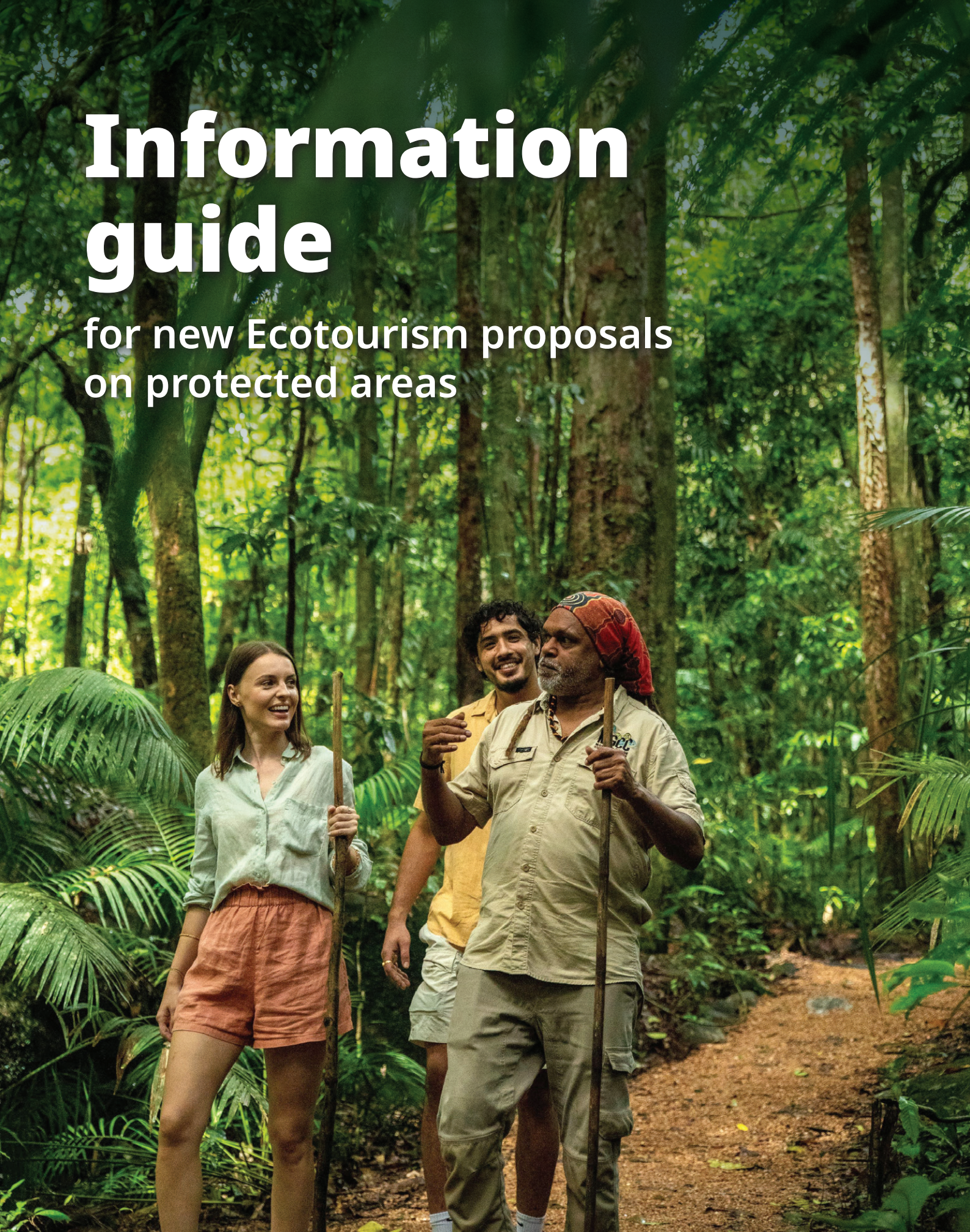


Information guide

for new Ecotourism proposals
on protected areas



Minister’s foreword



The Queensland Government understands that a balanced approach between tourism and conservation is an essential part of being an internationally celebrated ecotourism destination. Appropriately designed and managed, low-impact, authentic ecotourism facilities in protected areas deliver experiences that connect visitors to the places they visit, while conserving the very landscapes that have captivated them.

