

# Coffs Ambassadors Volunteer Interpretive Tours

**Council Name:** Coffs Harbour City Council

**Web Address:** [www.coffsharbour.nsw.gov.au](http://www.coffsharbour.nsw.gov.au)

**Size:** 1175 square kilometres

**Population:** 68,315



**Abstract:** Coffs Ambassadors Volunteer Interpretive Tours is an innovative program run by Coffs Harbour City Council, which educates and empowers the community to actively protect the outstanding biodiversity of the local area. Since it began in 2010, 13 volunteer 'Coffs Ambassador' Tour Guides have taken over 1,000 residents and tourists on interpretive tours of bushland, beaches and rainforests, all year round. Coffs Ambassadors are everyday people who are passionate about their local environment and receive training by National Parks and Wildlife Service 'Discovery' Rangers. The program is successfully educating the community, as 85% of people who came on a tour gained a greater knowledge of local biodiversity. Additionally, an overwhelming 69% of people said the tour had inspired them to be more environmentally active in their daily lives. Surveys three to six months later suggest that 90% of these people had actually made these environmental behavior changes that help protect local biodiversity.

## **Background:**

The North Coast of NSW is one of Australia's most biologically diverse regions, and Coffs Harbour LGA is a focal area for the biodiversity of the Mid North Coast, supporting biodiversity that is important from national, state, regional and local perspectives. The LGA is also an area of rapid population growth and the associated development pressures, including habitat loss and fragmentation, overuse of natural resources, weed spread and pest invasion, are impacting on the local biodiversity. The Coffs Ambassadors Volunteer Interpretive Tours Program was initiated because the community identified that "Preservation of forests, beaches, wildlife, water, rivers, marine (including increasing awareness and values)" was the highest mentioned priority (57%) during community consultation workshops in 2008 to develop the Community Vision for the Coffs Harbour 2030 Plan (community strategic plan).

The overall aim of the program is to protect and conserve the biodiversity of the LGA, by building the capacity of the community to become actively involved and take appropriate actions at home and when visiting the beaches, waterways and bushland.

The objectives of the program are:

1. Increase the awareness of residents and tourists of the biodiversity values of the Coffs Harbour LGA;
2. Increase the number of number of everyday actions that residents and tourists take to protect the biodiversity of the LGA;
3. Build a network of local residents sharing information with other residents, about what actions they can take to protect and improve their environment.

### **Implementation:**

The program has four project partners: the NPWS, the Solitary Islands Marine Park (SIMP), Coffs Harbour Regional Landcare, and Friends of the Coffs Harbour Botanic Gardens. The target audience for the volunteer tour guides are residents with a passion and knowledge of their local environment. The tour participants are largely residents and visitors to the LGA.

Council began the program in March 2009 when it received an 18 month grant from the NSW Government's Environmental Trust for \$47,357. Council then employed a Program Coordinator for 1.5 days/week to design the program and contracted the services of NPWS 'Discovery' Rangers (Interpretive Tour Guides) to undertake training of the volunteers. Since July 2010, the program has had an annual budget of \$32,000 and is wholly funded by Council. The program was modeled on the Marrickville Council 'Riverlife' and NPWS volunteer Discovery 'Chase Alive' programs.

The design of the program involved the development of the following components:

1. Volunteer training program, which includes: a) A two-day (14 hour) Interpretive Tour Guiding for Public Groups Course. This includes presentations, workshops and practical exercises covering: planning an interpretive tour; group management; occupational health and safety; Aboriginal cultural awareness; biodiversity values of the LGA and SIMP. b) One-on-one mentoring with a NPWS Discovery Ranger and Council's Coordinator, including: (i) A three hour reconnaissance walk to develop an in-depth tour plan; (ii) A practice run with tour participants, during which each trainee is assessed. c) Reptile safety training
2. Volunteer recruitment and selection process
3. Tour booking systems
4. Tours marketing strategy. In August 2009 the recruitment and training of volunteers began and in December the first eight tour guides graduated and tours commenced in January 2010. In March 2011 an additional five tour guides graduated and in March 2012 five new tour guides commenced training and are about to commence their tours in Spring 2012.

