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Chapter 6

Post War Developments: Tourism.

The ability of a small town to survive and prosper is dependent on its ability to develop an alternative economic base once its traditional economy has declined. Some regional centres have made the transition by identifying and exploiting new areas of commerce. Charters Towers and Armidale did this with education, and more recently Tamworth became a centre for country music. ¹Cooktown chose to exploit the assets of its place in Queensland's history, its climate, and its proximity to the Great Barrier Reef.

The tourist industry has played a part in Queensland's economy since the turn of the century. Initially the tourist trade was restricted by a lack of transport facilities. However, improved rail and road and shipping systems gradually allowed tourists access to the more exotic areas of the state. After the Second World War, tourism played an increasingly important part in Queensland's economy. For instance, the Cairns region was served by a series of "honeymoon" ships that regularly delivered tourists from the southern states. More recently, improved international air traffic has put Queensland in the forefront of tourism in Australia.

Tourism is increasingly important to the Queensland economy, its revenue rivalling that generated by either mining or agriculture production. Furthermore, being a labour intensive industry,

¹ Walmsley and Sorensen, Contemporary Australia, pp. 335-342.

tourism provides more work for Queenslanders than any other industry. Cooktown has shared in the "tourist bonanza", but it has yet to reach the potential promised by its historical, climatic and geographic attributes. Nevertheless, tourism is now a viable alternative to the various industries that had previously supported the town. In a sense, tourism is Cooktown's newest staple. Tourists are attracted to the area for a variety of reasons, including the equable climate, and the historical significance of Cooktown and the Palmer River gold field.

From the start of European settlement, Cooktown was highly regarded as an interesting place to visit, offering good fishing and shooting for those inclined to an active holiday. Although little evidence is available to indicate how important tourism was at the turn of the century, anecdotal evidence suggests that it had some economic impact.⁴⁹⁹ Initially visitors could get to Cooktown only by sea, and were obliged to wait until the boat returned to Cairns, usually two or three days. This changed in 1935 when Tom McDonald offered frequent flights between Cooktown and Cairns, allowing people with limited time to visit the town.⁵⁰⁰ However, tourism in North Queensland became organised only after the Second World War, when the State Government commissioned an inquiry.

Government intervention.

The Queensland Tourist Development Board was constituted in 1946 to report on the potential for tourism. The state was divided into

⁴⁹⁹ Evelyn Martin, interviewed by Duncan Jackson, 1983. Transcript in Cook Shire Council Library, Cooktown. Martin's parents owned the Family Hotel and she claimed that Cooktown was regarded as a tourist centre with people coming on boats.

⁵⁰⁰ McDonald offered flights to Cooktown on three days each week for £3 one way and a return trip for £5. *Cairns Post*, 5 April 1935.

divisions, or Key Points, and the tourist potential of each division was examined. The Board issued a questionnaire to interested persons and organisations to gather information, and followed this up with inspections and interviews.⁵⁰¹ The resulting Report shaped the growth of tourism in Queensland for many years. It designated Cooktown as Key Point No 10, and described the area as an "attractive proposition from a tourist point of view", despite the lack of transport to carry tourists to the district, and also of amenities such as power and water.⁵⁰²

The investigation drew much interest in Cooktown with representations from the Shire Council, the Cooktown Tourist Development League, and Moffat Constructions, a private company proposing extensive developments in the town. The Council was primarily interested in providing information for proposed developers, including a list of the facilities available in the area, and the attractions likely to interest tourists. It also gave an assurance that the Council would provide any aid within its resources to encourage the establishment of tourist facilities.⁵⁰³

A much more informative response was made by the Cooktown Tourist Development League, a local organisation committed to the development of the area. This report listed the advantages and attractions it regarded as favourable to a successful tourist industry.

⁵⁰¹ 1947 Report of The Queensland Tourist Development Board on The Tourist Resources of Queensland and the Requirements for their Development, Government Printer, Brisbane.

