Guide to working with First Nations businesses and Communities in Parks

DRAFT FOR INDUSTRY FEEDBACK – CLOSES NOVEMBER 20

This document is designed to help you understand who manages the places where you operate, who can speak for Country and Culture, and how to build respectful, meaningful and reciprocal partnerships.

Use the information and tools before designing, promoting or running activities in parks.

The rules and cultural protocols that guide your activities on Country will vary depending on the location in which you operate. The aim of this guide is to help you to understand how to identify whose Country you are on, and how to begin the process of building and nurturing connections and relationships.

Abbreviations

Acronym	Term
NTA	*Native Title Act 1993* (commonwealth)
EPBC	Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (1999)
ATSIHP	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act (1984)
ACHA	Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act (2003) (QLD)
TSICHA	Torres Strait Islander Cultural Heritage Act (2003) (QLD)
NCA	Nature Conservation Act (1992) (QLD)
IPA	Indigenous Protected Area
JMP	Joint Management Plan
JMB	Joint Management Body
QPWS&P	Queensland Parks & Wildlife Service and Partnerships
JMC	Joint Management Councils
ILUA	Indigenous Land Use Agreements 1. Area agreement 2. Body corporate agreement 3. Alternative procedure agreement
CAP	Commercial Activity Permit
CAA	Commercial Activity Agreement
UNDRIP	UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007)
LDDOIT	Larrakia Declaration on the Development of Indigenous Tourism (2012)
CHMP	Cultural Heritage Management Plan
CHMA	Cultural Heritage Management Agreement

In Queensland, parks and reserves have different ownership and management arrangements. Some are managed by the State, some are jointly managed with Traditional Owners, and some protected places are privately owned. The kind of land you wish to undertake commercial operations on influences who you need to speak with and what approvals you may require.

Key Term –

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) defines a protected area as: "a clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values".

Park types and land tenure:

Protected area types:

Place or arrangement	What you need to know
National Park	Protected primarily for conservation. Commercial activities generally need authorisation; check local visitor and cultural requirements.
Conservation park	Protects particular natural and cultural values. Permitted activities depend on the site and its management rules.
Special wildlife reserve / nature refuge	Privately managed protected land. Obtain landholder permission and check the applicable conservation agreement and other approvals.
Recreation area	Managed for recreation alongside conservation. Some areas have joint management arrangements; and separate recreation-area rules may apply.
Cape York Peninsula Aboriginal Land (CYPAL)	Aboriginal-owned land with jointly managed national parks. Check the park's specific agreements and Traditional Owner decision-making arrangements.

Before you plan a tour, experience or operation identify the exact park, land tenue, managing body and Traditional Owners so that you know who to contact regarding the different elements and activities of your tour operation.

Top tip - Do not assume that access to a public park automatically authorises a commercial experience or the use of cultural stories.

Why land tenure matters for First Nations authority, access, and tourism activity

Land tenure tells you who owns or manages a place and can help you identify the permissions required for tours, infrastructure and other activities. Native title rights and park arrangements may also affect decisions. Ask QPWS&P about the site and any joint management arrangements; independently identify and approach the relevant Traditional Owners through appropriate channels.

https://nativetitle.org.au/find/pbc/qld

Commercial activity permits and agreements

Commercial activities in many Queensland parks, require either a commercial activity permit (CAP) or commercial activity agreement (CAA) to be issued. The type of permit or agreement depends upon factors including the type, nature and scale of tourism activity.

A CAP is the usual starting point for many guided tours and similar activities. A CAA may be appropriate for more complex, longer-term or exclusive-use proposals. QPWS&P can advise which pathway applies; do not decide solely on the size of your business.

in accordance with the Queensland Government Native Title Work Procedures. Joint management and cooperative management partners of national park (Aboriginal land), national park (Cape York Peninsula Aboriginal land) and Indigenous Joint Management Areas may conduct commercial activities under a CAA or CAP.

