

Committee Secretary
Transport and Resources Committee
Parliament House
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6th April 2022

Re: Inquiry into the economic and regulatory frameworks for Queensland's island resorts

Thank you for the opportunity to make comment to the inquiry into the economic and regulatory frameworks for Queensland's island resorts. I will confine my submission to tourism in the Keppel Island Group and the Capricorn Coast of CQ as that is my field of knowledge. Having said that, abandoned tourism destinations and stranded assets in and adjacent to this part of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park are mirrored in other places where I have friends living, on Keswick Island and Dunk Island as well as those with an interest in abandoned resorts on islands among the Whitsunday group.

Clearly in the past there have been insufficient regulatory constraints when approving development on Island resorts in the GBRMP to prevent long term land banking by both national and international investment companies.

There are at least three large-scale and abandoned resorts (Great Keppel Island, Iwasaki Capricorn Integrated Resort and the 41.8ha Zilzie Bay resort) that have previously operated here on the Capricorn Coast. These resorts have left a negative environmental legacy through the loss of vegetation, foredunes and wetlands, the remains of collapsed buildings and infrastructure, and now with no ongoing land management resulting in weed and feral species invasion. There are no large-scale tourism resorts currently operating in our coastal region.

In addition, tourist developments have previously been constructed on Wild Duck and Kanomie (North Keppel) islands, but neither of these was ever opened and both have since been transferred to State ownership for education and conservation purposes.

By contrast, smaller eco-friendly tourism developments currently operate on Pumpkin Island and at both Fisherman's and Svendsen's beach on Great Keppel Island, with these smaller tourist destinations operating successfully for many years. Likewise, camping areas within National Parks on GBR islands are relatively sustainable.

/2.

I am a member of a community group in Central Queensland which has been advocating for the preservation of the relatively unspoiled environment on Woppa (Great Keppel Island or GKI) since 2007 when the Qld Government transferred the commercial leases on Woppa/GKI to Tower Holdings Pty Ltd.'s subsidiary, GKI Resort Pty Ltd. The sole owner of the two companies is Mr Terrence Agnew, a Sydney based real estate developer. Tower produced an Environmental Impact Statement over a decade ago. This EIS, and the approvals attached to it, are now very much outdated and should be revoked. For any sort of Social Licence to be granted a new EIS would first need to be prepared and the approval process started over from the beginning.

Mr Agnew made it clear in a recorded interview in 2021 that his plan was never primarily for Tourism; rather he had always intended to create a massive real estate development.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1866511450239902/permalink/3682782951946067/> Land banking on Qld Coastal Islands is rife under the current regulatory system and sadly not all of the leases on these Islands are even owned by Australian entities.

Our group, Capricorn GKI Alliance, has a particular interest in ensuring that all land use on islands in the Keppel group is sustainable and does not significantly impact on the terrestrial environment or that of the surrounding Marine Park. We have always maintained the Tower proposal for Woppa/GKI would be particularly destructive to both and, were it ever to proceed, it would almost certainly lead to stranded assets in a few decades time, just as happened in 2008 when Tower closed and stripped out the old resort. The failure of all three levels of Government to have Tower comply with the conditions of the State leases, and the timelines laid out in the Conditions of the Federal Approvals, has had a negative impact of tourism in this area on an ongoing basis. It has even been suggested that the example set by Tower was followed by the Iwasaki Company when they closed their own resort on the mainland. Government regulators it seemed were either asleep at the wheel or just not willing to have these big developers adhere to their original agreements to develop and maintain the agreed tourism business on their leases.

A thorough assessment of the reasons that large-scale tourism resorts have failed in this region is important to fully understand if they can ever be sustainable in Central Queensland without Social Licence from the Traditional (Woppaburra) Owners and the wider community of stakeholders to whom the natural values of islands, and the surrounding Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, is so important. We are all pro-development but also acutely aware that any future tourism development on all GBR islands must protect the natural values of the area and not simply seek to maximise short term profits and subsequently leave an adverse environmental outcome.

After many years of lobbying we, as an across community group, finally managed to convince the Qld Government that the expectations of the tourism market had shifted away from a prohibitively costed 5 star resort experience and that both domestic and international tourists were now looking for a lower budget and much more natural experience when visiting offshore islands such as those in the Keppel group.

/3.

