



# QUEENSLAND PARLIAMENT **COMMITTEES**

## **Consideration of Auditor-General Report 12: 2022-23 Growing ecotourism in Queensland**

Health, Environment and Innovation Committee



**Report No. 15**

**58th Parliament, October 2025**

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## **Health, Environment and Innovation Committee**

|                     |                                                 |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
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All references and webpages are current at the time of publishing.

### **Acknowledgements**

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## Chair's Foreword

At the outset, I want to congratulate the new Minister, the newly formed Department of Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation, and his team for their rapid response in addressing the concerns raised by the Auditor-General in Report 12: 2022-23 – *Growing Ecotourism in Queensland*.

The delivery of *Destination 2045* and related policies in June 2025 addresses the QAO's recommendations and remedies the previous government's failure to deliver a clear strategic plan for ecotourism within our state.

Queensland is a state of many natural wonders. Our amazing attractions span from Coolangatta to top of Cape York and west to border.

The Great Barrier Reef is one of the world's great living treasures. Queensland is blessed with some of the finest beaches, most spectacular marine environments, and breathtaking hinterland rainforests — including the magnificent Daintree. Our coastline is dotted with some of the world's most beautiful tropical islands, none more iconic than the Whitsundays. From world-class fishing and diving to unforgettable snorkelling adventures, Queensland offers some of the best nature-based experiences on the planet. Visitors can enjoy unique encounters such as Croc Cruises on the Proserpine River, Hartley's Crocodile Adventures, or First Nations cultural experiences that share ancient stories and deep connections to Country.

But Queensland's wonders extend far beyond the coast. Outback Queensland offers a landscape rich in history and adventure — from the age-old dinosaurs of Winton and the Charleville Cosmos Centre to the warmth and hospitality of Longreach, Roma, Boulia, Mount Isa and Barcaldine. Closer to the southeast, the hinterland is home to treasures like O'Reilly's, Binna Burra and Lamington National Park, while the spectacular Scenic Rim encircles lush valleys and World Heritage-listed rainforests — all within an easy drive from Brisbane. A little further west, past Cunningham's Gap, lies the Granite Belt Wine Country, where boutique vineyards, cosy cabins, open farm gates and gourmet produce welcome visitors amid the striking granite landscapes of Girraween National Park.

The rich tapestry of what Queensland has to offer the millions of domestic and international visitors that visit each year is world class. In this context, it's difficult to understand how the previous government failed to deliver a clear strategy for ecotourism within Queensland and respond adequately to the QAO's recommendations.

Since commencing work, the incoming government has conducted roundtable discussions from far North Queensland to the Gold Coast engaging with thousands of individuals and tourist operators across the state to develop what will be remembered as a landmark strategy, *Destination 2045*, delivering Queensland's tourism future

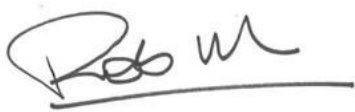
The committee heard from the new Director General and other departmental members about this road map to unlock the full potential of ecotourism in Queensland. The government's plan supports the transformation and development of visitor experiences while enabling investment in world class tourism and events.

I note the Minister's comments in the forward of *Destination 2045* where he says:

‘this is about supporting an industry that is innovative, diverse, and sustainable, with the right conditions to achieve excellence’.

Not only has the Crisafulli government committed to delivering a clear plan for the future of ecotourism but is also delivering more rangers within the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service.

In closing, it's fair to say that the Crisafulli government has taken timely action to address the outstanding recommendations from Report 12 and will confidently deliver a brighter future for ecotourism in Queensland.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rob M', with a horizontal line underneath.

**Rob Molhoek MP**

Chair

## Executive Summary

This report summarises the Health, Environment and Innovation Committee's consideration of Queensland Audit Office Report 12: 2022-2023: Growing ecotourism in Queensland (Report 12).

Report 12 identified several issues which are explored in this report. One key issue was the lack of a clear, statewide ecotourism policy. Such a policy would define how tourism and environmental agencies work together and support the Queensland Government's vision to become a world leader in ecotourism. This vision includes conserving natural and cultural assets and partnering with Traditional Owners.

Report 12 also recommended changes to address fragmented agency responsibilities, inconsistent planning approaches between protected and non-protected areas, and regulatory processes that were overly complex and burdensome for stakeholders.

The report made 4 recommendations emphasising the need for a coherent statewide policy, an implementation roadmap, alignment of agency plans, and simplified regulatory processes with greater support provided to proponents.

The QAO's *Report 1: 2024-25 Status of Auditor General's Recommendations* was tabled on 20 September 2024, and identified that DES and TEQ had either fully, or partially implemented the Report's recommendations. The Department of Tourism and Sport had not implemented any of the recommendations at the time of reporting. However, machinery of government changes at the beginning of the 58<sup>th</sup> Parliament consolidated the environment, tourism, science and innovation portfolios, which are now overseen by DETSI, including TEQ. Through this restructuring, DETSI became the principal entity responsible for the implementation of the Report 12 recommendations and oversight of ecotourism developments both within, and outside of, protected areas.

