

## **Making world heritage matter – the value of quality interpretation in sustainable tourism development**

New research highlights the importance and values of nature of the Wet Tropics for visitors and residents (Esparon and Stoeckl, 2014-15). It's not simply a matter of the economics of tourism, determined as income and profit from visitor numbers or money spent but more in the recognition that motivations for people to visit the Wet Tropics track back to its intrinsic landscape values and natural amenity. This relates to what the scientists and managers have established that our world heritage sites are notable for their Outstanding Universal Value (OUV): that which makes them places of truly world significance. In 2013, the IUCN ranked the Wet Tropics as the second most irreplaceable natural world heritage site thus serving to emphasise the need to more broadly recognise the value of nature in the region. This recognition strengthens the impetus to confirm that the Wet Tropics is special place to live in and visit. It underlines why we should be truly vigilant and purposeful in our management actions to keep it protected and presented to visitors in the highest standards. New approaches to ecotourism also recognise the value nature and its principles focus our efforts on ensuring natural values are understood and appreciated through education and quality interpretation.

Best practice tourism management in protected areas, I want to urge, should take on these interpretation and education responsibilities as mission central. Whilst it's not 'a new focus', it is certainly an area that warrants greater attention and thought. Every time I travel to the Daintree and see the decline in presentation infrastructure it brings this point home. I also frequently hear locals bemoan that visitors are not getting to really know and appreciate their area, suggesting that there is still much more we can do to improve and enhance the visitor experience. I suspect it's a trend nationally, although there are even greater cost challenges in Queensland where we do not charge park access fees that might help reinvigorate the visitor experience.

There ought to be a commitment to the highest quality standards in tourism practice commensurate with our outstanding natural sites (World Heritage and National Landscapes sites). There are economic as well as scientific and cultural imperatives involved. Ecological economists help us define the importance of our places in nature. They seek out what are the most important motivations for people to visit and stay at a particular site and what views they have about possible threats to that site. The analysis tends to go that people are willing to pay more to see the special values preserved and that the loss of habitat or environmental integrity is a greater disincentive than higher prices and costs of stay. People are prepared to pay for quality and in nature based tourism this relates to our responsibilities to ensure environmental integrity and quality presentation.

### **About The Wet Tropics – its natural value and OUV**

There are also scientific and ecological dimensions in this discussion about value. Let's remember that the economic value of tourism to the area is about \$2.6 billion a year (TTNQ) and that the region's pristine landscape and natural values is the major factor motivating people to visit. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature ranked the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area as the **sixth overall** irreplaceable protected area on earth and the **second most irreplaceable natural World Heritage site**. These rankings reflect the large number of locally endemic species whose total known distribution is confined to the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area. The level of endemism is one of the defining features of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area. Its global significance is highlighted by its Outstanding Universal Value (OUV). The Wet Tropics has the greatest number of endemic wildlife

species of any Australian bioregion and this reflects the extraordinary evolutionary history of the region and its complex mosaic of habitats.

### **What is Outstanding Universal Value?**

**Outstanding:** Properties should be exceptional or superlative – they should be the most remarkable places on earth.

**Universal:** Properties need to be outstanding from a global perspective - not just remarkable from a national or regional perspective.

**Value:** What makes a property outstanding and universal is its “value”, or the natural worth of a property. This value is determined based on standards and processes established under the World Heritage Convention’s Operational Guidelines.

Rainforests dominate the vegetation of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area and contributes the most to the Areas OUV. They contain the most habitat diversity, the most diverse biological communities and the most species of higher plants. The National Landscapes positioning for the Wet Tropics also alludes to its value. LEAP agency that undertook this work describes it so” “The Wet Tropics is a triumph of natural wonder, hidden beauty and unidentified nature. The landscape is beguiling that the mildest interest blossoms in to the deepest passion with the lightest touch”.

Its attributes include a spectacular array of flora and fauna and world renowned hotspot for bird watchers. Its living history dates back thousands years from Aboriginal Australia. Its gifts of astounding beauty include gorges, walks and falls. The World Heritage Area is laced with walking trails, scenic drives and waterways.

The Tourism Tropical North Queensland (TTNQ) Destination Tourism Plan describes the region as the “world’s best destination to engage with nature”. It is primarily focused on reef and rainforest but is also a large and geographically diverse region. It is therefore critical that natural assets are protected, enhanced and continue to be managed to world class standards. Furthermore, pro-active steps are taken to anticipate, respond, and adapt to key challenges such as climate change, biosecurity and other key factors that may affect the quality of the assets.

