

# Couran Cove Resort: Eco-tourism Experiences

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## Introduction

As we become more aware of the negative impacts we, as humans, are having on the environment around us, we are looking to find sustainable approaches to our everyday practices. This, combined with a growing public appreciation of our natural environment, has created the new niche in tourism. This new trend in tourism is considered an alternative to mass tourism and is associated with many names, including green, nature-based, environmental and, most commonly, "eco"-tourism.

In the past, tourism has been driven solely by economic considerations, today however environmental considerations are becoming increasingly important. Public demand together with new environmental laws has seen the term "eco-tourism" become the buzzword of tourism in the 90's. Simply, it is the tourism industry's response to increasing public concern, environmental morality, stricter environmental laws, or perhaps just a marketing ploy. Whatever it may be, all tourism is increasingly under pressure to become more environmentally based, whether it is true eco-tourism or not, and should ultimately become "sustainable tourism."

Some see eco-tourism as a successful symbiosis of nature preservation and commercial profit with virtually no down side, while others are more realistically aware of the difficulties eco-tourism ventures may encounter but nevertheless see it as a means to change the characteristics of all tourism to become more sustainable. Improving the environmental performance of a tourism operation does not have to increase the costs or reduce comfort and convenience. As practical solutions are sought and technology increases, more practices which enable environmental, financial and client services goals to be met simultaneously are being found. For example, good, passive solar building design reduces the financial and environmental costs of air-conditioning while improving client comfort. Not changing towels or linen daily unless requested lowers cleaning costs and reduces the pressure on the environment as well as extending the lives of these items. Simple solutions may not always be available, and choices may need to be made on the basis of which goals are seen as more important. Ultimately, however, protecting the environment enhances the tourism product and responsible actions of tourism operators are positive marketable commodities.

The rise of eco-tourism has resulted in the increasing awareness of the tourism industry and tourism operators worldwide. It has influenced the management decisions that they make, which has ultimately benefited their tourism establishments, whether they are focused on the eco-tourism market or not. This has culminated in growing awareness that for the long-term success of any tourism establishment, economical and environmental considerations must be made together. Many benefits can come from eco-tourism, but there are also many difficulties that need to be avoided. Eco-tourism is a new field of tourism and there are many operations undertaking a range of practices that blend financial and environmental benefits together, making these projects more sustainable for the future and setting positive examples for all types of tourism to learn from.

In an effort to help other tourism operators become aware of some of the difficulties and learn from one large-scale eco-tourism operator's experience, we have documented the following experiences. These experiences were gathered while working in the development and opening of what is currently marketed as Australia's largest eco-tourism resort, and can be considered a

positive step towards "sustainable tourism." We hope our experiences can assist others working in the tourism industry as we see sustainable tourism as a necessary evolution of modern tourism, and eco-tourism as the key to introducing this concept to the larger tourism industry.

### **Couran Cove Resort**

Couran Cove Resort is a new large scale eco-tourism development located on South Stradbroke Island, 45 minutes south of Brisbane and next to the Gold Coast in Queensland, Australia's premier tourism destination. South Stradbroke Island is only accessible by boat or helicopter, and therefore relatively undeveloped. The resort is approximately 150 hectares in area, and encompasses a diverse range of plant communities and animal habitats. These natural features extend from the mangroves on the west through significant patches of both Livistona rainforest and paperbark wetland, into open woodland, until finally arriving at the coastal dune vegetation on the eastern beach.

Couran Cove Resort is situated in the center of the island and is surrounded by a conservation park. This natural setting is an ideal environment for eco-tourism, and the Resort has placed a great deal of emphasis on minimizing the impacts of human usage of the environment, while offering an impressive range of nature, sporting and outdoor activities. It is part of a new hybrid in tourism, combining mass tourism, recreational tourism and eco-tourism principles and practices in one establishment.

The Resort has undertaken an environmental management plan, to utilize state of the art environmental management principles and practices in the Resort's operations to reduce environmental impacts. These environmental management initiatives are currently targeted at many of the Resort's aspects: architecture, community involvement, environmental education, landscaping, native flora and fauna rehabilitation, energy supply, pest and weed control, sewage treatment, site management, transport and waste management.

In an effort to bring together the concepts of mass, recreational and eco-tourism, the Resort has had some successes and failures, but ultimately the lessons learned are an important step in the movement of tourism to sustainable tourism. In order to show some of the successes and difficulties that were encountered while creating a large eco-tourism resort, various environmental initiatives will be discussed together with the theory behind the initiatives during the planning stage and the actual outcomes in practice.

### **Plan**

The direction of Couran Cove Resort was inspired by the vision of the Resort's Chief Executive Officer. His original task was to create a world class sports resort, however upon viewing the site he saw far more potential. The natural beauty of the site inspired further assessment of the natural area by local environment groups and a decision to employ an environmentally aware staff.

