

Mackay's Bluewater Trail—2010 National Overall Winner and National Category Winner (Planning for Active Living), Health Foundation Local Government Awards

by Onno Van Es





Introduction

The Mackay Regional Council area is one of the fastest growing regions in regional Australia, experiencing an average annual growth rate of over 3 per cent. Boasting a growing population of 116,000, the council area covers 7,261 square kilometers.

Its coastal location, halfway between Cairns and Brisbane, is complemented by 31 beautiful beaches, the picturesque Pioneer River, one of the few blue water rivers in the southern hemisphere, and a spectacular hinterland.

The region is the largest sugar-producing region in Australia with 1,400 growers. Nearly a third of Queensland's export goods originate from the region and it is the gateway to the rich coal deposits in the Bowen Basin.

There are about 30 different nationalities represented in the region, including people from Malta, South Africa, The Netherlands, Germany and Brazil. The region also boasts the largest Australian South-Sea Islander population in the country.

Bluewater Activation Strategy

The Mackay region has been experiencing an unprecedented period of growth over the past decade based on mineral resources, advanced engineering services, revitalised agri-business and emerging status as a lifestyle destination. This growth has provided opportunities to enhance the unique qualities of the region to create 'Australia's most liveable city'. This vision includes the creation of:

- ❖ An attractive and lively city centre waterfront to enhance the region's bustling business activity hub; with
- ❖ A network of destinations connected by vehicle, bicycle or foot.

The vision of capitalising on Mackay's Pioneer River gained momentum when a number of Mackay business identities shared their idea of a walkway on the river near Mackay's CBD with elected councillors in 2001. Receiving strong support, this vision became a reality when Mackay City Council opened the first stage of the Pioneer Promenade in 2004, followed by the second stage in March 2006.

Considering the success of the Pioneer Promenade and the community's enthusiasm, the idea of capitalising on Mackay's river was formally elaborated upon early 2006 when Council developed the Bluewater Activation Strategy and its associated Bluewater Trail concept.

Council conducted community consultation mid 2006 and clearly concluded significant community support for the strategy. The local community was also supportive in regard to acquisitions and land use approvals required to assist with development, including an area of land at Caneland

Park, north of Caneland Central shopping centre, which was converted from reserve and made available for expansion of the adjacent shopping centre, with such extension fronting and focused on the Pioneer River and providing resources to assist with development of sections of the Bluewater Trail.

Based on the overall vision of the Bluewater Activation Strategy and the continued period of strong growth, the following two objectives were developed for the Bluewater Trail:

1. Provide Mackay with a distinctive and accessible 'ring of activity' around the City Centre, to be known as the Bluewater Trail. This 'ring of activity' will comprise venues and destinations close to the Pioneer River, the city beaches and the green belt.
2. Activate the overall Bluewater Trail by increasing the range and intensity of activities in key sites and activity nodes of the trail.

The Bluewater Activation Strategy has continued to remain one of Council's key high-level strategies and recently reached major milestones. What started out from the humble beginnings of a community vision, today there are ten sites and activity nodes along the Bluewater Trail. The sites are:

1. Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens
2. Catherine Freeman Walk
3. Pioneer Environmental Walk
4. Caneland Park
(access to Caneland Central shopping centre, currently under redevelopment)
5. Bluewater Lagoon
(the free admission three-tiered aquatic facility)
6. Pioneer Promenade
7. Bluewater Quay
(public open space on the Pioneer River)
8. Sandfly Creek Environmental Walk
9. Iluka Park (all abilities playground)
10. Mackay South Sporting Precinct
(located on Bridge Road)

Although several key sites of the Bluewater Trail, such as the Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens, will experience further expansion, the majority of the activity nodes of the Bluewater Trail Masterplan are now complete.

Key sites/activity nodes on the Bluewater Trail

❖ Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens

Objective: Highlight the Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens as a major destination along the Bluewater Trail.