The world heritage name and brand is well recognised across the world and often is a focal point for tourism. The brand itself entails OUV and invites the opportunity for tourists and visitors to experience and appreciate the best that nature has to offer. According to an IUCN study, it gives tourists an expectation that they will have a unique experience and at the same time provides the tourism industry with an easily promoted and almost fail-proof destination.

### **New directions in ecotourism policy – education and interpretation**

The World Heritage Tourism organisation makes the call for measures to that enable tourism to play a key role in preserving and managing natural and cultural heritage. These centre on for promoting quality tourism products and experiences that encourage responsible behaviour and foster understanding and appreciation of WH values. Quality interpretation and education are integral to this. This is part of a broader shift towards quality tourism, particularly with a focus on education

and interpretation. This reaffirmation is recognisable also in the recently announced strategic focus for the International Society for Ecotourism (TIES). The approach and rethinking, effective January 1, 2015, includes a revised Definition and Principles of Ecotourism adding a third pillar of education/interpretation as a cornerstone. The existing definition included only two (Conservation and Local Communities) of the three pillars of ecotourism, the inclusion **Interpretation** now holds a central place. Therefore, TIES revised definition is *"responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people and involves interpretation and education"* with the specification that education is to staff and guests. A commitment to quality interpretation and education and informing visitors must then be elevated within the policy and program of Ecotourism policy.

Interpretation has always been a central pillar National Parks service USA, which has for many years run an interpretive development program. Interpretation supports its preservation mission:

"Interpretation is driven by a philosophy that charges interpreters that helps audiences care about park resources . . . by helping audiences discover the meaning and significance associated with those resources. National Parks Service USA: "a catalyst in creating an opportunity for the audience to form their own intellectual and emotional connections with the meaning and significance inherent in the resource", and especially to help pose the question of "why should I care?"

Some of these ecotourism principles are recognisable in some of the recent inquiries and policy forums including: Victoria environmental and Natural Resources committee Inquiry into heritage tourism and ecotourism in Victoria and South Australia's Nature based Tourism Action plan (draft) 2015 and the recent Draft Ecotourism policy in Queensland. Some of the common elements in the policy mix include:

- Nature is recognised as a key and growing area of the tourism market with significant potential based on our outstanding natural assets
- Shortages in infrastructure and work skills and training need to be addressed
- Key skills and a Tourism Excellence Program combining digital communication and enhanced capacity to engage with visitors
- Supporting Aboriginal tourism, recognised as key drawcard for international visitors and as a way to encourage regional dispersal
- Placing priority on world heritage listings
- Providing marketing and promotional rewards for certified (eco-accredited) operators and the use of preferential and exclusive permitting and access benefits in national parks/world heritage sites.

Training and skill development to support quality interpretation and presentation are key themes in all recent inquiries in to ecotourism. Global best practice nature based tourism experiences require great knowledge of the landscape and storytelling ability matched with consistent high quality delivery.

### **Where to start? Tour guide training, education and quality interpretation**

In the Wet Tropics, our own work has been on developing a partnership with Savannah Guides, to develop a tour guide training program. We have had about 70 guides graduate from the online

school and participate in workshops securing their recognition as certified Wet Tropics guides. This cohort of guides regularly interacts through an online Facebook page and ongoing field activities that strengthen their network as a group committed to excellence in World Heritage presentation and interpretation. In this work the Authority is endeavouring to support guides in offering very high standards of presentation to assist visitor understanding of the World Heritage Area and to improve the international competitiveness of the Wet Tropics nature based tourism industry. The program is receiving national recognition as a means of ensuring high quality in the guiding industry.



Russel Boswell as the manager of Savannah Guides identifies how this helps contribute to real world elements of quality:

Russell Boswell as the manager of Savannah Guides identifies how this helps to contribute to real world elements of quality and tangible commercial outcomes for operators:

1. Operators often secure distribution partners based on perceived higher quality and professionalism i.e., a German wholesaler may prefer the accredited operator regardless of consumer knowledge of, or attitude towards accreditation. Operators then must continue to deliver quality to maintain contracts.

2. Accreditation drives internal awareness and a lift in quality. That results in improved word of mouth which is acknowledged as a strong element in consumer choice, including through digital channels.

We can certainly point to these in the case of the guide program as well as EcoCertification.

