

TTNQ SUBMISSION

Inquiry into Preparing for Emerging Industries Across Northern Australia Joint Standing Committee on Northern Australia Submission from Tourism Tropical North Queensland

22 January 2026

1. Introduction

Tourism Tropical North Queensland (TTNQ) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Northern Australia's Inquiry into Preparing for Emerging Industries Across Northern Australia.

TTNQ is the Regional Tourism Organisation (RTO) for the northern region of Queensland stretching from the Torres Strait, south to Cardwell and west to the NT border where we connect with Tourism Top End and Australia's North-West in the Savannah Way partnership.

As one of the largest employing export industries in Northern Australia, the visitor economy has the potential to play an even greater role in regional development across Northern Australia, generating jobs, diversifying local economies, supporting export revenue through visitor spend, and creating pathways for First Nations economic participation. Economic estimates produced for the Savannah Way partnership in 2023 showed the region's tourism industry could grow by \$1B per annum with visitors' stay and spend per day closer to regions like Outback Queensland.

This submission aims to showcase tourism and the wider visitor economy as not only an established and essential industry sector, but also a sector with significant emerging industry segments with real growth potential, including events tourism, First Nations tourism and cruise tourism to name a few.

A well-supported, vibrant and diverse visitor economy has the capacity to contribute to economic diversification, workforce development, First Nations empowerment, infrastructure utilisation, sustainable development and climate resilience right across the communities of Northern Australia.

2. Tourism as an Emerging and Future-Focused Industry

Tourism is already one of the North's key economic pillars. Unlike resource sectors that fluctuate with global markets, tourism delivers:

- Export-equivalent revenue by attracting interstate and international visitors
- Local job creation across every community—urban, regional and remote
- Support for aviation, retail, transport, tours, hospitality and marine sectors
- First Nations employment and enterprise development
- Economic diversification in communities historically reliant on resources

The global tourism market is shifting toward sustainability, cultural experiences, remote and nature-based travel, and Indigenous-led tourism—all strengths of the Tropical North. These shifts position tourism as one of the most relevant emerging industries for Northern Australia in the next decade.

3. Submission Alignment with the Inquiry Terms of Reference

TTNQ's submission has been aligned to the Committee Terms of Reference for ease of review by the Committee and to demonstrate the alignment of the visitor economy to the inquiry into preparing for emerging industries across Northern Australia. Within each area are TTNQ's recommendations for the Committee to consider in achieving the potential of the visitor economy in Northern Australia.

Recommendation: the Savannah Way collective brings together the industry, Government and community stakeholders of the visitor economy under one strategic plan and vision. Funding administrative support for the Savannah Way would help to better align the role of tourism across the jurisdictions of Northern Australia with the wider role tourism can play in supporting other emerging industries.

3.1 Supporting the Global Transition to Net Zero - TOR (a)

As a global industry, the tourism industry in Northern Australia is increasingly called upon by its supply-chain partners headquartered in countries with more advanced compliance regimes for the transition to Net Zero. With consumers increasingly seeking 'low-carbon' products and experiences, the tourism industry can play a key role in communicating the importance of the transition and in some cases lead early adaptation of inter-operable technologies. For example, tourism and the farming sector face the challenge of transitioning to cost-effective liquid renewable fuels that comply with manufacturers requirements for existing engines.

Cost-effective, liquid renewable fuels are not only required for transport, but also the many locations reliant on diesel generators for stationary fuels. A transition to solar and wind power in most remote parts of Northern Australia will have limited application due to the absence of adequate electricity poles and wires over long distances. Low carbon liquid fuels will also bring other benefits such as employment, regional development and domestic fuel security.

Recommendation: through an R&D partnership between tourism and primary producers, identify the quantum of liquid fuels required, the manufacturer warranty requirements of the majority of existing units (generators, trucks, buses, etc) and map a pathway to a cost-effective local industry for the manufacturing of biofuels and the subsidy program required to support the transition.