The Queensland Government's new tourism strategy, *Destination 2045*, together with Queensland's Ecotourism Policy, *45 by 45: Getting Ecotourism Moving in Queensland*, both released in mid-2025, directly addresses the recommendations made in Report 12, including the need for a clearly defined statewide ecotourism policy (recommendations 1 and 2), alignment of agency strategies, investment priorities and having clear goals, measurable indicators of success and performance targets (recommendation 3), and the simplification of regulatory frameworks to provide greater support to proponents (recommendation 4). The strategy's long-term vision, measurable indicators of success, and interagency delivery mechanisms also responds to concerns raised in Report 12.

The committee made 1 recommendation, that the House notes the contents of this report.

## Recommendations

### **Recommendation 1 ..... 2**

The committee recommends that the House note the contents of this report.

## Glossary

|                         |                                                                 |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Committee</b>        | Health, Environment and Innovation Committee                    |
| <b>CSSC</b>             | Community Support and Services Committee                        |
| <b>EGC</b>              | Economics and Governance Committee                              |
| <b>DES</b>              | Department of Environment and Science                           |
| <b>DESI</b>             | Department of Environment, Science and Innovation               |
| <b>Destination 2045</b> | Destination 2045: Queensland's Tourism Future                   |
| <b>DETSI</b>            | Department of the Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation  |
| <b>DTS</b>              | Department of Tourism and Sport                                 |
| <b>DTIS</b>             | Department of Tourism, Innovation and Sport                     |
| <b>ECAWG</b>            | Ecotourism Cross Agency Working Group                           |
| <b>Report 1</b>         | Report 1: 2024-25 – Status of Auditor-General's Recommendations |
| <b>Report 3</b>         | Report 3: 2025-26 – Status of Auditor-General's Recommendations |
| <b>Report 12</b>        | Report 12: 2022-23 – Growing ecotourism in Queensland           |
| <b>TEQ</b>              | Tourism and Events Queensland                                   |
| <b>QAO</b>              | Queensland Audit Office                                         |

## 1. Role of the Health, Environment and Innovation Committee

The Health, Environment and Innovation Committee (committee) of the 58<sup>th</sup> Parliament was established by the Queensland Legislative Assembly on 28 November 2024 as a portfolio committee.<sup>1</sup>

The committee has responsibility for the following portfolio areas:<sup>2</sup>

- Health and Ambulance Services; and,
- Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation.

The committee's role includes consideration of reports of the Auditor-General within its portfolio area.<sup>3</sup>

### 1.1. Role of the Auditor-General

The Auditor-General, supported by the Queensland Audit Office (QAO), is Parliament's independent auditor of all Queensland's state and local government public sector entities. These entities include departments, government owned corporations, statutory bodies, controlled entities, and the state's 77 councils.<sup>4</sup>

The Auditor-General provides the Parliament with independent assurance of public sector accountability and performance by reporting to Parliament on the results of its financial and performance audits.

These audits do not consider the merits of government policy. Rather, they focus on how that policy is implemented across Queensland. Financial audits assesses whether information contained in the financial statements of public sector entities is accurate, can be relied upon, and is prepared in accordance with Australian Accounting Standards and relevant legislative requirements.<sup>5</sup> Performance audits evaluate whether an agency or government program is achieving its objectives effectively, economically, and efficiently; and whether it is compliant with relevant legislation.<sup>6</sup>

### 1.2. Reports to Parliament

As a portfolio committee,<sup>7</sup> the committee is to consider a report of the Auditor-General which is tabled in the House referred to it by the Committee of the Legislative Assembly.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Parliament of Queensland Act 2001*, s 88 (PQA) and *Standing Rules and Orders of the Legislative Assembly (Queensland)*, Standing Order 194 (Standing Orders).

<sup>2</sup> *Standing Orders*, SO 194 and Schedule 6.

<sup>3</sup> *PQA*, s 94.

<sup>4</sup> Queensland Audit Office, *Annual Report 2023-24*, p 4.

<sup>5</sup> QAO, *Practice Statement – Financial statement audit* (Factsheet, May 2016) p 1.

<sup>6</sup> QAO, *Practice Statement – Performance audit engagements* (Factsheet, July 2024).

<sup>7</sup> *PQA*, s 88.

<sup>8</sup> *Standing Orders*, SO 194B.

A committee may also self-refer an Auditor-General Report for consideration where it is relevant to the committee's portfolio area.<sup>9</sup>



### Recommendation 1

The committee recommends that the House note the contents of this report.

## 2. Report 12: 2022-23 - Growing Ecotourism in Queensland

### 2.1. Report Overview

The Auditor-General's *Report 12: 2022-23 Growing ecotourism in Queensland* (Report 12) identified several issues which are explored in this report. One key issue was the lack of a clear, statewide ecotourism policy to define how tourism and environmental agencies should work together and support the Queensland Government's vision to become a world leader in ecotourism. This vision includes conserving natural and cultural assets and partnering with Traditional Owners.

Report 12 also recommended changes to address fragmented agency responsibilities, inconsistent planning approaches between protected and non-protected areas, and regulatory processes that were overly complex and burdensome for stakeholders.<sup>10</sup>

The report made 4 recommendations, pertaining to planning and coordinating ecotourism and the approval of ecotourism facilities.