Russell Boswell of Savannah Guides observes: “In my experience those operators and guides that embrace professional development and industry accreditation are those that are more sustainable as they are analysing and evaluating their business, using certification/accreditation tools”.

An emerging strategic alignment around nature tourism - Interpretation, education and guide training was the new potential focus for action to emerge from was also identified at our 2013 National Landscapes Forum in the Blue Mountains when we thought of working cooperatively around strengthening support for quality tourism. The proposal of mentoring plus was developed as potential for STIG investment to assist businesses develop the experience offerings and to focus on the training and professional development of tour guides.

There has still been significant momentum sustained in developing this approach. It is reflected in developing focus of the National Landscapes Steering Committee, strong endorsement from TAPAF and on ground development and partnerships between agencies including Savannah Guides, Ecotourism Australia and the Wet Tropics Management Authority. There is also a strong history of cooperation between Ecotourism Australia and the GBRMPA and developing synergies with the work of Ecotourism Australia and Conservation Volunteers. These partnerships all emphasises quality support for tourism presentation, education and interpretation and are all unfolding and dynamic.



Let's go back two years to Blue Mountains Forum when we sought to identify innovative approaches for possible STIG funding and resourcing. We did after this get a very sophisticated proposal together under the heading of **Mentoring Plus**. Whilst the government pulled the STIG program after the election it is still very much the case that the core ideas have significant merit and logic that we can still work on together. The common elements are a commitment towards raising the bar in standards of tourism presentation and the agreement that the various protagonists they are closely linked in their missions and in the context of Australia's growing synergies around Nature tourism. The concept at the time was referred to as Mentoring Plus. The issues we seek to address include:

1. Guiding, visitor presentation and experience delivery standards are fragmented - and presentation standards and programs that need meaningful linkage. There have been several attempts at creating a national guiding standard (accredited Training Package units, Eco Guide, GOA), but some regional and sectoral approaches have been more successful (e.g. mandatory Kakadu and Uluru certification, Savannah Guides, Wet Tropics guides, GBRMPA programs) due to their direct relevance.
2. Tour Guiding, interpretation and tourism presentation remains an industry with unnecessary limitations on career opportunities.
3. World Heritage properties (and related National Landscapes), are Australia's premium range of offerings for Experience Seekers, should be at the forefront of solutions to these issues. By implementing a national approach to guide/operator training and mentoring and supporting it with a national approach to maintaining access to quality information and research, the opportunity presents for a sustainable long-term model of major benefit, lifting standards and increasing career opportunities right across the Australian nature based tourism.



The suggestion is for a national Nature Tourism Network to get behind this agenda to develop a national, innovative and collaborative approach to training and capacity development to better connect guides, operators, presenters and businesses to the skill sets information and other resources required to be best practice interpreters, ambassadors and spokespeople for their landscapes.

We would like to propose a meaningful rewards and recognition program based around a national approach. It would enable us to respond to long term challenges identified as:

1. The need to build resilience and productivity in our changing visitor market through higher quality and more diverse products based on the recognition that we cannot compete regionally and internationally on price.
2. The need to build career pathways and the professional standing of guides through networking, education and increased participation in the broader tourism industry.
3. And the need for an approach that builds on the strength of an Ecotourism accreditation program but focuses specifically around the quality of the nature based experience. Savannah Guides and its delivery role with Wet Tropics Guides and Ecotourism Australia are exiting partners with whom we can build momentum and further cooperation. Liking to Eco-guide, Wet Tropics Guides and Savannah Guides immediately brings close to 400 guides into an initial cohort of guides.

#### **Wider efforts to promote interpretation – self drives and community education**

To create a visually rich and engaging rainforest digital application which also consolidates and enhances our collection of contemporary and digital resources and content (photo, digital art, video and multi-media) to use across our rainforest interpretation and World Heritage presentation projects?

World Heritage area and values are supported and presented through the web, visitor centres, schools and attractions to enhance understanding and appreciation of the rainforest and the World Heritage area. Digital E-books and Apps are used to convey the online application conveys world heritage values in the most accessible format available for the World Heritage area through online, offline and multi device utilisation.

To meet visitor centre/attractions and wider community requests for accurate and visually engaging interpretive information about the Wet Tropics rainforest and OUV in a fresh and contemporary form and helps to foster regional partnerships and cooperation in the production of digital presentation slides on experiences and learning about the rainforest and digital based delivery.

