

**FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR TOURISM
AT THE HOUTMAN ABROLHOS ISLANDS
- DRAFT FOR PUBLIC COMMENT**

Prepared by Le Provost Dames & Moore
for the Abrolhos Islands Management Advisory Committee
in conjunction with Fisheries Western Australia

Fisheries Management Paper No. 121

DECEMBER 1998



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Draft version: December 1998

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Fisheries Management Paper No. 121
ISSN 0819-4327

An Invitation to Comment

The Abrolhos Islands Management Advisory Committee (AIMAC) in conjunction with FisheriesWA invites people to make a submission on the issues discussed in this paper.

The AIMAC was established in April 1996 to provide advice to the Minister for Fisheries on ongoing management of the Abrolhos Islands. AIMAC has recently completed a management plan entitled 'Management of the Houtman Abrolhos System'. The plan provides a blue-print for future management of the islands and their surrounding waters. Recommendation 43 of the plan 'Management of the Houtman Abrolhos System' recommends the preparation of a management plan for environmentally sensitive tourism at the Abrolhos Islands, including policies and operating guidelines.

The draft plan has now been prepared and is available for public comment for a three month period. This discussion paper provides a summary of the future directions for tourism at the Abrolhos Islands as contained in the draft plan.

Public comment is invited on the strategies contained in this discussion paper. Copies of the full draft management plan are available from Fisheries WA should further detail be required.

Why Write a Submission?

A submission is a way to provide information, express your opinion and put forward your suggested course of action, including alternative approaches.

AIMAC in conjunction with Fisheries WA will consider the submissions received and make recommendations to the Minister for Fisheries on the future management of tourism at the Houtman Abrolhos Islands.

Public submissions will be treated as public documents unless specifically marked confidential, and may be quoted in full or in part in any further reports on the islands.

Developing a Submission

In your submission you may agree, disagree or comment on general issues or specific strategies listed.

It may help to reduce the workload on individuals and increase the pool of ideas and information if you join a group with similar interests and make a joint submission.

When making comment on a specific issue in the report:

- refer each of your comments to the appropriate section or chapter heading in the report;
- clearly state your point of view;
- indicate your reasoning or source of information;and
- suggest alternate strategies, safeguards or information.

Public Submission Form

A public submission form is available for use if this approach is preferred. When using the form, your submission need not be limited to the space available on the form.

Please remember to include your name, address,the date and whether you want your submission to be confidential.

Closing Date

The closing date for submissions is March 10,1999

Contacts

Submissions should be addressed to:

Executive Officer
Abrolhos Islands Management Advisory Committee
C/- Fisheries WA
PO Box 1171
Geraldton WA 6531

If you wish to discuss the content of the document or require further information,please contact:

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1.0 Introduction

The Houtman Abrolhos Islands (“the Abrolhos”) is a complex of 122 low-lying islands and reefs located at the edge of the continental shelf, some 60 km offshore from Geraldton. There are three major groups of islands: North Island-Wallabi Group; Easter Group; and Pelsaert (or Southern) Group, separated by Middle and Zeewijk Channels which are each approximately 40 m deep.

The islands are diverse, with some major islands being of ‘continental origin’. Others were formed more recently by the erosion and deposition of sediments during the rise and fall of sea levels, and by storms, waves, winds and swell.

The Abrolhos coral reefs are the southernmost living reefs in the Indian Ocean. They have a unique assemblage of tropical species of fish, reef corals, and other invertebrates which live in close association with temperate species, particularly of algae, and species endemic to Western Australia. The Abrolhos is the centre of the fishery for the commercially valuable western rock lobster (*Panulirus cygnus*).

Terrestrial flora and fauna of the Abrolhos are relict and provide important reference areas on ecological interactions. Virtually all the islands of the Abrolhos archipelago have bird nesting and breeding areas, some of which are of international significance.

The Abrolhos is the site of the Dutch shipwrecks Batavia and Zeewijk.

