



# Country Noosa

PROMOTING A SUSTAINABLE RURAL FUTURE



Rural Enterprise Project

## CONCEPT PAPER

# Eco-tourism, recreation, and farm-based tourism

## Introduction

For residents of rural Noosa considering an eco-tourism or farm-based tourism business venture, this paper outlines ideas and opportunities in the Noosa hinterland region. It includes short stay visitor accommodation, either in a home-stay or bed and breakfast, businesses promoting local produce, such as farm-gate sales, pick-your-own businesses, and cafés and associated agribusinesses. This paper discusses the planning and zoning requirements and constraints associated with rural and rural settlement areas in the Noosa hinterland region to inform new development. Two case studies, one local, the other international, are used to inspire new businesses and provide insight into viability of farm-gate and trail-based opportunities. Finally, resources and links are included for those seeking further information.

This paper is being developed in a dynamic environment. Tourism Noosa is currently developing a master plan for the Noosa Trail network that runs through the hinterland and villages of Noosa, with a draft expected in 2019. Concurrently, Noosa Council has released a draft new Noosa Plan for public comment until 20 May 2019. The two plans will provide guidance for development in the rural areas and communities, such as Cooroy, Pomona, Kin Kin and Boreen Point.

## Community engagement on hinterland tourism concepts

Initial workshops and a survey of rural residents conducted by Country Noosa identified that residents of rural Noosa use their properties for a variety of purposes, ranging from small scale agriculture including livestock, fruits and vegetables, and niche crops to home-based businesses, such as permaculture education and soap making. Rural residents show an appreciation of the environment, land stewardship, and a desire to share their environmental and farming knowledge. Several residents expressed interest in exploring how to take advantage of being located close to the Noosa Trail.

An eco-tourism focused workshop held during December 2018 in Kin Kin specifically focused on identifying key constraints, needs and opportunities for hinterland residents to develop farm-based and eco-tourism opportunities. Participants identified the following needs and opportunities as highest priority for the region:

- Developing a network of local hinterland businesses to leverage strength in numbers to provide quality tourism experiences year-round, across the seasons. This is particularly relevant for recreational activities such as those linked to the trails network, as they are affected by seasonal weather fluctuations. Participants also noted the value of collaboration between farms and hospitality businesses combining in “paddock to plate” ventures.

- Involving the local Aboriginal community in tourism opportunities and promoting Indigenous heritage, culture and connection with the land. This would not only help to guide ecotourism in the region in healthy ways that recognise and preserve indigenous history, but also leverage tourist interest in Aboriginal culture and history of the region that could have commercial potential. It was noted that Aboriginal people should always lead these opportunities.
- There was significant interest in the forthcoming Noosa Plan and updated planning regulations particularly about by providing greater flexibility and scope in rural tourism opportunities such as tiny houses for both short and long-term accommodation options.
- The opportunity to capitalise on increased cycling-based tourism was identified by both residents and Tourism Noosa via increasing interest in the improvements to the Noosa Trail network, which is primarily used for mountain biking.

## Opportunities in the Noosa region

Noosa has experienced a steady growth in tourism over the years and Tourism Noosa and the Noosa Council support eco-tourism recreation opportunities, such as the [Noosa Country Drive](#) and the [Noosa Trail network](#). Taylor (2015) indicates that the three main factors that contribute to the success of trail-based tourism include the willingness of non-locals to visit, the experiences they have, and the support of governments, the tourism industry and the local community.

### Tourism statistics

From 2017 to 2018, visitor numbers in Noosa increased by 7% and they spent 5.8% more than the financial previous year. This is the third consecutive year that tourism statistics have shown significant growth in visitation, nights stayed and spending (See figure 1 below). This steady increase demonstrates the first contributing factor to trail based tourism success; the willingness of non-locals to visit (Taylor 2015).

