



### **Good Practice Story Title:**

‘Waterways and Wildlife: Good turns to balance conservation and visitation’

**Destination:** Central Coast, New South Wales

**Country:** Australia

**Submitting Organization:** Destination Central Coast

### **Category:**

- Destination Management
- Nature & Scenery**
- Environment & Climate
- Culture & Tradition
- Thriving Communities
- Business & Marketing

### **Destination description:**

The Central Coast is home to a waterworld like no other in Australia, with local life defined by these interconnected waterways. As a certified ECO Destination with Ecotourism Australia since 2022, it's no surprise more than half of the Central Coast is made up of national park, state forest, bushland, open space, nature reserves, beaches and waterways. From the streams to the sea, the region has several waterway destinations: Tuggerah Lakes, Hawkesbury River, Brisbane Waters, Southern Lake Macquarie, and its Coastal Lagoons. As New South Wales' third largest local government area at 1,681 km<sup>2</sup>, it's naturally a diverse destination. Featuring more than 40 beaches along 87km of Pacific Ocean coastline, proudly part of the marine Humpback Highway accessible from Crackneck or Captain Cook lookouts or ECO Certified marine tours, plus vast areas of bushland where Endangered koala and platypus hide and pelicans parade. The Central Coast's network of valuable waterways nourish its residents, attract holidaymakers, connect waterfront communities, and support NSW's only pearl farm and sustainable oyster industry. These waterways also hold deep Indigenous cultural significance as traditional fishing grounds for the Darkinjung, Guringai and Awabakal Aboriginal peoples. Today, they continue to provide sustenance, recreation, sanctuary, and employment for the hundreds of thousands of residents and visitors who flock to this unique aquatic environment. Located just 90 minutes north of Sydney CBD, the Central Coast is a breathtaking slice of Australian paradise that thrives on the accessibility of its natural beauty, which inspires the lives of residents and attracts conscious guests.



## Summary of Good Practice Story:

Whether you're wading in, paddling out, slipping under, walking along, swimming through or admiring from a headland or shore, the NSW Central Coast's waterways and coastlines offer a fresh perspective of this certified Australian ECO Destination. But with peak tourism season, major events and threatened birdlife, the region is calling on collaboration to tackle waterway wellbeing.

The Entrance is a popular waterside tourism destination, but humans aren't the only visitors attracted to this east coast town during summer – some special guests fly in to embrace the vibrant coastline too. Introducing the 'Swallows of the Sea' - Little Terns; a regular breeding summer migrant bird and the smallest Australian tern at just 20cm long. Little Terns are mainly a coastal species with Karagi Point at The Entrance North beach their preferred habitat for courtship, breeding, nesting and chick raising. Little Terns offer a spectacle, flying gracefully over Tuggerah Lakes, frequently diving into the channel to catch fish. After they arrive from South-east Asia, to mitigate threats Central Coast Council has implemented best practice Environmental Management over four years as part of the Little Tern Conservation Project. By collaborating with the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW), NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), Central Coast Visitor Centre, and Central Coast Holiday Parks, more than 725 people were engaged in Summer 23/24 by Council staff and Roving Rangers spreading the word to 'share the shore'. Karagi Point is now considered one of the most important, high-performing breeding sites for Little Terns in New South Wales, producing more fledglings (key measure of success), during the project than any other site, significantly contributing to their long-term survival.

Central Coast waterways are also home to the iconic Australian Pelican, a large bird species playing an integral role in making The Entrance a much-loved holiday destination for generations. In September 2023, after pausing since COVID-19, Destination Central Coast launched a new, eco-friendly, educational tourism experience called 'Pelican Time' hosted by trained experts at Marine Wildlife Rescue Central Coast (MWRCC). This new attraction celebrates these magnificent local birds in a respectful, engaging, safe way where tourists take home eco-facts over invasive photos. With 9,018 visitors in the 23/24 summer period, this weekly event is now a free education platform promoting marine conservation and responsible fishing.

This story fulfils a priority action in the Central Coast Destination Management Plan 2022-25 to develop, promote and support water-based ecotourism experiences that strengthen brand identity as an ECO Destination, while also highlighting best practice environmental management in local government.

## Issues faced:

In 2024, the groundwork of Central Coast Council's Environmental Management team and Destination Central Coast team is making waves of change to better connect people with the valuable waterways and its wildlife.

