH, ENVIRONMENT AND INNOVATION COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mr R Molhoek MP—Chair
Ms SL Bolton MP
Ms K-A Dooley MP
Mr JP Kelly MP
Mr HHC Vorster MP
Dr MPT Healy MP

Staff present:

Ms K Jones—Committee Secretary
Miss A Bonenfant—Assistant Committee Secretary

PUBLIC BRIEFING—CONSIDERATION OF AUDITOR-GENERAL REPORT 12: 2022-23— GROWING ECOTOURISM IN QUEENSLAND

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

Wednesday, 17 September 2025

Brisbane

WEDNESDAY, 17 SEPTEMBER 2025

The committee met at 9.32 am.

CHAIR: Good morning. I declare open this public briefing for the committee's inquiry into Auditor-General Report 12: 2022-23—*Growing ecotourism in Queensland*. My name is Robert Molhoek MP. I am the member for Southport and chair of the committee. I acknowledge the Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people of this state and their elders past, present and emerging. I also acknowledge the former members of this parliament who have participated in and nourished the democratic institutions of this state. Finally, I acknowledge the people of this state, whether they have been born here or have chosen to make this state their home, whom we represent to make laws and conduct other business for the peace, welfare and good governance of this state.

With me here today are: Mr Joe Kelly MP, the member for Greenslopes and deputy chair; Ms Sandy Bolton MP, the member for Noosa; Ms Kerri-Anne Dooley MP, the member for Redcliffe; Mr Michael Healy MP, the member for Cairns, who is substituting for Dr Barbara O'Shea MP, the member for South Brisbane; and Mr Hermann Vorster MP, the member for Burleigh, who is substituting for Mr David Lee MP, the member for Hervey Bay.

This briefing is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. Only the committee and invited witnesses may participate in the proceedings. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath or affirmation, but I remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. I also remind members of the public that they may be excluded from the briefing at the discretion of the committee. I remind committee members that officers are here to provide factual or technical information. Any questions seeking opinion about policy should be directed to the minister or left to debate on the floor of the House.

These proceedings are being recorded and broadcast live on the parliament's website. Media may be present and are subject to the committee's media rules and the chair's direction at all times. You may be filmed or photographed during proceedings and images may also appear on the parliament's website or social media pages. Please turn your mobile phones off or switch them to silent mode.

I now welcome witnesses from Tourism and Events Queensland and the Department of the Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation who have been invited to brief the committee. Please remember to turn your microphones on before you start speaking and off when you are finished. I now invite you to brief the committee, after which committee members may have some questions for you.

DAVIDSON, Mr Craig, Chief Executive Officer, Tourism and Events Queensland

KLAASSEN, Mr Ben, Deputy Director-General, Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service and Partnerships, Department of the Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation

O'CALLAGHAN, Ms Patricia, Director-General, Department of the Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation

PATCH, Miss Natalie, Acting Deputy Director-General, Tourism, Department of the Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation

Mr VORSTER: With your indulgence, Mr Chair, I might take this moment to make a declaration. For the benefit of the committee, I would just like to draw your attention to the fact that in a former capacity as a councillor for the City of Gold Coast I had the great pleasure of working alongside our director-general. I was an observer to the board of Destination Gold Coast, which is the destination marketing organisation that looks after this very special part of the Gold Coast. Patricia, of course, was the CEO of that organisation. I just thought I would bring that to your attention.

CHAIR: That is duly noted in *Hansard*. Thank you for that declaration. Director-General, over to you.

Ms O'Callaghan: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the members of the committee for inviting us here today to discuss Auditor-General Report 12: 2022-23—*Growing ecotourism in Queensland*. I am really pleased to outline the Department of the Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation's progress in implementing the report's recommendations. I acknowledge our colleagues here from Tourism and Events Queensland who have been key to that as well.

Since the committee's public briefing in February, the department has made significant progress in advancing sustainable ecotourism in Queensland. The development and release of *Destination 2045: delivering Queensland's tourism future* and Queensland's new ecotourism policy *45 by 45: getting ecotourism moving in Queensland* in June marked a major step in addressing the Queensland Audit Office's recommendations. I am pleased to provide the following updates.

Regarding recommendation 1, developing a statewide ecotourism policy: 45 by 45 provides guiding principles for Queensland's ecotourism development in accordance with the Nature Conservation Act 1992 and establishes a framework for balancing tourism growth with environmental protection.