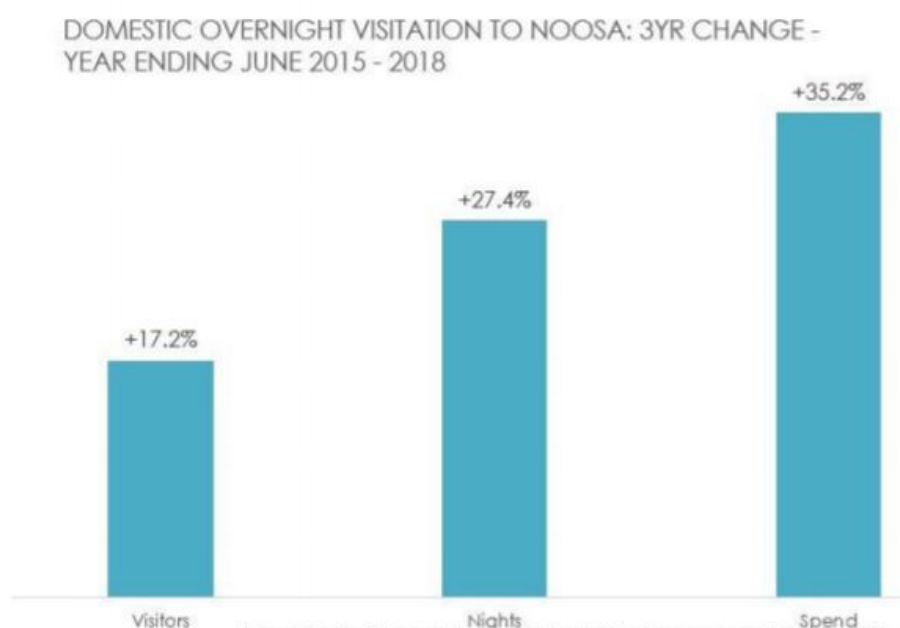


Figure 1 - Domestic Overnight Visitation 2015-2018 (source: Tourism Research Australia National Visitor survey year ending June 2018)

### Existing Tourism Assets

Recreation opportunities on offer in the Noosa hinterland region, such as hiking, horse-riding, mountain-biking and four-wheel driving are being promoted by Tourism Noosa through their Noosa Country Drive initiative and the repair and promotion of the Noosa Trail Network. These two projects encourage a greater diversity in tourism experience, complementing the traditional conservation assets with additional hinterland opportunities that provide places to stay, play and eat. This demonstrates another key factor to the success of trail-based tourism, namely the supportiveness of the local tourism industry (Willard & Beeton 2012).

### Noosa Country Drive

The Noosa Country Drive provides three main driving trails from Eumundi to Mt. Wolvi that promote the hinterland landscape and tourist activities that are available. A map of the Noosa Country Drive is provided in [Appendix A](#). The Noosa Country Drive provides a platform for businesses to advertise their product through a membership program provided through Tourism Noosa. The Noosa Country Drive expands and adds to their map to meet the demands of new members and their offerings.

### Noosa Trail Network

The Noosa Trail Network includes eight trails of varying lengths and difficulties for mountain bike riders, bushwalkers and horse-riders. The trails pass through national park, state forest, private property and council parks from Cooroy to Kin Kin. A map of the Noosa Trail Network is provided in [Appendix B](#). The Noosa Trail is undergoing repairs allowing for more access and better use of the trails by visitors. Tourism Noosa is developing a masterplan for the trail network to be finalised in 2019.

## **Ideas for Eco-and Farm-based Tourism in Noosa**

Eco-tourism, nature- and farm-based tourism is a natural fit with values held by the Noosa community. This paper outlines opportunities to expand in Noosa Biosphere Reserve's 'transition area', where sustainable human activities include settlements, cropping, recreation, and forestry. Eco-tourism is generally characterised as low-impact, small scale and ecologically sustainable, with a focus on high-quality experiences that build awareness and appreciation of natural, environmental and cultural assets, and provide socio-economic benefits to local people. With the upgrade of the [Noosa Trail Network](#) and the promotion of [Noosa Country Drive](#), visitors that want to experience Noosa away from the typical coastal experience will look for businesses and services that cater for their specific tastes and interests. This may include niche accommodation, food, beverage and cooking, environmental, educational, farm experiences, as well as services catering for the trail network experience, such as bike rental, baggage transport and horse agistment. Complementary businesses include art studios, workshop spaces, day spa and wellness centres.

