

TOURISM AUSTRALIA

Sustainability STORYTELLERS



RICHARD BERMAN-HARDMAN

General Manager | Skyrail Rainforest Cableway



Skyrail's gondolas, threaded along a 7.5-kilometre cable between Cairns and Kuranda in the World Heritage-listed Wet Tropics of North Queensland, connect thousands of passengers per week with the world's oldest tropical rainforest via one of the longest cableways on the planet – without leaving a footprint.

“When the Chapman family proposed the cableway over three decades ago, minimising environmental impact and conservation education were key drivers,” says Richard Berman-Hardman, Skyrail's General Manager, who saw joining the renowned ecotourism operator six years ago, after 25 years working in the sector, as a career-defining opportunity.

“During construction, existing clearings were used to situate the towers and all materials were either carried in on foot or by helicopter: there was no disturbance to the forest. Tangible benefits include the tens of thousands of cars and buses per annum that are no longer travelling the winding road up to Kuranda, and the cableway's silent operation, which has allowed the area directly below the cableway to become a cassowary haven.

“Our rangers are passionate educators – people come for a fun day out with the kids, and leave as advocates for the rainforest. We're discussing biodiversity and sustainability constantly, reaching hundreds of people an hour.

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“Our Skyrail Foundation supports research which informs our operation. Rainforest advocacy is what drives us.”

Skyrail is recognised as an ecotourism leader in Australia and globally, achieving the highest levels of accreditation, including being one of only a handful of Earthcheck Master Certified businesses globally.

“We already have a rigorous annual audit by Earthcheck that ensures we maintain or exceed our sustainability benchmarks. We get a bit anxious about it actually – they’re hard targets, but I figure if you’re not stretched to achieve them, you’re probably not trying hard enough.”

However, it’s only recently that the company has specifically focused on becoming a ‘net carbon zero’ business. Despite hosting Tropical Tree Days for the past eight years, during which 1,000 trees have been planted by volunteers, carbon offsetting is a new direction for the business.

“We’re looking at more tree planting partnerships to directly rehabilitate rainforest environments.”

Richard says there is still a lot of confusion around measuring environmental footprints, and what ‘net zero’ looks like.

“Rather than getting bogged down in the data, or just saying ‘we’ll do more’, we’ll do everything we can, within the limitations of our resources. Our challenge is to continuously exceed the standards we’ve already achieved.”

Skyrail is inherently a relatively low carbon emitter, as the cableway runs on an electric motor. Now, a major upgrade is planned, improving overall energy efficiency. Additionally, Skyrail continues to utilise solar energy, where practicable. Industrial ‘waste’ – including steel, rubber and electrical componentry – is already recycled and re-purposed wherever possible.

Skyrail’s environmental team continually assesses the company’s energy and water use and waste generation, and seeks ways to achieve further reductions. Red Peak station – one of the cableway’s midpoint stops – is already self-sufficient. The team is also examining the supply chain, with a majority of goods sourced within 50km, despite the challenges of Cairns’ remote location.

“During the pandemic ‘hibernation’, travellers – particularly in international markets – have become far more discerning, demanding demonstrable sustainability in their travel choices.”

“While ‘environmental sustainability’ has always been fundamental to our operation, we didn’t want to go back to market, post-Covid with the same message. We are now focused specifically on telegraphing our sustainability credentials and the work we’re doing to minimise our carbon footprint.

“Our goal is to be the undisputed heavyweight in rainforest conservation advocacy in the tourism space and to reassert ourselves as a leader and trendsetter in ecotourism. We’re only just embarking on a path to carbon zero, but we’re already envisioning carbon positive – if we could measure the impact of our advocacy work, we’d already be there!” 🌱

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