Provide rich content to key user groups and consumers including local residents, tourists, VICs, business, schools and community groups.

To consolidate and enhance existing digital content such as the touch screen and rainforest explorer applications, through cost effective delivery and wider dissemination to users, VIC's, tourists, recreation and educational groups.

The natural and cultural values of the World Heritage area are promoted as much as possible without encompassing on the drive experience. Some of the values and are outlined below:

Montane and heath forests occur at altitudes above 1,000m. Eastern facing slopes are covered in thick native rainforest while the western slopes are generally drier tall open forests.

Threats to the regional ecosystems include inappropriate fire regimes, pest plant and pest animal species.

Kirrama National Park is known to protect three plant and 12 animal species that are listed as significant for conservation. The Back on Track status for these species is also included in Table 2.

Rose gums, paperbarks, northern silky oaks, Queensland walnuts and kauri pines support a variety of animal species including gliders, possums, honeyeaters, cassowaries, king parrots and musky rat-kangaroos.

Six bird species listed in international agreements are noted in Table 3.

Old Aboriginal walking tracks exist on park. Artefacts such as shield trees, tools and art sites are also known to exist on this park.

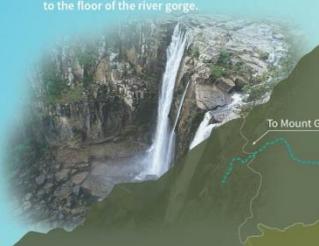
The road it does facilitates access to the Wet Tropics Great Walk and Blencoe Falls to the west and the Captain Cook Highway to the east.

# You are now entering the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area, a landscape unlike anywhere else on Earth

*"The Girramay Aboriginal peoples are the Traditional Owners of the land around you. As you traverse the range you will also pass through Warungnu and Jirrbal country. This area and its landscape features are of spiritual and cultural importance to our people. We welcome you and ask you to respect this special place."*

The Kirrama Range Road begins here. This steep and winding road traverses through various forest types from lowland eucalypt and tangled vine forests to towering rainforest. In wetter months waterfalls cascade in mountain streams along and across the road as it climbs. Much of the Kirrama Range is remote and inaccessible.

At the crest of the range the road passes through the site of the old logging settlement of Society Flats. At this point you will have almost crossed the Great Escarpment. After passing through Society Flats and mountain forests you will emerge into open grassland savannah as you approach Blencoe Falls. The falls are a segmented waterfall that cascade 320metres, thundering to the floor of the river gorge.



## The Timber Years

The Kirrama Range Road was built between 1935 and 1941 by the Queensland Public Estates Improvement Scheme. After European settlement, the Aboriginal tracks were used as pack tracks for miners heading to the Etheridge and Gilbert goldfields in the 1870s. The Kirrama Range Road was designed to provide access to the rich timber resources of the Cardwell State.

Timber extraction in these years was not the mechanised, industrial process of today's commercial clear fell logging but a challenging, selective logging process. Many Aboriginal men in the area contributed to this labour intensive industry. Timber extraction continued until the declaration of World Heritage in 1988.

## Since time immemorial

This is the traditional country of Girramay, Warungnu and Jirrbal Rainforest Aboriginal groups, each with their own language. Long before European settlement, Rainforest Aboriginal people managed and cared for the wet tropics region that is their home.

Although the Kirrama Range Road is the first European road to link Cardwell to the Atherton Tableland, Aboriginal people had long established tracks to cross the range to enable cultural and trading exchanges between the coast and the tablelands.

The Wet Tropics World Heritage Area has enormous significance as a living cultural landscape to the Traditional Owners of this country. Their strong and enduring connection to this area gives them a wealth of knowledge about its plants, animals, landscape and resources. The Aboriginal cultural significance of the Wet Tropics is recognised through inclusion on the National Heritage List in 2012.





Macleay's Fig-parrot

Buff-breasted Paradise Kingfisher

Emerald Dove

### Unique Environment

Kirrama National Park boasts an exceptional array of plants and animals. It has important Aboriginal culture and heritage values. The Wet Tropics World Heritage Area was declared in 1988. It stretches along the northeast coast of Australia for about 450 kilometres. Encompassing 894,420 hectares, this stunningly beautiful area is extremely important for its rich and unique biodiversity. These rainforests present an unparalleled record of the ecological and evolutionary processes that have shaped the flora and fauna of Australia.

