

# TOURISM AUSTRALIA *Sustainability* STORYTELLERS



## STEVE EDMONDSON

Owner & Operator | Sailaway



“You can’t get much greener than harnessing renewable energy to create a tourism product,” says Steve Edmondson, Owner Operator of Sailaway, describing how the company’s four luxury catamarans take advantage of the prevailing south-east trade winds to carry passengers to the Low Isles and outer Great Barrier Reef on a range of sailing eco-adventures.

However, it turns out it is possible to be greener - and Sailaway has gone beyond carbon neutral by continually assessing, adapting and learning.

“In 2003, my wife, Katrina and I bought an older Stratos catamaran that came with a crucial operator’s permit and a mooring at Low Isles. We had ambitions to improve our product and used an opportunity to extend our permit from six to 15 years by becoming Advanced Ecotourism Accredited,” explains Steve.

“In the course of getting certified, we identified that we needed a bigger boat to be sustainable – both environmentally and financially. We needed bigger engines that could run in the ‘sweet spot’ of efficient fuel burn for sufficient power; increased water-line length for speed,

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“Our recognised integrity and conviction meant we were able to recover quickly post-pandemic, attracting and retaining a full complement of 25 staff, including 12 marine biologists, and emerging with the same level of forward bookings as 2019.

“We offer an all-inclusive package representing good value for money, and every ticket includes \$20 for carbon offsetting: it shows people are willing to pay more for a quality, sustainable experience.

“We’re constantly learning and experimenting, educating ourselves and our clients, and now other operators and agents are asking to partner with us. Our next step is to become a carbon offset provider and advisor to other businesses, including inbound tour operators.” 🌱

comfort and carrying capacity; and a high-performance sailing ability. Having the certainty of the longer permit meant the banks were willing to lend us more money.”

“We then looked at reducing our carbon emissions as far as possible, addressing waste, energy and water use, our office footprint and supply chain. The next step was to offset our remaining emissions, but we didn’t want to purchase carbon credits overseas, so we established Eco Shamba Tree Farm.”

In 2009 the Edmondsons purchased a 27-hectare degraded sugarcane paddock close to Port Douglas, adjacent to the World Heritage Wet Tropics rainforest. Under expert guidance, Steve and his team began a permanent rainforest reforestation and Bio Sequestration project. They’ve planted 15,000 biodiverse species of trees and plants to form a wildlife corridor between the forest and waterway; reduce erosion and water outflow to the ocean; lock in carbon and provide measurable carbon offsets.

“We’ve planted native hardwoods that can be harvested for timber and experimented with sources of Biodiesel. We use no fertilisers or irrigation – it’s all organic.”

Steve acknowledges the difficulty of measuring a carbon footprint and the variety of metrics that can be applied.

“While we don’t know exactly where we stand in the carbon zero stakes, we know we’re beyond carbon neutral and making a sizeable positive carbon contribution. We just keep looking for ways to do better, knowing lots of small actions can make a big difference.”

Along with several other tourism operators, Sailaway is also involved in coral regeneration on the Reef, and has ‘planted’ 11,500 coral fragments that, as they grow, will help improve the resilience and regeneration of the Reef.

Steve says there is an appetite for genuinely sustainable travel, particularly in discerning European markets.

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