Regarding recommendation No. 2, develop and implement a statewide ecotourism road map: Destination 2045 serves as a road map for advancing Queensland's ecotourism and streamlining approval processes for operators and investors. The Ecotourism Plan for Queensland's Protected Areas 2025-2030 prioritises five action areas, including delivering innovative and fit-for-purpose ecotourism projects.

Regarding recommendation No. 3, aligning agency plans and strategies: Destination 2045 and its policies and plans guide the department's ecotourism approach. Our internal ecotourism frameworks are being reviewed to ensure alignment. In 2025-26 the Queensland government invested \$40.2 million in new funding to deliver the first of 45 new ecotourism experiences. This includes: \$5 million to support the proposed Whitsunday Skyway; \$19.7 million for the Wangetti Trail; and \$15.5 million for the Smithfield Mountain Bike Park. Further, the government's investment in other capital projects such as the development of cultural and ecotourism opportunities on Palm Island with our First Nations people, new visitor facilities at Springbrook National Park and upgrades to the Lake Eacham day use area at Crater Lakes National Park will further support the growth of ecotourism. Tourism and Events Queensland is developing a strategic approach for growing nature-based tourism to make Queensland a global ecotourism leader. This is backed by an additional \$146 million over two years for TEQ announced in the state budget.

Regarding recommendation No. 4, streamlining government approvals: through Destination 2045 the department is simplifying application processes and permitting arrangements for ecotourism projects on and off protected areas. There is legislation being tabled before the end of the year for a one-permit system in protected areas. This is a tangible example of streamlining. There is also potentially the launch of a tourism support hub, which will again help operators navigate the government's system.

In conclusion, the department is committed to creating a sustainable tourism sector that benefits all Queenslanders by implementing Queensland Audit Office recommendations and delivering Destination 2045. I thank the committee for your interest in this important work. I look forward to answering your questions today.

CHAIR: Thank you, Director. Mr Davidson, do you have an opening statement?

Mr Davidson: No, I do not, Chair. It is great to be here and I am happy to take questions.

CHAIR: We will go to questions from our guests. Do you want to go first, Deputy Chair?

Mr J KELLY: I will defer to the member for Cairns.

Mr HEALY: Thanks, Chair. G'day everyone. It is great to see you, Trish. How are you? I will not declare the fact that we have known each other or Craig for 25 years or anything. We will just get straight into it. I think this question is directed to you, Trish. I am just wondering about the difference between Towards 2032 and Destination 2045 in relation to the ecotourism strategy. Are there any differences in the two, and if so what are those differences?

Ms O'Callaghan: I think the clear delineation between Towards 2032 and Destination 2045 will be the development of the ecotourism policy, which we did not have in the previous document, but also the target of 45 projects by 2045.

Mr HEALY: Just on that—Craig, this is directed to you—and the figure of 45 tourism products coming up as ecotourism products, a lot of us know there will be investment from the private sector. Government have indicated that they are working with the private sector in a range of areas. You

have a team in TEQ that is focused on ensuring engagement with the private sector. This will be a significant increase in their activities. Are you allocating any additional resources to that team? Are you expanding your commercial team at TEQ to accommodate these extra demands?

Mr Davidson: TEQ will not be putting additional resources into the investment growth side of ecotourism products. I think those resources will come from within DETSI. Our role will be to provide input and advice, market input, research and analysis of the types of products that consumers are looking for. Once those products are launched, our role will be to market those products and continue to drive visitation to them.

Mr HEALY: Correct me if I am wrong, but previously TEQ had a team that worked with operators and was looking for investors. That is no longer going to be the responsibility of TEQ. Does that go into the department?

Mr Davidson: I do not have knowledge prior to my time at TEQ. Currently we have an industry development team that works closely with the regions and closely with industry on developing programs to help them improve their products and make them more sustainable. Our role, again, will be to help work with businesses and work closely with industry around how they develop and grow their products but not specifically to look at investment. We certainly are supportive of investment in ecotourism. Our role will be to promote those products and services once they are launched, and probably up to launch, in fairness, as well.

Mr HEALY: Your industry development team will not be involved in any of these projects.

Mr Davidson: The industry development team within TEQ will be there to provide advice, insights and research analysis around how they shape their products and businesses as these ecotourism products come online. They will work in lock step with them. I would also say that each of the regions we are looking at where these projects will be launched sits within our RTO network. We have a close association with our regional tourism organisations around what types of products and services they want in their regions and also around how they launch and market those products and services. You would probably be aware that each of those regions has a destination management plan. DMPs are really important in terms of identifying what products and services are required and where in those regions. We would be there to help support, through our TEQ team, the delivery of those destination management plans, which pick up products, services et cetera.