To that end the Qld Department of Planning and infrastructure was contracted by the Tourism Department, 8 months ago to canvas opinion and ideas as to the development of Woppa (GKI) from a wide range of local stakeholders including, island residents, business owners deriving their income from tourism on the island, Capricorn Enterprises (our local Tourism and Development organisation), the three organisations representing the interests of the Woppaburra (and the Council of Tribal Elders who overarch those three groups), representatives from the Committee of our Capricorn GKI Alliance, representatives of Great Keppel Island progress Association (GKIPA formerly the registered business Our Keppel Our Future, (OKOF) our nemesis group of vocal business men and women who would see development at any cost), and interested members of the local population who frequent the island for recreational purposes.

Our task was to produce a Masterplan to guide development on Woppa (GKI) over the next few decades. This process has now been ongoing for the past 7 months and arriving at a consensus has involved hundreds of hours of time and effort under the expert guidance of Mrs Nikki Wright, Regional Director, Regional Services, Department of State Development, Infrastructure and Planning.

No genuine survey can overlook the thorough Master planning process we have undertaken and the conclusions we have reached which are contained in our mission statement:

“Woppa (Great Keppel Island) is an inclusive, globally celebrated and loved, low impact marine and tourism destination, delivering world-class interpretation and experiences that support the maintaining, protecting and nurturing of the island’s diverse ecosystems and cultural land and sea country of the Woppaburra”

The Qld Government first promised \$25 million dollars in a pre-election promise some 8 yrs. ago, and subsequently added a further \$5 million for common use infrastructure to support Tourism on Woppa (GKI). \$4 million of this was wasted scoping out the politically motivated need for a power and water connection from the mainland, which was subsequently found to have not been needed or wanted.

The Master-planning Project Reference Group (PRG) has identified the need for the following public use infrastructure to address the current access and other challenges for lease holders to assist the redevelopment, of Woppa/GKI for tourist, residential and public purposes:

1. Cyclone rated jetty
2. Barge slant boat ramp
3. Visitor facilities including and all-purpose amenities block powered by Solar with backup generators.
4. Upgrading the current waste water treatment plant on the island
5. More shade and seating, both on fisherman’s beach and at vantage points around the island.
6. Rehabilitate existing walking trails and construction of new walking trails with viewing platforms at strategic places.

Obviously there will be a need to access other funding streams from all three tiers of Government if all this much promised work is to be completed. /4.

What we have seen on Woppa/GKI over the past 10 yrs. is small, largely owner-operated, tourism orientated businesses attracting new and return visitors to Queensland and to our part of the Great Barrier Reef. One of the greatest existing constraints impacting economic development opportunities on our island are 99yr leases over large areas of land leased to one big entity. This is not the way forward. In the past 6 years we have seen 4 such entities attempt to buy Tower's leases. A fifth is now looking at doing the same.

Hancock Prospecting has no social licence from our community to turn Woppa /GKI into Australia's version of Spain's Puerto Banús. To begin with, there are no deep enough bays on Woppa/GKI to build a marina and under no circumstances will our community see any of the shallow beaches dredged to build one. Hancock's executives have not gone about endearing themselves to our local community and their constant insistence on "cutting red and greed tape" in order to expedite their vision using Tower's existing EIS, and the approvals it attracted, are not universally welcomed in our community.

The Woppaburra are the Native Title holders of the Keppel Sea Country and all 6 families would need to endorse any proposals for development on GKI. To my knowledge, Hancock has thus far approached just one of the members of just one of the 6 families. It cannot therefore be said that the aspirations of the Traditional Owners have been incorporated into any of Hancock's proposed plans. Only a robust engagement with the Traditional Owners and the wider community of stakeholders will allow for an open and transparent dispute resolution as well as support an appropriate process and service standard for transfer of interests in leases and sub leases.

I submit that in order for any redevelopment of the old commercial leases to co-exist with the protected area both onshore and within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park areas, Lot 21 needs to revert to its former status as a recreational lease only and smaller multiple owned and operated tourist ventures on the old commercial footprint are preferable to having one sole entity dictating to the rest of the island's occupants how they should work and live for the next 100yrs.

In any event, given the time lapse since the current EIS was prepared by Tower, a current and up to date EIS now needs to be prepared if there is to be any deviation from the Approved plans, thus allowing both the Woppaburra and the wider community to have current input into the decision making process. Without this occurring, no future developer can hope to achieve an appropriate development that supports strong social, environmental, economic, and cultural outcomes.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Powell

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