### *Planning and coordinating ecotourism*

#### Recommendation 1

The Department of Tourism, Innovation and Sport and the Department of Environment and Science, in consultation with the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, develop an overarching statewide policy position on ecotourism for both on and off protected areas that:

- clearly defines ecotourism, and the scales and types of ecotourism development acceptable to the state
- identifies the state's priorities for ecotourism opportunities both on and off protected areas. This should include any differences in priorities and tolerances for developments within and outside national parks while respecting the cultural and traditional ownership of First Nations people
- sets a clear direction for achieving the vision of Queensland becoming a world leader in ecotourism, providing improved consistency and clarity for government entities, industry operators, and potential developers in understanding and implementing government's ecotourism priorities.

<sup>9</sup> PQA, s 94.

<sup>10</sup> QAO, *Report 12: 2022-23 Growing ecotourism in Queensland*, pp 11-14.

**Recommendation 2**

Following the development of a statewide policy position on ecotourism, we recommend that:

- the Department of Tourism, Innovation and Sport leads the development and implementation of an ecotourism roadmap for Queensland (aligned under the *Towards Tourism 2032 – Transforming Queensland’s visitor economy future strategy*), with a focus on supporting private investment and development in ecotourism outside Queensland’s protected areas
- the Department of Environment and Science leads the implementation of ecotourism in protected areas through its Ecotourism Plan for Queensland’s Protected Areas 2023–2028.

**Recommendation 3**

The Department of Tourism, Innovation and Sport; the Department of Environment and Science; and Tourism and Events Queensland develop, finalise, or update individual plans that clearly define how they will achieve the government’s vision of Queensland becoming a world leader in ecotourism, within their area of responsibility. This includes:

- aligning individual ecotourism-related strategies and plans with the *Towards Tourism 2032 – Transforming Queensland’s visitor economy future strategy* and the statewide policy position on ecotourism and ecotourism roadmap (once developed)
- developing investment priorities to ensure government funding is directed to/aligned with the vision and policy position on ecotourism
- using available information on nature visitor preferences for planning and prioritising ecotourism facilities, activities, and projects
- having clear goals, measurable indicators of success, and performance targets in all strategies and plans and regularly monitoring and reporting on progress.

***Approving ecotourism facilities*****Recommendation 4**

The Department of Environment and Science, in consultation with the Department of Tourism, Innovation and Sport:

- consider ways to further reduce the complexity of obtaining government approvals for ecotourism facilities
- provide greater support to proponents in navigating the legislative, engagement, and approval processes for ecotourism facilities.

## 2.2. Inquiry Overview

Report 12 was tabled on 9 May 2023 and referred to the Economics and Governance Committee of the 57<sup>th</sup> Parliament. No substantive consideration of Report 12 was undertaken by that committee.

In February 2024, machinery of government changes resulted in amendments to Schedule 6 of the Standing Orders and consideration of Report 12 was transferred to the Community Support and Services Committee (CSSC). The CSSC were provided with written briefings on Report 12 from the then Department of Environment, Science and Innovation (DES); the then Department of Tourism and Sport (DTS); and Tourism and Events Queensland (TEQ).<sup>11</sup> CSSC held a public briefing with the Queensland Audit Office on 15 April 2024, however, consideration of the Report 12 lapsed upon dissolution of the 57<sup>th</sup> Parliament on 1 October 2024.<sup>12</sup>

Following commencement of the 58<sup>th</sup> Parliament, the committee self-referred consideration of Report 12 on 22 January 2025.<sup>13</sup>

The committee held the following public briefings in relation to its inquiry:

- 28 January 2025 – a public briefing with the Queensland Audit Office
- 19 February 2025 – a public briefing with the Department of Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation (DETSI) and TEQ; and
- 17 September 2025 – a public briefing with DETSI and TEQ.

On 7 May 2025, accompanied by officers from DETSI, the committee undertook an on-site visit of the first stage of the Wangetti Trail located in Far North Queensland.<sup>14</sup> The Wangetti Trail is Queensland's first purpose-built dual use walking and mountain biking track in a national park, and one of Australia's leading adventure-based ecotourism experiences.<sup>15</sup> While in the area, the committee noted the substantial work being undertaken on the trail, in addition to some repair works to previously built sections following Cyclone Jasper.

<sup>11</sup> Community Support and Services Committee, *Consideration of Auditor General Report 12: 2022-23 – Growing Ecotourism in Queensland (Lapsed) – Related Publications*, (Webpage – Former Committees, Queensland Parliament, accessed 23 October 2025) <<https://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/Work-of-Committees/Committees/Committee-Details?cid=165&id=4326>>.

<sup>12</sup> Community Support and Services Committee, *Consideration of Auditor General Report 12: 2022-23 – Growing Ecotourism in Queensland (Lapsed) – Inquiry Overview* (Webpage – Former Committees, Queensland Parliament, accessed 23 October 2025) <<https://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/Work-of-Committees/Committees/Committee-Details?cid=165&id=4326>>.

<sup>13</sup> Health, Environment and Innovation Committee, *Minutes - Meeting No 3*, (22 January 2025) <<https://documents.parliament.qld.gov.au/com/HEIC-AF26/generic/20250122%20HEIC%20-%20Minutes.pdf>>.

<sup>14</sup> This visit was conducted while the committee were in Cairns conducting a Bill inquiry.

<sup>15</sup> Department of the Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation, 'Wangetti trail', (Webpage, accessed on 25 March 2025) <[www.detsi.qld.gov.au/tourism/tourism-development/qld-ecotourism-trails/wangetti-trail](http://www.detsi.qld.gov.au/tourism/tourism-development/qld-ecotourism-trails/wangetti-trail)>.