⁵⁰² The Report stated that the only tourist transport to Cooktown was the A.N.A. "Dragon Rapide" which offered a thrice weekly service. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁵⁰³ Information Of Interest To Persons Interested In The Establishment Of A First Class Hotel Or Guest House At Cooktown To Cater For Tourists. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

These included game fishing in the Flinders Island group, local tourist attractions like the Black Mountains, and the history of Cooktown itself. For the more energetic tourist, the report suggested "alligator or crocodile shooting", and pig hunting. However, the League said the three air services each week were not sufficient to encourage a tourist industry. More air services should be provided, and the Government should also construct a road to Cairns to encourage land based tourism.⁵⁰⁴

Although the Council and the Development League talked up the town's possibilities, an interim report issued by the Commissioners painted a different picture. It said that the town had only thirty-five bedrooms available in the three hotels, and twenty were occupied by permanent boarders. The morale of the local inhabitants was even more discouraging. In trying to determine how likely the locals were to participate in a tourist venture, one Board Member asked the Shire Chairman "What percentage of your population is active?" The Chairman was brutally honest. "They take a devil of a lot of waking up". The Board concluded that the immediate future of tourism was nil.⁵⁰⁵

Moffat Construction's tourism plan.

Moffat Construction Company, a Brisbane based firm, made the only private submission. O.C. Moffat told the Board that he intended to build a tourist complex on Grassy Hill at Cooktown. He had already purchased the Commercial Hotel, and would transfer the liquor license to the tourist resort when it was built. The resort would be constructed

⁵⁰⁴ Submission by Mr, H.E. Chatfield, Chairman of Cooktown Tourist Development League to The Queensland Tourist Development Board, 1946. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁵⁰⁵ The Queensland Tourist Development Board - Interim Report, 6 September 1946.

of reinforced concrete and local granite, and its features would include "ample lounge accommodation, suites of rooms with their own bathrooms attached, and, in general, [it]would be modern in every respect".⁵⁰⁶ Moffat obviously did not intend to let his proposed clients suffer from boredom. His plans included a sporting complex with a nine-hole golf course, swimming pool, tennis courts and bowling greens. He would supply horses for "the tourist who desires to ride into some of this beautiful bush country", and would also have a launch for fishing and sightseeing tours to the reef and Lizard Island.⁵⁰⁷

When Moffat submitted his proposal to the Shire Council, he offered to share his services with the town. He intended to provide the resort with a suitable water supply, and hoped to cooperate with the Council to offer a reticulated supply to everybody in town.⁵⁰⁸ He also planned to generate his own electricity, and would apply for a franchise to supply power to the general population.⁵⁰⁹ The Council saw several advantages in supporting Moffat's proposal. It offered the people of Cooktown services the town could not previously afford, and enabled the Council to unload some of its unwanted land, which it had unwillingly acquired for arrears of rates

Moffat's intentions were serious, as shown by the amount of money he was throwing about. In one transaction, Moffat bought nine town allotments from the Council for £120. The commercial sector also

⁵⁰⁶ Submission by Moffat Construction Company to The Queensland Tourist Development Board, 1946. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁵⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁸ Otto C.C. Moffat, Manager, Moffat Construction Co. Brisbane, to The Town Clerk, The Cookshire(sic) Council, Cooktown, 14 May 1947. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁵⁰⁹ Otto C.C. Moffat, manager, Moffat Construction Co., Brisbane, to The Town Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 14 may 1947. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

benefited when Moffat purchased the Sovereign and Seaview Hotels, as well as the Commercial.⁵¹⁰ He also commissioned Leith and Bartlett, a firm of architects and engineers from Melbourne, to prepare a town plan and zoning system. They recommended that most of the waterfront land should be taken over by the Council for recreation purposes. There would be a complete ban on any buildings in this area, except for a Civic Centre near Furneaux Street. The plan called for the commercial area to be gazetted a "brick" area only, with no timber buildings allowed.⁵¹¹ Moffat feared that the integrity of his resort would be compromised by shoddy buildings and unregulated development if the Council failed to adopt a town plan and zoning regulations because "without adoption of the town planning proposal there was nothing to prevent an aborigine putting up a hut near the hotel I was going to erect, or a foundry constructed close to houses which I planned to build and rent".⁵¹² He threatened to cancel his plans and dispose of all properties and businesses if the Council failed to comply with his wishes.⁵¹³