### **Visitor Accommodation and Farm Stays**

There is an opportunity for short-term accommodation in the Noosa hinterland region that creates additional income for property owners, while enabling them the flexibility to restrict access when required. Accommodation styles may include bed and breakfast accommodation, which involve the owner interacting and providing meals for visitors within or adjacent to the existing dwelling, or separate self-contained cabins where visitors are more independent and require less attention. Accommodation can be listed through local tourism sites or registered with external sites such as Airbnb. Planning requirements may affect the building type permitted in particular zones (outlined in more detail in *section 4.0*). Key considerations for

those contemplating such a venture might include: road access; other attractions that may bring people to the vicinity; noise and comfort; parking; scenic amenity; access to finance; sufficient water; internet and mobile phone service; and the capacity to provide on-farm experiences such as farm animals, short bushwalks, or environmental education.

The revitalisation of the Noosa Trail Network also provides specific opportunities to the residents of properties located along the trail networks to cater to the needs of horse riders, mountain bikers and hikers. Many of the trails are long enough to warrant overnight stays, therefore accommodation for hikers and riders, as well as their horses or bikes adjacent to the trail, may increase use of the trails and attract even more 'adventure tourists'. There are currently very few hosts offering short-term horse agistment and farm stays targeted at multi-day walkers, bike or horse riders, therefore there may be an opportunity to diversify into this market. Considerations for short term horse agistment may also include sufficiently large fenced properties with secure shelter; adequate water and feed; and pest-free pasture.

### **Farm-Gate Businesses**

Farm-gate businesses may include: selling your own and/or neighbours' produce at the premises, seasonal 'pick your own' fruits or vegetables, or a farm-based café, shop, cooking school, or tour. Two great examples within the region are Cooloola Berries (see *section 5.0*) and organic Hinterland Feijoas. Key considerations are: crop establishment time; access to finance and insurance; sufficient water; food service licence; road access and signage to farm; accessibility and safety within the farm; planning permission; labour; and relationship with neighbours (since cafés may generate more traffic than small scale accommodation). A genuine desire to interact with many different sorts of people who may 'turn up at the gate' is also needed.

### **Bike Rental and Services**

Bike rental and maintenance services could serve a growing number of interstate and international tourists that are passionate about bicycle touring, especially if the trail network and roads are upgraded over time. Bike rental and bike servicing are currently only available in coastal Noosa. The success of bike rentals for the Otago Central Rail Trail was reported by Otago District Council in 2014: all sports stores in the region ran out of bikes during their high season. As a result, 150% more bikes were ordered for the following season to accommodate consumer demand (Central Otago District Council, 2015). Considerations for establishing these businesses include: skills in bike maintenance and bike rentals; ability to invest in a range of bike sizes and additional equipment such as helmets and safety gear; and the ability to deliver and pickup bikes and bikers who need rescuing.

### **Baggage transport**

Bush-walkers using the Noosa Trail overnight and staying in accommodation adjacent to the Trail may be interested in having their luggage moved from one accommodation site to the next over a period of days, rather than carry a large pack. If exclusively used for transporting baggage, this may be considered a courier service; alternatively being an Uber driver may be cost-effective for transporting people when necessary. Considerations may include: commercial auto licence and insurance; business liability insurance; reliable vehicle; flexibility.

# Planning and zoning requirements and other constraints

The draft of the New Noosa Plan has been released for public comment up to 20 May 2019. For property owners interested in undertaking an eco-or farm-based tourism business, please refer to the detailed planning advice and constraints of the draft Plan at <https://yoursay.noosa.qld.gov.au/draft-new-noosa-plan>. For the purpose of this paper, we refer to the draft Noosa Plan 2019 and provisions within the 'Rural' or 'Rural Residential' Zones (See figure 2). It must be noted that some requirements may be subject to change in the Final Noosa Plan, to be confirmed later in 2019.

