

Queensland national parks lease plan angers conservationists and traditional owners

Exclusive by environment reporter [Laura Gartry](#)

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VIDEO: [Video of Hinchinbrook Island, courtesy of Wanderstories.](#) (ABC News)

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World heritage areas could be leased for 60 years under a State Government proposal to allow private companies to commercialise and build accommodation in three Queensland national parks.

Key points:

- Environmentalists are "absolutely appalled" by the Queensland Government's plan
- The proposed site is located within the world heritage-listed Great Barrier Reef Marine Park
- The Government has opened EOIs for private businesses to build accommodation at three sites along the trail

But environmentalists are "absolutely appalled" by the plan, with some vowing to fight commercialisation of Hinchinbrook Island in Queensland's north.

The site is the largest island national park in Australia and is located within the world heritage-listed Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

One of the proposed developments is on the renowned Thorsborne Trail, which snakes 32 kilometres along the east coast of Hinchinbrook Island and is regarded as a prominent wilderness walk.



PHOTO: [Environmental campaigner Margaret Thorsborne died earlier this month.](#) (ABC News)

With limited facilities, hikers camp and carry their own supplies on the Thorsborne Trail.

The Department of Parks and Wildlife only permits 40 campers overnight at a time because of the trail's ecological significance.

However, tender documents show the Government would entertain proposals to modify that restriction.

The Queensland Government has recently opened expressions of interest for private businesses to build accommodation at three sites along the trail.

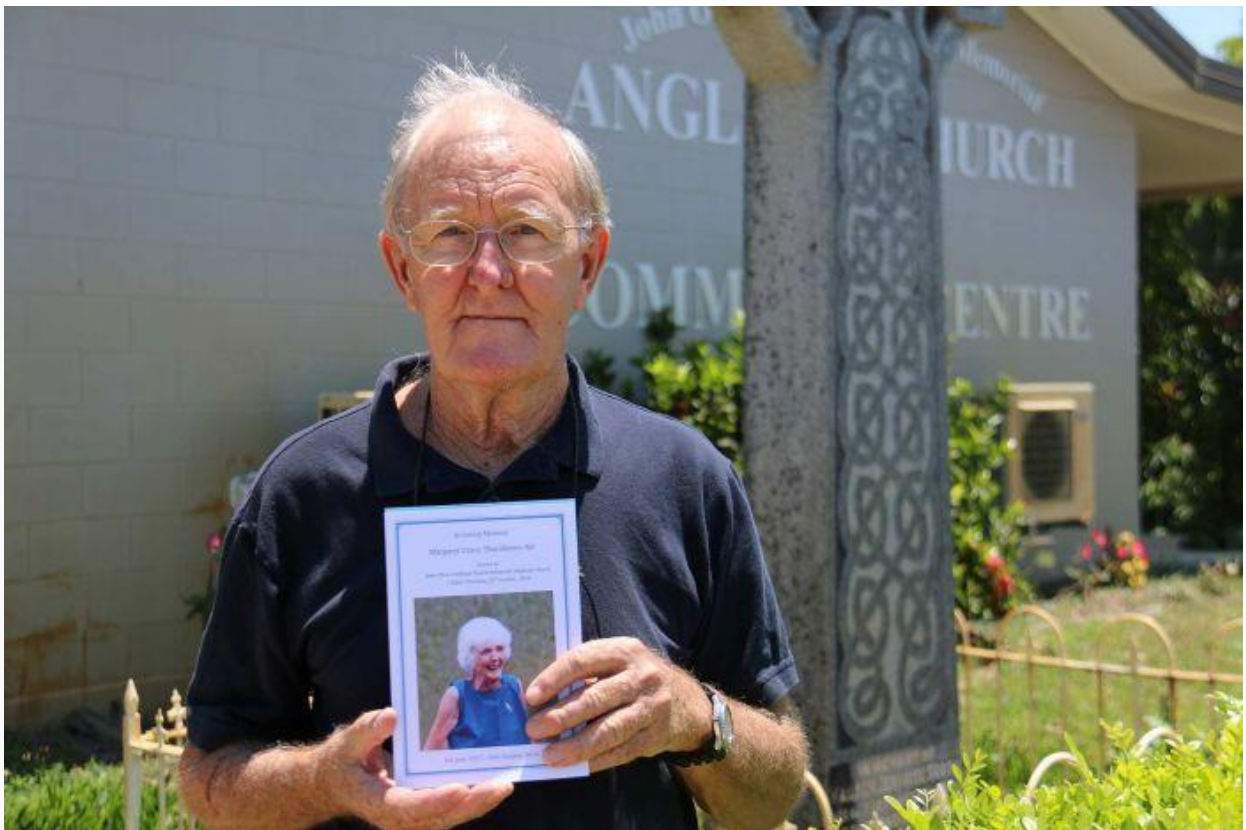


PHOTO: [John Thorsborne said his aunt "moved heaven and Earth" to preserve Hinchinbrook Island.](#) (ABC News: Laura Gartry)

Marketed as "eco-accommodation", this could include cabins, retreats, huts or glamping.