Official guidance: https://www.qld.gov.au/environment/parks/permits/commercial

CAP applications: https://www.business.qld.gov.au/industries/hospitality-tourism-sport/tourism/starting-up/regulations/parks-recreation-forests/commercial-activity-permit/applying

What is Joint Management

Joint management means Traditional Owners and the Queensland Government work together in managing particular parks. Specific responsibilities and approval pathways depend on the park and its agreements. For tourism operators, this means checking both park authorizations and the processes agreed with Traditional Owners before making plans.

Further information: https://www.qld.gov.au/firstnations/environment-land-use-native-title/native-title-and-park-areas

Recognising Traditional Owners in parks

'Country' is more than a location. It is used to describe a culturally defined area of land associated with a particular, culturally distinct group of people or nation. The term Country is often used by First Nations peoples to describe family origins and associations. It includes the land, waters, living environment, people, stories and ongoing cultural connections of a particular First Nations group. Recognising Traditional Owners means acknowledging their continuing connection and respecting their authority over cultural knowledge and practices. It is an ongoing way of working, not simply a Welcome to Country or an Acknowledgement of Country at the start of a tour.

Some simple steps to take include:

- Find out whose Country your business operates on.
    - Check the pronunciation rather than guessing.
- Include an appropriate Acknowledgement of Country in visitor briefings and communications. Remember, only Traditional Owners deliver a Welcome to Country.
- Check with Traditional Owners whether cultural protocols affect your route, activities, photography, interpretation or access at particular times.
- Invite Traditional Owner input early, discuss payment and permissions, and reflect agreed guidance in staff induction and tour procedures.

A Prescribed Body Corporate (PBC) is a corporation that manages or holds the Native Title rights and interests after determination. The PBC directory is a useful starting point for finding contact details, but it may not identify every relevant cultural authority or group PBCs in Australia. https://nativetitle.org.au/find/pbc.

If you cannot find the information you are looking for here, speak with your Regional Tourism Organisation or the Queensland Government (here) for additional information.

Who makes decisions and how to engage

Park managers decide matters within their legal responsibilities, including park permits and visitor management.

Traditional Owners hold cultural authority according to their own laws, customs and governance.

A PBC, joint management body or other nominated representatives may have formal roles, but the right person or group to authorise a particular cultural activity can differ.

Top tip - Ask rather than assume.

Your practical decision-making pathway

- Identify the site, land tenure and manager; ask QPWS&P whether joint management or special agreements apply.
- Identify the relevant Traditional Owner group and appropriate first contact using the PBC directory, QPWS&P and local referrals.
- Describe your proposal clearly: location, timing, group size, route, infrastructure, cultural content and any likely impacts.
- Ask how decisions are made, who needs to be involved and how much time the community needs.

- Confirm park approvals and cultural permissions separately, in writing where appropriate, before proceeding.

- Keep engaging as your activity changes; review consent, access and benefit-sharing arrangements.

First Nations decision making pathways on parks

Conservation values of Queensland's protected areas are linked with cultural significance for First Nations peoples, who have been protecting and stewarding landscapes for thousands of generations. Traditional knowledge is often passed between generations and shape the connections with the land, waterways and sky.

Through the way that land tenure is established, the Queensland Government is committed to protecting these special places together. By partnering with First Nations peoples, all Queenslanders benefit from a unique knowledge and perspective of Country, and the building of a shared future together.

The native title rights and interests of Traditional Owners varies and depends on the local laws and customs. Native title is usually (but not always) non-exclusive, meaning it exists alongside other (non-Indigenous) rights and interests.

Non-exclusive native title rights may include the right to access, hunt and camp on Traditional Country, but not the right to control access to, and use of, an area. Native title holders and registered native title claimants also have procedural rights in relation to future acts (such as mining and building roads), including the right to negotiate in some cases .

Who holds cultural authority in park contexts

Cultural authority in Queensland parks is a shared responsibility, with formal, legal authority held by the Queensland Government (via QPWS&P) and, co-management or cultural authority exercised by Traditional Owners (First Nations peoples).

As an operator seeking to actively work in parks, you will need to engage with all relevant parties.

