



COMMUNITY CHAMPION

Whitsunday Sailing

The Healthy Heart team met with Lindsay Simpson, Co-Manager & Operator of Whitsunday Sailing to talk about how her love for the reef fuels her passion for sustainable tourism. We discuss how they translate that passion into the guest experience and everyday operations of their two sailing boats, plus the immense responsibility as a tourism operator in the region. “There’s no point in being a spokesperson for the reef if you’re not practicing what you preach...”

Why did Whitsunday Sailing join the Whitsunday Healthy Heart Project?

We were excited by the idea of taking real action in measuring our contribution to demonstrate how we are reducing carbon emissions (instead of just talking about it). That commitment started when we purchased the sail boats themselves. We didn’t want to add to our carbon emissions by running a motor 100% of the time. However, being able to sail instead of using the motor all depends on the tide, wind and timetabling deadlines. So, the project helps to find the best way to manage that. We rely on fossil fuels for the engine propulsion on both vessels, and we’re hoping for government assistance to buy an electric engine for the one boat with air-conditioning (the MiLady). Running aircon creates the biggest footprint, so we’re hoping to curb that contributor.

The WHHP also helps explain to our guests what we are doing and why we are doing it. Tourism Whitsundays have been providing great statistics on the increasing number of visitors that are seeking an immersive reef experience with educational content, which backs up our research. Although these kinds of experiences usually come at a higher running cost, guests also are prepared to pay more to be citizen scientists and contribution to conservation.

Lindsay, tell us a little about your background, why you settled in the Whitsundays and embarked in this business.

Well, it is a romantic story. We found “Providence” on our honeymoon when we came here in 2003 from Tasmania. An old fishing friend of Grant’s (my partner) spotted us on our honeymoon in Airlie and asked him to skipper his tall ship “Flying Cloud” which was based in the Whitsundays. While Grant was up there, he called me and said that “he had found the boat” and I said: ‘What boat?’ At the time I was heading the journalism program at the University of Tasmania. I managed to secure a tenured position at James Cook University in Townsville, and we moved Providence up to Magnetic Island for 10 years.

However, our love for Airlie Beach motivated me to take early retirement and in 2015 we made the move to the Whitsundays. In 2013, we travelled to Europe and bought a second sailing vessel for our



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venture, MiLady – a 54 ft Jeanneau in Barcelona. We shipped her to Australia in 2018 to join Providence and service more up-market, overnight private charters..

The two boats service quite different clientele. Can you tell us more about them?

Providence takes up to 24 passengers on day trips and sunset sails. She used to have bunks for overnight back-packer trips, but during COVID-19 we pulled out the bunks and the galley to make more under-deck room. MiLady only takes six overnight and twelve on a day sail or sunset sail. This makes it quite special for the guests with a crew: guest ratio of 2:6 on the overnight sail.

When did you realise that understanding your business' carbon emissions was so important?

Around 2016, I started writing about mass coral bleaching for the Australian Marine Conservation Society. I recognised then that we needed to be doing much more as tourism operators to reduce global emissions. Many of us are already making conscious decisions around recycling at home, using a bamboo toothbrush instead of a plastic one, turning off lights, etc, so why can't we transfer these incentives across to the boats?

We were already doing a lot like using environmentally conscious cleaning products, recycling, reducing packaging on our lunches and removing bottled water from our boats. However, it was when I was in India conducting research for my book and we were facing those mass bleaching events on the Great Barrier Reef that I looked at our business more closely. I was determined to practice what I preached and use my skills as a writer to highlight what was happening on our doorstep. There's no point in being a spokesperson as a tourism operator if you are not practicing what you preach.