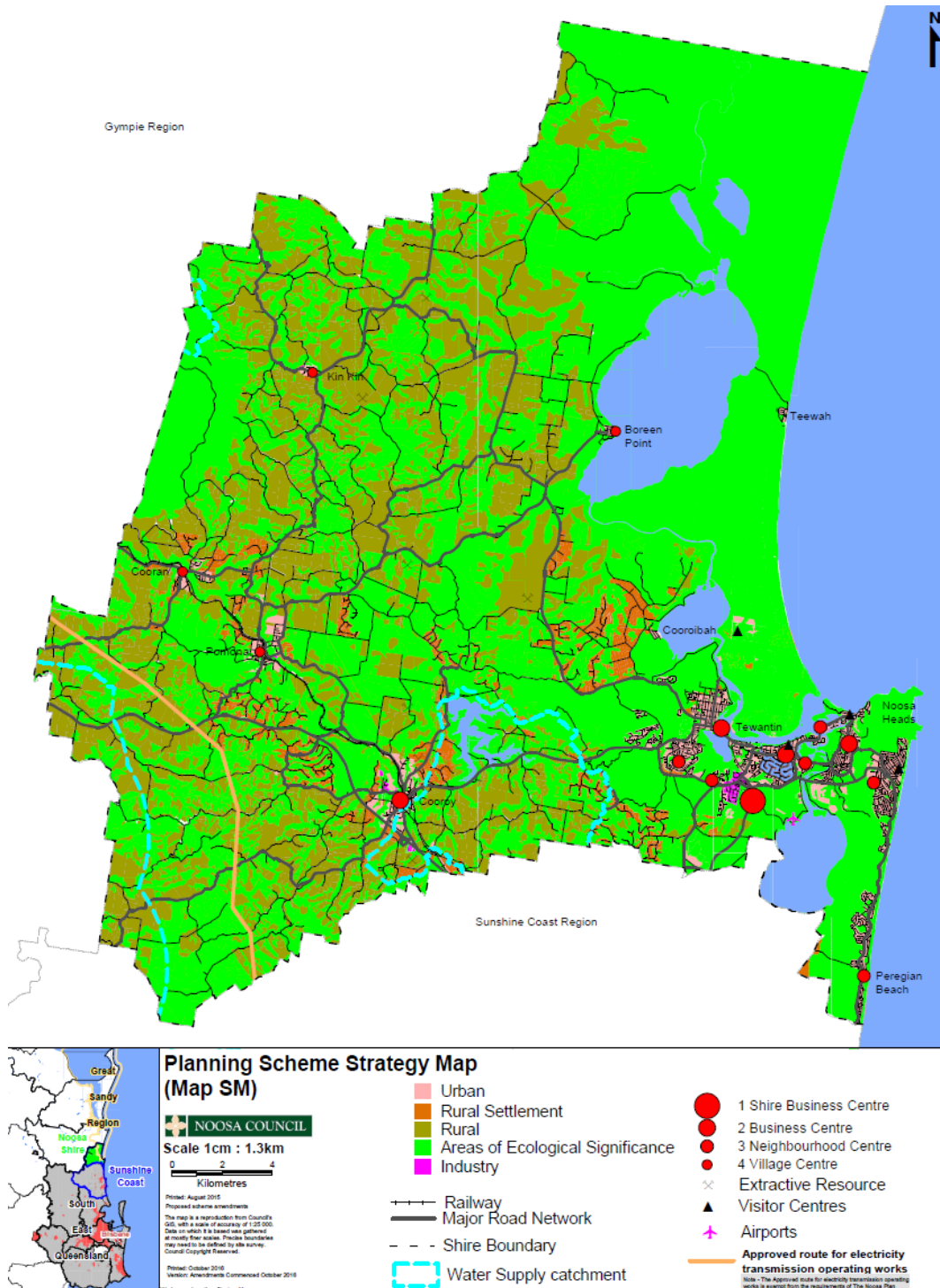


Figure 2 – draft Noosa Plan (2019) Planning Scheme Strategy Map - Rural and Rural Settlement