Queensland is renowned for its natural landscapes and protected areas with visitation driven by a desire to experience these unique ecosystems. Ecotourism is a key pillar of Destination 2045 and projects in protected areas that align with environmental, social, and legislative parameters are encouraged.

Destination 2045: Delivering Queensland’s Tourism Future outlines a strategic vision to enhance Queensland’s protected areas as key drivers of ecotourism by balancing tourism growth with the protection of natural assets, ensuring accessibility and sustainability. The approach focuses on streamlining regulatory processes, fostering collaboration with First Nations peoples, and delivering world-class visitor experiences.

45 by 45: Getting Ecotourism Moving in Queensland, Queensland’s Ecotourism Policy promotes environmental stewardship, land management, and cultural recognition while expanding ecotourism, especially in the regions, aligned with statewide strategic goals. All projects are required to adhere to relevant planning and environmental approvals.

Streamlined processes for ecotourism development in protected areas will allow for improvement and growth across the tourism industry so that Queensland is well-placed to become the leader in ecotourism and meet ambitious targets established in *Destination 2045*.

The Honourable Andrew Powell MP
Minister for the Environment and Tourism
Minister for Science and Innovation

Prepared by: Department of the Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation © State of Queensland, 2025.

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Acknowledgement of Country
We acknowledge Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Owners and custodians of the land. We recognise their connection to land, sea and community, and pay our respects to Elders past and present. We are committed to respecting, protecting and promoting human rights, and our obligations under the *Human Rights Act 2019*.



▼ Mamu Tropical Skywalk, Wooroonoon National Park
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Introduction

This Information Guide is for anyone interested in developing ecotourism proposals on protected areas, especially if you’re looking to present your idea and apply for an authority to establish an ecotourism facility within a national park. It outlines what’s required for your proposal and walks you through the application process step-by-step.

The guide covers the legislative and regulatory environment that governs the development of ecotourism facilities, and provides an overview of the application journey. As a potential applicant, this guide will help you understand what’s expected of you during the application and assessment stages. You’ll learn how to prepare a detailed proposal that aligns with the legislative framework and how the department evaluates proposals to ensure they meet the necessary standards and regulations for sustainable development and environmental protection.

Unlike standard tourism activities which can be conducted under commercial activity permits (such as guided tours), ecotourism proposals often involve infrastructure development, exclusive access to defined areas or existing facilities, and provide unique experiences within protected areas. These types of proposals should enhance visitor experiences while protecting the natural and cultural values of the area.

Outcomes:

Sustainable growth:
Accelerated ecotourism development, contributing to regional economies and job creation.

Conservation and stewardship: Enhanced protection of natural assets through low-impact tourism and reinvestment in conservation initiatives.

Cultural enrichment:
Increased opportunities for First Nations peoples to share their cultural heritage and lead tourism ventures.

Improved accessibility:
Expanded accommodation and amenities to make protected areas more accessible to diverse visitor groups.

Ecotourism in protected areas

The *Nature Conservation Act 1992* (NCA) governs the management of Queensland's protected areas and defines ecotourism as “*tourism that is ecologically sustainable and primarily focused on experiencing an area in a way that fosters understanding, appreciation and conservation of the area and its natural and cultural values.*”

Ecotourism on, or in relation to, protected areas at its core is based on a commitment to preserving and promoting the specific natural and cultural values of the protected area it operates on.

Ecotourism activities are supported on protected areas, including national parks, conservation parks, and resource reserves contingent on the type and scale of the activity being proposed. Ecotourism activities can be authorised under a range of different NCA approval mechanisms such as commercial activity agreements, section 34 licences and agreements, and section 35 ecotourism facility leases and agreements.

Ecotourism facilities (as defined under the NCA) can be established on national parks under section 35 of the NCA. Ecotourism facilities on national parks maintain a higher standard of environmental performance, and demonstrate a tangible, quantifiable conservation and/or management benefit back to the protected area estate, such as in-kind and financial contribution to management of the surrounding protected area.

Ecotourism facility: A facility or infrastructure that is designed and managed to facilitate the presentation, appreciation and conservation of the land's natural condition and cultural resources and values. Refer to the *Nature Conservation Act 1992* definitions for further details.