Following the public briefing on 19 February 2025, DETSI provided additional information regarding the status of the recommendations from Report 12. Additional information about implementation was provided by DETSI during the public briefing on 17 September 2025. Information relating to the committee's inquiry can be found on the committee's webpage.



Figure 1. Members of the Committee are pictured at the trailhead of the Wangetti Trail, accompanied by the Queensland Parliamentary Service First People's Liaison and DETSI Officers

### 2.3. Summary of QAO Findings

The Auditor-General's Report 12 found that:

- Queensland lacked an overarching ecotourism policy, resulting in fragmented planning, inconsistent definitions, and unclear development tolerances between protected and non-protected areas.<sup>16</sup>
- The absence of a unified ecotourism strategy across state agencies impeded clarity on the government's risk appetite, investment thresholds, and policy priorities.<sup>17</sup>
- No ecotourism roadmap existed to guide project identification, prioritisation, or coordination across government and industry, contributing to a historically reactive and short-term focus on potential ecotourism projects for both within and outside protected areas.<sup>18</sup>
- The *Towards Tourism 2032 – Transforming Queensland's visitor economy future strategy* included a greater focus on ecotourism and nature-based tourism

<sup>16</sup> QAO, *Report 12*, pp 2, 9.

<sup>17</sup> QAO, *Report 12*, pp 2, 9.

<sup>18</sup> QAO, *Report 12*, pp 11-12.

development, including recognition for additional opportunities for First Nations tourism and economic opportunities for Traditional Owners, but did not provide the clarity needed to attract significant investment.<sup>19</sup>

- Existing ecotourism-related strategies have operated in silos and do not include measurable indicators of success.<sup>20</sup>
- Since 2013, only three ecotourism facilities in national parks have been approved, with two more in development. The applications were exceedingly onerous on applicants, highlighting inefficiencies in approval processes.<sup>21</sup>
- The existing approval process for ecotourism developments in protected areas is complex, costly, and difficult for proponents to navigate, with unclear guidance and undefined timeframes for decision making.<sup>22</sup>

## 2.4. Other matters raised during the inquiry – overtourism

At the public briefing on 28 January 2025, the Member for Noosa asked whether consideration had been given to the risks of overtourism in the pursuit of expanding tourism in Queensland's natural environment, and whether the policy and strategies from DETSI would adequately consider these risks. The Auditor General said:

***Ms Vagg:** [...] It is a policy decision of government about where this activity may take place. We then looked at the effectiveness of the implementation of that decision, and that is where we have made comments such that you need to define ecotourism, you need to have an appropriate plan in place and you need to have an appropriate implementation strategy in place and with that comes the reflective piece of measuring impact from an economic and environmental perspective and then reporting on it and helping use that information to inform plans into the future.<sup>23</sup>*

At the public briefing on 19 February 2025, the Deputy Chair asked:

***Mr J KELLY:** [...] You have outlined a range of exciting ecotourism initiatives right around the state. Obviously, when we start developing assets there is going to be an increase in visitor numbers and an increase in businesses trying to take advantage of that. Does the strategy anticipate how increased visitor numbers and increased business requirements are going to be managed? Is it going to be simply left to the market to determine, or is there going to be some degree of government control to ensure environmental protection?*

***Ms O'Callaghan:** In terms of the increase in visitors, I acknowledge that the opportunity for ecotourism projects across Queensland to attract new visitors is real and potentially significant. That is where bringing the departments of environment and tourism together is an opportunity for the Queensland government to look at this with a holistic lens. We know that, whilst we want to*

<sup>19</sup> QAO, Report 12, pp 2, 9.

<sup>20</sup> QAO, Report 12, p 11.

<sup>21</sup> QAO, Report 12, pp 2, 16.

<sup>22</sup> QAO, Report 12, p 16.

<sup>23</sup> Hansard, Record of Proceedings – Public Briefing: Consideration of Auditor-General Reports (28 January 2025) p 10.

*increase visitors to Queensland, we play a really important role in ensuring sustainable and responsible development, and those words are very much reflected in the ecotourism priorities in our minister's charter letter.*

*I also want to acknowledge that Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service teams have many tools to address visitor capacity. There are management plans, there are visitor strategies and there are sustainable visitor capacity management studies on our key estates, including our World Heritage areas. It is really important to acknowledge that we now have existing evaluation and planning tools to inform these commercial activities. With regard to some of those visitor management studies, these studies and the research and the data helps us as a government to put in management plans where required and otherwise guide developments.<sup>24</sup>*

At the public briefing on 17 September 2025, the Deputy Chair asked again about the balancing act of tourism promotion against environmental sustainability in protected and vulnerable environments:

**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.<sup>25</sup>*

At the public hearing on 17 September 2025, the Member for Noosa asked for an explanation of how *Destination 2045* will ensure that an increased focus on ecotourism does not result in a detrimental impact on the environment. DETSI told the committee:

*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.<sup>26</sup>*

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<sup>24</sup> Hansard, *Record of Proceedings – Public Briefing: Consideration of Auditor-General's Report 12: 2022-23 – Growing Ecotourism in Queensland* (19 February 2025) p 4.