3.2 Supporting Export Industries - TOR (c)

Tourism is not only a significant export industry; it is a significant employer within communities as it brings the customer to the product (not the product to the customer). Tourism supports vital aviation services that connect Northern Australia, builds the brand of the regions of Northern Australia to boost the value of goods and services and injects over \$1.5B annually through accommodation, tours, transport, and hospitality from international visitors. As Northern Australia seeks to broaden its export base beyond minerals and energy, tourism offers a high-yield, low-emissions, globally competitive export opportunity. Northern Australia is also uniquely poised to benefit as airlines continue to adopt long-range, narrow body aircraft. These aircraft can fly directly to our region from a raft of Asian markets, but do not have the range to

service many other Australian airports, including Queensland's capital of Brisbane. We can maximise the potential of this new aircraft technology now, through strategic and considered airline partnerships.

Recommendation: a dedicated Northern Australia aviation attraction investment fund to attract and grow more direct international aviation services will help many export industries, including tourism, grow over the next decade. Each State has an established fund and the Northern Australia fund could extend these funds further to benefit the whole of Northern Australia.

3.3 Infrastructure Development - TOR (f)

Tourism productivity depends on safe, reliable and climate-resilient infrastructure. Tourism also provides the volume and economic justification that supports the maintenance (road, rail, port and airport) of existing infrastructure. TTNQ highlights the following strategic priorities:

- Road upgrades along the Savannah Way to create an all-weather route from east to west
- Marine access: Barge and ferry infrastructure funding programs, increased access for cruise line tenders to regional communities to share the economic benefits (including expedition cruises)
- Aviation access: Regional aviation affordability, year-round and all-weather approaches in remote communities
- Digital connectivity: Essential for visitor safety, marketing, bookings, and real-time road/weather updates
- Private sector investment attraction: Working in a more coordinated way with the States/Territories and Local Authorities to facilitate private sector investment into tourism infrastructure.

Infrastructure designed for resources, defence or freight can be co-designed for tourism, maximising public value.

Recommendation: through the Northern Australia Infrastructure Fund, explore the establishment of an investment facility for key sectors, such as experiential / resort accommodation (remote islands) and tours where the NAIF is a patient capital provider along with other investors. This would allow investors in identified priority sectors to access funding below the current threshold, similar to a family office investment facility for an identified asset class.

3.4 Managing Biosecurity – TOR (g)

In many remote island and coastal communities, a key biosecurity issue is marine plastic debris. For many of these communities, tourism, fishing and Government are the primary employers. Biosecurity risks from marine plastic debris are increasing as the frequency, volume and cost to manage the debris increases. New tourism infrastructure could be used to augment investments in marine plastic debris collection and management (beach clean-ups) and

dealing with waste. Further, R&D on treating and recycling marine plastic debris and recyclables for reuse as building or art materials could help to address this issue.

Recommendation: An R&D and supporting grants program to explore cost-effective reuse and recycling of both marine plastic debris and recyclables in remote communities for use in building or art materials could support both tourism growth and reduce the environmental impacts and biosecurity risks associated with marine plastic debris.

3.5 Workforce, Skills and Housing - TOR (h)

Workforce shortages remain one of the sector's most significant barriers to growth.

Tourism provides accessible employment for young people, seasonal workers, remote residents, and First Nations people, yet faces:

- Housing shortages in tourism towns
- Limited access to specialist training in remote areas
- Difficulty attracting and retaining skilled staff
- Seasonal volatility

Federal investment is needed in:

- Regional workforce programs
- Remote accommodation for workers
- Training pathways in guiding, hospitality, marine operations, and digital skills

Recommendation: Development of regional education and employment programs for international and interstate students can provide both a workforce and support the business case for purpose-built student accommodation.

3.6 First Nations Empowerment - TOR (i)

Northern Australia contains some of the richest Indigenous cultural landscapes in the world. First Nations tourism is one of Australia's fastest-growing visitor segments, contributing to:

- Local employment
- Language and cultural transmission
- Caring-for-country outcomes
- Community-led economic participation

TTNQ strongly recommends that the Committee recognise First Nations tourism as a critical emerging industry requiring targeted investment, enterprise support, and culturally-driven visitor infrastructure.

Recommendation: Work with the Savannah Way and the three regional tourism organisations to create a program that supports emerging and established First Nations tourism experiences to grow their domestic and international trade connections.