Types of ecotourism proposals

Ecotourism proposals can vary significantly in scale, type, design, and potential impacts, all of which influence the application pathway and the assessment process.

The department classifies ecotourism proposals using a risk-based framework, where proposals are assessed in accordance with the scale of potential impact or risk to natural and cultural values, and level of community interest associated with the proposal. Proposals should also demonstrate evidence of stakeholder and First Nations engagement, assessment of *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth) considerations, business plans, and development approval.

The department has three **assessment tiers**:

- **Low:** These proposals use existing infrastructure instead of building new facilities. They do not require changes to land management or public use, and their activities align with the park's conservation goals. Examples of low-tier proposals include using or repurposing existing park facilities or renewing existing authorities, without expanding outside the current disturbance footprint, creating additional impacts, or altering operations.

A photograph of a wooden signpost with the word 'NGARO' written vertically in a stylized font. The signpost is located on a rocky, elevated path overlooking a beautiful coastal scene with a white sandy beach, turquoise water, and distant hills under a blue sky with scattered clouds.

Low tier case study

The Ngaro Track, Whitsunday Islands National Park

The Ngaro Track, located on the southern end of Whitsunday Island, weaves 32km through the island's diverse landscape connecting two iconic destinations—Whitehaven Beach and Hill Inlet. Visitors can traverse remote interior areas of the island, while enjoying comfortable overnight camping at bespoke camp sites. The Ngaro Track is available to independent hikers, and visitors can also book guided tours through World Expeditions, who are global leaders in small-group, multi-day, sustainable walking tours.



▼ O'Reilly's Campground, Lamington National Park © SaltStone Media

Medium tier case study

O'Reilly's Campground, Lamington National Park

The former Green Mountains campground in Lamington National Park has experienced a major upgrade of facilities and the introduction of glamping accommodation. Operated by O'Reilly's Rainforest Retreat, the campground offers unpowered camp sites, bushwalker camp sites, campervan sites and family-sized safari tents, two of which are accessible for people with a disability. New facilities have also been added including a large communal camp kitchen, amenities block, meeting room and firepit, all of which were designed with accessibility in mind. These upgrades support people of varying abilities to experience the magnificent Gondwana Rainforests of Australia World Heritage Area.

High tier case study

Scenic Rim Trail, Main Range National Park

The Scenic Rim Trail is a 55km, multi-day walking trail through World Heritage-listed Main Range National Park, extending from the privately owned Thornton View Nature Refuge to Cunninghams Gap. Visitors can access the Scenic Rim Trail as independent walkers or by joining a guided tour. Operations along the trail are owned and operated by Spicers Retreats, Hotels and Lodges Pty Ltd and include two luxury eco-camps within the national park.



▼ The eco-cabins in Main Range National Park © Scenic Rim Trail

- **Medium:** These projects include development of new infrastructure, or alterations to existing infrastructure, where all development activity and impact is confined to pre-disturbed areas or have minimal disturbance. This includes using existing access roads for construction and ongoing operation and maintenance. Examples of medium tier proposals include development on cleared areas or degraded sites and modifying an existing structure to accommodate a new ecotourism use.
- **High:** These projects include development of infrastructure, including provision of access, on undisturbed areas of the park, which could impact its natural and cultural values. These projects are of significant community interest or may require significant changes to park management, such as changes to public use and enjoyment of the area, changes to existing, authorised park users, or alterations to Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS) management activities.

For medium tier proposals, operators must develop a baseline of matters affected and develop impact avoidance and mitigation measures to ensure the activity does not impact the values of the park. If an operator is unable to demonstrate adequate impact management, they may require an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The department will decide if an EIS is needed based on the specific risks of each project.

High tier projects require an EIS process for comprehensive environmental assessment and statutory consultation.

In this tiered approach, the complexity of the application is proportionate to the level of potential impact a proposal may have on the natural and cultural values of the area and the existing public use.

This presents multiple benefits, not least streamlining the assessment of applications for projects of all sizes, by tailoring the process to the individual proposal, and securing and sharing relevant information up front. Understanding where your proposed ecotourism project sits within these tiers will help facilitate the application and assessment process.

The required level of detail to assess an ecotourism proposal depends on its nature, scale, and location. Additional information may be requested by the department for evaluation throughout the process. Regardless of a proposal's complexity, the department is committed to providing a timely response to all applicants.

