

Michaelmas and Upolo Cays National Park

Management Plan

1998

Prepared by: **Queensland Parks & Wildlife Service (QPWS), Department of Environment and Science**

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The Michaelmas and Upolo Cays National Park Management Plan 1998 has been extended in 2023 in line with the Queensland *Nature Conservation Act 1992* (s120G). Minor amendments have been made. There has been no change to the plan's original management intent and direction.

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Summary

This management plan provides the framework and guidelines on how Michaelmas and Upolo Cays National Park will be managed. It sets out the considerations, outcomes and strategies that are proposed to form the basis on which day-to-day management decisions are made.

This plan was prepared in May 1998, in accordance with s 125 of the *Nature Conservation Act 1992* (Act). In 2023 the plan was extended, in keeping with s 120G of the Act. For further information on this plan or the planning process, please contact the Department of Environment and Science at ParkManagementPlans@des.qld.gov.au.

This management plan was prepared by Department of Environment and Science staff. Thanks are due to those groups and individuals who made submissions in response to the draft plan.

1. Management directions and purpose

1.1 Management directions

The Michaelmas and Upolu Cays National Park is one of 13 island national parks in the Cairns Section of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (GBRMP), which also contains 29 other non national park islands or groups of islands. All of the islands in the Cairns Section will be managed in a coordinated, strategic manner to provide for a range of conservation and recreational settings. Michaelmas and Upolu Cays National Park is dedicated under *the Nature Conservation Act 1992* and must be managed:

- to provide for the permanent preservation of the area's natural condition to the greatest possible extent
- to protect and present the area's cultural and natural resource values; and
- to ensure that the only use of the islands is nature-based and ecologically sustainable.

The prime purpose of management is to preserve the highly significant natural values of the cays, and in particular the breeding seabird populations of Michaelmas Cay and their habitat, while allowing for reasonable levels of appropriate use. The birdlife of Michaelmas Cay is significant on both regional (Great Barrier Reef [GBR]) and local (Cairns Section of the GBR) scales for at least four of the 22 species of seabirds that breed in the GBR (these species are the common noddy, sooty tern, crested tern and lesser crested tern).

The cays are popular recreation and tourism destinations. Michaelmas and Upolu Cays National Park will be managed to ensure that visitor use does not have an impact on nesting seabirds or other natural values.

Use levels will be closely monitored for adverse impacts on seabirds and management regimes will be adjusted accordingly. No permanent facilities, other than management-related infrastructure, will be permitted. The park has no permanent ranger presence but is visited regularly by marine park rangers.

Entry to the national park section of Michaelmas Cay (the area above high-water mark (HWM)) is prohibited by a regulatory notice under section 68 of the *Nature Conservation Regulation 1994*, since it is almost impossible to walk on the vegetated part of the cay without crushing seabird eggs or disturbing chicks and birds. Penalties apply for non-compliance. A regulation under the *Marine Parks Act 1982* also requires all visitors to Michaelmas Cay to enter only the Designated Access Area (DAA) for the portion of the cay below HWM (the beach) and specifies permitted activities. Activities that could disturb nesting birds are not permitted. The DAA is defined by a rope fence.

Commercial operations to Michaelmas and Upolu Cays and the surrounding reefs are subject to permits issued jointly by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) and the Department of Environment (DoE). Management of access to the beach is solely a DoE responsibility. Continued co-operation among management agencies is necessary to ensure a co-ordinated approach to management of the national park, the State marine park and the GBRMP. Operators without a permit to access are not permitted within one nautical mile of Michaelmas Cay. There will be no increase in permitted use levels of Michaelmas Cay.

While this management plan relates primarily to the national park component of the cays (the area above HWM), it also provides some guidance on management of the adjacent marine park.

Management agencies and tourist operators have developed a code of conduct for Michaelmas Cay to minimise disturbance to the resident bird population while permitting visitors to enjoy the cay's unique values. The code comprises a list of guidelines and voluntary practices which complement government regulations and relate to both the national park and the marine park. This code, self-regulated by operators, has helped provide direction for the wise use and conservation of the marine park and the national park.

The cays and their surrounds will be managed in a coordinated and complementary manner. Complementary management of waters adjacent to the national park islands is also vital and continued close co-operation between DoE and GBRMPA is essential if key natural values of Michaelmas and Upolu Cays National Park are to be protected.