Recreation activities under joint management should align with cultural values and respect Indigenous land use priorities.

Partnerships should prioritise Indigenous owned or operated tourism enterprises, capacity building, and equitable revenue sharing. This approach strengthens economic participation while reinforcing cultural continuity, ensuring that tourism within National Parks contributes to both conservation outcomes and community wellbeing.

Engage early, often and meaningfully

Economic participation means First Nations people and businesses have real opportunities to earn income, hold contracts, lead tours, make decisions and own tourism products.

In practice, there is the opportunity to buy services from First Nations-owned businesses, offer paid guiding or training roles, agree how income is shared, and give partners control over if and how their culture is presented. Discuss what outcomes the partner values rather than assuming that visibility or exposure is sufficient compensation.

The Cultural Protocol Guide provides guidance on steps to engage with Traditional Owners, but as a quick refresh;

Respectful consultation includes implementing cultural protocols such as a Welcome to Country (delivered by the Traditional Owners), and recognising Elders or Traditional Custodians, and extends to adapting the delivery of traditional consultation practices and processes to suit the intended group or community.

Adopt a Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) approach:

Free – Decisions are made free from force, intimidation, manipulation and/or coercion.

Prior – Decisions are made having provided sufficient time for engagement and consideration.

Informed – Decisions are informed by accessible and comprehensive information.

Consent – Decisions are made by those who are affected through customary decision-making processes. Where consent is given, it reflects the agreement to participate or proceed.

Engagement should be ongoing and meaningful, not one off or optional to ensure that consent is maintained and that operations reflect the values of the park.

Start by introducing who you are, the park involved, your proposed activity and what you are asking for. Allow enough time for a response, ask the preferred contact method and meeting format, and follow local protocols.

Listen before presenting a finished proposal.

Where engagement is sought, there may be a price associated with it, you are seeking time, knowledge and insights, so budget for this expertise, this will vary based on where you are located.

Discuss fees and payment terms before requesting meetings, reviews, advice, cultural performances, training, guiding, translation or use of cultural material. The appropriate fee depends on the work and the provider: ask for a quote or negotiate a rate, including preparation, travel, delivery, follow-up and licensing where relevant. Do not expect unpaid cultural advice or treat a one-off fee as permission for unrestricted future use.

Ethical engagement and reciprocity principles: https://aiatsis.gov.au/research/ethical-research/research-ethics-framework

What is a sacred site

Some places have significance under Indigenous Tradition. The site may be connected to Songlines, Creation stories, Ceremony or even traditionally for birthing. These may include landmarks, natural features, rock art, burial places, scarred trees, middens and sites associated with ceremonies or historical events.

Aboriginal Custodians have a cultural responsibility to manage sacred sites on their Country, keeping them safe and making sure they are used according to tradition. All operators have a responsibility to protect and not expose or damage these places, even unintentionally.

Consider the following steps:

- Ask appropriate Traditional Owner representatives whether a proposed route or activity involves sensitive places.
- Follow park directions and agreed no-go zones; alter the route or timing where required.
- Do not photograph, advertise, name or interpret sensitive sites without express authorisation.
- Brief staff and visitors on permitted behaviours without disclosing restricted information.
- If unsure whether an activity is appropriate, stop and seek advice before proceeding.

Cultural safety and visitor behaviour in parks

Cultural safety means that Traditional Owners, operators, staff and visitors feel safe, secure and respected in their cultural identities. Cultural safety requires active effort to understand, respect, and validate the diverse cultural backgrounds of individuals to offer inclusivity and equity.

Activities may be adapted, restricted, or seasonally managed to protect sensitive sites or support cultural practices. If a route is closed temporarily, consider alternative routes to protect the area.

Principles for achieving cultural safety in parks includes:

- Self-reflection: Actively examining your own assumptions, beliefs, and biases.
- Shared respect and meaning: Engaging in two-way dialogue that builds trust and respects cultural identity.
- Partnership: Collaborating with stakeholders to ensure approaches fit their values and needs.
- Anti-discrimination: Ensuring services are free from discrimination, stereotyping, and racism.

