

The Skyrail success story

The article describes the Cairns Skyrail success story, and how the massive benefits would have been lost if the 'green' activists had succeeded with their vociferous objections.

The family-owned Skyrail was conceived in 1987. It was proposed that a 7.5 km long cableway, the longest in the world at the time, be constructed in the rainforest from Caravonica to Kuranda. The developers were committed to delivering an environmentally sustainable tourist attraction that allows a unique interaction with the rainforest in an environmentally friendly way. The process was arduous with seven years of extensive planning. Community responses to the construction of Skyrail through the Barron Gorge National Park and the newly listed Wet Tropics World Heritage Area quickly became polarised as being either for or against the project. The controversy and political attention was reported widely at the time.

After numerous studies and approval processes ensuring the rainforest habitat would not be threatened by the project, construction commenced in June 1994. The Skyrail project and construction required 'world first' construction techniques which have helped place it as the most environmentally sensitive cableway project in the world.

The cableway was originally installed with 47 gondolas, giving it a carrying capacity of 300 people per hour. A \$2.5 million upgrade completed in May 1997 increased the total number of gondolas to 114 and increased the carrying capacity to 700 people per hour.

The successful application of sustainable practice in the planning, construction and ongoing operation of Skyrail has resulted in awards and recognition worldwide. It has been awarded some of the most internationally respected eco-tourism awards including the British



Airways 'Tourism for Tomorrow' International Environment Award, and EIBTM European Greening of Business Tourism Award in the Category of 'Most Environmentally Conscious Visitor Attraction'.

In Australia in 2008 and 2009 Skyrail received the Qantas Award for Excellence in Sustainable Tourism. In 2010 Skyrail was accepted into the Queensland Qantas Award for Excellence in Sustainable Tourism, Hall of Fame. In 2012

it became the first tourism attraction in the world to achieve the Platinum EarthCheck Accreditation placing it amongst the world's leading eco-friendly and environmentally sustainable businesses.

Comments from the Visitors Book at the CSIRO Rainforest Interpretation Centre at Barron Falls:

- Victoria Corse from Boston USA: Remarkable preservation work, so extraordinarily beautiful.
- Chris and Zita from New Zealand: Beautiful, amazing waterfall.
- Rosanna and Nathan from Australia: Stunning views! Will have to come during full flood to see Barron Falls!
- Odell family from Brisbane Australia: Very informative.
- G Flynn from Dublin Ireland: Out of this world experience!

Renowned environmentalist Professor David Bellamy said at the Forum Barcelona in 2004: *'Skyrail showed how to move, marvel and motivate large numbers of people through a world heritage rain forest causing little or no damage and providing hands-on education for the visitors. The owners of thousands of pairs of tramping boots that would otherwise have been destroying the forest floor as their owners grumbled about the mud and the rain and the fact that the trunks of most trees look much the same. Now ride high in silent gondolas, up in the canopy where all the wildlife action is, they have no hassle and do no damage to the infrastructure of the forest.'*

A long-running series of protests against the Skyrail project was led by CAFNEC. The main objections were as follows. Analysis at the time and later demonstrated that every objections was incorrect, many of which CAFNEC knew at the time.

- It would set a dangerous precedent for future private exploitation of national parks.
- It would include the private takeover of public land, destruction of World Heritage listed rainforest and white invasion of Aboriginal land.
- It would include tower sites, access roads, tourist shops, an 80-seat cafeteria, non-sewered toilets for up to 600 people an hour — all in the national park.
- It would threaten several sacred sites, one of which has already been vandalised — after it was shown to the developer.
- And criticised the short-term view of the government, which aimed only at *"having these heritage areas where they are profitable as a playground for tourists and a milking cow for developers"*.
- It would include the construction of roads, sewerage systems and portable helipads in the national park.
- Areas of unique flora and fauna which the Wet Tropical Management Authority has described as *"extremely valuable" would be cleared for 2.5 metre "pedestrian access tracks"*.
- A blind continuation by Government of the project and pure denial of any new issues that have been raised, including the Djabugay people's concerns.
- That the Chapman family are really timber loggers and that they were 'paying people off' for approvals.
- That the newly formed WTMA is being bypassed.
- That it is 'unlawful'.
- It is opposed by the Djabugay Tribal Corporation.
- That no one in Kuranda supported it.

The protesters disturbed businesses and tourists. There was a mock hold-up of the Kuranda tourist train at scenic Barron Falls lookout, to illustrate that if Sky-Rail goes ahead the train service may stop, and also that the opposite scenic rim would be destroyed by one of Sky-

Rail's stations Protesters obstructed the construction and one protester sat in a tree for 130 days.

A graphic of one of their demonstrations is below. The campaign had considerable similarities to CAFNEC's recent 'Save the Reef' campaign:



Skyrail has been acclaimed world-wide as a 'must-see' attraction that has played a major role in putting Cairns on the international as well as national tourist map. As Professor David Bellamy said: *'Skyrail showed how to move, marvel and motivate large numbers of people through a world heritage rain forest causing little or no damage and providing hands-on education for the visitors. All environmental requirements were fully met and the Djabugay objectors were supportive once their concerns had been allayed after the facts were explained. Cairns owes a large debt of gratitude to the Chapman brothers who, almost single-handed, stood up to the anti-development activists. Had the Chapman family not been so persistent, Cairns and a huge number of tourists would not have gained the wealth of benefits that Skyrail has delivered. Surely a vivid example of the grave dangers posed then, and now, by green activists and their anti-development agenda. As Daniel Patrick Moynihan said: 'You are entitled to your own opinion. But you are not entitled to your own facts.'*