3.7 Marine / Barge Access to Remote Communities - TOR (j)

Marine access infrastructure is essential for:

- Community connectivity
- Supply logistics
- Marine tourism (charters, cruising, fishing, cultural sea Country experiences)

Investment in multi-use barge landing and marine access points will support remote communities while enabling tourism growth in coastal and island environments, including the outer islands of the Torres Strait. This infrastructure is vital to these communities benefitting from the growth of the cruise and superyacht industries.

Recommendation: Co-investment with the State / Territory Governments in marine access to coastal and island communities identified through the Destination Management Plans of the three regions as having cruise tourism potential.

3.8 Research and Development - TOR (k)

Throughout the 1970's, 1980's and early 1990's the Pacific Asia Tourism Association (PATA) supported the development of plans for emerging tourism regions such as Cape York, the Torres Strait, and the Gulf Savannah and supported investment opportunities (including Sheraton Mirage Port Douglas) by connecting the tourism and resort know-how of established destinations such as Hawaii to emerging and remote areas. Over the next decade, with the support of the Federal Government and other partners, Northern Australia could become a test-bed and showcase for sustainable, culturally appropriate tourism and work to attract investment into the sector as well as demonstrating Australia's leadership role in the Pacific and South East Asia. The areas of opportunity for research and development include:

- Culturally appropriate tourism
- Sustainable tourism and accreditation programs
- Climate-resilient tourism models
- Carrying capacity and sustainable visitor planning

Federal R&D partnerships with Savannah Way, the RTOs, universities, and Traditional Owner groups could support innovation in destination management.

Recommendation: Co-investment with the State / Territory Governments in a Pacific Asia Tourism Association Chapter in Northern Australia and funding a program of product reviews and educational programs for destinations and investors on sustainable tourism.

4. Recommendations

TTNQ recommends the Committee:

- 1. Recognise tourism as a core industry for Northern Australia with emerging growth segments.** Tourism already acts as a major economic driver and diversification pillar across Northern Australia with the potential to grow by over \$1B per annum with the right investment.
- 2. Work through the Savannah Way partnership to grow sustainable tourism in Northern Australia.** Funding administrative support for the Savannah Way would help to better align the role of tourism across the jurisdictions of Northern Australia with the wider role tourism can play in supporting other emerging industries.
- 3. Grow the biofuels sector in Northern Australia through a tourism and primary industries R&D partnership,** mapping a pathway to a cost-effective local industry for the manufacturing of biofuels and the subsidy program required to support the transition.
- 4. A dedicated Northern Australia aviation attraction investment fund** to attract and grow more direct international aviation services will help many export industries, including tourism, grow over the next decade.
- 5. Use the Northern Australia Infrastructure Fund to explore the establishment of an investment facility for key sectors** where the investment is below the current threshold. Investing in a portfolio, rather than a single project e.g. remote island accommodation and tours.
- 6. An R&D and supporting grants program to explore cost-effective reuse and recycling of both marine plastic debris and recyclables** in remote communities for use in building or art materials could support both tourism growth and reduce the environmental impacts and biosecurity risks associated with marine plastic debris.
- 7. Invest in International Education** and employment programs for international and interstate students in Northern Australia to provide a workforce and support the business case for purpose-built student accommodation.
- 8. Work with the Savannah Way and the three regional tourism organisations** to create a program that supports emerging and established First Nations tourism experiences to grow their domestic and international trade connections.
- 9. Co-investment in marine access** to coastal and island communities identified through the Destination Management Plans of the three regions as having cruise tourism potential.
- 10. Establish a Pacific Asia Tourism Association Chapter in Northern Australia** and funding a program of product reviews and educational programs for destinations and investors on sustainable tourism.

5. Conclusion

As Northern Australia prepares for its next generation of emerging industries, tourism must be recognised as a central pillar of economic diversification, cultural empowerment, environmental stewardship and sustainable regional development. The regions of Northern Australia, including Tropical North Queensland, possess world-class tourism assets that, with targeted federal investment, can deliver long-term prosperity for communities across Northern Australia.

TTNQ welcomes further engagement with the Committee and is available to provide case studies, industry data, and on-ground insights.