<sup>25</sup> Hansard, *Record of Proceedings – Public Briefing: Consideration of Auditor-General's Report 12: 2022-23 – Growing Ecotourism in Queensland* (17 September 2025) pp 6-7.

<sup>26</sup> Hansard, *Record of Proceedings – Public Briefing: Consideration of Auditor-General's Report 12: 2022-23 – Growing Ecotourism in Queensland* (17 September 2025) pp 3-4.

**Committee comment**

The committee is satisfied that the Department of the Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation has considered the impacts of increased tourism on the natural environment, particularly where ecotourism takes place in a protected, or vulnerable, areas across Queensland, in line with the requirements set out in the *Nature Conservation Act 1992* and the *Environmental Protection Act 1994*.

## 2.5. Implementation of QAO Recommendations

The various departments and entities responsible for implementing the recommendations of Report 12 agreed with the recommendations at the time they were published and supplied a timeframe for implementation.<sup>27</sup> The committee notes that the original timeframes for implementation will not apply as a result of machinery of government changes.

### 2.5.1. Recommendation 1: Planning and Coordinating Ecotourism

The QAO recommended the relevant departments, in consultation with the Department of the Premier and Cabinet (DPC), develop an overarching statewide ecotourism policy for on and off protected areas. QAO said the policy should clearly define ecotourism, identify development priorities and tolerances, and set strategic direction towards Queensland becoming a global ecotourism leader.<sup>28</sup>

Prior to dissolution of the 57<sup>th</sup> Parliament, the Ecotourism Cross Agency Working Group (ECAWG) was established to provide guidance on implementing Report 12's recommendations.<sup>29</sup> The statewide policy position on ecotourism was expected to be finalised by Q2 2024-25.<sup>30</sup> It was not completed before the 57<sup>th</sup> Parliament was dissolved.

On 19 February 2025, during its public briefing with DETSI, the committee were advised that the development of an overarching ecotourism policy was underway but subject to the development of a new 20-year tourism strategy to replace *Towards Tourism 2032*.<sup>31</sup> DETSI advised they were currently receiving feedback from industry and community stakeholders and underscored the importance of incorporating that feedback into the policy.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>27</sup> QAO, *Report 12*, pp 24-36.

<sup>28</sup> QAO, *Report 12*, p 9.

<sup>29</sup> Community Support and Services Committee (57<sup>th</sup> Parliament), *Correspondence from DESI* (11 April 2024).

<sup>30</sup> QAO, *Report 12*, p 9.

<sup>31</sup> Hansard, *Record of Proceedings – Public Briefing: Consideration of Auditor-General's Report 12: 2022-23 – Growing Ecotourism in Queensland* (19 February 2025) p 2.

<sup>32</sup> Hansard, *Record of Proceedings – Public Briefing: Consideration of Auditor-General's Report 12: 2022-23 – Growing Ecotourism in Queensland* (19 February 2025) p 2.

On 3 April 2025, DETSI advised that ECAWG had finalised a draft Ecotourism Policy Position.<sup>33</sup> However, since the machinery of government changes, and because the previous Government did not adopt a policy position on ecotourism prior the change of Government, the status of recommendation 1 at that time was noted as partially implemented.<sup>34</sup>

In June 2025, the Queensland Government released *Destination 2045: Queensland's Tourism Future (Destination 2045)*, a long-term strategy to realise the Queensland Government's vision of making Queensland a must-visit destination for domestic and international travellers.<sup>35</sup> The strategy includes over \$1 billion in tourism investment, streamlined regulatory reforms, and partnerships with the private-sector to invest in new tourism experience development and industry growth.<sup>36</sup>

In conjunction with the release of *Destination 2045*, the government also released a specific ecotourism policy, *45 by 45: Getting Ecotourism Moving in Queensland*. At the public hearing on 17 September 2025, DETSI provided copies of these policies to the committee for consideration and answered questions about the framework:

*Ms O'Callaghan: [...] 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 farm stays 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,*

<sup>33</sup> DETSI, *Correspondence from the Director General* (3 April 2025).

<sup>34</sup> DETSI, *Correspondence from the Director General* (3 April 2025).

<sup>35</sup> DETSI, *Destination 2045*, pp 4, 6.

<sup>36</sup> DETSI, *Destination 2045*, pp 6, 42.

*at a total of \$100 million, to support tourism developments including ecotourism.*<sup>37</sup>

*45 by 45: Getting Queensland Ecotourism Moving in Queensland* commits to delivering 45 new ecotourism experiences in Queensland by 2045 and aims to promote environmental stewardship, land management, and cultural recognition while expanding sustainable ecotourism.<sup>38</sup>

On 17 September 2025, DETSI confirmed that the rollout of these policies reflected the total implementation of recommendation 1:

***Ms O’Callaghan:** [...] 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.*<sup>39</sup>

*45 by 45: Getting Queensland Ecotourism Moving in Queensland* is supported by the government’s *Ecotourism Plan for Queensland’s Protected Areas: 2025-2030*. The plan ‘strategically aligns with the priorities and success measures outlined in *Destination 2045* and provides the framework for ecotourism in national parks and other protected areas’.<sup>40</sup>

Throughout 2025, the Queensland Government have delivered a number of positive outcomes for ecotourism including:<sup>41</sup>

- the Reef Trails Project – 97 new or upgraded public moorings and 30 new no-anchor zone markers installed, improving responsible access to the Great Barrier Reef and island protected areas
- the Gateway Visitor Centre Concept Masterplans; and
- stage 1 of the Curtis Island Ecotourism Masterplan.

