

Whitsunday Islands National Parks Guide

Off the Queensland coast, east of Proserpine, lie a number of continental islands known as the Whitsundays. The Whitsundays include more than 90 continental islands that were once part of the adjacent mainland. National park status has been given wholly or in part to most of these islands. More than 96 percent of the 30000ha of wooded hills, rocky headlands and shingle beaches are managed to protect a range of values including fauna, flora, water quality and the scenic integrity. The waterways and beaches surrounding the islands are marine park, and fall within the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.

Temperatures in this tropical area, range from 5° to 35° and are moderated by south eastern winds in winter and north westerlies in summer. Rainfall varies from 1200 to 2000mm per annum, with most falling in summer.

The generally mild climate, natural landscape and warm sea temperatures make the Whitsundays a popular holiday destination. Nature-based recreation includes bush camping, diving, snorkelling, sailing, exploration, bird watching and photography.

Geological origins

During the last ice age (about 18,000 years ago) expansion of the polar caps reduced the sea to a level approx 100m lower than it is today. At that time, the Whitsundays were an inland mountain range and the Great Barrier Reef was a line of coastal limestone hills. About 10,000 years ago the icecaps began to melt causing valleys to flood and bays and inlets to form, isolating the Whitsunday Islands from the mainland.

The tropical waters surrounding the Whitsunday Islands are a particular shade of blue. The colour is caused by very fine particles of sediment in the water which scatter the sunlight as it penetrates the surface.

Aboriginal occupation

Research indicates that Aboriginal groups belonging to the Ngaro tribe inhabited the Whitsundays for at least 8000 years prior to European settlement. Evidence of their occupation can be found in authentic cave paintings discovered at Nara Inlet, Hook Island and in a stone quarry that exists on South Molle Island, where stone axes and other cutting tools have been located. Numerous fish traps which clearly demonstrate Aboriginal use of the marine environment, are also located throughout the area. Refer to *Our Coastal Homeland* brochure for further information.

Fringing reefs

Coral structures which grow around continental islands and occasionally along the mainland are known as fringing reefs. Their proximity to land means that they are affected by run-off and sedimentation. Today these structures vary from small colonies of corals on submerged rocks to reefs extending over several square kilometres.

Corals are almost always found in warm, relatively shallow, clear waters where the minimum/maximum temperature year round remains in a range of about 20 - 30 deg. The extreme tidal range of the Whitsunday area (up to 6m between low and high tides) causes fast currents to stream south with the incoming tide. These currents transport the food and inorganic nutrients that nourish a rich and colourful diversity of corals on the edges of the fringing reefs, which are critical habitat for other marine species and popular spots for snorkelling and diving.

Toward the shore where low tide exposure limits coral growth, the reef flat is more drab with areas of algal-covered coral rubble and sandy mud washed from the islands. A closer look at this intertidal reef flat reveals a fascinating and complex community.



Marine Parks

Beaches and rocky shores

Most Whitsunday beaches are composed largely of fragments of limestone skeletons produced by reef-dwelling organisms, including hard corals and some algae.

Close to shore, organisms with a higher tolerance for exposure at low tide become prevalent. As the tide recedes, oysters and snails seal their shells and worms retire to their burrows. Rock crabs dart for the nearest crevices as the shadow of a soaring brahminy kite skirts the rugged shoreline. Inevitably, some crabs are surprised and fall prey to these handsome chestnut and white birds.

The majestic white-bellied sea-eagle and the smaller osprey also soar high above the reef, their keen eyes searching for surface fish. These coastal birds of prey, which nest on the Whitsunday Islands, indulge in spectacular aerial courtship displays in the breeding season. Nesting birds are easily disturbed and often fail to breed or leave the area if the nest is approached too closely. Use binoculars for a rewarding view without harassing these inspiring creatures.

In contrast to the raptors which visit the ground only fleetingly, the beach stone-curlew seldom takes to the air. The mournful, wailing call of this bird is often heard at night as it patrols the beach in search of crabs. It nests on sand just above the high tide mark. This nesting habit makes

it vulnerable to predation by animals such as feral cats on the mainland.

Lace monitor lizards and sand goannas are the most commonly seen reptiles in the Whitsundays. These normally reserved animals will readily approach visitors in the hope of gaining a free meal. Please do not feed these animals as it may affect their health. Agitated animals can also be a potential risk to the feeder.

Above high tide mark, beach sands formed into dunes by the wind are colonised by plants such as the goat's foot convolvulus, the sea bean, and spinifex - a slender spiky grass. These plants, adapted to dry sandy soils and salt spray, help stabilise dunes and prevent blow-outs, (areas of wind generated degradation). Although these plants are undeniably resilient, they may be killed by trampling. It is recognised that dogs and other domestic animals are carried aboard boats whilst in the marine park. However, domestic animals are not permitted on national parks, on beaches, or in waters of the adjacent marine parks.