The Little Tern Conservation Project was created to ensure breeding success by effectively manage nesting habitat and managing issues like human disturbance at nesting sites, and predation by foxes, dogs, cats or larger predatory birds. When Little Terns migrate to Karagi Point each summer they're actually protected under both State and Federal Threatened Species Legislation and Council endeavours to meet its statutory obligation through best practice management. Based on their most recent breeding season, navigating major annual events at The Entrance near the breeding site is an emerging issue, making engagement and recruitment of the public – beach-goers, holidaymakers and fishers – vital to adapt visitor behaviour to be on board with protecting Little Terns.





The reformed Pelican Time experience arose from an evidenced review of the original wildlife encounter against best practice in responsible wildlife tourism. For years one of the most popular tourist attractions on the Central Coast was the free, public “feeding” of wild Pelicans in Pelican Plaza at The Entrance, drawing crowds of pit-stop coach tourists into the town centre, with minimal benefit to the local community – feathered or business owners. This was not sustainable for the visitor economy or the long-term health of the pelicans (due to creating poor feeding habits), posing safety risks to tourists who the birds feared less and less. The issue was threefold with negative impacts on marine wildlife, tourists and local businesses. The Entrance is also a popular fishing destination, perched where lake meets sea on ‘The Channel’. Both avian experiences are impacted by irresponsible fishing practices. Several Little Terns are known to have become casualties of discarded fishing line in previous years, and it’s a current threat with other threatened species becoming recently entangled. Entanglements are demonstrated as part of Pelican Time talks via live ‘health checks’; rescuing pelicans and other marine birds with hooks in their beak or fishing line around their feet or neck; a dramatic but impactful edu-tourism experience for audiences, where rescuers will enter the water to assist injured pelicans.

With multiple stakeholders activating The Entrance town centre during peak season, the challenge is finding a balance between boosting the visitor economy and protecting the natural environment – and our pearl of wisdom? Collaboration is key.

### **Solution:**

The Entrance waterfront is a place where collaborative efforts between community, tourists, operators, local government, state government and not-for-profit organisations can influence destination management practices to find a balance between conservation and visitation. This involved visitor dispersal and visitor education techniques on the ground through face-to-face conversations, engaging storytelling, family-friendly activities, social media ads on responsible fishing, proactive safety and risk mitigation techniques, hosting pelican talks weekly (not daily), installing conservation fencing, interpretive on-site signage, deploying roving NPWS Discovery Rangers and planning site closures during large events. Organisations like Marine Wildlife Rescue Central Coast and Take 3 for the Sea support this cause ensuring the Central Coast can continue to promote sustainable tourism practices and protect the long-term wellbeing of its cherished waterways.

### **Methods, Steps, and Tools applied:**

Both the Little Tern Conservation Project and Pelican Time are possible through collaboration-led project management and ongoing monitoring and resource allocation by Central Coast Council, NPWS, Destination Central Coast and MWRCC, with overarching goals to 1) Raise awareness 2) Positive visitor behaviour 3) Foster environmental stewardship. These waterway and wildlife projects serve as examples of how stakeholders can work together to deliver practical conservation outcomes. These stories are remarkable when considering the surrounding urban environment of The Entrance and present threats and management issues.

The Little Tern Conservation Project has been led by Council’s Environmental Management Unit for four years, as part of an evolving work program based on proven success points. The project team are continually learning and refining their methodology each breeding season, adapting to new challenges that surface.

2023/24 Effective management solutions included:

- Installation of robust conservation fencing around rookery
- Interpretive, regulatory signage
- Fox control program
- Schedule of weekly nest monitoring





- Proactive visitor dispersal and education surrounding major seasonal events (i.e. Lakes Festival)
- Educating fishers and dog walkers regarding rubbish and their proximity to the fence
- Rubbish removal to mitigate threat of avian predation and chick entanglement
- Advising people on bird photography etiquette and handy tips
- 8,000 Little Tern themed fish & chip bags produced and distributed to takeaway shops at The Entrance for peak summer period (QR code linking to 'Love Our Waterways' website)
- Educational talks and a real-life display at the nearby Central Coast Visitor Centre, The Entrance
- Development of Environmental Management Procedure for adoption in 2024.