#### Committee comment



The committee is satisfied that Recommendation 1 has been fully implemented through the introduction of *Destination 2045* and other associated policies.

<sup>37</sup> Hansard, *Record of Proceedings – Public Briefing: Consideration of Auditor-General’s Report 12: 2022-23 – Growing Ecotourism in Queensland* (17 September 2025) pp 5-6.

<sup>38</sup> DETSI, *45 by 45: Getting Ecotourism Moving in Queensland*, pp 1-2.

<sup>39</sup> Hansard, *Record of Proceedings – Public Briefing: Consideration of Auditor-General’s Report 12: 2022-23 – Growing Ecotourism in Queensland* (17 September 2025) p 3.

<sup>40</sup> DETSI, *Ecotourism Plan for Queensland’s Protected Areas: 2025-2030*, p 3.

<sup>41</sup> DETSI, *Ecotourism Plan for Queensland’s Protected Areas: 2025-2030*, p 5.

## 2.5.2. Recommendation 2: Planning and Coordinating Ecotourism

Recommendation 2, the development of a Queensland Ecotourism Roadmap, was directed to ensuring ecotourism opportunities were strategically identified, prioritised, and supported both within and outside protected areas, addressing the QAO's findings of unstructured and reactive planning.<sup>42</sup>

In QAO's Report 1: 2024-25 – Status of Auditor-General's Recommendations (Report 1), the then DESI self-assessed recommendation 2 as fully implemented, with its detailed implementation plan for the *Ecotourism Plan for Queensland's Protected Areas 2023-2028* approved in early 2024, which was ongoing at the time.<sup>43</sup> DTS self-assessed recommendation 2 as not implemented, noting that through the ECAWG, it had been developing a statewide policy position on ecotourism to implement funding initiatives to develop nature-based tourism adjacent to protected areas, and a tourism destination program to position Queensland as a sustainable tourism leader.<sup>44</sup>

On 19 February 2025 at the public briefing, DETSI confirmed the ecotourism roadmap was under development concurrently with the statewide policy.<sup>45</sup> DETSI noted that a number of ecotourism experiences were being progressed in the interim, including the Spicers Trail in the Scenic Rim and the Mon Repos Turtle Centre in Bundaberg.<sup>46</sup>

On 3 April 2025, DETSI confirmed that Queensland Government's 20-year plan for Queensland tourism, *Destination 2045*, would have ecotourism and nature-based tourism as a core element of the strategy. DETSI's reiterated that their response to recommendation 2 would form part of the delivery of *Destination 2045*.<sup>47</sup>

During the public briefing on 17 September 2025, DETSI explained how these policies sought to fully implement recommendation 2:

*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*

<sup>42</sup> QAO, *Report 12*, pp 11-12.

<sup>43</sup> QAO, *Report 1*, p 71.

<sup>44</sup> QAO, *Report 1*, p 72.

<sup>45</sup> Hansard, *Record of Proceedings – Public Briefing: Consideration of Auditor-General's Report 12: 2022-23 – Growing Ecotourism in Queensland* (19 February 2025) p 2.

<sup>46</sup> Hansard, *Record of Proceedings – Public Briefing: Consideration of Auditor-General's Report 12: 2022-23 – Growing Ecotourism in Queensland* (19 February 2025) p 2.

<sup>47</sup> DETSI, *Correspondence from the Director General* (3 April 2025) p 2.

*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 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.<sup>48</sup>*

At the public hearing, the Member for Cairns sought clarification surrounding the differences between the policies that had been announced:

**Mr HEALY:** *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.<sup>49</sup>*

In Report 3, DETSI self-assessed recommendation 2 as being partially implemented.<sup>50</sup> DETSI also noted that the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service was overseeing the department's release of an ecotourism plan which was directed specifically toward Queensland's protected areas.<sup>51</sup>

#### Committee comment



The committee is satisfied that Recommendation 2 has been fully implemented with the release of *Destination 2045*.

### 2.5.3. Recommendation 3: Planning and Coordinating Ecotourism

Recommendation 3 sought to improve fragmented agency-level planning and strategies, unclear investment priorities, and a lack of clear and measurable performance indicators.<sup>52</sup> Each entity was tasked with developing clear investment priorities, using preference data to guide planning, establishing measurable performance indicators, and regularly monitor and report on progress.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Hansard, *Record of Proceedings – Public Briefing: Consideration of Auditor-General's Report 12: 2022-23 – Growing Ecotourism in Queensland* (17 September 2025) p 2.

<sup>49</sup> Hansard, *Record of Proceedings – Public Briefing: Consideration of Auditor-General's Report 12: 2022-23 – Growing Ecotourism in Queensland* (17 September 2025) pp 2-3.

<sup>50</sup> QAO, *Report 3: 2025-26 – 2025 Status of Auditor-General's recommendations* (8 October 2025) pp 20-22, 73.

<sup>51</sup> QAO, *Report 3*, pp 73.

<sup>52</sup> QAO, *Report 12*, pp 12-14.

<sup>53</sup> QAO, *Report 12*, p 15.