Located at the southern gates to Mackay, the Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens (MRBG) represents the beginning of the Bluewater Trail. The MRBG opened in May 2003 and is being constructed in a 'stage by stage' 20 year timeframe. The MRBG contains an array of beautiful, rare and threatened plants native to the Central Queensland Coast bioregion that surrounds Mackay and the Whitsundays, and features special plants from Australia and the world. The MRBG has an active educational program and 90% of the MRBG is wheelchair accessible.

Historic

The Lagoons site has a significant history intrinsically tied to the life and development of Mackay City and the surrounding region. The site has cultural and historical associations with the aboriginal, Australian South Seas Islander, Torres Strait Islander, the European and Australian communities. As early as the 1880's, the site was mooted as a potential botanic garden. The first State Nursery was established on the site in 1889 where sugar cane, tea, coffee, fruit and timber trees and grasses and legumes were

all trialled. The first municipal water supply works were established in 1892 and continue to this day.

Landscape architect Arne Fink was commissioned to prepare plans for a Botanic Park in 1975. The local Branch of the Society for Growing Australian Plants began the thrust for a Botanic Gardens on the site in 1985. A plan for the Lagoons Reserve was prepared by landscape architect Catherine Brower in 1991. In 1998 landscape architect Lawrie Smith was commissioned to document the 2000 Masterplan when funding became available from the Queensland State Government through the Regional Centre's initiative. Construction of Stage 1 commenced in 2002 and completed in 2003. Stage 2 development commenced in 2004 and completed in 2006.

The Present

The MRBG Masterplan 2000 detailed the initial development of the new botanic gardens for the city and contained comprehensive investigations, financial planning and conceptual designs for the staged development of the site. In 2000 the overall development of the gardens was



estimated at \$14 million in a series of 10 development stages over 15 years.

Following the construction of Stage Two of the botanic gardens development in 2004-2006, the Botanic Gardens Reference Group advocated a review be conducted of the Masterplan to incorporate the development to date and provide a guide for future development of the gardens. This included financial implications of the proposed work and taking into consideration new information on site conditions and proposed climate change and sustainability. Commencing in 2009, the Masterplan took over 1 year to review and update.

The revised Masterplan 2010 produced in consultation with gardens staff, community representatives and specialist horticultural groups ensures the completion of all works on the Lagoon Street and Nebo Road side of the Lagoons and puts in place an innovative vision for the area to the west of the Lagoons, called Meadowlands. This area will incorporate water features, pathways, interpretive features, an entertainment precinct, car parking and connectivity to the entire gardens. The completion of the revised Masterplan 2010 design implementation is projected to cost \$16.42 million.

The Concept

The MRBG, covering 51 hectares, is a peri-urban site in West Mackay being developed to display, research, trial and preserve local native flora and plant species from around the world. Botanic gardens world-wide are charged with preserving flora and educating the public on the importance of conservation, potential climate change, sustainable resource use as well as the importance of horticulture and agriculture essential to everyday life.

The MRBG is divided into two main sections:

- ❖ The 'city' side is the main demonstration and display area with gardens of many themes. These gardens either demonstrate the use of plants in thematic gardens e.g. a 'sun' garden, a 'shade' garden, a 'hedge' garden etc., or display plants in settings that often represent geographic or ethnobotanic themes, e.g. the 'Finch Hatton Waterway' garden, the 'Monsoon Forest' garden, the 'Medicinal Plants' garden, etc.
- ❖ The western Meadowlands section of the MRBG will commence in 2011 and will predominantly house the local bioregional collection of plants found in the region that surrounds Mackay and the Whitsundays. This will be the core of the MRBG's preservation and conservation role and will one day house over 200,000 plants representing key plant communities and horticultural use usage.

A diverse project

As well as its important botanic collection in a uniquely designed facility, the MRBG offers a range of attractions for residents and visitors to Mackay. It features over 3 kilometers of pedestrian walkways, shared use paths, boardwalks and sensory trails offering significant access to the gardens. A destination café and art gallery is a major drawcard for the MRBG. The café's panoramic veranda is located 30 metres above the lagoons.

The Meadowlands development will also house an events and outdoor performance centre due to open in October 2011 with further pedestrian and shared-use pathways and future nursery facility.