Thus, the Abrolhos is a unique area of Western Australia. In recognition of this, the Minister for Fisheries released the draft plan Management of the Houtman Abrolhos System for public comment in December 1997.

The management plan has strategies whose implementation may have implications for the development of tourism. Specifically, the plan Management of the Houtman Abrolhos System identifies the need to consider the identification and management of marine and terrestrial areas with high conservation value. This may necessitate zoning and development of appropriate management plans for these areas, which may affect zoning for tourism.

2.0 Background

As one of its first tasks after it was formed in 1996, the Abrolhos Islands Management Advisory Committee (AIMAC) examined the final report of the 1995 Abrolhos Islands Tourism Working Party (AITWP). AIMAC considered the 1995 report to have been well prepared and agreed with most of its conclusions. However, AIMAC wished to further examine Recommendations 2, 3, 5, 6 and 7. These recommendations were:

2. Rules and a code of practice need to be developed for the siting, use and maintenance of permanent mooring sites.
3. Flora and fauna on the islands likely to be affected by the establishment of an adjacent mooring - and marine flora and fauna under the mooring - should be identified prior to any installation of that facility.

5. The appropriate authorities should determine the environmental constraints of each terrestrial site and categorise the permitted level of access to those sites.
6. If the Abrolhos Islands Land Management Sub-committee (AILMSC) and future tour operators reach agreement for access to islands inhabited by A-Zone rock lobster fishers, this access may occur.
7. The responsible management authority should develop policies, operating guidelines and a management plan for tourism development on the Abrolhos Islands before advertising for Expressions of Interest.

In addition, AIMAC wished to have the following points re-examined:

- a further assessment of the possible use of currently inhabited islands as opposed to the development of new islands;
- the need to develop facilities for day visitors on inhabited islands; and
- the viability of establishing land-based tourism on Long Island.

A sub-committee of AIMAC was established to develop a brief to be issued to potential consultants. The brief required the preparation of three documents:

- a draft tourism management plan;
- a draft application for commercial tourism; and
- a draft assessment form.

Tenders received were examined by the AIMAC sub-committee and the firm of LeProvost Dames & Moore (LDM) was selected to undertake the work. The project team consisted of three people:

Dr Fred Wells, chair, had twenty-one years of experience in working in the Western Australian marine environment with the WA Museum before joining LDM. His first trip to the Abrolhos Islands was in 1976 and he has worked there many times since. Dr Wells participated in the selection group which recommended the establishment of Reef Observation Areas in the islands, conceived and organised the 1994 Marine Biological Workshop in the Abrolhos and edited the two volume proceedings of the workshop.

Dr Ross Dowling was Senior Lecturer in Tourism at the University of Notre Dame Australia at the time of the study. He has subsequently become Associate Professor in Tourism at Edith Cowan University. Dr Dowling is Vice-President of the Ecotourism Association of Australia and undertook his PhD thesis on a similar study in Shark Bay. Dr Dowling has worked on many comparable projects in Western Australia, interstate and overseas.

Mr Jim Singleton, a consultant at LDM, has extensive experience in environmental planning, coastal development, ecosystem management, and related tourism and park management work. He worked in regional planning for many years and at the Department of Environmental Protection before joining LDM.

2.1 Approach to the Study

Fisheries WA organised a public advertisement of the study, its terms of reference, and requested public comment on the terms of reference. The study team wrote to people and organisations known to have an interest in the islands. The list included, but was not limited to:

- all people who responded to the 1995 draft of the AITWP document;
- people who subsequently made representations to Fisheries WA or AIMAC;
- conservation groups;
- tourism groups;
- fishermen's associations;
- people with specific expertise who have worked in the Abrolhos; and
- anyone else known to be interested.