Opportunities will be provided to stakeholders and the general community to be involved in and consulted about planning and management of Michaelmas and Upolu Cays National Park. This plan is not intended to erode or extinguish native title in any way.

1.2 Purpose

The major purposes of management will be to ensure that:

- island animals, particularly breeding seabirds, and their habitats are conserved and protected
- disturbance to island animals and island habitats is avoided
- the interests of indigenous peoples with traditional affiliations to the cays are recognised, acknowledged, protected, and presented where appropriate
- the natural setting is maintained to provide recreational opportunities consistent with a peaceful, undeveloped, semi wilderness experience; and
- no structures are erected on the cays other than those considered necessary for management purposes.

2. Basis for management

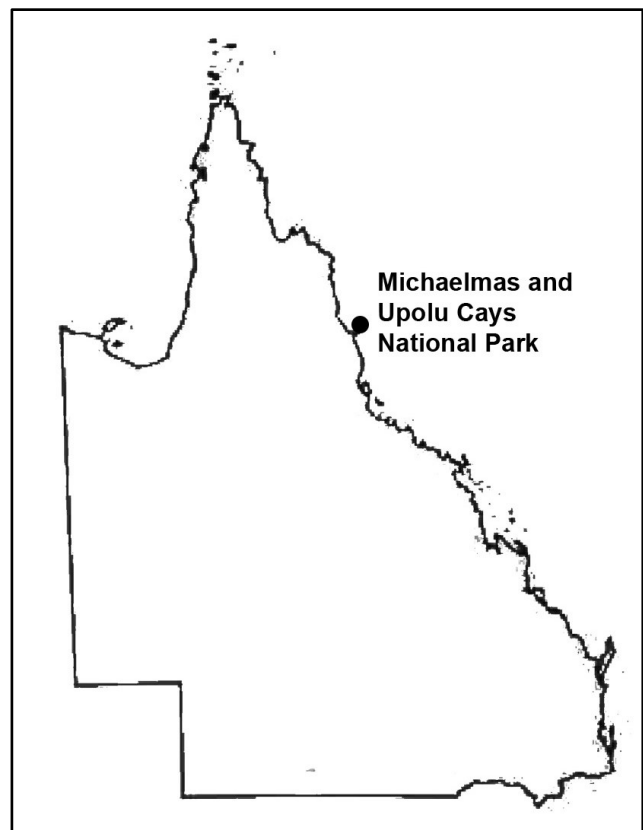
2.1 Bioregional context

Michaelmas and Upolu Cays are located approximately 40 kilometers north-east of Cairns. Michaelmas is the larger of the two cays, being 360 m long and 50 m wide, covered above HWM with low herbs and grasses, and extending over an area of about 1.8 ha. Upolu Cay is a smaller unvegetated sand cay.

The cays are within the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area and Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. Above HWM the cays are declared national park under the *Nature Conservation Act 1992*. The surrounding waters, from HWM to a distance 500m seaward of the reef edge, are zoned marine national park under both State and Commonwealth legislation and are no-structures sub-zones.

The birds of Michaelmas Cay are significant on regional (GBR) and local (Cairns Section of the GBR) scales. Thousands of seabirds nest on the vegetated part of the cay. Michaelmas is the only local rookery supporting breeding populations of sooty terns and common noddies. It is also the most significant local rookery for the crested tern and lesser crested tern. On a regional basis, it supports 50% of the sooty tern population of the GBR. 25% of the common noddy breeding population, more than 20% of the lesser crested tern breeding population and more than 10% of the crested tern breeding population. It may be significant at national levels also. Nesting takes place throughout the year, with different seasonal peaks in nesting activity for different species.

Australia is the only developed nation with extensive tropical seas and sufficient conservation legislation where large, relatively unexploited populations of tropical seabirds can be found. The significance of the Michaelmas Cay breeding populations relative to the Australian populations is therefore likely to reflect the importance of Michaelmas Cay on a geographical scale exceeding that of Australia and New Zealand.



Map 1. Michaelmas and Upolu Cays National Park location map

Michaelmas and Upolu Cays are among the most highly visited tourist destinations within the Cairns Section of the GBR and provide the only opportunity for visitors to experience a seabird rookery with such variety of species and high population levels.