Building this to include visitor behaviour means:

- Encouraging your guests to examine their own assumptions, beliefs and biases.
- Actively sharing protocols with guests to support a respectful visit.
- Delivering experiences that are free from discrimination, stereotyping, and racism and that promote safe and thoughtful cultural experiences.

Additional considerations for visitor behaviour include:

Do	Why it matters
✓ Respect signs and closed areas	They may protect cultural places or support cultural practices.
✓ Stay on marked tracks	Avoid damaging cultural and natural values.
✓ Ask before taking photographs	Some places, people and activities must not be photographed.
✓ Follow guides' instructions	Traditional Owner and park guidance takes priority.
✓ Look, but do not touch or climb	Protect rock art, cultural features and fragile places.
✓ Take rubbish with you; listen respectfully	Leave the place as you found it and avoid treating culture as a photo opportunity.

First Nations IP in parks

Stories, language, imagery, and artistic expressions are cultural knowledge and may carry rights beyond standard copyright law. Even where legal copyright may not apply, cultural authority, moral rights, and community protocols govern how information is shared and used. Being able to find a story or photograph online does not mean you can use it in a tour, brochure, social post, sign or merchandise.

Seek permission from the relevant Traditional Owner group or PBC to use material that you find or that they will share with you and make sure you adhere to any agreed terms that address attribution, context, benefit sharing, and any restrictions on sensitive or sacred knowledge.

Before you use cultural material

- Identify exactly what material you want to use and where it comes from.
- Ask the appropriate artist or cultural authority who can give permission; do not assume the PBC is the only decision-maker.
- Explain how and where the material will appear, the audience, duration and whether it will be sold or shared online.
- Agree on approval, attribution, payment, benefit-sharing, access restrictions and the right to withdraw or amend use.
- Get permission and agreed terms recorded before publication; retain the record.
- Ask for approval of the final wording, design or interpretation and review it if the use changes.

Signage and interpretation may also require QPWS&P approval and is required to fit park management requirements. Where possible, use Traditional Owner-led or co-designed interpretation rather than retelling stories without cultural authority.

Case study example of good practice

Case Study: Great Barrier Reef

Walking with Country: First Nations Engagement for Tourism Operators

How the Reef Authority's Master Reef Guide Program built a model for respectful, reciprocal engagement between tourism operators and Traditional Owners on Sea Country.

The challenge

Tourism operators across the Great Barrier Reef often didn't know how or where to begin engaging with Traditional Owners. They wanted to go deeper but had no pathway. Meanwhile, operators were unknowingly using Country without acknowledgment, and Traditional Owners felt their knowledge, stories and sovereignty were not being respected.

The approach: a three-stage journey – respect – friendship – development

1. Respect - start with symbols that matter

Small gestures signal genuine intent. Operators were invited to tag the Country they operate on using #CountryName, and to audit their websites for any mention of Sea Country or cultural context. Including an Acknowledgment even a short one on digital platforms opens the door to trust. Operators don't need permission to show respect; they just need to start.

2. Friendship - build relationships before content

The Master Reef Guide Program embedded Traditional Owners into week-long field schools, not as a single session, or thing to learn but for the entire week. This created genuine friendship and mutual respect.

3. Development - empower Traditional Owners to lead, not just participate

The program is structured so that field schools and master classes are led by the Traditional Owners whose Country they are held on. This is not a consultation model for Master Reef training, it is a handover model. Traditional Owners share their story first; science and operator knowledge follows. There is always a seat at the table, whether Traditional Owners choose to fill it or not. The program pays Traditional Owners for Welcome to Country and cultural contributions.

"Permission to tell is not the same as assuming you have the right to say whatever you want. Their stories carry deep personal grief and thousands of years of knowledge. That is not yours to take, it is yours to be offered."

— Principle from the Master Reef Guide Program

Outcomes

- 7 Traditional Owner Reef Guides trained

- Traditional Owner guides now lead reef experiences with cultural story and sea country knowledge at the centre.
- Annual event connecting Traditional Owners, operators and visitors, many Traditional Owners returning to dance and sing on Country for the first time in years.
- CORE online training
- A 10-module training package including a deep-dive on First Nations cultural history designed for all frontline reef workers.