The lagoons site has cultural and historic associations with the Aboriginal, Australian South Sea Islanders and Torres Strait Islander communities, as well as the early European settlers of Mackay. Five cultural gardens and precincts represent this diversity with specific cultural themes.

The MRBG is an important recreational site for Mackay with many residents using pathways and lawns daily for walking, exercise, personal training and relaxing. The Ooralea local area plan places the MRBG as a cornerstone green space and recreational facility for a new community of over 20,000 residents on the cities south-western fringe over the next 25 years.

❖ Catherine Freeman Walk

Objective: Create a natural river walk connecting Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens to the Pioneer Environmental Walk.

The Catherine Freeman Walk was constructed in partnership with an Indigenous training scheme for local youth. The enthusiastic team undertook the construction in 2004 and the resulting path is now used daily by recreational



Mayor Col Meng with wife Rhonda enjoying a barbeque at Bluewater Quay



cyclists, walkers and dog owners who enjoy the Bluewater Trail.

This part of the Bluewater Trail winds along the Pioneer River to the old hospital bridge fishing platform. The Hospital Bridge, officially named Pioneer Bridge, had its origins in 1876 and was decommissioned in 2009 after opening of a new connection a short distance upstream. Four spans remain today and is now the site of a popular fishing platform.

The name proudly refers to one of Australia's most recognized athletes who was born in Mackay. Catherine Freeman became the first female Australian Aboriginal to win a gold medal at an international athletics event. A two-time World Champion, Catherine is remembered for her inspirational gold medal win at the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games (400m) before retiring in July 2003. This section of the Bluewater Trail was extensively used as part of Mackay Regional Council's 2010 Fathers Day celebrations.

❖ **Bluewater Lagoon**

Objective: Provide residents of the Mackay region with a world-class lagoon-style aquatic facility in a premium riverfront setting.

Continuing east in a clock-wise direction past the Catherine Freeman Walk, the Pioneer Environmental Walk and Caneland Park, the Bluewater Lagoon emerges.

The \$12.7 million Bluewater Lagoon was launched with 9,200 people visiting the 4-hour opening event on 10 August 2008. With a view to fully engage residents throughout the project, Council organised a large-scale opening event, which involved music, foods/drinks, aerobatics, circus performers and a spectacular display of fireworks.

The history of this project started in 2002, when Council commenced active research and reviewed existing aquatic facilities to develop a strategic plan for future aquatic development for the region. From this initial study, more specific research was conducted, which ultimately concluded the need to develop a lagoon-style facility. Mackay residents strongly supported Council's direction to develop a lagoon-style facility with an 11,000 petition in 2003 (approximately 15% of the population at the time) to develop a 'stinger-free' lagoon. With a community preference to locate the facility near the beach or river, Caneland Park was selected in January 2005 as most suitable for the new aquatic facility. Caneland Park is located adjacent to the river and Mackay's largest retail shopping centre; Caneland Central. This shopping centre is currently undertaking a \$210 million redevelopment and expansion and is within walking distance from the City Centre.

Funding options were actively pursued since site selection and in addition to securing internal funds, Council succeeded to obtain funding from the Australian Government (\$4 million) and Queensland Government (\$6 million), prior to commencing construction in August 2007. The Bluewater Lagoon provides a direct response to Central & North Queensland's Spring/Summer marine stinger period and aims to provide the Mackay region with additional lifestyle-related infrastructure.

Key rationales and objectives for a lagoon-style facility for the Mackay region were clearly identified during the planning stages:

Rationales

The presence of dangerous marine life at the beaches during September to April.

- ❖ The requirement to provide alternative recreational, social and lifestyle opportunities for residents, tourists and specific groups to promote a healthier community.
- ❖ Strong regional growth and a high need for additional lifestyle related infrastructure.
- ❖ The requirement to attract and retain more workers and families to the region by increasing lifestyle attractiveness during a period of strong economic growth and skill shortages.
- ❖ A perceived lack of facilities for the youth, who represent a high percentage of the region's population.
- ❖ Existing swimming enclosures that are of limited recreational value due to local environmental factors (Mackay's beaches are tidal. Swimming enclosures can only be used at specific times of the day).
- ❖ Limited water space at existing aquatic facilities.