Ms BOLTON: Director-General, I want to go back to your opening remarks and the progress on the recommendations from report 12. The QAO noted that the overarching tourism strategy was insufficient. I suppose the importance is having a clear strategy. From what you have said, I take it that the strategy and the policy have now been developed. Within those, is there a clear definition of what ecotourism actually is, because it has been inconsistent? Is that clearly defined in that policy?

Ms O'Callaghan: I am really pleased to say the answer is yes to all of the questions you have asked. Recommendation 1 was implemented through the release of *Destination 2045: delivering Queensland's tourism future* and then in the subsequent ecotourism policy—*45 by 45: getting ecotourism moving in Queensland*—which was also announced in June this year. 45 by 45 outlines what ecotourism is, our approach to ecotourism in Queensland, our approach for priorities both on and off protected areas and how we will engage with proponents to achieve the aspiration of being the world's leading ecotourism destination. I am also pleased to say that the definition of 'ecotourism' aligns with the Nature Conservation Act 1992.

Ms BOLTON: Does our committee have copies of those policies and plans?

Ms O'Callaghan: They are all available publicly on the website. If the committee does not have copies, I am more than happy to share them with you.

Ms BOLTON: When considering ecotourism projects, what consultation will the department undertake with the community to ensure a social licence, similar to the government's policy for renewable energy projects?

Ms O'Callaghan: I think we have made it really clear that we will not be reducing environmental protections when considering any ecotourism projects. Obviously, engaging with the community is key. There are robust processes in place to make sure I make informed and appropriate decisions under the relevant legislation and regulations. Also, it is important to acknowledge that departmental officers make thorough assessments of every project put to the department prior to them coming to me for my consideration as the delegate. We also know that a thriving environment is central to a thriving tourism industry in Queensland, and we are not prepared to jeopardise either.

Ms BOLTON: How would you say the ecotourism policy addresses the potential risks of overtourism in certain areas?

Ms O'Callaghan: I think all of us here know that, together, Queensland's unique natural assets and strong tourism industry can position us globally as a leader in ecotourism. With regard to that, Destination 2045 and the ecotourism policy provide the overarching framework to advance ecotourism in Queensland.

When it comes to balancing overtourism, we will continue to monitor data on visitor numbers to national parks, which will provide high-level indicators regarding visitation and the natural environment. It is also important to note that Queensland Parks and Wildlife has many tools to address visitor capacities, including management plans, visitor strategies and sustainable visitor capacity management studies, on its estate. There are also important evaluation and planning tools to inform commercial activities issued by QPWS. We also use a range of studies based on community consultation and independent observations of visitor usage or recreational trends and assessments of sustainability of visitor interactions with natural environments and our infrastructure. We have a lot of years of data and, obviously, our engagement with the community, which we heavily prioritised through the development of Destination 2045 and will remain central to our moving forward.

Ms BOLTON: What red tape will be cut from these ecotourism projects?

Ms O'Callaghan: I know this was part of the QAO's recommendations and was still outstanding. The department is simplifying and streamlining government engagement for the tourism and events industry. We are reducing duplication in permit and approval processes. In my opening statement I mentioned legislation that will be tabled before the end of the year to streamline permits for protected areas.

We are also reviewing tenure and permits to enhance the protection of our natural environments and streamlining business support. Later in the year, the minister will be announcing the launch of the tourism support hub. Again, it will be a central hub for operators and potential investors in navigating the government system. There are a number of different areas that we are addressing from QAO, and we are also setting up the department for the future.

Mr VORSTER: Director-General, I would like to unpack how the new ecotourism policies are in fact aligned with Destination 2045, noting that recommendation 3 of the report talks about the need for there to be a better alignment or a better fit between the pillars of our tourism strategies. Are there any marked changes between a previous approach and what we are taking now?

Ms O'Callaghan: Probably the biggest difference in approach is that we now have an overarching strategy in Destination 2045, which an ecotourism policy has been developed from. In Destination 2045, we know that ecotourism is one of the six pillars of priority for the government, and the policy has been developed as a result of that. From there, the implementation and investment frameworks are all being updated.