Rocky slopes and lush valleys

Vine forests and thickets of lush vegetation grow in gullies and hillsides where fires are less frequent. Towering hoop pines, *Araucaria cunninghamii*, emerge from these forests and mark the skyline with their distinctive radiating branches and tufts of deep green foliage. The tall pyramid shaped flame tree are easily recognisable during the summer months when their red flowers can completely cover the tree.

Drier slopes are generally covered by open grasslands as well as eucalypt and acacia forests and woodlands. These communities rely on fire to regenerate and survive. Pink bloodwood, poplar gum, Moreton Bay ash and white mahogany are common. Their distribution and density is determined by soil, aspect and fire frequency. The grass tree,



Lace monitor

Xanthorrhoea, is a typical plant, attracting noisy flocks of birds, butterflies and many insects to its large flowering spike.

The fauna of these island forests and woodlands is less diverse than that of the adjacent mainland. Birds are conspicuous with many species recorded.

Whitsunday Island supports a population of unadorned rock wallabies while Gloucester Island is colonised by the Proserpine rock wallaby. These highly social and nocturnally active wallabies are an unusual occurrence on east Australian islands.

Boating

In 1770 when Captain Cook wrote of the Whitsunday passage: "The whole passage is one continued safe harbour", he was writing from the Endeavour, a substantial sailing ship. Smaller boats should be anchored carefully with thought to wind and tide. In certain areas stiff breezes against tidal currents can produce very choppy conditions. Anchoring and mooring restrictions apply within the Whitsundays. For more information see *Protecting coral in the Whitsundays* brochure.

Walking

South Molle, Lindeman and Long Islands each have approx 15km of graded walking tracks. A track on the western side of Whitsunday Island connects Dugong Beach to Sawmill Beach. On the eastern side, of Whitsunday Island, a boardwalk leads to a lookout high on Tongue Point providing a spectacular view of Whitehaven Beach and Hill Inlet. A lookout highlighting the islands of the Whitsundays, can also be found at Spion Kop, South Molle Island.



Beach stone-curlew - Photo by Ian Hutton

On islands without tracks, beach walking and rock hopping along the rocky coastline can provide an introduction to much of the island's flora and fauna. However, be mindful of tide times so as not to become stranded. Refer to individual island park guides for more detailed information.

When reef walking (for which stout shoes are essential), remember the importance of these areas to the marine and island ecosystems. Avoid crushing delicate corals and always return lifted or overturned rocks to their original positions. Refer to the GBRMPA guidelines for best environmental practices, to ensure minimum impact whilst reef walking.

Access

To reach non-resort areas, visitors without their own mode of transport can choose from water taxis, day cruise boats and charter boats (with or without crews), available from Shute Harbour and Airlie Beach. Boat ramps for launching private vessels and shops for provisions and fuel, are available at both locations. Island resorts are serviced directly or indirectly by air or sea with travel agents providing details about a variety of transport, accommodation and tours.

Snorkelling and diving

Water is usually clearest at the northern ends of the outer islands. Hook, Border and Langford Islands are some of the better locations for snorkelling and diving, although snorkelling almost anywhere over the reef flat at high tide can be rewarding. Some marine organisms can deliver painful and dangerous stings if handled. The best policy is to look but do not touch. Refer to

Safety on the Reef, visitor information sheet for more information.

Camping

Camping is available in selected areas only. Details of camping permits and fees can be obtained from the QPWS Whitsunday Information Centre in Airlie Beach. Application for campsites, should be accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope and appropriate fees, prior to your proposed arrival date. Applications for permits may also be made by phone or alternatively permits can be obtained over the counter at the QPWS Whitsunday Information Centre.

You can help

The island national parks of the Whitsundays are one of Australia's most popular holiday destinations. By following the recommendations set out below, you can help us to protect this area so it may continue to give enjoyment to you and others. Refer also to the GBRMPA guidelines for best environmental practices.

- Ensure that you obtain information about the area you are visiting;
- Leave your pets at home: domestic animals are not permitted on national parks, on beaches, or in waters of adjacent marine parks
- Do not interfere with the natural surroundings: firearms and sharp implements (other than cooking gear) are prohibited;
- Do not litter or bury rubbish: take it back to the mainland, remember if you can ship it in, you can ship it out;



Sawmill Beach - Dugong Beach walking track

- Obtain a permit before camping to ensure that camp grounds are not over crowded; and
- Bring your own fuel stove and fuel: open fires and collection of firewood are prohibited.

Marine parks

If you are boating or fishing on the reef you need to be aware that most of north Queensland's east coast, and the Great Barrier Reef Region, is protected as a multiple-use marine park. Fishing is allowed in some areas (zones) but not others. Zones are designed to ensure that different activities can be undertaken on the reef and that this valuable resource is used wisely.

In addition to zones, anchoring regulations now apply within the Whitsunday area. These regulations add extra protection for the reef in popular boating areas by helping to reduce anchor damage to coral. To assist us with protecting the coral reef, please use public moorings where possible.