Tours are promoted through:

- Council's websites, E-newsletters, Facebook and Twitter;
- Press releases;
- Posters to Visitor Information Centres, caravan parks and resorts;
- Word of mouth

The community can book their place on a tour online at <http://www.coffsharbour.nsw.gov.au/tours> or by phone through the Coffs Harbour Visitor Information Centre. The program assists Council to deliver outcome LE1 in the Coffs Harbour 2030 Community Strategic Plan ('We understand and value our unique natural environment and it's cultural connections') and community engagement components of Council's Draft Biodiversity Action Strategy (2012).

### **Outcomes:**

The program has made significant achievements in educating and empowering the community, including:

- 1,000 residents and visitors have attended a Coffs Ambassador Tour (300 in Jan- Dec 2010, 400 in Jan-Dec 2011 and 300 in January- August 2012);
- 18 volunteers have graduated from the training and mentoring program to become Coffs Ambassador tour guides (5 commenced in March 2011);
- 18 unique interpretive tours of Coffs Harbour's diverse natural environments have been developed;

The program has also achieved its objectives:

1. It has increased the awareness of residents and tourists of the biodiversity values of the LGA, as 85% of tour participants reported a greater knowledge on biodiversity.
2. It has increased the number of everyday actions that residents and tourists take to protect the biodiversity of the LGA: a) 69% of tour participants said the tour had inspired them to do one or more of the following: • Fish in the right zone of the Solitary Islands Marine Park; • Keep their cat inside at night; • Keep their dog on a lead and safely fenced; • Keep native trees and shrubs on their property; • Keep chemicals and rubbish out of stormwater drains; • Pick up rubbish; • Join a Landcare group; • Remove weeds from their garden; • Use their green bin for garden waste. b) Three to six months later, 90% of these people said they had made one or more of these changes to their daily life.
3. It has built a network of 15 Coffs Ambassadors local residents who share information with others about what actions they can take to protect and improve their environment.

The evaluation methods for the program have included the analysis of 300 tour participant feedback forms and an email survey of tour participants, which has been verified by Jetty Research Pty Ltd.

The unexpected outcomes of the program have been:

- The higher than anticipated number of people to come on tours
- The quality of the tours and volunteer tour guides were higher than expected, as 92% of people who came on a tour rated it as excellent to very good.

Anticipated longer-term outcomes include a greater profile for community environmental education and empowerment programs in the region.

### **Future:**

Council is ensuring that the benefits of the program are ongoing by continuing to fund it through its Environmental Levy program and recurrent budget. Because the program is ongoing, Council has been continuously reviewing and reflecting on what has and hasn't worked. This feedback loop approach has meant that Council has made a number of improvements since 2010 in terms of volunteer training, booking of tours and the promotion of tours.

One of the challenges of the program has been the lack of resources for the evaluation of the behaviour

change aspects of the program. The original funding application did not allow for support from evaluation consultants to design an evaluation program and subsequent funding from Council has been unable to cover these consultant fees. This has meant that this aspect of the evaluation has been undertaken by the Program Coordinator, who only works on the project 1.5 days/week and is not trained in statistical analysis of data. As a consequence, the initial promising results on the success of the behaviour change aspects of the program only emerged in early 2012, being that 90% of people who had been inspired them to be more environmentally active in their daily lives had actually made these changes three to six months after going on the tour.

Based on advice from Jetty Research market research in Coffs Harbour, Council is now redesigning the survey methods of tour participants to capture more rigorous and representative data relating to the behaviour change aspects of the program. It is anticipated that this will conclusively demonstrate that the program is a successful environmental behaviour change model than can be adopted by other Councils across Australia. To facilitate this, funding will be investigated for the creation of an on-line “How to” guide to share the program learnings with other councils.

Other ‘next steps’ for Coffs Ambassadors Volunteer Interpretive Tours include:

- Continue to develop advanced training opportunities and rewarding team get-togethers to ensure the high rate of volunteer retainment continues;
- Providing opportunities for our Coffs Ambassadors to consider how they can work in partnership with other environmental organisations and programs;
- Proposing that the volunteers be given the opportunity to form a community environmental advisory group for Council, based on their passion and knowledge for local environmental issues and their existing relationship with Council.
- Creating an individual website and a facebook site for promoting the tours.

**References:** [www.coffsharbour.nsw.gov.au](http://www.coffsharbour.nsw.gov.au)

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