Council's internal collaboration encompassed multiple teams, showcasing how environmental conservation can connect many areas of a destination including: Environmental Infrastructure, Environmental Education, Natural Assets and Biodiversity, Catchments to Coast, Strategic Communications, Destination Marketing and Visitor Services, Ranger Services, Environmental Reporting, Events, Community Facilities (commercial fishers), Town Planning, Beach Safety, Lifeguards and The North Entrance Surf Club. Main agents of supporting resources for Council were NSW government partners; the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, NPWS and Saving Our Species, Beach Nesting Birds, and Share the Shore conservation programs. Additionally, the Central Coast Group of Birding NSW (Central Coast Birders) and "twitchers" safeguarded the Little Tern nest site by reporting management concerns (damaged fencing, nests outside the fenced area), practised ethical bird photography, and encouraged the public to proactively collect litter.

At Pelican Time, visitors to The Entrance are now encouraged to celebrate this bird and learn about the region's nature – and how to protect it during their visit. The journey to get to this eco-friendly state involved:

- **2019:** Council commissions independent consultant to review pelican feeding at The Entrance
- **2020 - 2021:** Traditional pelican feeding paused during COVID-19, initiating internal review of its viability, sustainability and impact on wildlife, visitors, and surrounding ecosystem
- **2022 - 2023:** Destination Central Coast invite expressions of interest from local trained wildlife experts to partner on creating a new, eco-friendly experience, with \$60k in supportive funding; successful tenderer appointed with in-kind marketing and promotion
- **Sept 2023:** New 'Pelican Time' experience launches in partnership with MRWCC, who have been rescuing and caring for marine birds on the Central Coast for more than 30 years.
- **2023 - 2024:** Pelican Time free educational talks delivered weekly during school holidays with fascinating wild facts on pelicans, ways to protect them in their environment by being waste wise when fishing, plus information on Little Terns conservation incorporated into summertime sessions.

## Achievements and Results:

Central Coast Council is now recognised by NSW government agencies as delivering the most successful Little Tern management and monitoring program, having produced more fledglings over the last four breeding seasons than any other nest site in the State. After a long period of decline in NSW (approx. 3% annually), Little Terns are bouncing back, with the Karagi Point nesting site significantly contributing to the species' long-term survival. By adopting best practice management and proactive visitor communication over the last four Little Tern breeding seasons (commencing prior to the start of the 2020/21 season), the Karagi Point breeding colony is now one of the most important in the state, celebrating 317 confirmed fledglings (avg. 79.25 fledglings per season), an incredible 7-fold increase.

In 2023/24, Karagi Point was again the highest performing breeding colony in NSW, accounting for nearly one third of the state's estimated breeding pairs (178), and over one third of the state's fledglings, with at least 134 fledglings confirmed! Amazingly, this was the most successful breeding season at Karagi Point to date, reaching the magic triple-figure mark for the first time, beating the 96 confirmed fledglings of 2021/22. This result





significantly contributes to the long-term conservation of the Little Tern, and assuming best practice management continues it's considered likely Karagi Point will remain one of the most important nest sites in NSW, thought capable of producing 200+ fledglings per season.

Supporting rising fledgling numbers, is a noticeable positive shift in public sentiment and local environmental stewardship. During the 23/24 Little Tern breeding season, the community seemed largely supportive of best practice management and aware of the breeding colony's importance. Behavioural change included people taking their rubbish with them, staying back respectfully from the fenced area and a reduction in dog walkers.

**2023/24 Effective visitor communication solutions included:**

- +5000 attendees recorded to Council's Environmental Education stalls
- Karagi Point closures during large outdoor events, with supporting communications
- On-site Roving Ranger conversations with more than 500 beach / reserve users
- NPWS Discovery Rangers delivering 11 educational activities to +1000 people
- Summer holiday educational talks on Shorebirds at 7x Holiday Parks to 100 attendees
- Approx. 120L rubbish removed daily during summer by Council staff
- Council Officers educating Visitor Centre staff and volunteers about Little Terns to ensure correct information is being passed onto the public
- Development of a 'real life' educational display installed at Central Coast Visitor centre
- 13 x Social media posts targeted at educating audiences during large events and public holidays.

**Promotional features:**

- Destination website: News article and new Waterways & Coastlines hub published for visitors
- Sydney Weekender - screened on Channel 7
- Local television and radio
- Council social media channel: 110,000 people reached
- Council media releases.