Learnings - What operators can do right now

Practical first steps for any tourism operator in a National Park or Marine Park setting:

- ☐ Identify Country and the correct Traditional Owner contacts.
- ☐ Review your website, scripts and imagery for cultural references and permissions.
- ☐ Invite engagement without assuming participation or an immediate product outcome.
- ☐ Budget for appropriate paid cultural contributions.
- ☐ Support Traditional Owner leadership over cultural stories and experience design.

Practical tools to get you started:

Park access & permit screening checklist

Use this before designing or advertising any tourism activity on protected-area land in Queensland. Complete it once per site/activity and keep it on file, it supports your Commercial Activity Permit or Commercial Activity Agreement application and shows you understand the Native Title and joint management requirements.

Step 1: Identify the land tenure

Tick the tenure type that applies to your operating area. This determines which agreements and contacts apply later, so if you are unsure contact QPWS&P for support.

- ☐ National Park: high-profile conservation land; may be an Indigenous joint management area
- ☐ Conservation Park: smaller area protecting specific habitats, species or heritage values
- ☐ Special Wildlife Reserve: private land under voluntary agreement with the Queensland Government
- ☐ Recreation Area: e.g. K'gari, Mulgumpin, Minjerribah (some jointly managed)
- ☐ Cape York Peninsula Aboriginal Land (CYPAL): Aboriginal freehold, jointly managed National Park
- ☐ Indigenous-owned / privately managed natural refuge
- ☐ Not sure: contact QPWS&P or your Regional Tourism Organisation before proceeding

Site / park name: _____

Managing body (QPWS&P / Joint Management Body / Traditional Owner corporation):

Step 2: Is this an Indigenous joint management area?

If yes, activities must be managed, as far as practicable, consistently with Aboriginal tradition applicable to the area, and any proposal must be consistent with the relevant Indigenous Management Agreement (IMA).

- ☐ Yes: joint management area. Note the IMA / ILUA reference:
- ☐ No: standard QPWS&P managed area
- ☐ Unsure: confirm with QPWS&P before applying for a permit

Step 3: Determine the permit pathway

Question	If yes →	If no →
Is this a one-off, small-scale or low-impact commercial activity?	A Commercial Activity Permit (CAP) may be sufficient	Assess against a Commercial Activity Agreement (CAA)
Is the activity ongoing, higher-impact, or exclusive-use in nature?	A Commercial Activity Agreement (CAA) is likely required	A CAP is more likely to apply, confirm with QPWS&P
Is the park a joint management / Aboriginal land / CYPAL area?	Check the relevant ILUA / IMA / Cooperative Management Agreement (CMA) terms in addition to the CAP/CAA	Standard QPWS&P CAP/CAA process applies

Step 4: Identify who to contact

- ☐ Prescribed Body Corporate (PBC) / Traditional Owner group for the area. Search nativetitle.org.au/find/pbc/qld
- ☐ Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service and Partnerships (QPWS&P) regional office
- ☐ Your Regional Tourism Organisation (RTO), if you need help identifying the right contacts
- ☐ Joint Management Body / Joint Management Council (if applicable)

Step 5: Before you submit

- ☐ I have identified the correct land tenure and managing body
- ☐ I have identified the relevant PBC / Traditional Owner group
- ☐ I have checked whether an ILUA, IMA or CMA applies to this park
- ☐ I have allowed sufficient time for Native Title assessment
- ☐ I have started early engagement with Traditional Owners (see Tool 2: Engagement Tracker).

Quick-start checklist

This checklist is a planning aid, not legal advice. Confirm requirements with QPWS&P and the relevant Traditional Owner group before commencing operations.

Respect → Friendship → Development

Work through the stages in order, don't skip to development before respect and friendship are genuinely in place.

Respect

These steps need no permission, they signal genuine intent and can start today.