2.2 Values

2.2.1 Geology and landform

Michaelmas Cay is a leeward sand cay orientated north-east to south-west on the western tip of Michaelmas Reef. The cay was formed by an accumulation of broken coral, shells and remains of calcareous algae. The cay is generally stabilised by the formation of beach rock - sand and other reef remnants cemented into a rock by the action of algae - and has mobile sand spits at either end.

Michaelmas Reef forms the north-eastern section of the Arlington Reef complex, which sits atop a platform reaching to approximately 30m below sea level.

In 1926, Great Barrier Reef Committee geologists drilled a bore hole on Michaelmas Cay to a depth of 182.5m demonstrating a sequence of reef rock extending to a depth of 15.3m and underlain by quartz sand. The extent of movement of the cay can be demonstrated by the relative position of the bore hole to the cay.

Upolu Cay is not stabilised by beach rock and so is more dynamic in shape and size.

2.2.2 Plants and animals

The vegetation and seabird colonies on Michaelmas Cay are more characteristic of the cays found on the offshore outer barrier reef. The cay's vegetation is low-growing and composed of grasses including sand spinifex *Spinifex sericeus*, stinky grass *Lepturis repens* and other cover including goats foot vine *Ipomoea pes caprae*, bulls head vine *Tribulus cistoides*, sea purslane *Sesuvium portulacastrum* and *Boerhavia diffusa*. Occasionally seeds from trees such as *Barringtonia* sp. and mangroves wash ashore and germinate but die due to a lack of suitable substrate.

Four species of seabirds regularly nest on Michaelmas Cay and at least 16 species visit the cay throughout the year. In the past, during summer when nesting is at its peak, as many as 30 000 birds have been present. Nowhere else in the Cairns Section are these particular seabirds found breeding in such vast numbers in an area readily accessible to visitors. Michaelmas Cay is ranked not only as the most important seabird rookery within the local Cairns region but also as one of the seven most important nesting colonies in the entire GBR.

Animals of conservation significance on Michaelmas Cay include the little tern, listed as endangered. Green turtles have been recorded nesting on the cay and the reef supports a rich mollusc fauna, including populations of giant clams.

There is no recent recording of animals of conservation significance on Upolu Cay. However, the black-naped tern, crested tern and common noddy have been recorded nesting on the cay in the past. The reduction in the size of the cay following cyclonic events appears to have inhibited nesting.

2.2.3 Cultural heritage

Local indigenous groups with a specific interest in Michaelmas Cay and Reef are the Yirrganydji, Mandingabay-Yidinji and Gungandji people.

Michaelmas Cay was first named Oyster Cay in 1849 when HMS *Bramble* anchored offshore. A commercial beche-de-mer industry operated from 1870 until 1900. A guano-mining lease was granted in 1901 and lasted for a short time. GBR geologists drilled the deepest bore on the GBR at Michaelmas Cay in 1926, to prove the existence of a sequence of reef rock and support the theory of sea level change. Michaelmas Cay was declared a fauna sanctuary in 1937.

Upolu Cay and Reef are named after the schooner *Upolu*, owned by William Pitts of Sydney, which struck the reef on Easter Sunday, 25 April, in 1886. The crew salvaged stores picked up the day before from Townsville and ferried them to a sand cay three miles away, where they spent the night. The crew

set sail for Port Douglas in a lifeboat on 27 March and were eventually picked up by the *Bulimbo* off Cape Grafton on May 4.

Michaelmas Cay and Upolu Cay were declared a single national park in 1975.

2.2.4 Scenic and aesthetic

The cays have high scenic value due to their untouched appearance. They stand out in sharp contrast against the backdrop of clear blue open waters and varying shades of blue green reef-flat shallows.

2.2.5 Scientific and educational

Michaelmas Cay provides an excellent opportunity to study seabird breeding patterns. Seabird behaviour and nesting seabird reactions to the presence of humans.

2.2.6 Recreation and tourism

Michaelmas and Upolu Cays and their adjacent reefs are one of the prime tourist destinations offshore from Cairns. Annual commercial tourist visitor numbers to Michaelmas Cay and Reef have been as high as 90 000. and 40 000 at Upolu Cay and Reef. Several large tourism companies feature the cays as a major part of their operations. Visitor numbers do not take into account the significant recreational use of the cays, both popular destinations for local yachts.