The Wet Tropics World Heritage Area is home to nearly half of Australia's bird species. The Kirrama Range is a bird watcher's paradise: the shimmering green of the Emerald Dove can often be seen along the road or you may catch a glimpse of the brilliant blue and orange of the Buff-Breasted Paradise Kingfisher, trailing their long white breeding plume. Brush turkeys are a common sight along the road too and you might see tiny Macleay's Fig-parrot feeding on seasonal rainforest fruit.

Home to 35% of Australia's mammal species, the Wet Tropics World Heritage area provides essential habitat for many rare and threatened species. Keep an eye out for the Lumholtz's tree kangaroo. Most mammals in this area are nocturnal but tree kangaroos can sometimes be seen in the treetops resting or occasionally crossing the road during the day.



Golden Bowerbird

### Winds of Change

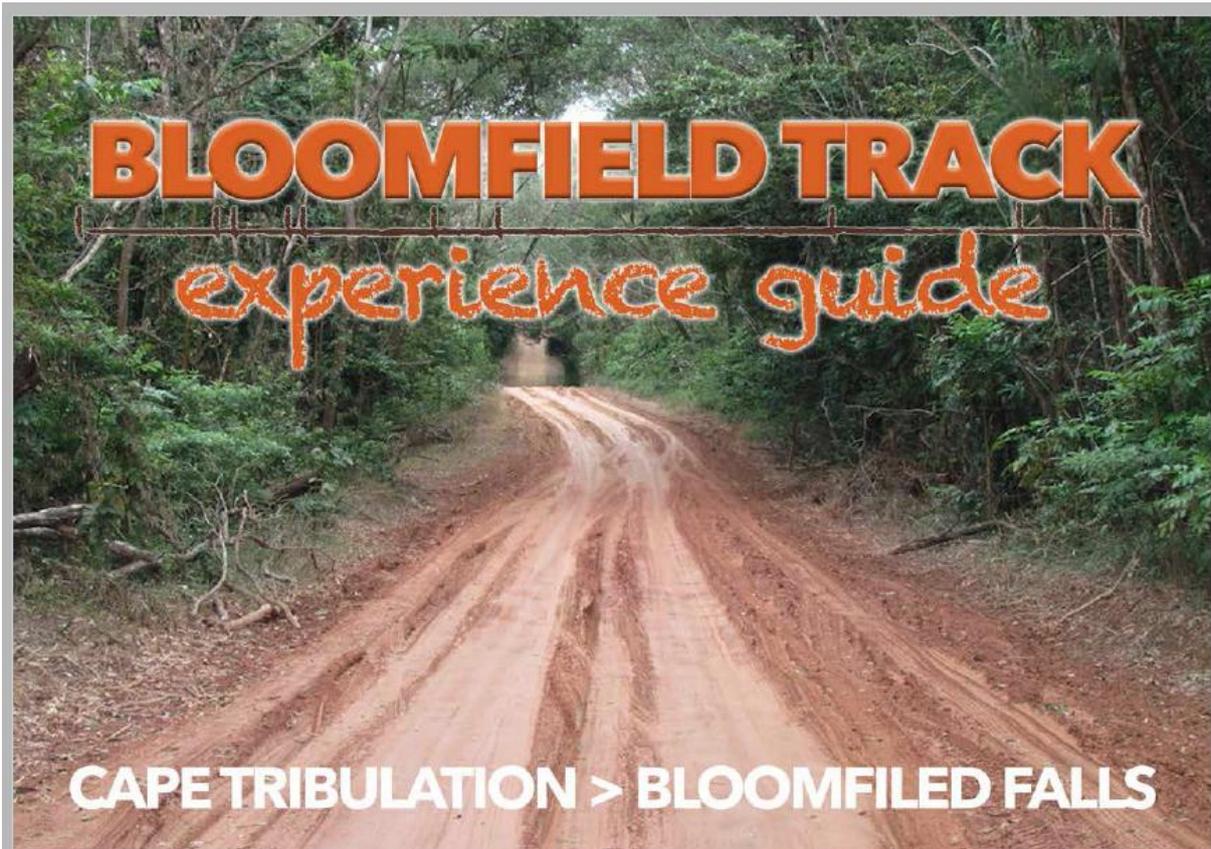
Evidence of cyclones can be seen in these forests, particularly on the eastern side of the range where impact is often the greatest. Cyclonic winds strip leaves and cause tree fall and torrential rains that accompany these events cause landslides and flooding. Tropical cyclones are a natural and frequent weather event in this part of Australia and many plant species have adapted to rapidly recover following storm damage.