Objectives

- ❖ To develop a lagoon-style aquatic facility for the residents of the Mackay region to provide a safe alternative to beach swimming.
- ❖ To attract (and retain) more workers and families to the region by increasing lifestyle attractiveness.
- ❖ To provide alternative recreational, social and lifestyle opportunities for residents and tourists, including senior citizens, people with disabilities and youth to promote a healthier community.
- ❖ To provide a response to community demands and expectations.

The facility comprises a 3,000m² (equivalent to three 50m pools) three-tiered lagoon with a children's interactive waterplay feature (including two small slides, jets, water curtains and water drop-bucket), a children's lagoon, a



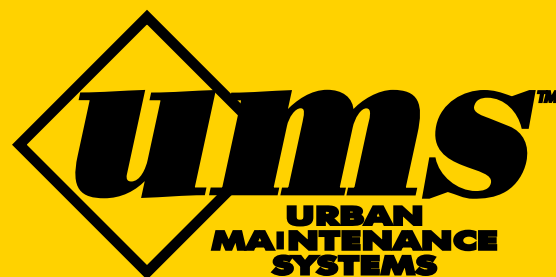
19.5m waterslide in the middle lagoon and an upper lagoon overlooking the Pioneer River. Beach entry points and handrails provide people with a disability safe access to the water and a café is situated near the children's water play area.

The café's operating hours are in line with the lagoon's opening hours and free electric barbecue facilities are available to encourage social interaction and family outings. Alcohol is not allowed to be consumed on the premises and the facility is declared smoke-free. Other facilities include a first aid room near the main entrance, lunchroom for the various contractors involved in the operations of the lagoon, storeroom/CCTV room and an office for a Council staff member to oversee the facility's operations.

It was intentionally decided to create three different water zones to cater for the various community needs rather than one large body of water:

- ❖ An interactive waterplay feature and kid's lagoon to cater for 0–6 years (shallow water).
- ❖ A middle lagoon with 19.5 metre slide to cater for the 6–13 years.
- ❖ An upper lagoon for the competent swimmers/adults overlooking the river (also the deepest lagoon pool).

The facility is open 7 days per week and only closes for approximately four weeks during winter for scheduled maintenance work. The Bluewater Lagoon attracted 413,374 visitors during the 2009/2010 financial year.



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Bluewater Trail signage on Catherine Freeman Walk

❖ **Bluewater Quay**

Objective: Stimulate redevelopment of River Street East as a major site on the Bluewater Trail.

The completion of the Bluewater Quay project delivered another key component in Council's vision for the Bluewater Trail and provides an accessible and attractive lifestyle facility for residents and tourists to enjoy. Located on the southern bank of the Pioneer River and a key activity precinct of the Bluewater Trail, the Bluewater Quay aims to revitalise the eastern side of the Forgan Bridge through purpose-built social infrastructure.

In a joint partnership between Mackay Regional Council and the Queensland Government through its 150th Legacy Infrastructure Program (Q150 LIP), the \$12 million 2,000m² waterfront facility provides a meeting place by the river. Affectionately called Mackay's 'town square on the river' by residents, the Bluewater Quay extends almost 250 metres and was built around the historic Leichardt Tree (part of the *Nauclea orientalis*), a common meeting point for new migrants to Mackay that arrived at the old Port district along River Street.

The facility was officially opened in October 2009, as part of Mackay's annual River to Reef Festival. It is anticipated

that the 'Quay' will become a catalyst to future development along River Street, similar to the catalyst effect the Bluewater Lagoon experienced on the western side of the Forgan Bridge.