It is important to note that not all proposals will meet the requirements of the NCA. For example, a tourism resort that requires substantial alteration of a large parcel of land is generally not conducive to the protection and conservation of protected areas. Projects such as these are more suitable for development on alternative tenure. Careful consideration and due regard to the suitability of the activity with respect to the tenure type and the NCA is required.

For initial advice and support during the development of your proposal and pre-lodgement request, you can reach out to the department via the **Tourism Support Hub**. Contact the Hub via phone: +617 3101 2002, via email: tourismsupporthub@detsi.qld.gov.au or online via www.qld.gov.au/tourismsupporthub

The application journey

The information required to assess an ecotourism proposal is tied to its assessment tier and will generally become more detailed as the proposal proceeds through the stages.

The ecotourism proposal assessment process typically involves three stages:

STAGE 1 PRE-LODGE MENT

STAGE 2 APPLICATION

STAGE 3 ASSESSMENT

Figure 1: Application stages under the NCA

STAGE 1 PRE-LODGE MENT

What you can expect from Stage 1

1. **Define your ecotourism proposal:** document what you want to do and preferred locations.
2. **Attend a pre-lodgement meeting:** submit an online pre-lodgement form and a representative from the department will arrange a meeting with you to discuss your proposal.

Defining your ecotourism proposal

Before proceeding with an ecotourism proposal, it is important to consider its likely **assessment tier** and gather sufficient information relevant to the tier level. A well-defined ecotourism proposal will facilitate an efficient pre-lodgement process and should consider the following:

- **Alignment with the purpose of protected areas:** Does your proposal support the protection and conservation of nature while allowing for its ecologically sustainable use? Does your proposal support existing public visitor experiences and enhance or complement the use of the area?
- **Consistency with the NCA and relevant policies:** Does your proposal meet relevant legislation and policy objectives for the development of ecotourism activities or facilities on protected areas?
- **Consistency with relevant management plans:** Queensland's protected areas have strategic documents that guide their management and sustainable use. [Management plans and statements](#) outline key natural and cultural values, appropriate use and accepted activities, including ecotourism, within its respective park. Does your proposal need to take into consideration matters specified in the area's management plan or statement?

- **Environmental significance of the project area:** Protected areas and other areas of high environmental value often include overlapping [Matters of State Environmental Significance \(MSES\)](#) and [Matters of National Environmental Significance \(MNES\)](#), such as threatened species, remnant vegetation, and World Heritage and National Heritage listed areas. Early assessment of these matters is essential to determine a project's viability, cost, and assessment requirements.
- **Areas of historic and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage and native title matters:** Are there cultural or heritage areas or native title issues that might impact your proposal? Protected areas often include culturally significant areas such as historic heritage sites under the *Queensland Heritage Act 1992*, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural values under the two cultural heritage Acts. Native title rights and interests must be addressed under the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth).
- **Environmental sustainability and conservation:** How will your proposal minimise its impact on the environment, implement sustainability practices, and contribute to park management and conservation outcomes?
- **Viability of the proposal:** Does your proposal have long-term financial viability and are you able to demonstrate financial capacity to deliver and sustain the proposal? Do you have a successful history in delivering related proposals and infrastructure projects?

Once you have included the above considerations in your ecotourism proposal, submit a [pre-lodgement form to QPWS](#). The department will then contact you to schedule a pre-lodgement meeting to talk through your ecotourism proposal in further detail.

The pre-lodgement meeting

A pre-lodgement meeting gives you the chance to present your ecotourism proposal to the department and learn more about the application and assessment processes. Meetings are generally held online via Microsoft Teams. In-person meetings can be arranged if required.

After the meeting, the department will inform you of the likely **assessment tier** for your proposal and advise you on the information that should be included in your application, or, if any changes to the proposal should be considered.

Following the review of your proposal, and the provision of any additional information, you will receive an application pack and be invited to submit your application through the [Online Services portal](#).

STAGE 2 APPLICATION

What you can expect from Stage 2

- 1. Make your application:** Review the materials in your application pack and ensure your application addresses all required areas.
- 2. Departmental review of application information:** The department will examine your application for completeness, and inform you if:
 - further information is required
 - your project requires an EIS
- 3. Application confirmed for assessment:** Once all information has been submitted, your application will proceed to Stage 3 - Assessment.