The Kirrama Range Road was damaged by severe tropical cyclones Larry and Yasi in 2006 and 2011 respectively. The road was closed for seven years and reopened in November 2014.



Brush turkey

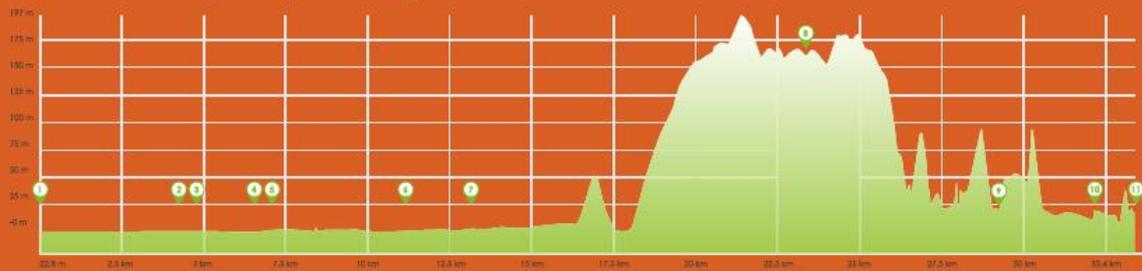
Bloomfield Drive E-Book



# Birdseye view of your journey



## Elevation Profile of Bloomfield Track



# Exceptional Natural Beauty

## STOP 2: CAPE TRIBULATION LOOKOUT



SECTION 1  
00.0-04.4



This small lookout gives you a classic view of where the 'rainforest meets the reef' at Cape Tribulation. Extensive mountain rainforest ridges plunge down from their summits, merging with the beautiful sandy beaches and fringing reefs of the Great Barrier Reef.

These stunning coastal views are world class. The area is rare in being one of very few sites where two world heritage areas adjoin side by side: the Wet Tropics and Great Barrier Reef. It is of such universal value that its conservation is of worldwide concern.

On our journey today we are going to discover a little more in depth about the reasons this landscape is so special, remember beauty is more than skin deep. For example; all of Australia's unique marsupials and most of its other animals originated in rainforest ecosystems, with their closest surviving relatives occurring in the Wet Tropics. These living relicts of the ancient world and expansion across the country provide unique insights to the process of how life on earth adapted to ever changing environments.

### Did you know?

The Wet Tropics has Australia's highest diversity of rainforest mammals, with 35% of Australia's mammal species found here including Australia's two monotremes, the platypus and echidna, 41 marsupials, 15 rodents and 36 bats.



### CALENDAR OF THE WET TROPICS...

#### January

- > The Kuku Yalanji people refer to the period between December and March as the 'proper wet time'.
- > The Candle Nut Tree (*Aleurites moluccana*) produces white fragrant flowers which can be smelt in the air between January and March.
- > The Orange and Black Cruiser Butterfly males and Blue Triangle Butterfly can be seen near damp leaves or still pools in the summer months beside rainforest streams.



# What birds can you see today?



CRESTED TERN



COLLARED KINGFISHER



AUSTRALIAN DARTER



BRAHMINY KITE



RAINBOW BEE EATER

40% of Australia's birds are found in the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area

The Wet Tropics of Queensland is listed for all four natural World Heritage criteria...

**Criterion 7:**  
Contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance.

**Criterion 8:**  
Be an outstanding example representing the major stages of Earth's history, including the record of life, and significant ongoing geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features.

**Criterion 9:**  
Be an outstanding example representing significant ongoing ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals

**Criterion 10:**  
Contain the most important significant habitats for in situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation



# What you might see on the beach...





Description



# Shared Cultural Landscape

## STOP 9 : BLOOMFIELD RIVER LOOKOUT

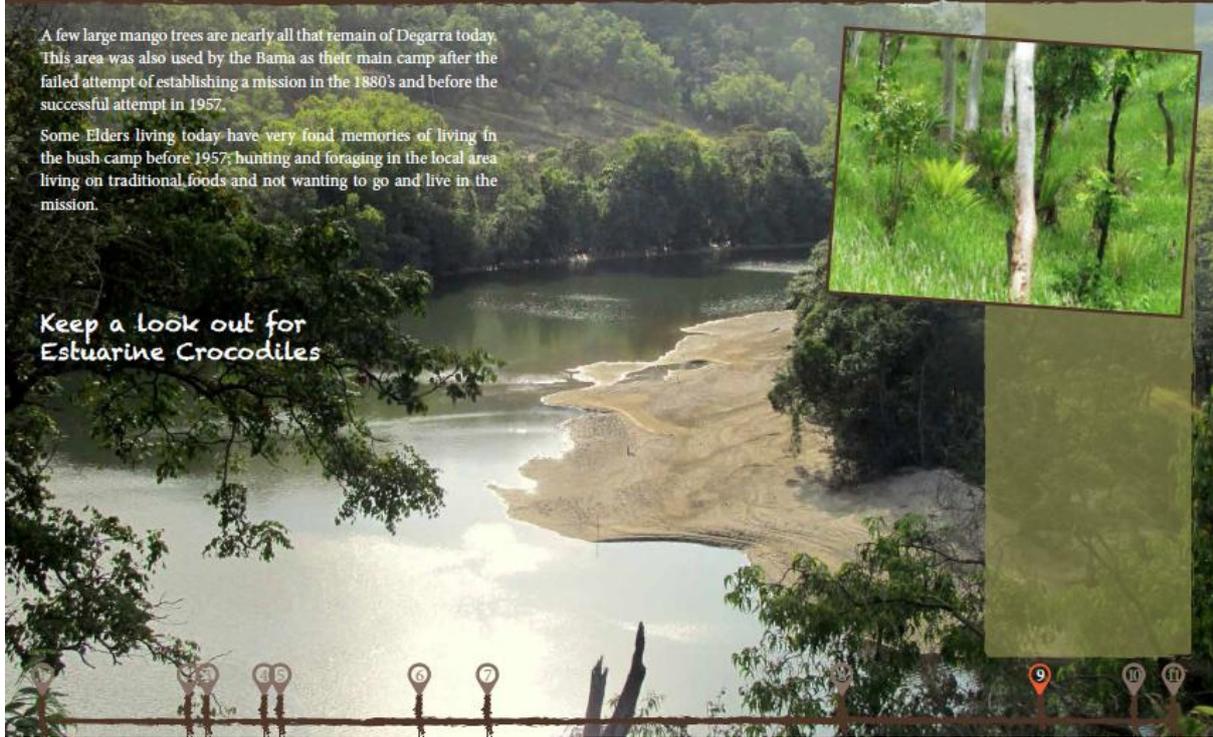


SECTION 4  
00.0 29.3

A few large mango trees are nearly all that remain of Degarra today. This area was also used by the Bama as their main camp after the failed attempt of establishing a mission in the 1880's and before the successful attempt in 1957.

Some Elders living today have very fond memories of living in the bush camp before 1957; hunting and foraging in the local area living on traditional foods and not wanting to go and live in the mission.

Keep a look out for  
Estuarine Crocodiles



## **Conclusion**

This approach gives us a basis for advancing sustainable tourism goals for improving the quality of interpretation within and our best “Best of Nature” experiences within our key protected areas. It is an agenda common to all protected areas managers who seek to have estates best managed, protected and presented. It also enables to deliver tangible benefits for our stakeholders by offering a portfolio of best of the best iconic experiences within Australia’s outstanding nature and culture destinations. It contributes to the conservation of the natural/cultural values of the nature tourism through either physical, financial or in-kind assistance and provides experiences of nature and/or culture that informs, educates and grows awareness, appreciation and enjoyment of the natural/cultural values of the sites and the need to conserve these values (i.e. promote and appreciate). It is clearly consistent with the conservation of natural and cultural values in our Ecotourism certification framework and makes ETA an essential partner working alongside protected areas managers and industry operators and guides.

We have the potential to come a national standard for interpretation, particularly in the guiding arena, at state and Commonwealth level (for example, all levels are endorsed by Director National Parks and the program accredited under the GBRMPA, which could be rolled out to other areas). It also provides a cost effective way for operators to obtain accreditation in the guiding arena and maintain best practice, with auditing and compliance.

This proposal can benefit the nature based tourism industry where it matters most, across World Heritage properties and our 16 national landscape projects. One of the great benefits of the pilot schemes has been greater strengthening of relationships between the tourism industry, conservation, academic and research sectors. This has never been achieved at a national scale and would be a significant innovation. We anticipate similar flow on benefits to other community business and agencies and stimulate private sector investment in our most important and sought after nature destinations.

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