3. Management strategies

3.1 Native plants

Current situation

The vegetation on Michaelmas Cay is low-growing and composed of sand spinifex, stinky grass, goats foot vine, bulls head vine, sea purslane and *Boerhavia diffusa*. Occasionally seeds from trees such as *Borringtonio* sp. and mangroves wash ashore and germinate but die due to a lack of suitable substrate.

Upolu Cay is unvegetated.

Desired outcomes

- Extent and integrity of vegetation cover is maintained.
- Visitor impact on vegetation is minimised by management controls.

Proposed policies, guidelines and actions

- Visitors continue to be prohibited from accessing the national park (area above HWM).
- Commercial tourism operators and their visitors abide by the industry code of conduct.
- Regular monitoring of vegetation condition and extent is done.

3.2 Native animals

Current situation

Large populations of breeding seabirds including common noddy, sooty tern, crested tern and lesser crested tern are present on Michaelmas Cay throughout the year. Little tern (endangered) has been recorded at Michaelmas Cay.

Upolu Cay does not support breeding seabirds at present. It is a seabird roost site.

Turtles occasionally nest on both cays.

Desired outcomes

- Breeding seabirds are not disturbed by tourism and populations are stable.

Proposed policies, guidelines and actions

- Commercial tourism operators and their visitors abide by industry code of conduct and specific guidelines for behaviour adjacent to seabird colony.
- All visitors continue to be prohibited from entering the national park (area above HWM).
- Monthly counts of various seabird species are undertaken throughout the year.
- Long-term research project is initiated to determine impact, if any, of visitors on seabirds' breeding patterns to enable ecologically sustainable management of the cay and other seabird breeding populations.

3.3 Introduced plants and animals

Current situation

There are no known introduced plants or animals on the cays.

Desired outcomes

- The cays remain free from introduced plants and animals.

Proposed policies, guidelines and actions

- Cays will be monitored for introduced plants and animals.

3.4 Landscape, soil and catchment protection

Current situation

The cays have high natural and scenic values.

Desired outcomes

- The cays' high scenic and natural values are maintained.
- Activities which degrade the landscape or physical integrity of the cays and reefs do not occur.

Proposed policies, guidelines and actions

- Visitors continue to be prohibited from entering national park (area above HWM) on Michaelmas Cay.

3.5 Cultural heritage

Current situation

The cays and their fringing reefs are part of the traditional sea country of the Yirrganydji, Mandingalbay-Yidinji and Gungandji people.

Michaelmas Cay has European historical association, having been visited by early explorers and used by the beche-de-mer industry and for scientific purposes.

Upolu Cay was named after the schooner *Upolu* which went aground on Upolu Reef in 1886.

Desired outcomes

- The cultural and heritage values of the cays are recognised and presented where appropriate.
- Traditional use of the cays continues, in accordance with the provisions of current legislation regulating such activities in protected areas.

Proposed policies, guidelines and actions

- Document the cultural and heritage values of the cays where appropriate.
- Traditional custodians involved in the management of the cays, including the active involvement of community rangers.

3.6 Recreational and tourism

Current situation

Very high levels of commercial tourism use. Waters adjacent to the cays provide good anchorage. Code of conduct developed jointly by Department of Environment and Science and industry for Michaelmas Cay. Cays are popular destinations for local yachts, with high number of visits.

Desired outcomes

- Visitor impact on Michaelmas Cay is minimised by adherence to all aspects of code of conduct.
- Impacts on Upolu Cay are assessed.

Proposed policies, guidelines and actions

- Visitors continue to be prohibited from entering the national park (area above HWM) on Michaelmas Cay.
- Commercial tourism operators and visitors abide by industry Code of Conduct and the Regional Policy Statement - Tourism and Recreation
- Management (C N 97-001) specifying guidelines for behaviour at Michaelmas Cay.
- Seaplane, helicopter or hovercraft access not permitted, except in emergency situations. A voluntary Fly Neighbourly Agreement is being implemented by Air Services Australia.
- No increase in permitted use level. No operations of horns, loudspeakers or sirens except that required for safe operations.

3.7 Education and interpretation

Current situation

Visitor information sheet available. Marine Park Zone maps available. Industry code of conduct available.

Desired outcomes

- Pre-visit information is readily available to visitors.

Proposed policies, guidelines and actions

- Commercial tourism operators and their visitors to abide by an industry code of conduct specifying guidelines for seabird conservation.
- Management plan to be provided to users through commercial operators, fishing clubs, marine outlets, local service stations and DoE.
- Code to be updated in line with increasing knowledge of natural values of the cays and natural or human impacts.