A working visit to the Abrolhos was arranged by Fisheries WA to familiarise the panel with all of the island groups and the major sites of interest for potential tourism. The group included Mr MP Rogers of MP Rogers & Associates, who had been contracted separately by Fisheries WA to investigate the suitability of Long Island for construction of a tourism facility.

After background work was complete and initial writing had commenced, the tourism study team held separate meetings in Geraldton with fishermen and tourism operators.

2.2 Previous work

Preparation of the draft tourism management plan was not undertaken in isolation. Instead, it relied heavily on previous studies, including in particular the final report of the Abrolhos Islands Tourism Working Party. The draft plan *Management of the Houtman Abrolhos System* was being prepared at the same time, and the tourism study team was provided with up-to-date copies of drafts of the developing management plan so there would be no conflict between the two documents.

A basic tenet of the draft *Management Plan for Sustainable Tourism at the Houtman Abrolhos Islands* is that it is a part of the aforementioned overall plan. However, the draft tourism plan was written as a stand-alone document for ease of reading. If an inadvertent conflict has arisen between the two documents, the overall management plan has precedence.

Other documents were used in the preparation of the draft tourism plan, including management plans for the World Heritage Area in Shark Bay, Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, and the Solitary Islands off New South Wales.

After the draft tourism plan was completed, it was submitted to the AIMAC sub-committee for comment. The plan was then revised and a second draft submitted to the full AIMAC. AIMAC has now further modified the plan.

Copies of the full draft tourism plan can be viewed at Fisheries WA offices in Perth and Geraldton, but the summary that follows in Section 3.0 outlines its major points.

3.0 Future Tourism in the Abrolhos

The Abrolhos is becoming an increasingly popular destination for tourists attracted by its diving, fishing, bird watching, maritime history and other features. The Abrolhos Islands Management Advisory Committee commissioned the draft *Management Plan for Sustainable Tourism at the Houtman Abrolhos Islands* to provide a framework within which tourism can be developed in the islands.

This detailed plan is available from Fisheries Western Australia. It encourages environmentally sensitive tourism, or nature-based tourism, which is compatible with maintaining the Abrolhos system in an ecologically sound condition. All tourism developments must be consistent with the overall management plan for the islands.

The goal of the draft tourism plan is to:

“Manage environmentally sensitive nature-based tourism which is consistent with the values of the Abrolhos System and provide appropriate access to the area for the community.”

The basic aim of the tourism plan is to make the islands more accessible to a variety of people from Western Australia, interstate and overseas. Tourism in the Abrolhos will be restricted to nature-based tourism designed to minimise environmental effects.

3.1 Constraints

Constraints on tourism in the Abrolhos include:

- fragility of some of the ecosystems in the islands, especially the large populations of seabirds and corals;
- need to protect high conservation areas, which may limit tourism in some areas;
- need to prevent the introduction and spread of exotic plants and animals;
- lack of fresh water;
- distance from shore and frequently unfavourable weather;
- need to ensure sanitary waste disposal; and
- lack of supporting infrastructure.

3.2 Key Management Strategies

The key management strategies of the draft tourism plan are summarised in Sections 3.2.1 to 3.2.5 of this document.

3.2.1 Facilities in Geraldton

Attention is drawn to facilities available in Geraldton, such as the Geraldton Region Museum, to enhance the experiences of tourists visiting the Abrolhos and the need to integrate these facilities into management strategies developed for tourism at the Abrolhos Islands. Geraldton should remain the focus of tourism in the Abrolhos.

3.2.2 Private visitors

Information and facilities may be provided for private visitors to the islands, such as moorings and limited infrastructure for day visitors.

3.2.3 Commercial tourism

Provision is made for several types of commercial tourism:

For planning purposes, operators will be required to provide information about the number of visitors to the islands and the activities they undertake.

In the **short term**, the following developments may occur:

Charter Boats. Charter boat operations will be allowed throughout the islands, subject to the needs for safety and minimisation of adverse environmental impacts, and provision is made for developing the necessary shore-based facilities, including jetties, storage sheds, and mooring sites. Fly/boat ventures would be possible.

