

## **TOWARDS A REALISTIC APPROACH TO TOURISM MANAGEMENT IN NOOSA SHIRE**

Noosa Parks Association (NPA) sees the issue of tourism and its impacts as the key challenge facing the Noosa Shire going forward. NPA is less than satisfied with the half-hearted focus that has been given to this pressing issue by the current Noosa Council, plus the secretive efforts of the Destination Management Project Control Group. We are aware of reports that the handful of external reference group members were asked to sign non-disclosure agreements if they wished to continue to work with the council's appointed destination management group. The clear implication is that council believes there are destination management issues that residents should not be privy to.

Destination management is a discussion that could not be more important for Noosa, yet the debate over the past three and a half years has been focussed solely on Noosa Council, Tourism Noosa, and vested business interests. The glaring omission from the dialogue has been Noosa residents. Belatedly, the council is now undertaking a dubious consultation process via an online survey seeking responses to a Discussion Paper that has been prepared without any genuine resident input and without Limit of Acceptable Change (LAC) research. Given its track record, NPA does not believe that the current Noosa Council is genuine in its approach to resident concerns on this matter. Nor do we believe that Tourism Noosa has a sincere interest in resolving simmering resentment amongst residents towards the tourism sector.

Of course, NPA acknowledges that tourism is an important slice of Noosa's economic profile. We also accept that some residents benefit from businesses and activities that are largely pitched at visitors. However, we also understand that tourism is around 14% of the total economy (NIEIR figures in Noosa Council's .idcommunity demographic resources for 2021/22). Other areas of significant employment include construction, professional services, education, and health care. Tourism should not be allowed to overshadow or impact on the 86% of business activity that is not tourism focussed. While some residents may benefit directly or indirectly from tourism, most do not. Furthermore, there are clear and evident impacts on resident amenity arising from the concerted effort to turn Noosa Shire into Australia's most popular tourist destination.

The following is a set of principles that NPA believes to be essential to managing tourism and, importantly, its impact on Noosa residents.

### **1. RESIDENT AMENITY SHOULD BE BETTER PRIORITISED**

Noosa needs to get the balance right between resident amenity and the many ways in which tourism impacts on residents. This includes not only access to public spaces, but also traffic congestion, road closures, public transport, council spending and the liveability of residential areas. At present, there is growing frustration amongst residents directed towards the tourism sector. This has the potential to evolve into outright hostility which will, in turn, impact on the visitor experience. It is thus in the tourism sector's interests to better manage the destination and tourism impacts.

### **2. PRIORITISE VALUE-OVER-VOLUME**

Tourism Noosa's pre-Covid approach aspired to be one of value-over-volume. That meant no marketing to drive-in or day trippers, with the entire focus on visitors from places such as Sydney, Melbourne and overseas (often referred to as "fly-in-and-flop" tourists). Prior to 2020, the value-over-volume intent was shared by both TN and Noosa Council. Indeed, TN's 2018-19 Annual Report states: "Our approach ... is to prioritise value over volume to help grow opportunities for the region's economy. These visitors generally stay longer in the region and spend more ... This strategy has seen a far greater growth in spend by overnight visitors than the growth in the number of visitors. Average spend per person has increased 25% in the past 4 years."

It has been well documented in many international studies that single day tourists provide minimal economic benefit yet massively increase over-tourism. The result of unmanaged day visitation is to diminish the quality of the experience that longer-term and high-spend visitors are seeking. Plainly large numbers of day visitors also have a weighty impact on resident amenity. Though some tourism businesses fail to get the message, research clearly shows that overcrowding can have a detrimental impact on overall tourism revenue. The difference between daily spend by day trippers as opposed to interstate and international visitors to Noosa is well documented, including in the Destination Management Plan Discussion Paper. While TN had a marketing strategy focussed on value-over-volume in the pre-Covid era (since largely abandoned), what it always lacked was a management strategy for day visitors.