The level of information required to be addressed in your application will be dependent upon what **assessment tier** your proposal falls within. This will be communicated to you through the pre-lodgement process. However, there is a set of documentation required to be submitted for most NCA applications (listed on the right hand side of this page, detailed in the application pack, and the Online Services portal).

Ecotourism proposals should be designed, constructed and operated to minimise impacts, and include whole-of-life considerations (including decommissioning and rehabilitation). Ecotourism proposals should enhance the long-term protection of the area’s natural and cultural values and aim to minimise impacts through each phase in the development lifecycle.

To facilitate a comprehensive assessment of the proposed ecotourism proposal, detailed documentation will be required that considers the proposal’s lifecycle. The application should address the legislative requirements, design, construction (if applicable), operation, renewal, decommissioning and site rehabilitation (if applicable). The proposal must also identify potential negative impacts (social, environmental, cultural etc) and how these will be avoided or mitigated.

What your application must include:

- ☒ **Completed application form:** Captures applicant information and basic details of the proposal.
- ☒ **Submission report:** This should respond to the NCA criteria for an ecotourism facility.
- ☒ **Detailed proposal:** This should provide a detailed description of the proposed ecotourism commercial enterprise (how construction and operation of the proposal will be financially viable), and how the ecotourism facility will be constructed and operated. This will also include detailed studies of social, economic and environmental sustainability and an impact assessment. The detailed proposal must include sufficient information to support assertions made in the submission report.
- ☒ **Environmental management plan (EMP):** Include plans to manage environmental impacts, such as an EMP that covers both the construction and ongoing operation of the facility. The EMP may be standalone or integrated into the detailed proposal.
- ☒ **Spatial data:** Provide map data in shapefile (shp), Google Earth (kml), or geodatabase (gdb) format.
- ☒ **Administrative plan or survey plan:** If leasing, a survey plan is needed before final approval.

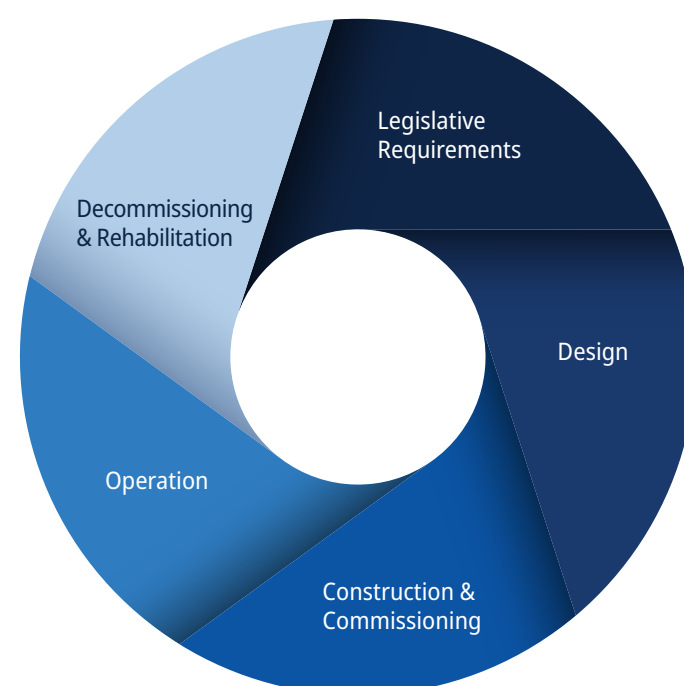


Figure 2: Ecotourism proposal lifecycle components

Additional information that may be required:

- Other approvals:** Evidence of other relevant approvals being sought or obtained, such as, local government Development Approval, *Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC) approval, *Wet Tropics World Heritage Protection and Management Act 1993* approval (if applicable);
- Cultural heritage approvals**, including historic heritage approvals under the *Queensland Heritage Act 1992*, and agreements or management plans relating to the management and protection of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage under the *Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act 2003* and the *Torres Strait Islander Cultural Heritage Act 2003*;
- Assessment of native title obligations** under the *Native Title Act 1993 (Cth)*, evidence of procedural requirements being met, or, if required, an Indigenous Land Use Agreement being finalised or in progress;
- Assessment of offset liability** under the *Queensland Environmental Offsets Act 2014*; and/or
- Assessment of impact to Human Rights**, including to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, under the *Human Rights Act 2019*.