The Resort's initial sporting and recreational emphasis was then complimented by environmental considerations and the architectural brief for the Resort emphasized the importance of the natural environment. As the Resort's planning was further developed the concept of environment was emphasized to a point where the environmental considerations were considered just as, if not more, important than recreational considerations. The Resort then truly became an eco-tourism development.

The CEO, although not environmentally trained, took to the eco-tourism direction for the Resort wholeheartedly, and indeed wanted the resort to be the best eco-tourism resort in the country and a world leader in eco-tourism practices. The Resort's mission statement highlights this motivation:

By the end of 1998, Couran Cove Resort will have established itself as the country's leading Eco-tourism Resort, and be recognized as a world leader in environmentally sound and ecologically sustainable resort management and operations.

This vision resulted in increased emphasis being placed on the most modern and effective environmental management considerations possible. The following section highlights the theory behind and practical outcomes of some of the environmental initiatives utilized by the Resort.

## Environmental Initiatives

### Architecture

Architecture is a visible feature of any establishment and should be functional and aesthetically pleasing. With the use of solar passive design, architecture can simultaneously reduce the demand on natural resources and consequently decrease the long-term costs through reduced energy needs.

Management Practice	In Theory	In Practice
<b>Eco-cabins</b>	Based on environmental best practice and set in a natural setting.	Solar passive design, environmentally sensitive siting, choice of paints and other chemicals for low toxicity and considerations for environmental best practice in building materials.
<b>5H Marine Apartments</b>	Incorporate some environmental best practice initiatives into a modern 5H marine setting.	Choice of paints for low toxicity and environmental best practice considerations in building materials.

### Energy

Energy supply and use can be a significant cost for a tourism establishment. Power supply should be where possible environmentally friendly and cost effective, while power use should be efficient so as to reduce energy demands and running costs.

Management Practice	In Theory	In Practice
<b>Supply</b>	To use environmentally low impact and, where possible, renewable energy supplies.	Use of LPG instead of Diesel resulting in 90% less emission. Solar cars and hot water. Wind turbine to supply 25% of resort energy requirements.
<b>Use</b>	To reduce energy use, with all appliances to be energy efficient. Waste heat from generator to heat swimming pool. Advanced computer system reduces energy through shutting down non-essential appliances.	The computer system has helped promote efficient use of power, and educates guests on their power consumption. After the initial set-up some additional appliances purchased were not energy efficient (e.g., high-energy use fridges).

### Water

Water is the basis of life and wise use should always be encouraged regardless of locality. By reducing the amount of water used, you not only conserve this precious resource but also save money by reducing the costs of treating and pumping the water.

<b>Management Practice</b>	<b>In Theory</b>	<b>In Practice</b>
<b>Supply</b>	Sustainable water use. The use of groundwater was chosen over a desalination plant as hydrological predictions indicated sufficient groundwater availability.	Unplanned excessive water use (such as for non-native landscaping) led to the first groundwater pump, which was designed to last several years, but ran dry before the resort opened.
<b>Use</b>	The Resort policy was to minimize water use through the use of water efficient appliances and local plants in the landscaping.	Water efficient appliances such as low flow dishwashers, showerheads and dual flush toilets were installed but other basic designs were overlooked such as shallow basins and totally native landscaping.

### *Liquid and Solid Waste*

Waste management should be based on the waste hierarchy; where reducing the amount of waste produced is the most important, reusing whatever wastes possible, recycling other wastes and finally disposal as the last option. Effective waste management can reduce environmental impacts and save money.

<b>Management Practice</b>	<b>In Theory</b>	<b>In Practice</b>
<b>Reduction</b>	Reduction of waste through strict purchasing policy that required items to be purchased based on their minimal waste production such as bulk purchasing and reduction of excess packaging.	Staff believed that simply moving waste to another location was in line with our reduction waste policy. This simply created a waste problem at our supply terminal.
<b>Inorganic</b>	To ensure inorganic wastes such as packaging can be reused and easily recycled.	Many items purchased were not in bulk, were not re-useable and were not recyclable even though alternatives were available.
<b>Organic</b>	All organic waste to be reused, by compost and worms resulting in high-grade worm castings that could be either sold or utilized on site.	A compost and worm system was operating well with the majority of kitchen waste being processed and used in the gardens.
<b>Liquid</b>	A state of the art liquid waste system with maximum treatment of wastes and minimum impact to the site.	Use of vacuum sewer pipes to reduce impact and wastes treated to a post-tertiary level.