On 3 April 2025, DETSI wrote to the committee and said clear goals and measurable indicators have now been incorporated into the *Ecotourism Plan for Queensland's Protected Areas 2023–2028*. Following the release of *Destination 2045* and related documents, this has now been superseded by the *Ecotourism Plan for Queensland's Protected Areas 2025-2030*.

DETSI has committed to regularly reporting against identified performance metrics throughout the plan's duration, utilising readily available and measurable data, including visitor statistics from Tourism Research Australia, ecotourism accreditation figures from Ecotourism Australia and EarthCheck, and internal data from Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service concerning tourism permit and authorities.<sup>54</sup>

In addition to internal reporting, DETSI advised the Tourism and Environment portfolios under the auspices of DETSI goes some way to ensuring greater interagency cooperation and that it is seeking to collaborate with the Department of State Development, Infrastructure and Planning to monitor planning approval processes related to nature-based development activity.

At the public briefing on 17 September 2025, DETSI was asked how recommendation 3 was being approached, in light of the QAO's findings that the scope of potential development was not optimal. DETSI told the committee:

*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.[...] <sup>55</sup>*

At the committee's public briefing on 19 February 2025, TEQ expressed its support for all of the recommendations made in Report 12. In regard to recommendation 3, TEQ recognised its responsibility for the component of developing, finalising and updating their ecotourism plans that clearly outline how, within TEQ's scope of responsibility, TEQ will realise the governments vision of Queensland becoming a world leader in ecotourism.<sup>56</sup>

At the public hearing on 17 September 2025, the Member for Cairns asked Mr Craig Davidson, Chief Executive Officer of TEQ what steps were being taken in relation to recommendation 3 generally. TEQ told the committee:

<sup>54</sup> DETSI, *Correspondence from the Director General* (3 April 2025) p 2.

<sup>55</sup> Hansard, *Record of Proceedings – Public Briefing: Consideration of Auditor-General's Report 12: 2022-23 – Growing Ecotourism in Queensland* (17 September 2025) pp 5-6.

<sup>56</sup> Hansard, *Record of Proceedings – Public Briefing: Consideration of Auditor-General's Report 12: 2022-23 – Growing Ecotourism in Queensland* (19 February 2025) p 4.

*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.*

#### Committee comment



The committee is satisfied that Recommendation 3 has been fully implemented by the Department of the Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation with the release of *Destination 2045*.

TEQ should further consider what, if any, additional steps are necessary for it to meet the intent of Recommendation 3.

#### 2.5.4. Recommendation 4: Approving Ecotourism Facilities

Recommendation 4 sought to improve proponents experience when applying for approvals of ecotourism projects. QAO recommended the respective agencies reduce the complexity of obtaining government approval for ecotourism facilities and increase support provided to proponents during the process.<sup>57</sup>

At the public briefing held on 19 February 2025, DETSI acknowledged the importance of exploring avenues to streamline government approvals for ecotourism developments.<sup>58</sup> DETSI noted that feedback on the current approval process from industry stakeholders is that it is extremely complex, time-consuming and a huge investment, especially when dealing with three levels of government and different departments across each level of government.<sup>59</sup>

On 14 November 2024, the Queensland Government formally announced the establishment of the Tourism Cabinet Committee, an inter-departmental body charged with advancing tourism productivity and service delivery across the state. DETSI is among the participating entities contributing to this mandate.<sup>60</sup> Since its formation, the Tourism Cabinet Committee has been examining the current approval process to identify ways to

<sup>57</sup> QAO, *Report 12*, p 16.

<sup>58</sup> Hansard, *Record of Proceedings – Public Briefing: Consideration of Auditor-General’s Report 12: 2022-23 – Growing Ecotourism in Queensland* (19 February 2025) p 2.

<sup>59</sup> Hansard, *Record of Proceedings – Public Briefing: Consideration of Auditor-General’s Report 12: 2022-23 – Growing Ecotourism in Queensland* (19 February 2025) p 5.

<sup>60</sup> Premier and Minister for Veterans, Hon David Crisafulli MP, ‘Media Statement: Queensland Government announces Tourism Cabinet Committee’ (14 November 2024) <<https://statements.qld.gov.au/statements/101620>>.

streamline and simplify the process whilst ensuring environmental standards are met and the environment is protected.<sup>61</sup>

At the public briefing on 17 September 2025, DETSI told the committee:

*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.*<sup>62</sup>

Regarding recommendation 4, the Director-General advised:

*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.*<sup>63</sup>

The Member for Noosa asked:

**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.*<sup>64</sup>

#### Committee comment



The committee is satisfied that Recommendation 4 is being implemented, and notes DETSI's acknowledgement of legislation and regulations which will be introduced to fully implement this recommendation.

<sup>61</sup> Hansard, *Record of Proceedings – Public Briefing: Consideration of Auditor-General's Report 12: 2022-23 – Growing Ecotourism in Queensland* (19 February 2025) pp 4-5.

<sup>62</sup> Hansard, *Record of Proceedings – Public Briefing: Consideration of Auditor-General's Report 12: 2022-23 – Growing Ecotourism in Queensland* (17 September 2025) p 4.

<sup>63</sup> Hansard, *Record of Proceedings – Public Briefing: Consideration of Auditor-General's Report 12: 2022-23 – Growing Ecotourism in Queensland* (17 September 2025) p 2.