Destination 2045 does set the vision for ecotourism in Queensland. It provides context, including that ecotourism is a key competitive advantage for our state, and offers significant potential to create future jobs, support local communities and unlock opportunities for operators. It outlines the aspiration for Queensland to become the world's leader in ecotourism. It articulates that a central component of this vision is fostering understanding, appreciation and conservation of our natural environment. It sets an overarching intent to review and streamline the regulatory system to provide clear and consistent pathways for industry whilst, importantly, delivering better outcomes for the environment.

To support the implementation of Destination 2045, the department has also developed a suite of ecotourism documents and applicant support tools. This has all been entailed within the policy, along with the commitments and the associated documents.

Mr VORSTER: The member for Noosa asked a question around social licence. To my mind, that is often achieved through consultation. Would you mind talking me through how the theme of ecotourism emerged through the consultation process around Destination 2045? How did that drive greater alignment or place greater emphasis on ecotourism as a pillar?

Ms O'Callaghan: It is important to note that ecotourism very much came through from the industry, and in Queensland our tourism industry are very passionate about the natural assets in which they are providing their experiences. In Destination 2045, consultation was vital because we knew that Queensland and Queenslanders were going to be the heart of this plan. In that consultation, we partnered with our regional tourism organisations, our councils and our industry operators to deliver 16 face-to-face workshops, which were attended by 1,400 people, and we also received hundreds of submissions. Ecotourism was front and centre of the consultation process for the development of 2045. It was identified as a key pillar, so we wanted to hear directly from the industry.

From that, we asked our industries and also the Queensland communities: how can Queensland best deliver the attractive and adventurous experiences that Queenslanders and visitors are seeking, whilst showcasing and preserving our natural environment; how can industry help to position Queensland as the leader in eco- and nature-based tourism; and what can governments at all levels do to facilitate more eco- and nature-based tourism experiences? We also held an ecotourism deep dive—a round table—with specific stakeholders that had an interest in or a passion for ecotourism. I am really pleased to say that that feedback was also taken into consideration.

I also want to acknowledge that all our industry associations which had very strong views on ecotourism—the Queensland Tourism Industry Council, Ecotourism Australia, QUT, Griffith University and the National Parks Association of Queensland—lodged submissions around this. The feedback we have had on Destination 2045 and the ecotourism policy is that their views have been reflected in a majority.

CHAIR: Director-General, before we move on, it would be great if we could get copies of Destination 2045 and the policy. We would all love the hard copies, not the downloaded versions.

Ms O'Callaghan: I am more than happy to provide those.

CHAIR: I attended one of the forums on the Gold Coast. It was great to see the broad consultation and the huge number who attended the arts centre. I think there were about 300 people. Would you like to comment on those forums more generally? How were they conducted? What were some of the biggest challenges that people identified through those forums in respect of ecotourism and developing the strategy moving forward?

Ms O'Callaghan: Thank you for attending and participating in those forums. Resoundingly, the feedback was that the Queensland tourism industry in particular is very passionate about protecting our natural environments in Queensland. We have five World Heritage areas. Even within our portfolio, we are managing approximately 1,000 national parks and state forests. There is an opportunity to protect, but what really came out was that we also need to showcase those experiences and provide an education platform for not just visitors but Queenslanders as well.

There was a really strong appetite for Queensland to be recognised not just domestically but also globally as a leader in ecotourism experiences, whilst also protecting and managing our natural environments. Having lived in North Queensland, I know how our tourism operators engage with the Great Barrier Reef and also play a conservation role. How can we do this better in Queensland and use the tourism industry not only as ambassadors but also as conservationists so we can educate visitors? It was really great to hear that feedback come through.

We also heard of the challenges of investing in ecotourism for Queensland. That is where the feedback came through around streamlining our regulatory processes, making sure that we are coordinated as a government. It is not unusual for an investor to have to deal with three or four departments as well as three levels of government—local, state and federal. We know that the Commonwealth has a vested interest in ecotourism through regulation and legislation. That is why we will have a case management service when the tourism support hub is launched. That will provide one-on-one assistance to our potential investors to help them navigate these systems and provide corporate knowledge. I know that, from a marketing point of view, Tourism and Events Queensland are working up a lot of information and potential plans around nature-based tourism, which I am sure the TEQ CEO can attest to. If it is okay, Chair, the TEQ CEO could talk about their nature-based marketing.

Mr Davidson: Thanks, Director-General. Our role at Tourism and Events Queensland is to tell those great stories and great narratives to the world and to the rest of Australia to drive visitation to these great places. Our work revolves around understanding what the consumer needs and wants in terms of nature-based tourism, understanding what each of our regions are wanting to achieve through their plans and putting together marketing plans and brand campaigns that work to drive visitation to these great products.