### 3. CEASE RESIDENT FUNDING OF TOURISM NOOSA

Tourism Noosa has become a bloated bureaucracy that is no longer fit for purpose. Noosa does not require the same level of marketing that occurred ten or twenty years ago. Under previous councils, Tourism Noosa was funded through a levy imposed on businesses, scaled according to type and location of the business. Under the current council, this approach has been discarded in favour of funding Tourism Noosa from general revenue (i.e. rates). Residents are expected to accept an impost of \$2.52 million which is Noosa Council's annual subsidy for Tourism Noosa. We believe Tourism Noosa can operate effectively on its membership fees, income from its booking service, plus its additional income received from grants, events, Tourism Queensland etc.

It is worth noting that many tourism hotspots around the globe have determined to simply cease marketing altogether in order to better manage the impacts of tourism on residents (Amsterdam has even run a "stay away" campaign to deter tourists). It is both ironic and unconscionable that Noosa residents should be forced to subsidise ever-increasing numbers of tourists that have a direct and evident negative impact on their own day-to-day lives. What's more, residents already fund the very significant impact that visitors have on local infrastructure, from roads and parks to public toilets. NPA would support some form of bed tax to help offset such costs.

### 4. CAP OR EVEN REDUCE THE NUMBER OF EVENTS

Large-scale events were once used to fill the low tourism periods between school holidays. But those low periods have ceased to be a problem for the tourism sector. Put bluntly, Noosa has become so popular as a destination that events are no longer required as a fillip. We do not need more events, and certainly not those that require road closures, or which commandeer public spaces. Events which require road closures should be phased out. The greenwashing of event promotion, in which events make a pretence to act with environmental sensitivity, should also be carefully scrutinised. The carbon emissions from transport required to bring people to Noosa more than exceeds the minimal environmental benefits achieved during the running of such events.

### 5. CONTROL DAY VISITOR NUMBERS AND VEHICLES

NPA recognises that single day visitors cannot be completely prevented from accessing Noosa. However, there are strategies available to minimise their impact and their numbers. As well as ceasing to target drive-in visitors through marketing, Noosa needs to be working towards an effective park-and-ride approach to keep visitor vehicles out of the coastal centres. As with many international destinations (Cinque Terre, Medina of Fez, Hoi An, Pontevedra, Bath, Zermatt etc), Noosa must work towards a system where visitor vehicles are captured at transport hubs on feeder roads (Sunshine Motorway, Noosa-Cooroy Rd, Eumundi Rd and David Low Way). Under this system, day visitors would be prevented by law from driving into Noosaville, Noosa Heads, Sunshine Beach etc. These areas would thus be accessible by vehicle to residents, ratepayers and perhaps long-stay guests.

NPA acknowledges that this will take some time to implement, requiring land to be allocated for satellite parking (land is already identified for a park-and-ride hub in the planning scheme for Noosa Civic, though other nearby land may better serve the purpose). State-owned land with low environmental value - such as beneath the power lines in Tewantin NP - may need to be swapped for higher quality conservation land as part of a state-council arrangement to secure park-and-ride sites. There is vehicle recognition technology already available to monitor and police vehicle access, a system that would also require both local government and state cooperation.

What's more, negotiations should be happening now to sever the state's stranglehold on local public transport. With day visitor cars removed, Noosa Council needs to be able to provide a clean-energy, efficient transport service to help visitors access key areas. Clearly, the state government needs to be onboard with Noosa's aims to be an efficient, low-carbon, well-managed tourism hub that becomes a global exemplar of both sustainable tourism and resident amenity. NPA does not believe that paid parking in places like Hastings Street is an adequate long-term solution to the existing problem of vehicle congestion and day-visitor impact. Indeed, experts have previously advised Noosa Council that paid parking does not act as a deterrent to visitors arriving in vehicles. There are multiple examples across the nation where the introduction of paid parking has failed to minimise traffic congestion. Paid parking simply raises revenue that can be spent on other, more effective initiatives. Nor does NPA believe that the free bus service provided by council - currently funded by residents - offers an effective incentive to prevent visitors from driving into Noosa's key areas. Any pretence that the existing free bus service has a significant impact on traffic congestion is risible.

## 6. PLACE CONSTRAINTS ON AIRBNB AND SHORT-STAY ACCOMMODATION

The impact of the disruptive short-stay accommodation (STA) sector has been significant for Noosa, as is the case in tourism hotspots across the planet. Lack of long-term rental accommodation, accessibility of affordable housing, worker shortages, decreasing resident amenity and diminishing social cohesion are some of the problems associated with STA. Noosa should be standing shoulder-to-shoulder with places like Byron Bay, Mornington Peninsular, Hobart, and Busselton in seeking real solutions to this issue.