## **Rural Zone and Rural Settlement Zone Requirements and Constraints**

Figure 2 shows the Rural Zone coloured in khaki and the Rural Residential Zone (areas around regional towns, such as Cooroy), as red patches in the hinterland region. This land use is scattered throughout the map, of special relevance in areas where the Noosa trail intersects. There has been some rationalisation of the Rural Residential Zone in the draft scheme with some 350 lots currently in the Rural Settlement Zone moving to the Rural Zone. Smaller lots are generally in the Rural Residential zone if they are in the Rural Living designation of the South East Queensland Regional Plan, part of an established estate or very close to towns and villages. If isolated from services and amongst farming lands they are more likely to be zoned Rural. Definitions of visitor accommodation types are consistent with the State Planning Provisions. The New Noosa Plan increases flexibility for rural and rural residential land owners to undertake appropriate rural enterprise and home-based businesses. Home-based businesses include value adding to food production through cooking classes or farmgate sales, as well as studios, professional services, health clinics, etc. A fact sheet 'working from home' is available online regarding 'home-based businesses' at <https://yoursay.noosa.qld.gov.au/draft-new-noosa-plan/documents>.

Likewise fact sheets are available at the above weblink, about the range of visitor accommodation requirements under the Plan including for parking of RVs, camping, BnBs, cottages/cabins and nature-based lodges. Level of assessment and requirements differ with the scale and nature of the proposal.

Under all zones, overlays, such as biodiversity values, flooding or bushfire hazard, may affect development applications. Overlays do not necessarily rule out development, however some specific outcomes may need to be addressed. Noosa Council provides public access to interactive maps to show what zone and overlays a property is subject to. Some applications may also incur a small infrastructure charge.

### Bed 'n' Breakfast Accommodation

Accommodating guests in your home while you are in residence is considered a 'home-based business'. Accommodation is not self-contained but could be detached from the balance of the house. In a Rural and Rural Residential zone, providing an owner meets the requirements of a home-based business, no planning approval is needed.

### Caravan/RV Parking

Such use is defined as a Tourist Park and includes holiday accommodation in caravans, self-contained cabins, camping ground and tents or similar – with no ablution block. In the Rural Zone lots of at least 10 ha may have up to 5 fully self-contained recreational vehicles for no more than 4 nights. The Visitor Accommodation Code in the Plan sets out specific requirements. In all other zones, planning approval is required.

### Rural/nature-based Accommodation and Farm Stays

The defined use of Nature-based tourism covers tourist accommodation for the appreciation, conservation or interpretation of an area of environmental, cultural or heritage value; or a local ecosystem; or the natural environment. It would include environmentally responsible accommodation facilities with a small ecological footprint (such as cabins, huts and tented camps). Within the Rural Zone this use is acceptable development subject to requirements (self-assessable) on lots of at least 4ha in area where accommodating no more than 8 guests in no more than 2 cottages/cabins/tents. The code provisions are quite specific. Slightly larger developments would require code assessment but for more than 4 cottages/cabins or 6

permanent tents impact assessment would be required. In the Rural Residential zone a planning approval will always be necessary.

Other accommodation not qualifying as nature-based accommodation (such as farm stays, cottages & cabins) would be defined as short-term accommodation and might include a farm stay. This is not supported in the Rural Residential Zone and in the Rural Zone will require planning approval, although only code assessable if on a property of at least 4 hectares and accommodating no more than 8 guest in no more than 4 cottages or cabins. Impact assessment is necessary for bigger development or those including any event or conferencing facilities.

(New Noosa Plan Fact Sheets 11, 14, 15 accessible at <https://yoursay.noosa.qld.gov.au/draft-new-noosa-plan/documents>)

## **Case study - Cooloola Berries and the Cooloola Farm Trail**

The Cooloola Berries farm is a great example of farm gate tourism. It is located in the hinterland just to the north of the Noosa Council boundary, approximately 20km east of Gympie in the small town of Wolvi. After opening their business in 2014, the Cooloola Berries tourism experience evolved from a pick-your-own strawberry farm to incorporate a café that serves local produce inspired food and drinks, including their own strawberry ciders. Diversifying their product has allowed them to operate their business all-year round, rather than seasonally. Originally just pick-your-own strawberries, which were available from June to November annually, the farm now provides pick-your-own blueberries in December and January as well. Their café is open all year and their venture into ciders has allowed them to showcase their produce out of season.