The department may request additional details after you submit your application or based on your pre-lodgement discussions.

Addressing the legislative requirements

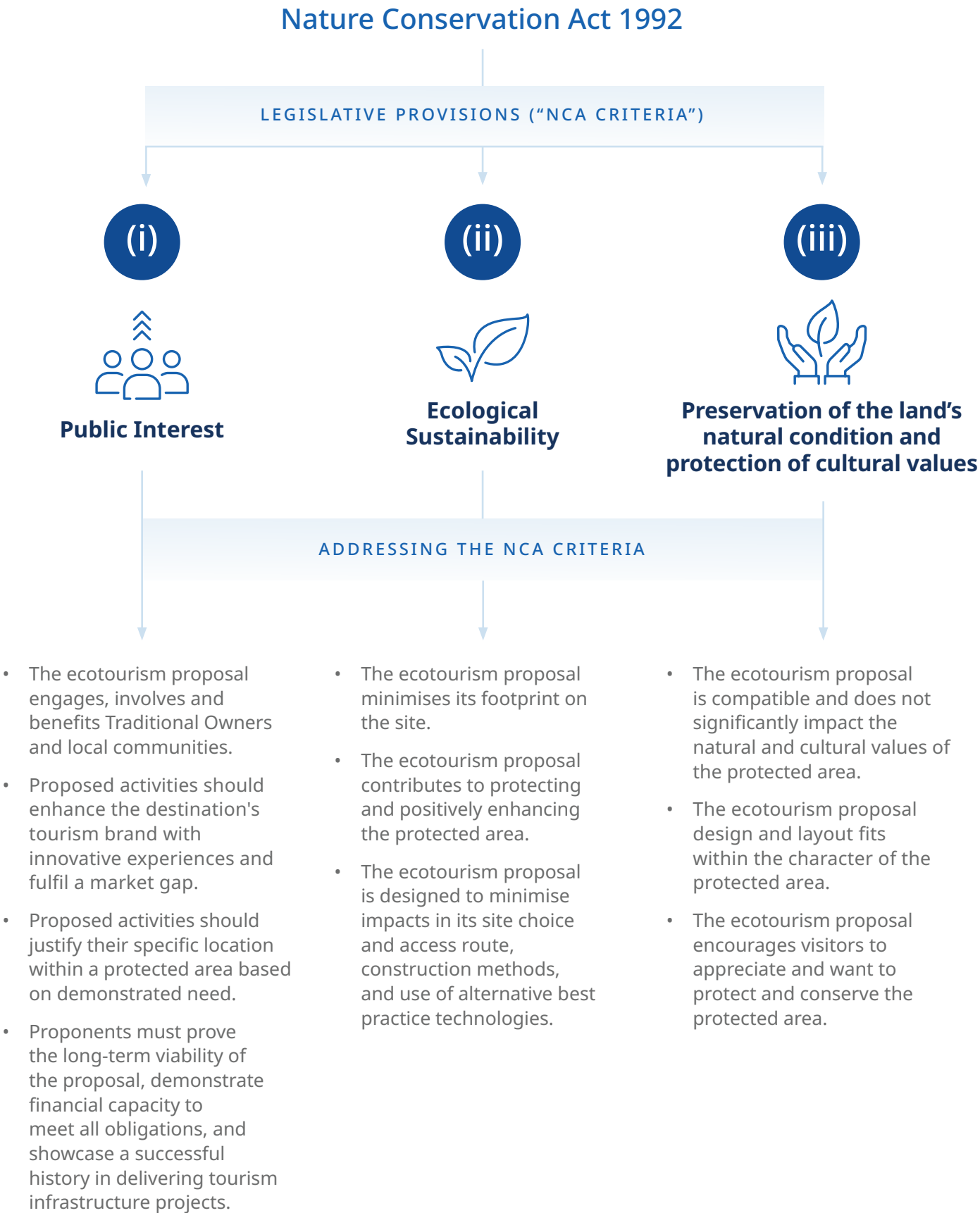
A core component of your application will be to demonstrate how your ecotourism proposal addresses the legislative requirements set out in the NCA and Nature Conservation (Protected Areas Management) Regulation 2024. Information on the different legislative requirements are outlined in the respective QPWS [policies and procedures](#).