- Find out whose Country you operate on. Research local Traditional Owner groups and land/sea Country names before anything else (nativetitle.org.au/find/pbc/qld).
- Add a Country acknowledgment to your website, tour scripts and social media.
- Tag Country using #CountryName on social posts about your tours.
- Audit your existing marketing, website and signage for any unacknowledged use of Sea/land Country, cultural imagery, stories or place names.
- Reach out to your Regional Tourism Organisation or the Queensland Government to help identify the right Traditional Owner contacts.

Friendship

Relationship first, content second, this stage cannot be rushed or done once.

- Offer Traditional Owners a genuine seat at the table for planning, programs or events with no expectation attached, and let them decide whether to take it. Consider that there is likely to be a fee involved, you are asking for their time and guidance.
- Commit to engagement that is ongoing, not a single meeting, log every contact.
- Apply Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) to any decision that affects Country or culture.
- Budget to pay for cultural knowledge, Welcome to Country and other cultural contributions, reciprocity is not optional.
- Build in time for trust to develop before asking Traditional Owners to co-create products or content.

Development

This is a handover model, not a consultation model, Traditional Owners share their story first. This approach places Traditional Owners at the centre of decision-making, storytelling and how their story should or should not be used. This ensures cultural authority is retained by the Traditional Owners and that IP is protected through the process.

- Before using any cultural story, image, symbol or place name in marketing, tours or merchandise, seek explicit permission every time.
- Where possible, have Traditional Owners lead or co-deliver the experience, rather than have their input filtered through your own interpretation.
- Prioritise partnerships with Indigenous-owned or -operated tourism enterprises.
- Build capacity-sharing and equitable revenue-sharing into any commercial arrangement.
- Review agreements and permissions periodically, consent is maintained, not granted once.

Date	Traditional Owner Group / PBC / Contact	Stage (Respect/ Friendship/ Development)	Purpose of contact	Who attended	Outcome / agreement	Paid for cultural contribution? (Y/N)	Next step	Notes
2026-01-15	Example: [PBC name]	Respect	Introductory call to identify contacts	Owner, Ranger coordinator	Agreed to meet on Country next month	N	Arrange on-Country visit	First contact via Regional Tourism Organisation referral

Visitor cultural safety briefing

A short briefing for the start of any tour or activity in a park. Fill in the blanks for your area, laminate it, and use it (or a version of it) at every departure.

Before you fill this in

- Confirm the correct Traditional Owner / language group name for the Country you operate on. Do not guess.

- If possible, have this wording reviewed or endorsed by the relevant Traditional Owner group before use.
- Where appropriate, invite a Traditional Owner to deliver the Welcome to Country or co-deliver the briefing, and budget to pay for this.

Opening Acknowledgment (say to every group)

Script: "Before we begin, I'd like to acknowledge the [Traditional Owner Group Name], the Traditional Owners and Custodians of [Country / place name], the land and waters we're visiting today. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present, and recognise their continuing connection to this Country."

Any specific protocol to add (e.g. seasonal restriction, current cultural event):

What to tell every visitor

- Respect all signage. It may mark restricted areas or limit photography.
- Do not touch or climb on rock art, burial sites or sacred waterholes.
- Stay on the designated track at all times.
- If a Traditional Owner is guiding, follow their instructions on photography and behaviour exactly.
- Leave no trace, take all rubbish with you.
- This place may hold deep personal and cultural meaning, please listen and reflect rather than treat it only as a photo opportunity.

If a guest asks about a story, site or symbol

Script: "That's a great question, some knowledge here belongs to the Traditional Owners and isn't mine to share without their permission. What I can tell you is..."

- Never improvise or fill gaps in a cultural story yourself.
- Redirect guests to Traditional Owner-led content, signage, or a future opportunity to hear it from the right source.

Closing

Script: "Thank you for visiting this Country respectfully today. If you'd like to learn more or support Traditional Owner-led tourism here, [add local opportunity / organisation]."

This template supports, but does not replace, direct guidance from the Traditional Owner group for your area. Review and update it whenever your engagement with them progresses. Check the wording and their comfort with your approach.