

This is the submission by the Rottnest Society to the Rottnest Island Authority on the Rottnest Island Management Plan 2023-2028. The submission was made in May 2023.

The Rottnest Society



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PO Box 418 Claremont
Western Australia 6010

ROTTNEST ISLAND AUTHORITY
PO Box 693, Fremantle WA 6959

ROTTNEST ISLAND MANAGEMENT PLAN 2023-28

COMMENTS FROM THE ROTTNEST SOCIETY

It is understood that the RIMP review has been brought forward at the request of the Government to plan for the challenges presented while coming out of the period of Covid lockdown.

The comments below are provided sequentially relating to the 46 page document. Statements made in the RIMP are shown in italics while Rottnest Society comments are in normal type.

P 6. Settlement area.

The Act specifically outlines the part of the island lying on the northern side of a line drawn generally from Geordie Bay to Kingstown Barracks. During this RIMP period the RIA will not look to expand the settlement area established by the Act and will ensure future developments remain sympathetic to the island's environment and that 85% of the island remains as a conservation and recreation reserve.

Support – it is noted that previously the Society had criticised the previous RIMP for not confirming this. Accordingly, these statements are welcome. However, the statement that the RIA will not look to expand the settlement into the 'A' Class protected area "at this time" does imply that such an action may be contemplated in the future. It is requested that this be clarified and that it be stated that in accordance with past legislative requirements accommodation be restricted to the Settlement Area.

P 9. RIA is required to be self-funding regarding its commercial operations.

The pattern witnessed over recent years has been characterised by the RIA divesting itself of some of the commercial operations by entering leases for hotels, restaurants and the like. It should be recognised that the more the RIA does this the more its income stream will be lessened. The financial aspects of the lease agreements have not been divulged to the Rottnest Society notwithstanding its FOI request, however, it is reasonable to assume that the financial arrangements are attractive to the limited number of organisations bidding. Lease fees should be audited by a reputable financial consultant to ensure that entrenched stakeholders on the Island do not get a windfall.

P 12. Guiding Principles.

The community will be consulted where significant changes or impacts may be felt on the island from implementation of any of the initiatives proposed.

Notwithstanding this statement, the RIA Board does operate in a secretive manner. Significant development applications are dealt with behind closed doors with no opportunity for interested parties to view technical reports or make deputations to the Board. The RIMP should include a statement of intent to provide greater transparency to the Board's operation with respect to major development decisions.

P 14-18 Strategic Focus Area 1 – Diversify the Visitor Base and Enhance the Visitor Experience

P 14. Target New Visitor Segments

The Rottnest Island Destination Strategic Plan 2024-28 will be implemented in synergy with the RIMP 2023-28 and outlines strategies to ensure island markets and visitor segments are prioritised against objectives relating to sustainable growth, a diversified visitor base and revenue targets.

The emphasis in the Plan to promote Rottnest nationally and globally, to create year-round visitation and increase visitor spend would have implications for the image of and development of the Rottnest many West Australians have come to love and would prefer to continue. This path that the RIMP is promoting, no doubt aligned with Tourism WA's desire to grow the State's market share, has serious implications for the future of Rottnest. Is the RIA confident that the Western Australian community would endorse these initiatives? Will the promotion of Rottnest Island as a destination of national significance result in a series of changes that over time result in a Rottnest West Australians no longer admire and identify with?

Prior to going down the path of making Rottnest a destination for huge numbers of tourists, it is suggested that an independent review be undertaken to establish what the carrying capacity of Rottnest Island is.

P 15. Enhance Visitor Experience.

RIA reinforced and widened the main jetty in December 2022 and will continue to improve the presentation and amenity of the jetty and island entry point. RIA has aspirational plans to transition the island's barging operations away from the main jetty to the former Army Groyne and South Thomson Bay to help reduce visitor congestion and improve the arrival experience.

The Society is concerned that the works on the main jetty were not foreshadowed in earlier plans and will serve to entrench the main jetty as the only entry point. The “aspirational plans” for the former Army Groyne would appear to be preparing the public for doing nothing which is of concern in view of previous statements being made to undertake necessary works.