Although the Shire Council favoured Moffat's proposal, some locals were more cautious. Members of the Cooktown Progress Association complained of the lack of information about the project, and demanded that the Council call a public meeting to discuss the matter.⁵¹⁴ The meeting was acrimonious, and after discussing the project for three

⁵¹⁰ Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to J.F. Fitzgerald & Co., Ascot Chambers, Brisbane, 31 May 1948. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁵¹¹ A.C. Leith, A.C. Leith and Bartlett, Architects And Engineers, Melbourne, to O.C. Moffat, Moffat Construction Co. Brisbane, 4 August 1948. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁵¹² The Australian, 16 October 1949, p. 3.

⁵¹³ Otto C.C. Moffat, Manager, Moffat Construction Co., Brisbane, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 11 November 1948. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁵¹⁴ H. Hudson, Honorary Secretary, Progress Association, Cooktown, to Shire Clerk, Cooktown, 19 November 1948. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

hours, it resolved to ask Moffat to address a future public meeting to explain his plans for Cooktown.⁵¹⁵ The meeting was held, but neither Moffat nor his town planners could allay public apprehensions. Many people feared that the project would hinder the construction of a timber mill within the perimeter of Moffat's proposed commercial centre. Moffat attempted unsuccessfully to convince the timber company, Bunning Bros, to build the mill on an alternative site.⁵¹⁶ When the Council failed to achieve a reconciliation between Moffat Constructions and Bunning Bros, it decided not to adopt Moffat's town plan.⁵¹⁷

In an interview with The Australian, Moffat said that he would have invested £150,000 in Cooktown over a five-year period. He said that Cooktown had more potential as a tourist resort than any other area he knew. It had the most equable climate on the Eastern seaboard, and was "probably one of the best natural sites for a town that I have seen anywhere in the world". He complained that the Council's failure to adopt the town plan forced him to abandon the project, as without it, his investment would have been jeopardised by unregulated development.⁵¹⁸ He told journalists: "I was the only person who stood to lose on an idea that would have converted the best known of Queensland's ghost towns into the best known Australian tourist resort".⁵¹⁹ Despite Moffat purchasing numerous properties, and employing a town planner to prepare preliminary plans, residents who lived in Cooktown at the time still claim that he did not have the funds

⁵¹⁵ Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to The Manager, Moffat Construction Company, Townsville, 25 November 1948. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁵¹⁶ Otto C.C. Moffat, Manager, Moffat Construction Co., Brisbane, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 11 November 1948. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁵¹⁷ Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to The Secretary, Moffat Construction Company, Brisbane, 16 March 1949. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

⁵¹⁸ The Australian, 16 October 1949, p. 1.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid.

to proceed. There is now no way to determine if their assessment is correct, or if they take this position to justify the rejection of a plan that could have "saved" Cooktown.

Recent developments.

Cooktown saw little further tourist development until 1964, when Development Pty Ltd purchased the Sovereign Hotel and constructed motel accommodation. Most guests arrived by Hayles' weekly boat, which could bring from sixty to seventy passengers.⁵²⁰ The new Sovereign accommodation brought extra tourists to Cooktown, but growth remained sluggish until the general upsurge in tourism in Queensland during the 1980s encouraged new entrepreneurs to the area. The Sovereign Hotel was redeveloped again in 1986, when all the original buildings were replaced. The new complex, which cost \$4 million, included a three-storey hotel, a shopping arcade, twenty-one motel rooms, and a new swimming pool.⁵²¹

The construction of the newest Sovereign Hotel complex coincided with the resumption of a regular boat service to Cooktown, although the two matters were apparently not related. The *Sundancer*, a jet-powered catamaran, carried passengers from Cairns to Cooktown in about three hours, a welcome contrast to the relatively slow trip previously provided by Hayles' boat, the *Merinda*. The *Sundancer*, which cost \$1.7 million, carried 45 passengers and travelled at almost thirty knots.⁵²²

⁵²⁰ Ernie Kerr, Interviewed by Duncan Jackson, 1984. Transcript in Cook Shire Council Library, Cooktown.