Shore-based Facilities. Small scale, low impact shore-based facilities could be operated in one or more areas of the Abrolhos. Relevant areas may include:

- Long Island, Wallabi Group;
- Little Roma Island, Easter Group;
- Middle Island, Southern Group; and
- Murray Island, Southern Group.

A Moored Accommodation Facility of a size consistent with this plan in the Easter Group near the anemone lump is possible.

In the **medium term**, developments could include:

East Wallabi Island, Wallabi Group. With its extensive sandy beach and low, rolling dunes, Turtle Bay on East Wallabi Island is one of the prettiest areas of the Abrolhos, and an attractive position in which to base a tourist facility. This site is considered to have considerable conservation values and should not be carelessly developed. It could be used for a low key, one storey development after appropriate consultation with conservation agencies and provided the conservation values of the area are not compromised.

Presently inhabited islands. Shore-based facilities could be considered on presently inhabited islands following consultation with the island fishing community, AIMAC and other interested parties.

Administrative requirements for developing commercial tourism operations in the Abrolhos are detailed in the main draft plan at Section 4.

3.2.4 Management procedures

The following management procedures will be established:

All activities at the Abrolhos must be undertaken on a cost recovery basis. Therefore, a **visitor fee** will be required for **all** visitors to the islands to help recover part of the costs of managing and providing facilities for visitors and managing visitors. Private boat owners will be able to obtain either a single trip or annual permit to visit the islands.

Licences for commercial tourist operators will be granted for an initial period of seven years, with two renewals of seven years each being possible.

Independent **environmental monitoring** of the effects of large projects or those in environmentally sensitive areas will be required. Tourism operators will be required to rectify any environmental damage caused by their operations.

The tourism operator proponent must **decommission** and remove any facilities when the project ends.

Operators must demonstrate that they are **economically viable** before receiving a licence.

3.2.5 Facilities required

There is very little infrastructure at present to support either private or commercial tourism in the Abrolhos. The following facilities are recommended:

A broadening of **air services** to allow their use for tourism.

Commercial tourist operators will be allowed to establish **boat moorings** in accordance with location and design criteria. **Public moorings** may be installed and rented for use by private boats.

After some upgrading of facilities **Dransfield House**, on Beacon Island, could be used as an interpretive centre.

3.3 Strategic Overview of Tourism Development in the Houtman Abrolhos Islands, Western Australia

Tourism type	Period	Strategy
Independent	Immediate	<p>The goal of this plan is to: <i>Manage environmentally sensitive nature-based tourism which is consistent with the values of the Abrolhos System and provide appropriate access to the area for the community.</i></p> <p>Collect data on tourism - 'where', 'when', 'how' and numbers of people. Provide more information on attractions in the islands and areas to avoid. Encourage visitors to utilise core areas by zoning and provision of facilities. Avoid conflict between nature conservation, private tourism, and fishers. Provision of moorings which can be rented through Fisheries WA. Access to East Wallabi jetty for private flights.</p>
	Medium-term	Progressively provide more facilities and control access to sensitive areas.
Commercial	Immediate	<p>Avoid conflict between nature conservation, fishers, and commercial tourism. Any tourism must be ecologically and economically sustainable. Consider the development in each group for tourist ventures. Provide access to the airstrips on East Wallabi and Rat Islands. Provide for establishment of common moorings.</p>
	Medium-term	<p>Any modifications of plans to make them environmentally sensitive do not have to be expensive, but should 'add' to the Houtman Abrolhos. Possible mixing of fishers and tourism. Any tourism development should use 'best practice' techniques. Permanent moored facility near Leo's Island. Assess the possibility of a small, one storey high, quality international level nature-based tourism facility on East Wallabi Island, in future, if demand is sufficient. Other options for tourism facilities to be investigated, such as use of a large catamaran from shore.</p>