P 15. New Accommodation.

RIA will assess new visitor accommodation development opportunities in accordance with the Land Use Plan and bring to market those opportunities most likely to deliver on its strategic objectives. Opportunities include potential for development of associated staff housing to support operations, which may be on or off-site.

This statement is very confusing and mixes new unspecified visitor accommodation with staff housing. It is of concern that this statement could be interpreted very widely to foreshadow major new hotel development. Clarification of what is actually meant by these statements should be provided in the RIMP. It is understood from the briefing provided by the RIA Chairman that two possible hotels are foreshadowed and their location and dimensions would be dependent on negotiations with prospective developers. One of these potential hotels could be associated with the Golf Course. If the RIMP is to be used in the future to justify such developments, some clarification on the scale of the developments envisaged would be appropriate and therefore requested.

The suggestion in this section that more staff housing will be seen as a beneficial opportunity is strongly objected to. A large permanent population on the Island proved a problem in the past and now the RIA appears intent on repeating those mistakes. Rottnest is fortunately located within a half hour ferry ride of a region with all necessary facilities – why would you bother with the worry of schooling, health and welfare provision on the Island when workers and their dependents can more easily be provided for on the mainland? Also, why would you use up valuable land that could otherwise be utilised for tourist accommodation yielding higher returns? The RIA is making the mistake of responding to developers’ complaints that they find it difficult to source staff, which is a short-term problem, by setting up a solution that will be with us in the long term.

P 15. Golf Course Precinct.

The potential revitalisation of the Rottnest Island golf precinct by adding and activating both indoor and outdoor spaces is a priority project for this RIMP 2023–28 and will help expand the island’s visitor base. With the recent closing of the popular Governor’s Bar and loss of this amenity there is an opportunity to develop a sports bar.

It is agreed that the closure of the Governor’s Bar was a sad loss, which the RIA did nothing to prevent. While an alternative bar to the Rottnest Hotel would be welcome, the development of a sports bar in the vicinity of the golf club would have to be developed with care. It should be recalled (now that the RIA appears to be determined to populate the Island with permanent residents) that when there was previously a large permanent population on the Island those individuals tended to view the golf club as their private club and visitors were frowned upon. Such an outcome should be avoided.

P 16. New Accommodation Key outcomes.

Private investment in accommodation and recreation facilities for the Golf Course precinct, RIA will also consider development projects in other locations within the settlement and facilitation of new staff housing to support new visitor accommodation operations.

Accommodation within the golf course precinct is seen as a key outcome, but is nowhere explained or justified. These statements are wide ranging with significant implications. It is of concern that any number of future proposals could be lodged and the applicant would claim “it was foreshadowed in the 2023-2028 RIMP”. As noted above, amplification of these statements to indicate the scale and character of these future developments should be provided in the RIMP.

P. 16. Affordable accommodation.

Aspirational options for further accommodation development include infill at Bathurst and North Thomson Bay, which could include relocation of some Rottnest residential housing to a less central area of the island. Opportunities also exist to expand the offering of camping and cabins in and around existing precincts.

RIA will work to identify and recommend suitable sites for affordable rental accommodation in any designated mixed use land area within the settlement and will confirm the feasibility of relocating all staff resident housing out of North Thomson Bay.

While these actions could be supported, they are unclear in their scope and dimension.

Certainly, additional camping would be supported following the RIA’s actions to reduce the camping area consequent upon its support of the Discovery Glamping development.

For clarity the phrase “less central area of the island” should be replaced with “less central area of the settlement”.

P 16. Kingstown Barracks.

The RIA hopes to create a high quality, value for money product that will also attract international and interstate visitors seeking affordable accommodation options. RIA will seek external project funding from heritage organisations and philanthropic funds to support the upgrade of this important heritage and educational complex.