Private companies are also invited to provide commercial activities, tour guides, and equipment hire.

Unfolding disaster of Queensland resorts



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The matter has come to a head with the death of conservationist Margaret Thorsborne AO, who dedicated her life to defending the environment and wildlife on island.

The trail is named after her late husband Arthur.

This week, as family and friends gathered for Mrs Thorsborne's funeral, many voiced their anger at the Government's plans.

The Thorsborne family, conservationists and traditional owners have vowed to fight commercialisation of the trail in memory of the couple who dedicated their lives to conserve it.

Mrs Thorsborne's nephew John Thorsborne said she had "moved heaven and Earth" for six decades to preserve Hinchinbrook Island as a wilderness.

He said she would be "absolutely appalled" that private enterprise would be operating within national parks.

"They are established by the state, they are funded by the state, they are managed by the state, and they are for the people of the state," he said.

The island already has a failed private resort on a long-term lease sitting in ruins.

Three national parks up for development

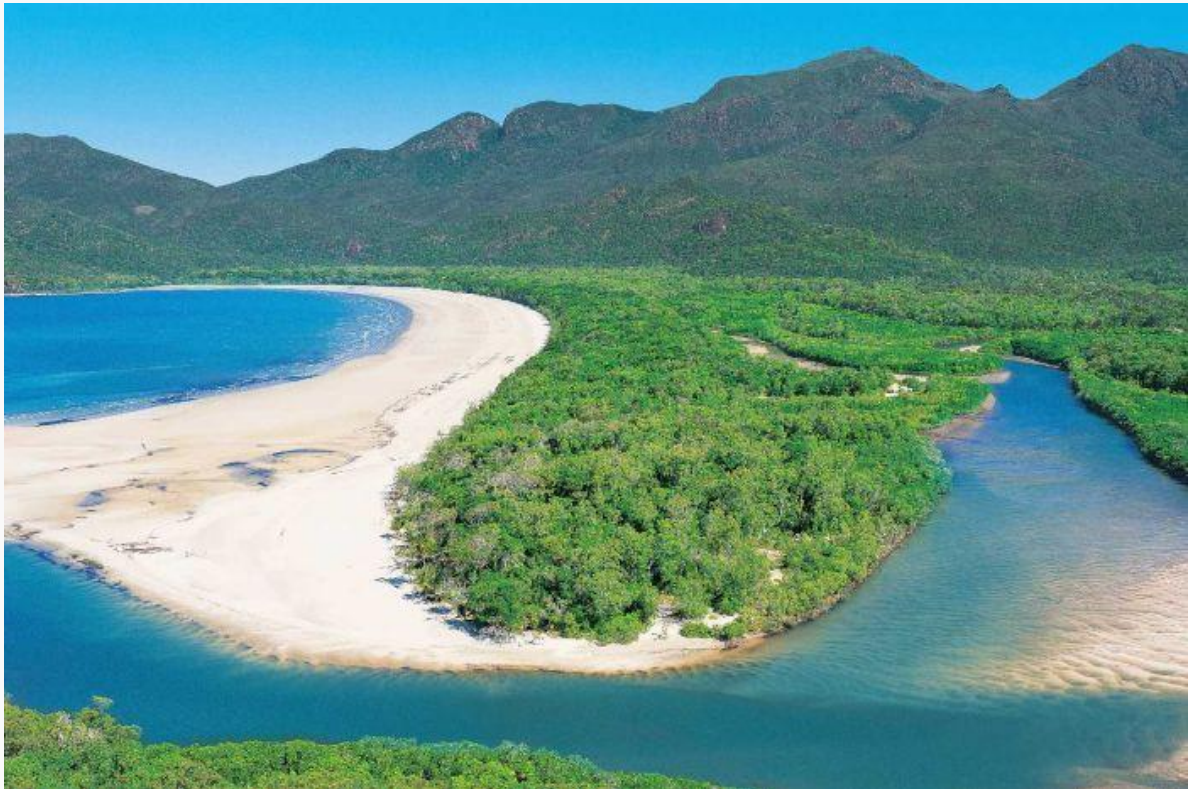


PHOTO: [Hinchinbrook Island attracts hikers from all over the world.](#) (Supplied: Steven Nowakowski)

The State Government's lease plans extend beyond Hinchinbrook to the Whitsunday Islands National Park and the Great Sandy National Park along the Fraser Coast.