⁵²¹ *Far North Weekly*, 22 August 1986, p. 1.

⁵²² *Ibid.*, 15 August 1986, p. 6.

It is more probable that the developers of the *Sovereign* and the operators of the *Sundancer* hoped to cash in on an integrated tourist development proposed by the Queensland Tourist and Travel Corporation. In 1987 Cabinet gave approval in principle for a development on the Endeavour River within the town boundary. It was proposed to reclaim ninety-nine hectares of mangroves for the project,⁵²³ but many locals opposed the development, fearing that it would "ruin" Cooktown.⁵²⁴ Opposition also came from some Government departments, including Land Management, National Parks and Primary Industries,⁵²⁵ and the proposal was dropped.

In December 1987 *Sundancer* was replaced by the *Quicksilver*, owned by Quicksilver Connections, a Cairns company. The new boat, a *Wavepiercer* 2001, carried 150 passengers.⁵²⁶ The service initially operated on Saturdays, Mondays and Wednesdays each week, but later offered a daily run. Despite the fast modern service, the operators abandoned the run in 1990. Quicksilver Connections cited the rise in fuel prices as reason for the closure, claiming that they had added \$400,000 to the yearly fuel bill.⁵²⁷ The harbour still plays a significant part in the tourist industry in Cooktown, with the *Kangaroo Explorer* calling with up to forty passengers, and *Captain Cook Cruises* with up to 168. Both boats call weekly and stay for about four hours. Both use the wharf facilities when the tide allows, but passengers are tendered in if necessary. Tourists also arrive irregularly on larger ships. For instance, the Norwegian Line ship *Viking Princess* delivered over 700

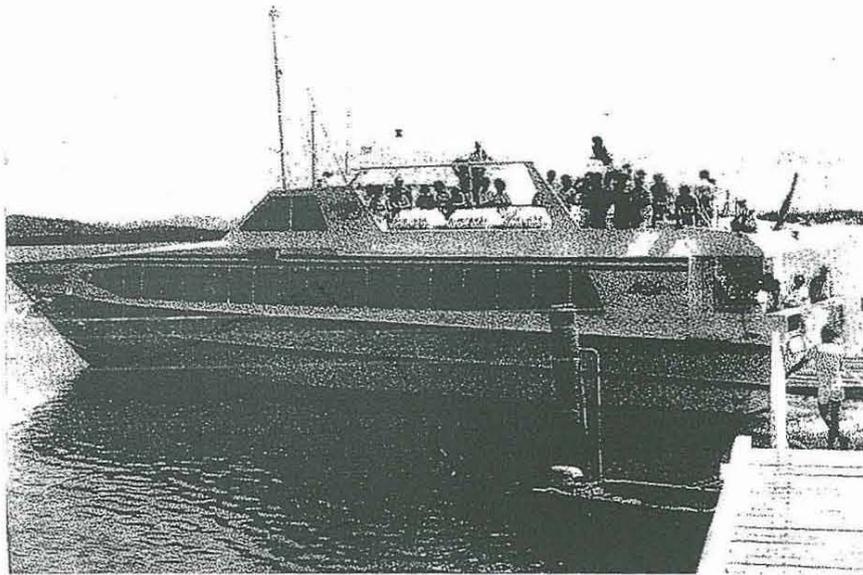
⁵²³ *Daily Sun*, 10 November 1987.

⁵²⁴ *Sunday Sun*, 15 November 1987.

⁵²⁵ *State Hansard*, 7 September 1988, p. 599.

⁵²⁶ *Travel and Tourism*, June 1988, p. 5.