3.8 Plan implementation and monitoring

Desired outcomes

- Management plan is successfully implemented, and desired outcomes are achieved.

Proposed policies, guidelines and actions

- Performance indicators identified to allow monitoring of plan implementation and effectiveness of management measures.

3.9 Complementary management of adjoining areas

Current situation

Great Barrier Reef Marine Park - the adjacent marine park is managed under the provisions of the *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975*.

Cairns Area Plan of Management - Michaelmas Cay locality is a sensitive location, designated for low-use:

- maximum of IS visitors per vessel (including crew)
- one vessel per day permitted to Michaelmas Cay locality
- access by booking only (unless exempt)

Queensland Marine Park - Regulation under *Marine Park Act / 1982* limits activities, restricts beach access to specified times and to the Designated Access Area which is defined by a rope fence.

Mooring, anchoring and diving may damage the fringing reef, but the impact of these activities has not been assessed.

Crown of Thorns (COT) starfish outbreaks have occurred.

Desired outcomes

- The national park and adjacent marine park are managed under their respective legislation in a coordinated and complementary manner.

Proposed policies, guidelines and actions

- Encourage ongoing liaison within Department of Environment and Science, and between Department of Environment and Science and other agencies, to promote coordinated and complementary management, particularly with regard to:
 - development and revision of policies and zoning and management plans
 - visitor management and permit issue arrangements; and
 - public contact and information.
- No increase in permitted use level.
- Baseline surveys of the fringing reef will be undertaken. Re-survey every 2-3 years will assess impacts.

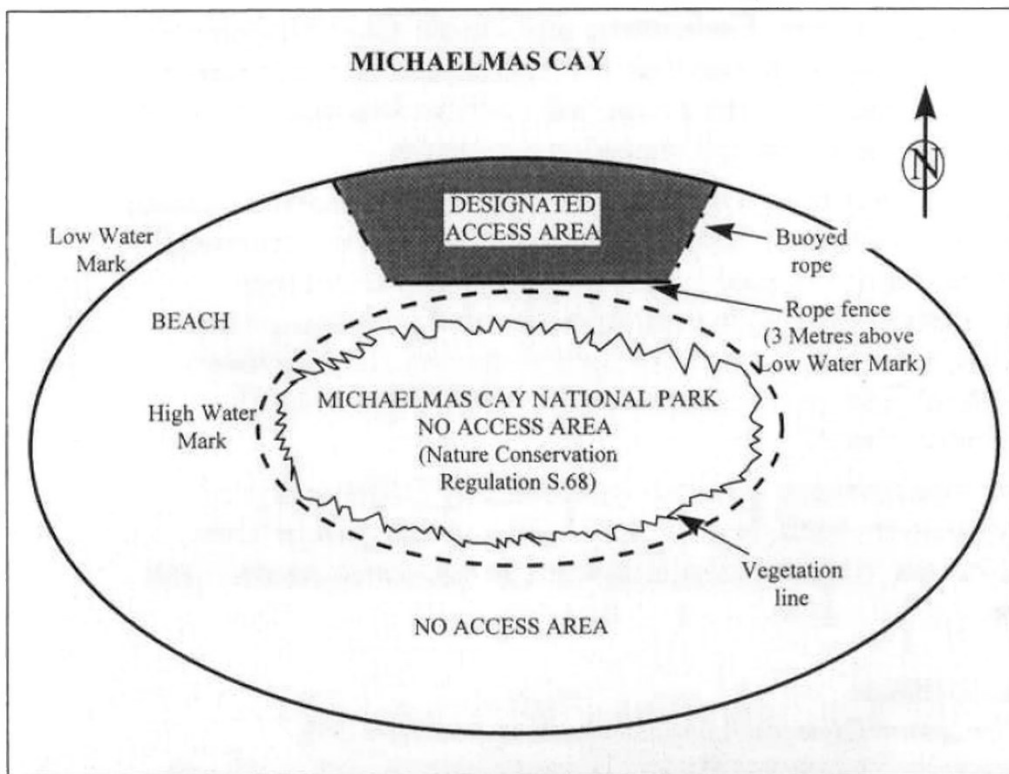


Figure 1. Designated access area, Michaelmas Cays