Government documents said the state-funded works and approvals would be delivered "at no net cost or risk to taxpayers" because it was hoped the value of the accommodation would offset the current cost of maintaining the trails.

The Government would also pay for the civil works and "base infrastructure" for the accommodation along the trails, including land grading, additional roadworks, telecommunications, and vegetation clearance.

Hinchinbrook Island traditional owner Abe Muriata said he was opposed to the lease and did not think the proposal would be supported by the local Aboriginal corporation.

"Go away, and leave it alone. More people will come when it is left the way is it, pristine," he said.

"Leave something as a memorial to a very fine lady."



PHOTO: [Melbourne hikers Tamie and Eddie Cleaver say the island should not be commercialised.](#) (ABC News: Laura Gartry)

Trail hikers Eddie and Tamie Cleaver said the development was not necessary because they were attracted to the walk because of its seclusion.

"I think those options are already available. On other islands, like the Whitsundays," Eddie Cleaver said.

"There are not that many places left that you can you safely backpack across an island for six days, have minimum facilities and not bump into a small hotel," Tamie Cleaver said.

"I think that is part of the problem, they are trying to make it a business," she said.



PHOTO: [Friends of late environmentalist Margaret Thorsborne rally against development on Hinchinbrook Island.](#) (ABC News: Laura Gartry)

Fast-tracked approval process for developments

The State Government is looking to give companies a fast-tracked "coordinated approvals process" and could offer rent abatement during that time.

The Environmental Defenders Office (EDO) is concerned the approval process may not require a full environmental impact assessment or public consultation.

The Government would contribute up to \$5 million for eco-accommodation to be built along the Whitsunday Island Trail.

Companies are also being urged to apply for loans from the Northern Australia Infrastructure Fund to pay for the project.



PHOTO: [Gutted remains of the Hinchinbrook Island eco-resort administration building and swimming pool off north Queensland.](#) (ABC News)

'Failed resort should be fixed first'

On Hinchinbrook Island, the burnt-out remains of a failed government lease lies abandoned.

The cyclone ravaged Cape Richards resort and sewerage treatment plant accumulated around \$800,000 in debts to state and local governments.

It was the only accommodation on the national park island, but over the past eight years had been smashed by Cyclone Yasi, looted by vandals and destroyed by fire.

The island's local councillor Glenn Raleigh and tourism operators wanted the resort fixed before they invited any more private companies to invest.

"These private investments in national parks need to have some sort of mechanism in place, so that if they do go belly up there is something in the kitty to restore the environment," Mr Raleigh said.

"I don't believe the community has been consulted, myself included".

Boat operator John Schmidt said he wasn't aware the Government was going to lease more land out to companies.

"It's decrepit, it's a mess. Nobody is bothering to fix it up. That's what happens to leases. People just walk away," he said.



PHOTO: [A run-down entertainment area of Hinchinbrook Island Wilderness Lodge.](#) (ABC News: Josh Bavas)

Private industry deserves lease certainty: Government

Tourism Minister Kate Jones said she supported having long-term leases with private companies within national parks.

"We have listened to industry and they do need certainty on their lease to make sure they can make the investment," she said.

"We want to make sure we get it right but we absolutely want to partner with the private sector, who are best placed to offer that genuine tourism experience."

Ms Jones said Tasmania had recently taken "all of the eco-tourism market in Australia" after a private company took over some of the walking trails.

"It is an increasing, competitive market in eco-tourism and we need to make sure we are partnering with the best in the business," she said.

"We also know Queensland does not get the visitation to national parks that other states do because we don't have that experience, such as Tasmania."

Nature conservation laws were amended in 2013 by the Newman government to allow for private development in national parks.



PHOTO: [Landscape of Hinchinbrook Island off north Queensland.](#) (Supplied: Steven Nowakowski)

'We've never seen this before'

Sean Ryan, principal solicitor of the Environmental Defenders Office, said he thought a Labor Government would have reversed the changes.

"This is a weakening of protection of national parks in Queensland, we've never seen this before," he said.

Ms Jones said the failed resort lease was a separate issue.

"We are doing separate work in regard to that resort, in ensuring that anyone that has a lease on one of our island has to be actively working on that lease," she said.

Katter's Australian Party Member for Hinchinbrook Nick Dametto said the proposal was a "wonderful" investment opportunity for the region.

"Our electorate is crying out for jobs and eco-tourism can provide just that," he said.

Mr Dametto said he had "no issue with the state offering exclusive ground leases on national park land," because the option "makes sense if you want to market Hinchinbrook Island as a 'stay and play' destination".

But he said the trail should be freely accessible at all times.