

Mapping out the future for Queensland tourism

Mackay homework set to develop next boom industry

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WELCOMING the sunrise on a beach with a bunch of kangaroos had the Queensland Premier filled with optimism about Mackay's tourism sector.

In fact, after starting yesterday at Cape Hillsborough, Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk opened the state tourism industry forum DestinationQ by speaking about how the experience ticked both the 'genuine' and 'unique' categories that could pull tourists to the region from further afield.

More than 300 tourism industry leaders and seven ministers attended the Mackay forum, where the state-wide strategy was launched.

It centred on growing the Asian tourist market, the tourism sector workforce, improving visitor experiences and enhancing tourism infrastructure.

But although Mackay hosted the event, Mackay Tourism general manager Tas Webber pointed out that after years of focus on the resource industry, the region still had homework to do

before it was positioned to capitalise on all parts of the strategy.

While the Premier and State Tourism Minister Kate Jones spoke about attracting Asian visitors and building more hotels, Mr Webber said the Mackay region first needed to focus on developing the range of experiences it had on offer, and targeting domestic and western international markets. The Whitsunday region, on the other hand, was well placed to make the most of the State Government strategy.

"In terms of tourism in Mackay, it's in its infancy stage," Mr Webber said. "(But) The Whitsundays have played in that space for many, many years now. Once we get to that level we'll be able to play in that market. I'd say in a couple of years we'd be ready to tap into that market."

Nonetheless, Ms Jones explained that Brisbane Airport was in discussions with Tourism Mackay and Tourism Whitsundays about leveraging off the daily flights it was attracting from China.

She believed the region

would make a submission to tap into the \$33.5m Connecting to Asia strategy, to create more flights to ferry those Asian passengers to the region.

Mackay Airport general manager Rob Porter confirmed it was in discussions with Cairns and the Gold Coast about opening up gateways to disperse Asian travellers throughout the region.

While he said New Zealand remained the focus for Mackay's international flights, he gave no fixed timeline as to when these were likely to be locked in.

"There's still quite a bit of work to go. The stars have to align for us," he said. "We are planning on leveraging off what the big guys are doing (Cairns, Brisbane and Gold Coast airports) to disperse Asian travellers to the regions."

Up-skilling workers to create a larger, permanent tourism sector workforce underpinned another key component to the State Government plan.

Ms Jones said Queensland would need another 20,000 jobs over the next four years to support the state's

growing industry.

Minister for Training and Skills Yvette D'Ath spoke about the government's \$100m regional back to work program, that would provide \$10,000 for small business to put on extra employees.

"We want people to see jobs in the tourism sector as a career path," she said.

Another key component was an idea for 10-year visas for Chinese visitors, a concession already granted by the US. This would mean tourists would need only apply for one visa each decade to enjoy multiple trips to Queensland.

"I want their number one destination for their annual holidays to be Queensland," Mr Palaszczuk said. "Over the coming years we are going to experience a large number of Asian tourists coming here to Queensland. We need to get ready now."

"We need to make sure we have the hotel products. We need to make sure we have the tourism experiences bedded down."

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POTENTIAL: Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk at the launch of Destination Q in Mackay.
PHOTO: TONY MARTIN