Noosa Council must go back to its previous position of working with the Local Government Association plus the state government to develop policies and legislation that will benefit not only Noosa residents but also local businesses in need of workers. Local laws aimed at a code-of-conduct for Airbnb type properties need to be genuinely enforced, as opposed to the half-hearted approach currently taken by council. Zoning measures in the planning scheme need to be supported. Most importantly, as with many other states, Noosa must lobby the Queensland Government to introduce caps on the number of nights that non-hosted STA properties can be let in any given year. This appears to be one of the better solutions, reducing the attractiveness of STA to investors and thus ensuring there are adequate homes available for workers and residents. Other incentives could also be considered. For example, the council in Italy's Florence has not only banned further Airbnb properties, but provided three-years of tax breaks for property owners who switch from short-term letting to ordinary long-term leases.

Even Prime Minister Albanese has finally acknowledged that Airbnb type properties place "pressure" on communities and the rental market and also generate a "lack of accessibility" amid the ongoing housing crisis.

## 7. MINIMISE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

Thanks to six decades of community action, primarily by Noosa Parks Association, some 45% of the Noosa Shire is today in some form of protected estate, either as national park or other environmental covenant. Council's stated aim is to reach 50%. These areas should be accessible to

visitors and residents, whilst being adequately managed for their environmental values. Increased foot traffic through Noosa National Park headland section, and vehicle traffic in the Cooloola section of the Great Sandy National Park, especially camping and vehicles on Teewah Beach, all need to be better managed. This can only occur by council working cooperatively with the state government.

Programs by Tourism Noosa such as their "Tread Lightly" and "Trees for Tourism" programs plus other "green" initiatives are more marketing ploy than serious proposals to deal with climate impacts. Tourism Noosa needs to acknowledge the total carbon footprint of visitors, including travel to and from the region, and find ways to offset this impact.

Noosa River is the busiest waterway in Queensland, especially during peak holiday periods. We support Noosa Council's proposal for a Conservation Park to be established in the Fish Habitat Areas of Noosa River under the Nature Conservation Act. Further work needs to be carried out by Noosa Council alongside the state government to better manage activities on the river.

## CONCLUSION

We note that the Destination Management Discussion Paper appears to refer to sustainable tourism as "regenerative destination management". We reject the implications in the word "regenerative" as it suggests self-sustaining rather than managed. We do not believe the tourism sector, and Tourism Noosa in particular, are capable of establishing effective limits to tourism growth. Self-interest and greed are always impediments to constraint. Yet Noosa does need to establish acceptable limits to tourism, though many believe we have already surpassed such efforts. We reiterate that the Noosa community needs to be engaged as equal partners in any debate about tourism numbers and destination management. We remind the Noosa Council that they serve all residents and ratepayers, not just select sections of the business community. We also remind Tourism Noosa that its success relies on the goodwill of the resident population.

The tourism sector and Noosa Council must acknowledge that Noosa is already facing a problem with over-tourism. The emphasis going forward must be on balancing resident amenity with tourism numbers and types of visitor.

NPA believes that resident amenity should, as a general rule, take priority over visitor experience. However, the two can work in tandem.

NPA believes that access to Noosa's key areas should be via a booking system for both overnight and day visitors, such as the approach being taken by many other tourist destinations across the planet. (We note that overnight accommodation is already a form of booking, but specific constraints need to be applied to day visitors.) We also recognise that some measures will take time to implement and will require state-council cooperation. But such complexity should not be an excuse to avoid preparatory actions.

NPA believes that residents should be adequately consulted regarding all destination management solutions, and that effective Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) research should be regularly undertaken.

NPA acknowledges that there may be significant changes in the future to transportation, climate, and the global economy, which in turn will affect management of Noosa tourism. Any solutions to the problems generated by the tourism sector must be flexible and constantly appraised. For now, the issues and solutions documented above should be priorities.

The purpose of destination management must be to establish a sustainable tourism industry that has minimal impact on resident amenity, and which is managed appropriately.