<sup>64</sup> Hansard, *Record of Proceedings – Public Briefing: Consideration of Auditor-General's Report 12: 2022-23 – Growing Ecotourism in Queensland* (17 September 2025) p 4.

## **Appendix A – Public Briefing, 28 January 2025**

### **Queensland Audit Office**

Ms Rachel Vagg

Auditor-General

Mr Darren Brown

Assistant Auditor-General

Mr David Toma

Senior Director

Mr Joel Cooper

Director

## **Appendix B – Public Briefing, 19 February 2025**

### **Department of Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation**

|                          |                                                                                  |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ms Patricia O’Callaghan  | Director-General                                                                 |
| Ms Mary-Anne Curtis      | Deputy Director-General, Environment<br>and Heritage Policy & Programs           |
| Mr Brad Wirth            | Acting Deputy Director-General,<br>Environmental Services and Regulation         |
| Mr Ben Klaassen          | Deputy Director-General, Queensland<br>Parks and Wildlife Service & Partnerships |
| Mr Mark Jacobs           | Deputy Director-General, Science                                                 |
| Ms Lea Diffey            | Deputy Director-General, Innovation                                              |
| Mr Chad Anderson         | Deputy Director-General, Tourism                                                 |
| Ms Vivienne Van Der Laak | Acting Deputy Director-General,<br>Corporate Services                            |

### **Tourism and Events Queensland**

|                     |                                |
|---------------------|--------------------------------|
| Mr Ollie Philpot    | Acting Chief Executive Officer |
| Ms Diana Mulholland | Trade Events Leader            |

## **Appendix C – Public Briefing, 19 February 2025**

### **Department of Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation**

Ms Patricia O’Callaghan

Director-General

Mr Ben Klaassen

Deputy Director-General, Queensland  
Parks and Wildlife Service & Partnerships

Miss Natalie Patch

Acting Deputy Director-General, Tourism

### **Tourism and Events Queensland**

Mr Craig Davidson

Chief Executive Officer

## Statement of Reservation

Health Environment and Innovation Committee (HEIC)

Inquiry into Auditor-General Report No. 12, 2022-23 – Growing ecotourism in Queensland

**Statement of Reservation — Sandy Bolton MP, Member for Noosa**

Whilst supporting the work done to prepare this report which considers QAO Report 12 on growing ecotourism, there are additional matters arising from the committee's consideration of Report 12 which warrant explicit discussion. This is the result of insufficient time for appropriate scrutiny when committee workloads exceed resources.

The first matter is regarding the conclusion made in the first "Committee comment" on page 14 of this report that the Department of the Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation (DETSI) has considered the impacts of tourism on the natural environment including where ecotourism is taking place in protected areas. This followed questions from myself and others at public briefings about the risks of overtourism in our national parks and recreation areas.

The evidence provided was that DETSI and the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS) have tools and control measures, such as management plans and visitor strategies, to address overtourism. However, this does not mean that the tools or controls are effectively utilised, with an example being the Cooloola Recreation Area. For the last eight years the Noosa community has sought action to reduce the impacts from uncontrolled visitor numbers which is affecting the natural environment, infrastructure, residents and tourists. The various 'tools' and 'controls' have failed to address this problem, with a response given that day permit controls are a matter for government. The conclusion that the committee is satisfied that DETSI has considered the impact of tourism on the environment is not one I can agree with.

The second significant matter is in respect to the implementation of the QAO recommendations on ecotourism, where the evidence does not support the conclusions reached.

For example, with recommendation 1, the QAO found that growing ecotourism in Queensland, while protecting the natural environment, requires a clear statewide policy for ecotourism on and off protected areas with details on the scale and types of acceptable developments, priorities and clearly stated tolerances for

development in and outside protected areas, and consistency and clarity for all agencies involved.

At the hearing DETSI reported that the new government policies *Destination 2045* and *45 by 45: Getting Ecotourism Moving* reflect the total implementation of recommendation 1 and this is quoted in the report. However, a review of the policies makes it clear that they fall short of the requirements of recommendation 1, as both are high level statements of intent with limited detail on the practical aspects of implementation. *Destination 2045* has 4 pages devoted to ecotourism with the actual policy statement amounting to 1 page and 400 words, and the *45 by 45* policy is 4 pages with photos.

Some additional detail is provided in *Ecotourism Plan for Queensland's Protected Areas 2025–2030* although this is an update with the same level of detail as the previous governments *Ecotourism Plan for Queensland's Protected Areas 2023–2028*, which existed when the QAO made its recommendations.

A similar issue arises with recommendation 2 for an ecotourism roadmap, with the claim that *Destination 2045* meets the requirement. While it provides some high-level principles, it does not have the detail of a roadmap for implementing ecotourism. Recommendation 3 is also not met by *Destination 2045* as stated in the report.

Overall, *Destination 2045* and associated documents may represent a new direction for ecotourism in Queensland and be well presented, however they are high-level statements of intent which do not meet the recommendations of the QAO for detailed planning.

Ultimately, for committees to do appropriate scrutiny, which includes examining in detail government policies, extra resources including time are required.

I would like to acknowledge the work by all including our exceptional Secretariat, our Chair and committee members, departmental staff and agencies, and thank them for endeavouring at all times to do the very best in unrealistic timeframes.



**Sandy Bolton MP**  
**Member for Noosa**