⁵²⁷ *Cairns Post*, 1 December 1990. It is more likely that the Company diverted the *Quicksilver* to the more lucrative Barrier Reef trips from Cairns.



Sundancer with tourists, Cooktown harbour, c. 1986

passengers to Cooktown for a short stay in mid August 1999. Although the harbour had recently been dredged, the ship lay offshore and discharged passengers by tender.⁵²⁸ Such visits stimulate the local economy, but place a temporary strain on existing services. The town copes in the way Cooktown always has. For instance, when the *Viking Princess* called, the lack of tourist buses to handle customers was filled by school buses. Cooktown bus operators even arranged for Hopevale buses to travel to Cooktown to assist.

Cooktown has been served by caravan parks from the early 1970s, although initially the services were not of tourist standard. The majority of their customers were pensioners, or people who could not afford "regular" accommodation. This changed as tourism developed, and three caravan parks now operate within the town's limits, with another at Endeavour Falls, on the road to Hopevale. The quality of accommodation has improved substantially, with facilities for tent and caravan travellers, in addition to up-market motel accommodation. The town also boasts a comfortable backpacker lodge, and other short-term boarding accommodation.

Recent statistics show that in spite of the Asian economic problems tourism in Far North Queensland has continued to expand. Total domestic visitor numbers to the area increased by 13.7% from 1998 to 1999. International visitor numbers between March 1999 and March 2000 increased by 11.1%.⁵²⁹

⁵²⁸ The author was in Cooktown when the ship arrived. Passengers were ferried to the town by small boats and took advantage of the various tours on offer.

⁵²⁹ Annual Report For the 12 months ending 30th June, 2000, Tourism Tropical North Queensland, Far North Queensland Promotion Bureau Ltd, Cairns, Appendices 1 - 4.

Unfortunately, the official statistics on tourism in the area north of Cairns do not give specific data on individual towns like Cooktown. However, an accommodation survey of the area surrounding Cooktown indicates that approximately 77,000 tourists visited the town in 1998. This is expected to increase to 88,000 by 2003.⁵³⁰

Conclusion.

Cooktown is capable of catering for the present tourist trade, but any significant increase would require more accommodation. Despite the considerable growth Cooktown has enjoyed in tourism, there has not been the economic resurgence expected from the industry. The failure of the district to attract a greater number of visitors has been influenced by the general downturn in Asian tourism, but there is little doubt that Cooktown should have had a greater share in the boom years. The district does not have the economic capacity to maintain the advertising campaign necessary to attract a reasonable share of international and national tourists, and this must have a detrimental effect. Failing a considerable injection of funds from outside, it would appear that Cooktown and district will enjoy a slow growth in tourism, but will not be in a position to take full advantage of any general resurgence in the industry. Given the reaction of locals to previous plans for integrated tourist developments, most residents will not be disappointed.

The history of tourism in Cooktown is one area that accords well with all facets of Central Place theory. Cairns is the centre for tourism in North Queensland, and tourism in the surrounding area is controlled by

⁵³⁰ Operational Assessment, Cooktown Botanic Gardens Interpretive Centre, Tourist and Travel Corporation, Brisbane, 1998.

events in Cairns. This was made clear in the downturn in tourism following the recent decline in the Asian economy, when the fall in the number of tourists visiting Cairns adversely affected surrounding areas, including Cooktown. The relationship between the two centres is obvious, in that almost all tourists who visit Cooktown, whether by road, air, or sea, arrive via Cairns.

Other theories also have relevance in Cooktown's tourism experience. Growth could never have been achieved without the provision of road and airport infrastructure to allow people to travel to Cooktown. Power and water was also critical, as few tourists will visit areas without at least basic services and facilities. The exception to this is the "adventure tourism" market, where people pay to experience life "in the raw". However, this is a small niche market, with minimal effect on the economy. Cooktown's history of tourism supports Myrdal's economic theory that the injection of substantial funds is necessary to reverse the economy of a town in decline. It is fair to say that tourism is now the staple industry in Cooktown, and may well eventually replace the gold of past years.