What is great for Tourism and Events Queensland is seeing new products and new news as well. It does not have to be an ecotourism product, but in that space we know that consumers are looking for nature-based experiences. It is one of the key drivers of visitation, and it is growing. Telling stories of new products or revitalised products in terms of ecotourism in the ecotourism space is aligned with our strategy in terms of how we drive visitation.

Ms DOOLEY: The QAO has noted that previous approaches to ecotourism did not have the risk appetite needed to stimulate greater ecotourism investment and benefits, so what work has the department done to broaden the scope of potential ecotourism development? I appreciate you have addressed some of that already in your responses this morning. Could you elaborate on that?

Ms O'Callaghan: What we can confidently say is: it is taking a new approach to ecotourism development in Queensland. The overarching framework in Destination 2045 sets the clear expectations and guidelines for ecotourism and then, the associated policy, *45 by 45: Getting ecotourism moving in Queensland*, sets the framework in which ecotourism potential will be realised. This is all about enabling responsible tourism growth while safeguarding natural and cultural values for future generations. I know I have mentioned the policy, but it does provide a clear vision for advancing ecotourism and promoting environmental stewardship and cultural recognition and demonstrates the government's priorities to simplify approvals and reduce duplication while tailoring support for tourism operators.

To advance a new approach to ecotourism in the department, there is a clear direction to deliver 45 world-class ecotourism projects by 2045; for example, increasing the state's dark-sky tourism experiences, which I think will open up a lot of potential for Queensland across the state, especially in some of our outback regions; increasing light-footprint accommodation options in protected areas; and importantly, conserving Queensland's natural assets.

There are nine key initiatives under the ecotourism pillar of Destination 2045. This includes a commitment to work with private investors on ecotourism facilities. Key initiatives that broaden ecotourism opportunities include, as I mentioned, increasing and expanding the dark-sky reserves across the state; delivering our Queensland parks experience program, which showcases our rangers' expertise and environmental custodianship—having spent a fair bit of time on the ground with our rangers, as I know our DDG has, I know that they are really passionate about this opportunity to share their story; providing new visitor experiences and enhancing accessibility to protected areas through appropriate light-footprint accommodation; and working with our First Nations people to support culture and country and to create access to our valued experiences. Agritourism also came up through the consultation—how we encourage more farmstays and experiences, helping farmers to diversify and improve on-farm profitability.

We are backing our private investment in ecotourism through grants and streamlining approvals for operators. The minister has just announced a Tourism Icons Investment Fund and the Regional Tourism Infrastructure Fund, at a total of \$100 million, to support tourism developments including ecotourism.

Mr J KELLY: Ben, I am interested in overtourism. I have spent a fair bit of time travelling in the States over the last 30 years, and on many occasions I have been to ecotourism type activities where the numbers of people participating or visiting sites or experiences are quite controlled. Is that something the national parks and wildlife service would have to incorporate into an ecotourism strategy here, particularly in highly sensitive areas?

Mr Klaassen: As the director-general indicated earlier, we have a range of measures that we use to manage visitor numbers. Through our management plans, we can control access and the number of people who go to particularly sensitive areas. We work with tourism operators around the number of persons they take to particular locations to manage the number of visitors at any one time. We work collaboratively with regional tourism organisations around promotion and how to highlight areas that maybe are not getting as much visitation to try and shift the loads in some instances. There are a range of strategies we try to use. We also have our camping system that regulates the number of people who can stay overnight in various locations. There is an integrated approach. We have visitor strategies for highly visited areas which regulate the number of people, locations and the access and infrastructure needs to manage how people get to key locations. There are a range of measures we use to assist and adapt the number of visitors we get.

Mr J KELLY: Presumably, scientific advice drives the numbers and how many people should be in areas at particular times?

Mr Klaassen: It is based on a mix of factors from sustainable visitor capacity studies on the number of people that an area is equipped to handle to visitation trends and data; the particular landscape and the environment in terms of what it can cater for; and what infrastructure we can put in place to protect the environment and manage the load, whether that is a boardwalk or a lookout or a walking track. Things like that influence how we go about it and set the right visitation strategies to manage the level of visitation and the impact on the environment.

Mr J KELLY: Are there processes in place for ongoing monitoring and response if there is found to be negative impacts on sites or on flora and fauna?

