

CAIRNS SHIPPING DEVELOPMENT PROJECT
Cairns Regional Council Submission

1. Cairns is a Major Tourist Destination

The Tropical North Queensland Region is one of Australia's premier tourism destinations being located in close proximity to two World Heritage Listed natural wonders – The Great Barrier Reef and the Wet Tropics Rainforest.

More than two million visitors a year from around the world are attracted to these two internationally recognised icons and to other natural attractions offered by the region.

The region's tourism operators are industry leaders and have embraced best practice principles to preserve and protect the natural environment which is the core of their existence. Tourism is a sustainable industry and a major driver of employment.

The future of Cairns is inextricably linked to tourism and the need to protect the major natural attractions is not to be questioned.

2. Cairns is a Commercial City

The city of Cairns is the "regional capital" of Tropical North Queensland and provides a variety of commercial, educational and recreational facilities for the regional population. Cairns International Airport and the Port of Cairns are located close to the city centre but provide services and trade facilitation capability to the broader region.

The region's population has grown from 128,000 in 1976 to 270,000 in 2011 – an increase of 111%, the fastest growing region in Queensland over that period. Population is expected to double over the next twenty five years, increasing demand on infrastructure and services.

It is inevitable that the critical infrastructure located in Cairns, including the Cairns Seaport, will grow to support the demand created by the increased regional population and economic activity.

3. The Role of the Cairns Sea Port

The Port of Cairns is a multi-purpose facility catering for a range of tourist, bulk cargo and coastal trading vessels as well as the Royal Australian Navy and is supported by a highly experienced marine services sector.

Cairns has a long history as a key cruise destination in Queensland with cruise ship numbers steadily increasing. Internationally, ship numbers have significantly increased at a time when there is a clear trend to larger vessels. In the case of Cairns, future growth may be constrained by the limitations of the existing shipping channel with the situation being exacerbated as the size of cruise ships increases.

The removal of existing constraints is proposed by the Cairns Shipping Development Project.

The Project, when completed, is expected to deliver significant growth in larger cruise ship visits. Increased visitation will deliver substantial economic returns to the region, and flow-on benefits to other regional cruise destinations.

This project will also provide opportunities for the expansion of HMAS Cairns as well as improving operational efficiencies for the Port's shipping operators.

4. The Conflict

There can be no question that the two World Heritage Listed natural wonders – The Great Barrier Reef and the Wet Tropics Rainforest must be protected.

However, Cairns and the surrounding region will experience significant population growth in the next 10 – 50 years as a result of sustained increases in economic activity, most likely driven by tourism and tourism-related activities.

The Region has an obvious conflict:

The region recognises unequivocally that the priority must be to preserve and properly manage the Great Barrier Reef and Wet Tropics Rainforest.

There is also recognition that enabling infrastructure, including Cairns Seaport, will need to be expanded to sustain future economic growth.

5. The Great Barrier Reef is the Priority

Preservation of the region's natural attractions must continue to be a priority. There is a wide variety of stakeholders whose activities impact on the health of the reef including local governments, port operators, the shipping, fishing, agricultural and tourism industries and the broader community living along the Queensland coast.

Governments at all levels should commit whatever resources are necessary to ensure that impacts of stakeholder activities on the Great Barrier Reef are understood. In particular, scientific studies should assess the impact of stakeholder activities relative to ambient and natural processes and other naturally occurring phenomena.

Better understanding these relativities will encourage stakeholders to commit to best practice in their operations and areas of influence to ensure there is broad community support to deliver against desired outcomes and manage the impacts of activities on the natural environment.

6. Disposal of Dredge Material in Cairns

Dredging has occurred in the Port of Cairns for over 100 years with maintenance dredging being undertaken annually to remove naturally occurring sediment that has accumulated in the channel. The last major capital dredging project was undertaken in 1990. Between 1913 and 1974 a small proportion of the annual dredging was used to reclaim land. These practices would not meet current environmental management requirements.

It is understood that the project will require the disposal of approximately 4.4 million cubic metres (m³) of capital dredge material during the construction phase and an estimated additional 100,000m³ of annual channel maintenance dredging through the operational phase. The existing annual operational dredging is approximately 350,000m³. The current site for disposal of dredge material is marine-based and approximately 14km north of the Port of Cairns entrance.

The EIS considered five (5) land based options and five (5) marine based options for dredge disposal.

The preferred marine based site was a site 3.5kms from the current dredge material placement area and is in deeper water (18-22 metres) which was assessed as being almost fully retentive under both cyclonic and normal conditions. The site was assessed as not containing seagrass, corals, or other important habitats. The marine placement assessment concluded that this option provided the best environmental and financially sustainable outcome with project costs estimated at \$102 million.

The preferred land based option was the 520 hectare East Trinity site, however this site, as a land disposal site, was not considered appropriate due to environmental issues (predominantly associated with Potential Acid Sulphate Soils) and disproportionate costs (an additional \$330 million project cost for the land disposal option). Council supports the findings of the EIS with respect to the land based option.

Unlike other ports along the Queensland coast, Cairns has limited alternatives for the disposal of dredge material on land. The EIS has clearly identified a preferred marine based site which was considered to deliver the best overall outcome from an environmental and financial perspective.

An approval for the marine based disposal of dredge spoil should be considered when applications are supported by the best available scientific studies assessing the likely impact on the Great Barrier Reef and accompanied by Management Plans which demonstrate best practice in the proposed dredging operations.

It is important to understand that the expansion project and resultant capital dredging required to accommodate larger ships into the Port of Cairns is separate to the annual maintenance dredging that is required to ensure ongoing safe and efficient port operations.

If annual maintenance dredging of the channel did not occur, the Port of Cairns would close down, due to the natural accumulated sediment from wind and currents. Closure of the port would have a devastating impact on the region's economy.

Maintenance dredging is the subject of comprehensive monitoring and studies by scientists from James Cook University which confirm that the material disposal site is in the best location with no long term environmental impacts.

Recognition must be given to the economic importance of the Port of Cairns and the activities undertaken to ensure its safe and efficient operation both now and into the future.

7. A Compromise Position

Council proposes the following for consideration by all levels of Government:

- a. Recognition must be given that the preservation of the Great Barrier Reef is of primary importance and a renewed commitment by all levels of Government must be made to ensure the current deterioration of the reef is addressed and that best management practices are introduced to preserve its future in the long term.
- b. All stakeholders whose activities impact on the reef must commit to best practice in their operations and areas of influence to ensure there is broad community support to reduce the impacts of operational activities on the natural environment.
- c. A commitment must be made to develop a best practice management model for the Great Barrier Reef which is supported by the best available science. Ongoing scientific research is required to understand, predict and manage impacts relative to ambient or natural processes.
- d. Appropriate funding necessary to support these commitments must be quantified and made available to ensure an overarching management regime is in place.

- e. Recognition must be given that the Port of Cairns will need to undertake annual maintenance dredging in accordance with approved conditions and monitoring regimes to ensure safe and efficient operation of the port.
- f. Recognition must also be given that the Port of Cairns will need to expand to sustain future economic growth and that, for this expansion to occur, capital dredging will be required.
- g. A final decision on whether the Cairns Shipping Development Project should proceed should be deferred and further assessed if it can be clearly demonstrated that:
 - i. the Project is supported by the best available science;
 - ii. the Project will be based on best practice management of environmental impacts; and
 - iii. the Project includes a comprehensive monitoring regime to measure impacts on the natural environment.