There are some positive suggestions regarding the architectural design vision incorporating military heritage which could be supported. In keeping with the intent to provide infill accommodation generally, financed by the RIA from accommodation revenue, the improvements at Kingstown Barracks should not be entirely dependent on successful sourcing of external project funding.

P 17. Pedal and flipper expansion.

Increased capacity of bikes and other e-rideables to meet growing and changing demand.

While cycling around Rottnest is a recognised Rottnest experience, the onset of e-bikes and e-scooters has created a new safety issue that needs to be addressed. These vehicles travelling at 50km per hour pose a far greater risk to individuals than ordinary bikes. The RIA and their Rangers need to have a clear view on how to regulate and manage these e-rideables.

P 19-21 Strategic Focus Area 2 – Deliver Sustainable Island Infrastructure and Services

P 19. Renewable energy and electrical infrastructure upgrade.

The listed solar and wind power improvements are supported.

P 20. Drinking water and wastewater upgrade.

The initiatives to improve the water supply network and improve ablution facilities and transfer control to the State-owned provider is welcome.

P 21. Transport plan.

While the Society welcomes initiatives to better manage the transportation system, there is continuing concern at the increasing proliferation of vehicles due to the growing number of private contractors. Some mention of the objective to limit such usage further would be welcome in the RIMP.

P 21. Maritime Infrastructure Upgrades.

It is agreed that the island's Mooring Management System effectively manages the finite space available. This not only relates the space available but also the behaviour. The Society does receive complaints about noise in particular emanating from moored vessels which should be addressed by a greater marine ranger presence.

P 22-24 Strategic Focus Area 3 – Respect and Engage the Island's Cultural Heritage

P 22. Cultural heritage.

Whadjuk-led consultation and truth-telling. Memorialise the Aboriginal Burial Ground and Quod subject to further consultation and obtaining appropriate funding.

The Society facilitated an event involving Aboriginal elders engaged in truth telling following a working weekend event during 2022. The Society supports initiatives to better engage with the Traditional Owners. The action on the Quod would be timely. Potentially the Quod could be a highlight of the visitor experience and an opportunity to reflect on its history and its past incumbents – if undertaken with care and sensitivity. Obtaining funding should be a priority in view of the fact that a potential funding source from developers as a condition of the Lodge redevelopment approval was not capitalised on by the RIA.

P 23. Reconciliation Action Plan.

A new Reconciliation Action Plan to be launched during the RIMP period and delivery of the actions identified in the Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan 2021- 2023.

The Society supports these initiatives and commitments.

P 23. Upgrade Built Heritage.

Secure funding and deliver heritage unit refurbishment.

The Society supports the inclusion of this initiative in the RIMP, although in view of the likely premium to be charged to those eventually enjoying, and paying for, "a unique visitor experience" in the Stay Rottnest heritage cottages, some of the works should be financed directly by the RIA from its accommodation revenue.

P 24. Defence heritage interpretation Plan.

Secure external funding and implement the DHIP.

The Society supports this initiative.

P 25-28. Strategic Focus Area 4 – Explore and Conserve the Island's Environment.

Five initiatives to explore and conserve the Island's environment.

Many of the key outcomes expected from these initiatives are rather vague. Such as to: *conserve and restore island marine and terrestrial reserves, manage human impacts on the island's flora and fauna, improve water management initiatives, deliver dune and pathway stabilisation, improved visitor amenity, and improve management of specific island sites and their unique environmental values.*

Other key outcomes relate to future, as yet unseen, plans:

An adaptive Environmental Management Plan, the implementation of Sustainability Action Plan 2023–28 and an island Recreation Management Plan that applies adaptive management principles.

Other key outcomes seek future alternative funding or research:

“Secure external funding for the development of the Wadjemup Conservation Centre” and “increase research and monitoring of the island's ecosystems”.