Mr Klaassen: Yes. We have what is known as a values-based management framework. As part of that process we do health checks across our priority national parks. That includes rangers out in the field doing an assessment across all the values; any impacts or issues that are affecting the

value; and what we need to put in place to manage, monitor and report on that and take action if necessary. That process has been going for a few years now. We are just starting to get the richness of data that informs us and those management decisions.

Mr J KELLY: Recently we have had a couple of world-famous 'idiot-fluencers' engaging with wildlife that they should not touch for any particular reason. If you have ecotourism operators bringing people into an area where even one-off small actions by a moron doing the wrong thing can have devastating impacts, to what level is it anticipated the ecotourism operator would be held responsible for the behaviours of the people they are bringing into a sensitive area?

Mr Klaassen: Where operators are permitted to work on the protected area estate, there are clear conditions and expectations around how they manage their guests. That includes ensuring they adhere to the appropriate laws of the state, managing behaviour and being mindful of other visitors. We do have a framework in place around that. In today's world everyone has a camera, so people can report things to us and we do investigate matters that get reported and follow through and take appropriate action as necessary. Most tourism operators are very responsible. They educate their guests, they want to go out into these environments to promote Queensland and give people a nature-based experience. They value their permit so they do not engage in silly activities, and if people are doing things they should not they take action very quickly.

Mr J KELLY: I assume these operators have to be authorised or need a licence of some description to move into these areas, so is there a potential penalty of the removal of these authorisations and licences if they are not complying?

Mr Klaassen: Yes. To operate in a protected area you need a permit under the Nature Conservation Act. That permit has conditions that need to be met and, yes, there are penalties should they not be met. We operate on a basis of working with the operators in educating them, but in a particular scenario it is possible a permit could be suspended or removed if there was poor behaviour.

Mr HEALY: Trish, you noted in your opening remarks—

CHAIR: Members, if I can just pull the committee up. We have been using Christian names a little bit through the meeting. I think we probably should be just a little more formal. I have fallen into that trap as well. It is for the benefit of Hansard as well.

Mr HEALY: Director-General, in your opening remarks you touched on the fact there was \$146 million of funding for ecotourism. Does that include the \$100 million—the \$80 million and the \$20 million—which was recently announced for tourism development? Does that include that money or is there \$146 million in totally separate funding for ecotourism?

Ms O'Callaghan: The \$146 million was referring to TEQ's additional funding. I will get the exact numbers, but I think the number I had in my opening statement was \$40 million for ecotourism projects and the \$100 million funding grant programs that were announced are in addition. I will just make sure I get those facts right for you all.

Mr HEALY: Is that \$40 million for TEQ or is that for the department?

Ms O'Callaghan: In the 2025-26 state budget, the Queensland government has invested \$40.2 million in new funding to deliver the first suite of ecotourism projects. This includes Wangetti and Smithfield. The \$100 million is in addition to that. That is for tourism grant programs that are specific for the industry to apply for.

Mr HEALY: Okay, but not specifically ecotourism? Basically, there is \$40.2 million that will be specifically for ecotourism and the rest is for an operator, like the one I spoke to this morning, who is putting in for funding?

Ms O'Callaghan: You are correct. It is probably important for me to note that in those guidelines ecotourism projects are highly encouraged.

Mr HEALY: I noted from the information provided that the ecotourism working group seems to be a key aspect of the department. What is the composition of that working group?

Ms O'Callaghan: There is an ecotourism project control group that has been put together, and I chair that ecotourism group. That consists of representatives from DETSI as well as TEQ. Around that, we also have a number of other different intergovernmental groups. There is now an ecotourism intergovernmental group with other departments which has been pulled together by our director of ecotourism. That is to ensure some consistency and engagement across all of government on ecotourism as well. I also want to acknowledge that there is a Tourism Cabinet Committee that is chaired by the minister with all of the director-generals and ministers from a number of different portfolios. Again, ecotourism is a priority for that cabinet committee.

Mr HEALY: Are there any private operators, organisations or entities that are involved in either of those groups?

Ms O'Callaghan: At this stage, no, there are no private entities involved in those groups.

Mr HEALY: Is that expected to expand? Are you expecting to get the private sector involved?

Ms O'Callaghan: The private sector engagement very much was done to develop Destination 2045 as well as the ecotourism policy. We will continue to engage with the private sector, but at this stage we do not have plans right now to invite the private sector onto those groups. We are engaging with industry associations that represent private sector operators, but there are no specific invitations at this stage.