Then the Whitsunday Healthy Heart Project (WHHP) came along, which was something tangible. It is all very well to say we don't do this, and we don't do that, but how do we actually count what we are doing? The education market is also crucial. We are trying to use the boat as a way to demonstrate to people not only the importance of what is happening under the water and in the intertidal zones, but also to look at the differences in emissions with the vessel under power vs under sail and how this is no different to energy considerations when we consider our use of lighting at home. We are a high standard tourism operator with Ecotourism Australia accreditation and in many countries across the world, people are consciously selecting operators that are choosing to reduce emissions. We know that our visitors are interested in the idea of the new ecotours which we are developing.



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One of the things we are planning for future trips is accessing scientific experts to provide an enhanced educational expedition for our visitors. School groups are another sector we believe has huge potential. The Queensland government is providing subsidies for school groups who want to go out to the reef, and this is a wonderful way of offering a sailing experience that doesn't cost top dollar, educates them on how to lower emissions, while showing the effects of climate change underwater.

Which monitoring programmes are you currently engaged with?

We currently conduct voluntary surveys for GBRMPA at Peters Bay and Dumbbell Island. This data is used to assess coral health over time as part of the [Tourism Weekly Monitoring Program](#). Tourists can learn how to monitor coral through introductory online modules provided by GBRMPA via its Eye on the Reef program which also covers reef health, marine animals and recording incidents. Tourism Weeklies help GBRMPA understand long-term trends in coral and overall reef health.

We are also actively marketing to Queensland schools and utilising the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority program "Be a Marine Biologist for a Day". This program provides a suite of resources and activities that are curriculum-linked and assists teachers, marine tourism operators and reef guides facilitate higher quality learning excursions. I was excited to see that climate change is alive and well in the school curriculum. It doesn't matter if we are talking about rubbish on beaches, marine debris, marine pest identification or coral health, it all relates back to climate change.

What has been your experience with carbon emissions benchmarking? How easy did you find the portal to use? Do you have any advice for operators looking at joining the project?

It took a while to work through our first benchmark as it is quite detailed. However, Grant found the portal quite easy to use once he had completed the tasks as he could then analyse our business and understand how we contributed to carbon emissions. It is easy to overlook this aspect when you are a small, hands-on operator with limited administration staff.

Once the data is uploaded and analysed, it can be a useful tool in making business decisions like purchasing larger ticket items such as electric engines. This would not only save money on fuel but reduce our carbon emissions dramatically.

Benchmarking has also encouraged us to reflect on other operational practices of our vessels such as choosing sails over engine propulsion or electing to increase the sail area to harness further wind energy.



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The Zero Emissions Event was great in that it highlighted diesel and petrol engine use as the most significant source of carbon emissions in the marine tourism sector. Using electric engines is crucial to reducing our emissions and tackling the challenge of climate change. It is not a cheap transition for a small business to make.

The event also highlighted this a constant challenge for other marine tourism operators, so it would be good to see more financial assistance to make this transition. We need proactive governments who seriously tackle climate change and do not expect small businesses to solely carry that financial responsibility. Although there are some Queensland government grants for this challenge, they are few and far between.

What are some of the decarbonisation initiatives you have implemented or plan to implement?

Two key initiatives are the selection and training of staff to sail the vessels and managing time schedules especially on day sails. We have emphasised the ability to sail as a preferred skill when advertising for crew.

That capability also provides a powerful educational opportunity for our guests. For example, choosing a skipper that knows how to use wind as energy and crew who are willing to provide interpretive experiences. Recruitment of the right staff is crucial if we are to share this knowledge to our visitors.

What have you identified as a priority to decarbonising and how will you solve this?

Increased use of sails! We also want to reduce the use of air-conditioning onboard the MiLady vessel by increasing ventilation and natural airflow, especially in winter months, which means not using the generator overnight in particular. Larger 12v fans have been installed to increase airflow.

We have also applied to state government for some financial assistance towards an electric motor for one of the vessels.

What are the tangible differences between Whitsunday Sailing's eco-accreditation and the partnership with the Whitsunday Healthy Heart Project?