Cooloola Berries has joined [Gympie Gold Regional Produce](#) which showcases and promotes local produce in the area by creating events and putting Gympie and its local businesses on the map. Gympie Gold included Cooloola Berries among seven farms in their annual Cooloola Farm Trail held over one weekend in September. Although Gympie Gold only provides membership and events to food and beverage agritourism businesses in the Gympie region, inspiration comes from what Cooloola Berries have achieved. This agritourism-focused promotion could be applied to the Noosa Country Drive concept as similar values are held by the people in these regions.

The Cooloola Berries experience has proved to be highly popular for locals and tourists alike and the evolution from farm to diversified farm-gate tourism demonstrates the ability of small farms to create a unique business in a rural setting. It also showcases the way in which the promotion of a business in a local setting can help boost the business (Willard & Beeton 2012).

## **Case study - Otago Central Rail trail, New Zealand**

The Otago Central Rail Trail (OCRT) is an international example of trail-based tourism success in a rural setting. The trail was established in 2000 and from 1997 to 2005 the region experienced a 260% increase in visitor numbers (Reis & Jellum 2012). One third of businesses in the region reported that they decided to establish themselves because of the trail. This is reflected in this small region's \$2.3 million contribution towards New Zealand's GDP (Reis & Jellum 2012). Businesses that have emerged to cater for tourists on the trail include food and wine-based tourism such as pubs, bakeries and restaurants where local produce features, along with accommodation options such as farm stays, bed and breakfasts and more luxurious accommodation. Other services are provided in the area include bike rental, bike maintenance, car hire and operator-led tours.

Funding for the maintenance of the OCRT is seen as critical to the success of the trail, and therefore the tourism businesses that have emerged to cater for the cycling market (Taylor 2015). This has implications for the establishment of the Noosa Country Drive routes and the repairs of the Noosa Trail Network, as continued maintenance and development should increase amenity and, in turn, increase visitor numbers.



## Conclusions

Community engagement in late 2018 demonstrated that rural Noosa residents value environmental stewardship and many have a desire to increase diversification and the business potential of their rural properties. As tourism statistics demonstrate a steady increase in visitor numbers and spending habits, this improves the potential for more eco-and farm-based tourism in the region, especially combined with existing tourism assets, such as the Noosa Trail Network and Noosa Country Drive. The success of similar farm-gate and trail-based businesses is demonstrated in the Cooloola Berries and Otago Central Rail Trail case studies.

With regards to zone and planning requirements, visitor accommodation such as home hosted and rural accommodation businesses are either self-assessable or impact assessable in Rural and Rural Settlement zones under the Noosa Plan 2006. They are generally accepted as long as guidelines are met. Although the exact specifications of the New Noosa Plan 2019 are unknown, changes to zoning types and land uses will not change due to State Planning Provisions.

## Relevant links and resources

The Noosa Council provides public access to interactive maps, allowing anyone to determine what zone they live in, as well as natural hazard maps, natural resource maps and heritage maps: <https://noosacouncil.wixsite.com/interactivemaps/noosa-plan>

Tourism Noosa provides the Noosa Country Drive initiative that aims to increase awareness and visitation in the Noosa hinterland. Membership with tourism Noosa includes various advertisement types to help all business types be seen and heard: <https://www.visitnoosa.com.au/industry/become-a-member>

Cooloola Berries - <http://cooloolaberries.com.au/>

Hinterland Feijoas – Organic and slow food network. Orchard, food van and shop. <https://hinterlandfeijoas.com.au/>

Noosa Trail Network - <https://www.noosa.qld.gov.au/noosa-trail-network>

## Acknowledgement and Disclaimer

We acknowledge assistance of Dr Claudia Baldwin and Claire Stewart, University of the Sunshine Coast, Social Deck, Tourism Noosa, and Noosa Council. The project is funded by Country Noosa under a Noosa Biosphere Reserve Big Ideas grant.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Noosa Country Drive map



# Appendix B: Noosa Trail Network