Mr HEALY: My last question is to Mr Davidson, the Chief Executive Officer of Tourism and Events Queensland. Mr Davidson, as I said earlier, by all accounts, from listening to what has been said this morning, there is going to be a strong focus on ecotourism. What changes to Tourism and Events Queensland internally will you need to make or do you envisage, taking into account that there is a big focus being pushed down from government?

Mr Davidson: When Destination 2045 was launched we did an initial review of our strategic plans, and we will continue to do that. We will provide our board with an update to our strategic plans by the end of this year. We are in the process of developing an ecotourism plan for Tourism and Events Queensland. We would envisage that that would be active by the end of the financial year. We are certainly looking at our strategic position once the 20-year plan was delivered. Then we will look at our resourcing. We already have quite substantial resourcing within TEQ around the industry sector and ecotourism. You can rest assured we do have good people in place already in that space.

I think we are looking at what it means for the development of our new products and projects within the state and also the ability for us to showcase those. Things like the ranger program I would call out as something that has also been called out in the 20-year plan. We think there is a significant opportunity to activate our rangers around the state as a great resource. We have great people. We have plans in place, supported by DETSI, to invest in those ranger programs and education programs around the state to really highlight how they can be part of the journey. I think it is a combination of physical product being delivered by industry that we can promote but also looking at the people in the industry who are already engaged, particularly through Ben's team.

Ms BOLTON: Deputy Director-General, there has been a lot of talk about control measures and the value management framework. As you are aware, Cooloola for the last eight years has been seeking to reduce the impacts that have been experienced by uncontrolled numbers of visitors. That occurs because of the day permits. There is no cap on them and no way to actually reduce those numbers. Understandably, there are concerns about the current control measures in place. What will bring greater faith and trust going forward that the issues being experienced at Cooloola will not be replicated elsewhere? I do not think anyone on a nature-based visit wants to see turtle hatchlings being run over, which is what is happening.

Mr Klaassen: Yes. As you know, we have been working on Cooloola issues for many years. We have invested additional rangers there to do compliance. We are actively working with Queensland police on joint patrols. I am pleased to say that, certainly over the last 12 months, I think it has moderated a bit at Teewah Beach. There are still behavioural issues that we are working to manage at certain peak times. We are looking to do what we can to manage the visitor numbers.

The day permit is a policy matter of government, so I am not going to be able to discuss that. We certainly appreciate the issues that have been raised by the community and by members. We are working closely with the turtle volunteer groups again to be ready for the upcoming turtle season so we can ensure that any nests are protected or relocated as they need to be. We are doing as much as we can to ensure the protection of that particular area, which is a very popular destination for people from South-East Queensland.

Ms BOLTON: I am sorry to interrupt, but what I am seeking is assurance that in all of the policies and the plans there is a recognition that there are control measures in place. They have failed previously. What is being added to ensure that Cooloola and the damage that is being done there is not replicated in other areas?

Mr Klaassen: I think there is some uniqueness around Cooloola that would not make it replicable across other locations because of the easy access of four-wheel drive beach areas. We are not looking at promoting additional four-wheel drive beach access. We are talking about how we encourage ecotourism that balances the unique environment in the location. As a project is put forward, we go through a detailed assessment process to see how it interacts with that local

environment, what is the community perspective on it and how it will add value to the tourism industry but also look at the economic and social piece. There is an environmental piece that goes through all of our assessment process which is how we assess whether we will approve something to go forward in a protected area.

Ms BOLTON: Director-General, you have mentioned light-foot accommodations. What does that actually mean, especially given that the cardinal principle of the NCA—which is protection and conservation—was raised as potentially incompatible with on-park ecotourism? Obviously, it has been raised many times. What are we looking at? Are we looking at commercial resorts ending up in our national parks in increasing numbers?

Ms O'Callaghan: You raise a really important point. In the ecotourism policy, ecotourism is very much still defined by the Nature Conservation Act. When it comes to light-foot accommodation, we will be assessing proposals on a case-by-case basis. Realistically, we have given examples in the ecotourism policy. That would be in the form of tiny cabins and small huts, potentially.

If I can take that even further, small-scale, low-impact ecotourism is about size and layout, and small land areas with facilities designed for limited visitor numbers. We will also be taking into consideration visitation numbers and activities; smaller operations focusing on lower impact experiences; environmental and cultural impact of operations, minimising any impacts on the site's natural and cultural values; access and infrastructure utilising existing visitor infrastructure such as walking tracks and access routes, and relying on sustainable utilities such as rainwater tanks and solar power. Then small-scale facilities, as I have mentioned, can be safari tents, walkers' huts and eco-cabins. We know there are examples not just in Australia but around the world of light-foot accommodation in World Heritage areas and protected areas as well that we can use as best-case scenarios.