They are related but definitely not in opposition. Our eco-accreditation agency provides us with the credentials and recognition of our eco-efforts, whereas the project is providing a sense of community,



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tangible day-to-day solutions to decarbonisation and a “leading by example” profile. Hopefully these benefits will encourage new partners to join the project.

Have you set an emissions reduction target?

Net zero by 2026! However, this is dependent greatly on increased financial assistance from the government in the form of electric engines.

Have there been any surprises that have come out of your emissions footprint measurement?

Yes, the driving practices of our skippers (who are not always educated on climate change) and the effects of their driving on increased carbon emissions created by our vessels. Our pledge to adopt a more wholistic approach to climate change education for our crew and guests by focusing on ecotourism has greatly assisted this. It has made our crew reflect on how they can individually make a difference both in their own practices and their interpretation for guests. For example, we had one skipper who did not want to put the mainsail up as he believed it took too much time and would slow down the vessel. However, the extra speed of the vessel in favourable winds, in fact, greatly reduced the passage time and fuel consumption, not to mention carbon emissions and added greatly to the enjoyment of the guests.

I believe that the marine tourism sector in the Whitsundays is a microcosm for supporting old technology and not embracing up-and-coming tech due to our high reliance on carbon fuels and the high costs of transitioning to the new renewable forms of energy. Also, the lack of awareness, and therefore incentive, on how much businesses can save financially once the initial investment is made. A comparison can be made on the use of electric vehicles and the initial outlay for a car that does not rely on old energy. There is also other equipment which contributes to carbon emissions and is associated with reliance on fossil fuels. For example, we would not be using oil filters and fuel filters and large amounts of oil. Each time we do an oil change, we use 40 litres of oil.

Where are you sourcing eco-friendly supplies and how you managing waste?

We use biodegradable BioPak for plates (purchased online), and by using wraps we don't need packaging. Coffee pods are recyclable and purchased online, our “glassware” is polycarbonate and washed on board, and our mugs and utensils are reusable. I am currently looking for a local supplier of ecofriendly cleaning products and boat washdown products.



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There are bins at Coral Sea Marina to separate our waste, however more education is needed on where to put what waste, as a lot of contamination is occurring. Getting this right is crucial as the amount of waste coming off marina-based vessels is substantial. We were keen from the start to eliminate bottled water from our boats. Instead, we ask our guests to bring their own water bottle and provide them with chilled water onboard. We also provide spray jackets to prevent guests from buying disposable rain jackets.

What would a Whitsunday Sustainable Destination mean for Whitsunday Sailing?

This would be an excellent marketing tool for the region. But, in order to achieve this, the state and federal governments both need to provide much better financial assistance for electric engines to lead away from the reliance on fossil fuels by marine tourism operators in the Whitsundays.

Marketing our region as a sustainable destination is definitely a way to encourage tourists to visit but it can't be greenwashing. The discerning tourist, confronting continual examples of climate change in their own backyard (e.g., floods/fires/droughts) is far less likely to be hoodwinked by marketing sustainability which is not actively going to change their future lives. When tourists visit the Great Barrier Reef, they want to know they are contributing to the conservation of the Great Barrier Reef, not to aid and abet in its decline.

The WHH project is a step in the right direction and enables us to proudly stand up and be identified as a community that has earned the right to be called a sustainable destination. It's an aspiration to be proud of as long as it is authentic.

For more information or to register interest in joining the Whitsunday Healthy Heart Project, please visit our website <https://www.innovationhub.whitsundayrc.qld.gov.au/whitsunday-healthy-heart-project>

The Whitsunday Islands is one of three key locations with projects currently underway as part of the Great Barrier Reef Foundation's Reef Islands Initiative, which is working to restore critical island habitats to protect ecosystems and save vulnerable species. The 10-year program is supported by funding from Lendlease, the Australian Government's Reef Trust, the Queensland Government, and the Fitzgerald Family Foundation.