### *Landscaping*

The gardens surrounding any hotel or resort increase the aesthetic appearance and consequently the guest's enjoyment. In a natural setting, the garden can impact significantly on the surrounding environment, especially if plants that are not endemic to the area are used (as introduced plants can cause havoc to natural areas). To overcome this problem, the use of

species that are endemic to the area is encouraged as that can have many benefits, including environmental and monetary advantages, as native gardens typically require minimal care.

<b>Management Practice</b>	<b>In Theory</b>	<b>In Practice</b>
<b>Design</b>	The use of only native plants in the landscaping of the whole resort in order to reduce water usage, and encourage native plants and animals.	Some introduced plants were used and grass was laid on large areas resulting in increased financial and environmental costs through the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides and increased pest numbers.

### *Pest Management*

In any tourism establishment it is important to reduce guest contact with plants, animals and especially "undesirable" insects. The better an establishment can do this while maintaining the natural beauty of the area the happier and more comfortable the guest will be.

<b>Management Practice</b>	<b>In Theory</b>	<b>In Practice</b>
<b>Treatment</b>	The use of environmentally friendly solutions for controlling pests including; biological control, denying food or reproduction opportunities, encouraging natural predators and direct human intervention.	Initially the resort was very supportive of this approach. However, as guests began to arrive, more and more pressure was placed on short-term expensive chemical treatments that could disturb the existing treatments.

### *Community*

A significant key to the success of an eco-tourism venture is the involvement and support of the local community. The attitude of the local community can make the difference between guests enjoying or not enjoying their stay, and in turn lead to the financial success or failure of the venture.

<b>Management Practice</b>	<b>In Theory</b>	<b>In Practice</b>
<b>Local involvement</b>	Involvement of local indigenous groups and local environmental groups. Sponsorship of local sporting and environment events. The establishment of a trust fund for environmentally sustainable projects.	Local indigenous and environmental groups were involved from an early stage forming good relations. The Resort sponsored a variety of local 'fun runs' and Clean Up Australia Day activities. A Couran Cove Environmental Research Trust was also set up.

### *Environmental Education*

Most people, particularly those who patronize eco-tourism operations, have very positive attitudes towards the environment and are likely to expect the operator to have environmental education activities in and about the local environment and to carry out best practice initiatives for the environment.

<b>Management Practice</b>	<b>In Theory</b>	<b>In Practice</b>
<b>Promotion</b>	Promote positive environmental initiatives for the resort. This was to be achieved through environmental walking tours, activities, an interpretive information centre, education on guests' televisions and several nature notes in the cabins.	Unfortunately the resort was not actually carrying out some of the environmental initiatives being promoted by the time it opened. For those guests that noticed, this was very negative and did not promote the resort well.
<b>Activities</b>	To provide staff, guests and visitors with a greater appreciation of the Islands natural and cultural history, ecology, flora and fauna of the area.	The Resort's activities were gradually modified and reduced, however there is still an impressive array of information available, guided walks and displays in an interpretive centre.
<b>Staff training</b>	The Resort proposed to give all staff a 2-week environmental training course to increase their awareness of the natural environment and the Resort's environmental initiatives.	A three-day environmental training was undertaken by approximately 95% of staff. Although much shorter than initially planned feedback showed that this was a very positive activity.

### **What Went Wrong!**

The above tables demonstrate the Resort's initial determination to become a world leader in eco-tourism, but also some of the difficulties of putting this into practice. The state of the art tertiary sewage plant, utilization of a low polluting source of energy such as natural gas, and plan to receive 25% of its energy from a renewable source, are testimony to the Resort's initial adoption of environmental initiatives in its plans. These, combined with the waste management plan and use of solar passive architecture in the majority of the buildings, indicated that the Resort was well on its way to achieving its mission statement.

The sheer size of the project gave it significant financial resources to implement and undertake large-scale environmental initiatives, further the desire to be the best eco-tourism resort in the country and a world leader in environmental management attracted a team of motivated and experienced people. This team was willing and able to help the Resort reach its long-term objectives. While still in the planning stage, an Environment Department was formed to assist and advise all other departments on environmental matters and encourage all departments to take on the responsibility of implementing environmental best practices. Many departments, such as Food and Beverage and Landscaping, showed considerable initiative and contributed to many of the final decisions relating to environmental best practices.

The environment department, through past large-scale eco-tourism experience, emphasized the need for and importance of staff training to ensure that everyday environmental practices are undertaken effectively. An estimated 95% of all staff were trained including upper management and feedback was very positive. Unfortunately, as the opening neared, pressure increased and many basic environmental practices such as waste management fell to the wayside. In addition, when put under pressure to open, many of the longer term environmental management procedures were dropped by upper management in favour of short-term economical alternatives, some of which created long-term financial and environmental problems. Environmental policies and practices that were set up earlier were forgotten as management and staff fell into old routines.