Ms BOLTON: A timeline for launching the tourism support hub?

Ms O'Callaghan: The minister will be announcing the launch of the tourism support hub, and I know that is imminent.

Mr VORSTER: Speaking about visitor numbers, Burleigh Head National Park I think attracts 1.3 million visitors. I stand to be corrected, but it is simultaneously our smallest and perhaps busiest national park loved by locals and also by tourists. Overnight a fire tore through part of the eastern part of Burleigh Head National Park and it has forced the closure of the Oceanview Track, which I regard not only as a recreational asset but as a tourism asset as well. How will we ensure that when ecotourism assets become so tied to our lifestyle and economy we are doing all that is necessary to keep them safe and accessible and we are building resilience into that estate so that when we do have small-scale events like spot fires in national parks we can bounce back more quickly?

Ms O'Callaghan: I will say around our protected areas that our Queensland Parks and Wildlife are very in tune with not just the management and protection of those sites but also ensuring access for our visitors and Queenslanders alike. I acknowledge the incident that happened overnight. We know that that is being investigated and assessed. We will be looking at the opening of that particular experience as soon as we possibly can. I will hand over to our DDG to talk further about some of the strategies.

Even in natural disasters, you can see our Queensland Parks and Wildlife team are on the ground immediately post a disaster. They do their assessments and investigations very quickly and will reopen where it is safe to do so as quickly as possible, because we know how important those experiences are to Queenslanders as well as to visitors.

We also acknowledge that the government has increased the resourcing for our rangers. There was a commitment for 150 additional rangers to support not just the management of our current protected area estate but also understanding that ecotourism is a really important part of that. We are really pleased about that 150-ranger commitment. Our Indigenous land and sea rangers are also key in that establishment. There are a number of different measures. There is additional resourcing. We also want to acknowledge that the experience and background of our rangers is incredibly inspiring and it has been great to spend some time with them. DDG, would you like to provide any further context around that?

Mr Klaassen: With reference to the Oceanview Track, as the member would appreciate, we do have particular triggers in place around events that need some short-term closures. We had to close that track at about 10 o'clock last night as the fire was proceeding. We had staff on the ground until midnight. It was extinguished. They are doing their assessments at the moment. We will get that

track opened up as quickly as we can. Those boulders that are perched up there can be impacted as a result of the fire. We have to do some quick safety assessments to make sure that is all okay, and then we will reopen it as quickly as possible.

Mr VORSTER: Just on those boulders, as part of that safety assessment will there be any geotechnical assessment carried out? I am mindful of the fact after ex-Tropical Cyclone Alfred we had a rockslide on the other side of the national park. Will that safety assessment make sure we can open up that track as quickly as possible but only when it is safe?

Mr Klaassen: We have had extensive geotechnical work done on the boulders. As a result of that, there are some trigger points that we have mapped out that allow us to make our own assessments as to whether we need to get a specialist in or not. Without knowing exactly the full extent of it, the team are doing that work right now. If we do not need any further geotechnical assessment then we will be able to get that done very quickly. We are working to reopen it as fast as we possibly can.

Mr VORSTER: That is great news. Thank you.

CHAIR: We are pretty much out of time. I have one final question for the director-general. It is probably of a personal nature. If I were contemplating a road trip, considering what is in store for us under Destination 2045, what would be the one place that I should be planning to go and visit?

Mr HEALY: It is Cairns, obviously!

CHAIR: I am not taking that injection from the member for Cairns.

Ms O'Callaghan: I would probably say that I would start either in the far north at the tip or down south at the Gold Coast and make your way through all the five World Heritage areas, the thousand state forests and national parks, taking in the reef, the outback, our beaches and our rainforests as well.

Mr HEALY: Very well said.

CHAIR: That is a very diplomatic response. I think we have just been granted permission as a committee do a road trip, which would be a little bit more exciting than some of the other work we have been doing in recent months. That concludes this briefing. Thank you to everyone who has participated today. Thank you to our Hansard reporters. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee's webpage in due course. I do not believe there were any questions taken on notice, but we did ask for hard copies of the 2045 strategy for each committee member. With that, I declare this public briefing closed.

The committee adjourned at 10.29 am.