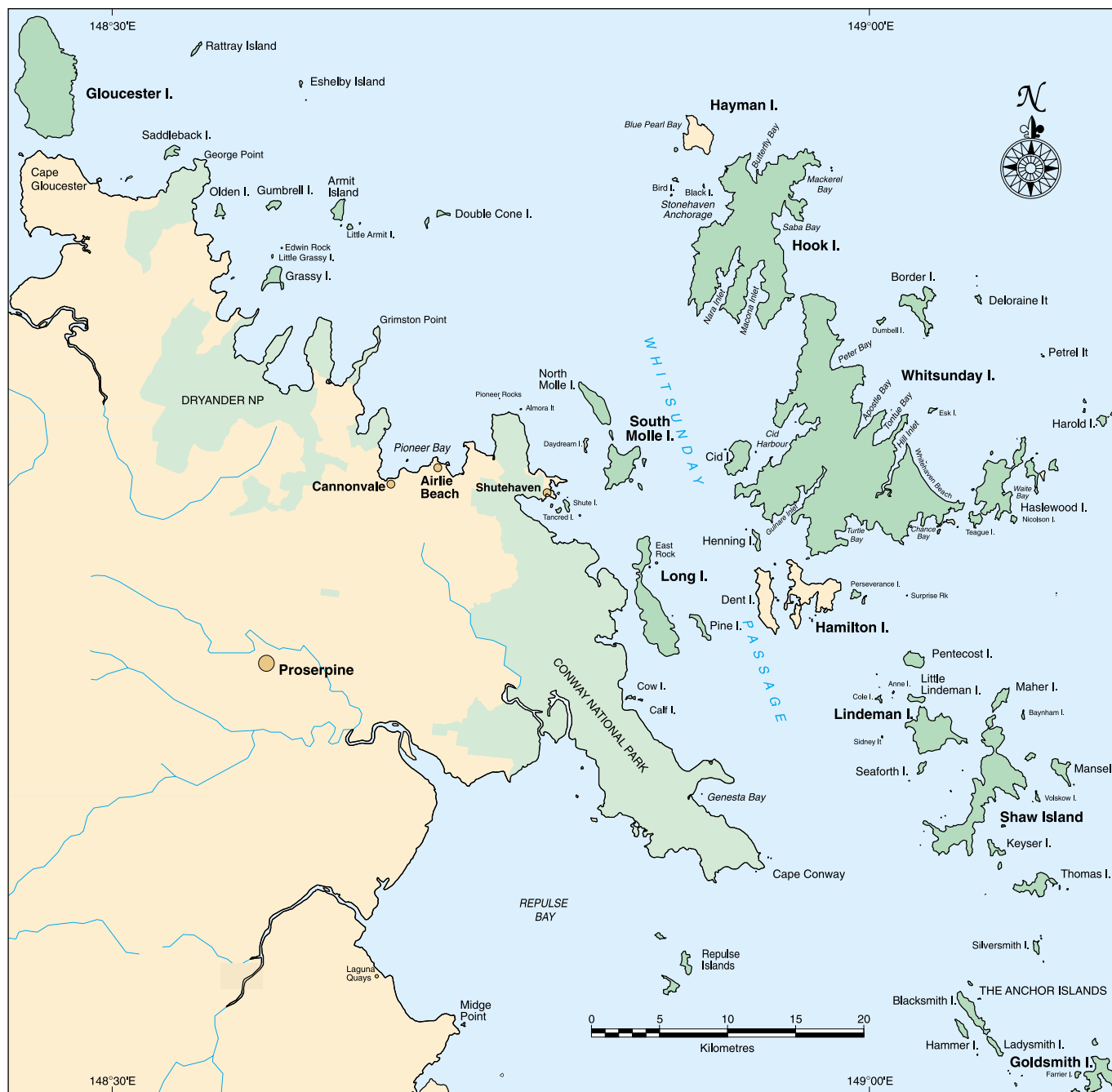
So, before you go boating and fishing, know your zones and anchoring regulations - where you can go and what you can do. Introductory guides to zoning, anchoring information and the Whitsundays Plan of Management are available free of charge from QPWS and GBRMPA offices. Detailed zoning plans can be purchased. You also need to know Queensland's fishing regulations - what you can take and what you cannot. This information is available from DPI Boating and Fisheries Patrol.



Snorkelling on the reef

Park information

Whitsunday Islands National Parks



 Mainland National Parks  Island National Parks

Further information:

Further information about national parks and marine parks can be obtained from the following offices:

Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS)

Whitsunday District Office Cnr Mandalay and Shute Harbour Rds
PO Box 332 Airlie Beach Qld 4802.
Phone: (07) 4946 7022
Fax: (07) 4946 7023

Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA)

2-68 Flinders St
PO Box 1379 Townsville Qld 4810.
Phone: (07) 4750 0700
Fax: (07) 4772 6093

Marine Parks



GREAT BARRIER REEF
MARINE PARK AUTHORITY



Queensland Government
Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service