Bluewater Quay features include:

- ❖ Children's waterplay and playground area
- ❖ Entertainment stage
- ❖ Open space/boardwalk for activities and events
- ❖ Picnic and BBQ areas
- ❖ New viewing platform
- ❖ Upgraded fishing platform
- ❖ Incorporation of the heritage listed Leichardt Tree
- ❖ Public art

Design Intent

- ❖ Natural lines, simple design and a timeless style that would last well beyond the next half century.
- ❖ Lots of timber and plywood.
- ❖ To use the area as a levee bank to protect Mackay, by installing long and varied blocks of concrete that are used as both an entry way and levee bank.
- ❖ To ensure all features designed for the project are aimed at bringing Mackay to its riverfront.
- ❖ To create a meeting place Mackay's CBD never had.



Cr Paul Steindl accepts Heart Foundation 2010 National Overall Winner Award



Sandfly Creek

- ❖ Small built-in stage area for festivals and public concerts and undercover areas for market stalls and events. In October 2010 Council endorsed the concept for plans to construct a café in partnership with a local business operator, with the aim to further invigorate this public open space. The local business operator will construct the shell of the café, with Council contributing towards the design of the building to ensure consistency with the Bluewater Quay. The initial plan is to operate seven days a week and provide breakfast, lunch and dinner and cater for events such as weddings and other functions.

❖ **Sandfly Creek Environmental Walk**

Main Objective: Preserve the natural environment of the Sandfly Creek in accordance with DERM guidelines and State Government Legislation as an Environmental Reserve.

Sandfly Creek Environmental Reserve contains small remnants of the original coastal vegetation and habitats that once typified the coastal zone adjacent to Mackay City. The Reserve is made possible by its designation under the Land Act 1994 with Mackay Regional Council as trustee. Under this designation the Reserve is to be managed 'for the protection of natural environment values while allowing low impact public use.' The Reserve was designated following a comprehensive 'Most Appropriate Land Use Study' completed by the Department of Natural Resources and Mines in 2005 (Department of Natural Resources and Mines, 2005). In 2006, this 60 hectare area officially became the Sandfly Creek Environmental Reserve.

The Sandfly Creek Environmental Reserve has high conservation values and is visited seasonally by many important migratory shorebird species. It is one of the most significant high tide roost sites for shorebird wader birds in Central Queensland. Mackay Regional Council endorsed a Management Plan in December 2010 to preserve and enhance the reserve's significant environmental values. Interpretive signs are being installed so trail users can learn

about shorebirds and the environmental values of the area. The Yuibera people, as traditional owners of the land that forms the Reserve, gathered food, medicines and other resources at this site and continue to have strong links with the area.

The Natural Environment Advisory Committee was a key driver in the preservation of the natural vegetation along the trail and helps identify the environmental aspects of the project. The committee's role is to provide advice on environmentally significant land for its suitability for acquisition and greater involvement of the local community in Natural Resource Management. Through the committee's recommendation and via funding from Council's Environmental Levy, the Sandfly Creek Environmental Walk was constructed.

In 2010 the establishment of a partnership between DERM, Mackay Regional Council and Local Conservation Group representatives was required to ensure the continued preservation of the reserve was enforced. The restriction of dogs from the reserve was considered necessary to reduce the impact upon visiting wader birds in the October to April Wader Bird visiting season. Signage and alternative routes for dog walkers were installed to inform visitors of the high significance of the Wader Birds to this area.

❖ **Iluka Park**

Objective: Provide a state of the art playground accessible to all people.

The Iluka Park All Abilities Playground was officially opened on 13 August 2010, making Mackay one of 16 locations in Queensland that has a state-of-the-art playground suitable for children of all abilities.

The centrepiece is a maze and lookout, featuring sensory plantings and an array of interactive panels, plus chimes, tom toms and other musical elements. Other attractions include a sand play station, junior and senior play areas, a kick-about area, climbing structure, double swing, giro spinner, hand water pump, circle swing and dry creek beds.

Students from Mackay and District Special School and Victoria Park State School were commended for their mosaic installation, which has pride of place in the playground. The artwork features children playing side-by-side capturing the whole essence of the project.