In the area of waste management the Resort had very good policies and procedures that relate to waste minimization, however as these procedures were put into practice many basic concepts were ignored. For example, staff appeared confused about the concept of waste reduction and saw the aim as reducing the amount of waste on the island only, which they achieved by dispensing excess waste on the mainland. This of course resulted in the waste ending up in landfill anyway. In addition many items that could have been purchased in bulk were not and many items that were purchased were neither recyclable nor re-useable. To make matters worse, food that was delivered to guests' rooms was first re-packaged into polystyrene and plastic containers. This is just one of the problems encountered in waste management and is indicative of what not to do as a leading eco-resort.

The initial concepts for landscaping were proving to be world standard in eco-tourism, where often the utilization of only native plants is forgotten. The island had undergone significant degradation due to past practices but through consultation with Australia's leading conservation agency reintroduction and breeding of native plants was achieved. This resulted in many endangered plants such as orchids and epiphytes being bred and native sting-less bees and butterflies becoming more abundant. Unfortunately, even though environmental problems were highlighted and it went against the Resort's native landscaping policy, it was decided to use introduced plants and especially grass through the landscape. Further it was decided to place an oval on a fragile beach dune system. These activities placed increasing pressure on the groundwater and negatively impacted the environment through pesticides and fertilizers, thereby costing the resort more money and resources, and taking away from the original vision of native landscaping that would have been better for the environment and attracted guests.

Ultimately it seems many of the problems stemmed from bad planning, as underestimation in time and cost led to less upper management support and ultimately reduced emphasis on environmental management initiatives. As with many large-scale projects, the resort was running behind schedule for completion. Instead of postponing until all development could be undertaken properly the resort pushed ahead and the resulting outcome was that environmental initiatives became less important as they were often more time consuming. This has culminated in the resort now putting more marketing emphasis on adventure sports than its well-deserving environment initiatives.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the problems encountered, Couran Cove Resort still represents an excellent example of large-scale sustainable tourism. It has incorporated many positive environmental initiatives into its planning and operation, and provides many examples in theory and in practice of ways of bringing environmental and financial considerations together for financial and environmental benefit.

From our experiences we have seen that large scale environmental initiatives are important, particularly in mass tourism, but have been reminded that it is often the most simple and cost effective practices that can prove to be more sustainable and beneficial than large-scale initiatives. Although the resort spent a lot of money on major environmental management initiatives, it lacked in smaller everyday practices. It is unfortunate that a project that put considerable financial and human resources into achieving its objective and showed so much potential and promise let some smaller routine practices be forgotten.

Often it is the small everyday practices like education and waste management that guests will notice and not the larger, less obvious initiatives such as sewage and energy. We have found that although the larger initiatives are very important, it is the little things that require continuous forethought, diligence and sometimes determination that will ultimately ensure the long-term sustainability and success of a project. No matter what the size of the project, it is not so much the financial investment of the large-scale environmental initiatives as it is the management and

staff support for environmental initiatives that will make tourism projects more economically and environmentally sustainable in the future.

Some of the simple more obvious ways that tourism can promote economical and environmental considerations and become more sustainable, include:

- energy efficient appliances that reduce energy needs, save money, and reduce environmental impacts;
- environmental education for staff and guests promotes efficient resource use, saves money and reduces environmental impacts;
- minimizing waste through purchasing policies can save money and reduce environmental impacts; and
- marketing the natural attributes of an area can increase guest occupancy and enjoyment, while promoting greater environmental awareness.

In the short term environmental management initiatives can take longer to plan and cost more to implement, however in the longer term they will save considerable money and keep the Resort's environment in a good state to keep visitors coming back. The Resort's management spent a great deal of time and money in following environmental best practice but unfortunately undid some of this good by making some bad decisions when under pressure to open. From the beginning the Resort was poised to become an exemplary world leader in eco-tourism. It is unfortunate that it did not maintain its original vision, as presently it offers excellent examples of large-scale "sustainable tourism" practices. We hope others will learn from the Couran Cove Resort experiences, and be better prepared for some of the difficulties in achieving more sustainable tourism.

### **Disclaimer**

This information is based on our experiences as environment manager and environment officer in the planning and implementation of Couran Cove Resort, Queensland, Australia. This is a critical evaluation, however it is not intended to criticize the Resort's operations, but rather it is hoped to share examples of what can be done and what can go wrong, and from these examples help others learn how to do it better in the future. We left the Resort three months into its opening, (to pursue more fulfilling work as volunteers in Cambodia), and as such can not comment on the resorts current practices. We wish the Resort success in meeting its objective through pursuing environmental best practices, and wish other tourism operators success in achieving sustainable tourism, the tourism of the future.