Ecotourism facilities on national park tenure must specifically address the **criteria** listed under section 35 of the NCA:

- Public interest:** National parks provide important environmental, social and economic benefits to the public. Privately owned ecotourism facilities on national parks should complement the national park and not unduly restrict public access. Private ecotourism facilities must represent the greatest net public benefit for the land, considering the environmental, social and economic outcomes of that use.
- Ecologically sustainable:** An ecotourism facility must ensure that structures and associated activities are fully integrated, and in harmony, with the ecosystem of the surrounding national park, and consider its environmental features and constraints.
- Provides, to the greatest possible extent, for the preservation of the land’s natural condition and protection of cultural values and resources:** An ecotourism facility must prioritise preserving the unique natural and cultural values of the surrounding national park. Proposals must consider the land’s natural and cultural significance, existing disturbances, and the potential impacts of the development. The scope of impact assessments, management plans, and auditing obligations will vary depending on the type of facility, its location and impact with respect to natural and cultural values, and the level of risk associated with the proposed use.

If you require additional support during the development of your application, or you would like to request follow up meetings to further discuss your proposal, you can reach out to the department via the **Tourism Support Hub**.

Figure 3: Key principles for ecotourism proposals.



STAGE 3 ASSESSMENT

What you can expect from Stage 3

1. **Assessment against legislation:** Your application will be reviewed against the NCA criteria and other relevant legislation.
2. **Recommendation:** The department's Chief Executive is the decision delegate for the assessment. The department will prepare a briefing package for submission to the delegate outlining the application and the assessment process, and providing recommendations to support the delegate's decision-making.
3. **Final decision:** The delegate will review the briefing package and make a final decision on the outcome.
4. **Grant of lease, licence or agreement:** Applicants are notified of the delegate's decision and are issued with a notice of decision and the executed ecotourism lease, licence or agreement.

The assessment process

Your application will be assessed to ensure it aligns with the legislative criteria outlined in the NCA, and how the ecotourism facility proposal supports:

- **Conservation goals:** how it contributes to conservation of natural and cultural values.
- **Minimising environmental impacts:** minimising impacts to natural and cultural values.
- **Enhancing visitor experiences:** providing sustainable and enjoyable experiences for visitors.

In addition to the NCA, your application will also be assessed to ensure compliance with other relevant state and federal legislation, including:

- **Other approvals:** Evidence of other relevant approvals being sought or obtained, such as, local government Development Approval,

Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC) approval, Wet Tropics World Heritage Protection and Management Act 1993 approval (if applicable);

- **Cultural heritage approvals**, including historic heritage approvals under the *Queensland Heritage Act 1992*, and agreements or management plans relating to the management and protection of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage under the *Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act 2003* and the *Torres Strait Islander Cultural Heritage Act 2003*;
- **Assessment of native title obligations** under the *Native Title Act 1993 (Cth)*, evidence of procedural requirements being met, or, if required, an Indigenous Land Use Agreement being finalised or in progress;
- **Assessment of offset liability** under the *Queensland Environmental Offsets Act 2014*; and/or
- **Assessment of impact to Human Rights**, including to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, under the *Human Rights Act 2019*.

Commercial terms negotiation

Each ecotourism lease, licence or agreement will require negotiation of the commercial terms outlined in the authority. This process will be facilitated by the department and will be undertaken either during the assessment stage or following the delegate's (in-principle) decision.

A draft lease, licence or agreement will be provided to you for review prior to its execution. Timeframes to finalise the lease, licence or agreement will be dependent on the level of negotiations required.

Notice of decision

Once the delegate has made the final decision on the application, the lease, licence or agreement will be formally executed. Copies of the notices and approvals will be available for viewing and accessing through the Online Services portal.

How do I apply?

For more information on applying for an ecotourism authority on protected areas, [click here](#) or visit <https://parks.qld.gov.au/management/ecotourism/how-do-i-apply>.



▼ Wallaman Falls, Girringun National Park © Tourism and Events Queensland

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