It is difficult to comment on vague statements of intent or motherhood statements, other than to agree that they would be desirable to achieve. For instance, it would be difficult to disagree with the desirability of the following outcomes, all quoted from the RIMP:

- *Conservation and restoration of island marine and terrestrial reserves would be beneficial,*
- *the human impacts on the island's flora and fauna should be managed,*
- *there should be increased water production and reduced water loss,*
- *there should be woodland restoration, and*
- *there should be increased fauna habitat, improved condition of island vegetation, dune and pathway stabilisation, coastal restoration, increased animal habitat and improved visitor amenity.*

But are the Management Plan's environmental commitments to be entirely comprised of vague global statements of intent? Without identifying where these statements will particularly apply there is little in Strategic Focus Area 4 to comment on.

To provide a more useful environmental component of the RIMP it is recommended that the areas requiring priority attention and those facing the most likely threats be identified and prioritised. It is suggested that the Appendix maps be amplified to identify where conservation efforts need to be focused.

P 29. Strategic Focus Area 5 – foster strong partnerships.

The first key initiative applies to the RIA's own workforce and how their job satisfaction should be increased. The Rottneest Society has been advised by a number of staff that they are not happy with the undue emphasis of the Board on development at the expense of the environment. Not surprisingly some of these staff have left, explaining why the environment branch in particular has suffered a high staff turnover. Perhaps the RIA needs to modify its development-orientated philosophy if it is seriously intent on securing staff job satisfaction.

The desire to forge strong partnerships with local businesses is well and good. But the RIA needs to consider the extent to which these partnerships result in a select number of local businesses gaining monopoly power over many Island facilities, some of which the general public feel more comfortable with management remaining with the public authority, (RIA). In the briefing provided by the RIA Chairman, it was evident that it was his intention that reference to fostering strong partnerships related to volunteer groups as much as to commercial interests. This should be made clearer in the RIMP. It could be noted that the

numerous volunteers, who frequent Rottnest, develop a strong sense of ownership and commitment to the Island, which is in itself a good thing.

Key initiative - Valuing our volunteers.

Rottnest is somewhat unique in having such a range of volunteer organisations prepared to give their time and energy to enable visitors to the Island better enjoy the traditional Rottnest experience. The RIA needs to be conscious of the fact that these groups are motivated by views, sometimes gained in childhood, of the pristine environment and unique simple Rottnest experience. Again, an over-emphasis on development of big, expensive hotels does not form part of most people's view of what Rottnest means to them.

Key initiative to maintain a contemporary funding model.

It is recognised that activity-based costing is appropriate and funding from a range of sources (accommodation, leases and admission fees) is necessary. However, substituting the direct provision of a service for a lease is likely to leave the RIA with a less attractive income stream in the long term.

P 32 on - Appendix.

The land use maps included in the Appendix are a welcome and necessary addition to the RIMP.

It is requested that the meaning of the four "mixed use" sites west of Catherine Bay (City of York Bay), near the lighthouse and at the nursery site be clarified. What uses could be permitted at these sites within the "A" Class reserve? The definition of mixed use in the RIMP includes the following:

- *To provide for residential and or leisure and or commercial uses which complement the tourism function of the island.*
- *To provide for appropriately designed and located accommodation for seasonal and short-term workers.*
- *To facilitate the use, development and redevelopment of land in accordance with the existing or preferred character of the area.*

This definition may suit the commercial centre, but not those four identified sites within the Rottnest Island environmental area. Indeed, it contradicts statements made elsewhere in the RIMP relating to accommodation in the land outside the identified settlement area (which are strongly supported by the Rottnest Society). Accordingly, the Society objects to the Mixed-Use sites in the absence of a specific land use definition relating to the four sites and suggests that they be deleted from the maps.

As mentioned above, it would be more useful if the initiatives outlined in Strategic Focus Area 4 (Explore and conserve the Island's environment) be identified on the maps.

The Appendix indicates the "The full suite of Rottnest Island Land Use zone maps can be viewed by visiting RIA's website at ria.wa.gov.au/rimp."

The only land use zone maps at this website appear to be those within the Appendix of the RIMP. Clarification of where the full suite can be found is sought.

THE ROTTNEST SOCIETY
May 2023