More than 150 residents participated in the design phase through a range of activities, including student workshops and community consultations. The \$400,000 project, jointly funded by Mackay Regional Council and the Department of Communities, was part of a \$4.6 million Queensland Government initiative. The 'playground for everyone' has been very popular amongst the high portion of young people residing in the Mackay region.



Public Art–Fish Bones

❖ **Public Art**

Mackay's Bluewater Trail consists of some of the finest first-class public art. The \$2 million beautification and urban art initiative consists of six original and eye-catching artworks created and installed along the Bluewater Trail. Designed by renowned public Brisbane-based artist Fiona Foley, the works were constructed and installed by Brisbane's Urban Art Projects (UAP). Described as engaging and interactive, Ms Foley's artwork holds special significance to the Mackay community and the region. The artist's work is often made out of bronze and aluminium and her most recognised work public artworks include Queensland State Library (2006), Brisbane Magistrate Court (2005), Melbourne Museum (1997) and Museum of Sydney (1994).

The following six pieces of artworks are installed along the Bluewater Trail:

- ❖ YUWI: A bright red, aluminium 3D statue of the word YUWI representing the presence of the Yuibera people who once densely populated Mackay.
- ❖ The Crows: This masterpiece features a willy wagtail standing and three flying foxes hanging from a tension cable that supports the bird frame.
- ❖ Sugar Cubes: Made of stacked blocks of aluminium, this structure represents the growth of Mackay and the importance of the sugar industry.
- ❖ The Mangrove Cap: This 9.5 metre structure is made of weathered steel and reflects the region's natural coastal environment.
- ❖ Shields: These three stones (honestone, natural and zen) have been cut to reproduce three shields originally belonging to the Yuibera nation from Mackay.
- ❖ Fish Bones: This six-piece cast aluminium artwork has become an icon of the wharf precinct.



Milestones

Date	Project
May 2003	Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens – Stage 1 completion
July 2004	Catherine Freeman Walk
March 2006	Stage 2 Pioneer Promenade
September 2006	Sandfly Creek Environmental Walk
August 2008	Bluewater Lagoon
October 2009	Bluewater Quay
June 2010	Development of Bluewater Trail Branding & Signage Style Guide
July 2010	Pioneer Environmental Walk
August 2010	Iluka Park
February 2011	Caneland Park (access to Caneland Central shopping centre, currently under redevelopment)



Pioneer Promenade



❖ Conclusion

The Bluewater Trail delivers a critical piece of infrastructure that supports the region's community through a proactive approach to community health, wellbeing and safety. It addresses local and regional objectives for improving community wellbeing and recreational opportunities, and provides a mixed use integrated trail through environmental and green space areas and the city's beaches with links to popular recreational destinations.

Capitalising on Mackay's Pioneer River, the Bluewater Trail highlights and beautifies the natural, cultural and historic features of the Mackay region through facilities, activities and the integration of public artworks and epitomises the region's wonderful lifestyle.

Onno Van Es has been actively working in the sports/leisure industry for public and private sector organisations in Europe, Africa, Asia and Australia for 22 years. His work experience is diverse and includes working for sports travel

organisations, fitness centres, water sports centres, armed forces (Sgt sports instructor), 5-star resorts, scuba diving organisations, tennis clubs, health resorts and most recent local governments. During this time, Onno held various positions including coach/instructor, consultant, proprietor and worked in managerial functions for the past 16 years. He also worked in a senior human resources role for 6 years.

Onno was the Manager Aquatic Facilities for Mackay City Council from 2003 – 2008 where he was responsible for the planning and delivery of the \$12.7 million Bluewater Lagoon project and is currently the Manager Recreation Services for Mackay Regional Council*.

He holds a Bachelor of Sports/Recreation (The Netherlands), Postgraduate Diploma of Management (CQU) and a Master of Project Management (USQ).

* The Mackay Regional Council came into existence after the amalgamation of the former Mackay City Council, Mirani Shire Council and Sarina Shire Council on 15 March 2008.



Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens



❖ **Interested in more information regarding the Bluewater Trail?**

Contact Onno by sending him an email,
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