The development of an Environmental Management Procedure (EMP) by the lead Technical Officer has also resulted, aiming to manage impacts to Little Terns from major events at The Entrance. This enables Council to mitigate impacts on the nesting colony, such as short-term nest site closures at Karagi Point during major / high-risk events to protect the species from increased public access, (actioned four times during the 23/24 period). The EMP provides criteria to determine if events are low or high risk, proposing control measures to mitigate risk and comply with Council's legislative obligations. This involved balancing enforcement with community education and engagement i.e. internal consultation with Events team, planning communications, access controls (signage, barriers etc.), briefing security personnel and NPWS Discovery Rangers, and influencing community sentiment (i.e. about Little Terns).

Pelican Time is a growing success story for introducing a new eco-friendly educational experience to the Central Coast, joining the region's ECO Certified whale watching tours as a signature waterway-based ecotourism attraction.

Since launching September 2023, Pelican Time has recorded:

- o 17,778 total visitors – 2,222 average per month
- o 9,018 visitors in the 23/24 peak summer period
- o 29 live rescues successfully performed during talks
- o 14,867 visitors to the Pelican Time page on LoveCentralCoast.com
- o Media feature with Dr Harry, Australian TV vet personality and the Newcastle Herald newspaper
- o Attracted international media and buyer attention at the Australian Tourism Exchange 2024.







During the 2023/24 peak period, Destination Central Coast also pursued a partnership with global anti-plastic pollution movement Take 3 for the Sea, creating content for a themed ‘Responsible fishing’ social media ads campaign, targeted at locals and visitors with an interest in nature, ocean or fishing. The campaign was in market December 23 to January 2024 with a \$3k investment it achieved \$0.14 Cost Per Click, with 20,734 Click throughs, 492,770 Impressions and 87,877 Reach on Take 3 channels, considered above average engagement.

### Lessons Learned and Advice:

Many pearls of wisdom can be seen when exploring two localised waterway tourism activation and conservation projects on the Central Coast, but the standout lesson is: partnerships get tangible results. Overall, implementing best practice sustainable destination management has resulted in exceptional conservation outcomes and engaged visitors and community. Collaboration is not always swift or simple. For example, development of the EMP internally at Council involved compromise with competing project goals between the Events team and Environmental Management team, extensive stakeholder engagement, and budgetary approval for consultancy. However, persistent, authentic public engagement can shift sentiment and gradually create destination stewards who soak up knowledge and add to the army protecting local wildlife. The well-publicised Little Tern success since 2020 sets a high bar for expected ‘service levels’, ensuring the breeding colony receives best practice management long-term. In ecotourism we play the long-game – and by bringing community on the journey we’ve seen overwhelming local support for Little Terns and Pelicans.

Responsible fishing is an ongoing challenge for The Entrance. Council will continue to tackle this with partnerships to deliver a program of educational activities, i.e. kayak and bike tours, nature walk and talks, responsible fishing workshops. This will be supported by promotional material delivered to bait and tackle shops, with a recently floated idea to re-install ‘Tangler’ bins (supported by OzFish) for line waste explored with Council’s Catchments to Coast and Tourism teams. As a certified ECO Destination since 2022, the Central Coast continues to do what’s possible to protect natural landscapes of the region, all the creatures living among it, and visitors exploring it. Echoing the Central Coast Sustainability Pledge; we encourage community and guests to tread lightly and go slow on the NSW Central Coast – especially if enjoying The Entrance.

### Recognitions and Additional References:

The Little Tern Conservation Project:	ECO Destination / Industry awards:	Videos and Resources:
<p><b>Winner</b> - 2021 KAB NSW Sustainable Communities Tidy Towns Awards – Habitat &amp; Wildlife Conservation Award, Population Category E.</p> <p><b>Finalist</b> - 2022 NSW Local Government Excellence Awards. Award category: Environmental Leadership. Project name: Central Coast Council – Little Tern Conservation Project 2021.</p>	<p><b>First Place in the world</b> for Destination Management; Green Destinations Story Awards 2024.</p> <p><b>Gold Winner:</b> Local Government Award for Tourism, NSW Tourism Awards 2023.</p> <p><b>State Winner:</b> NSW Local Government Excellence Awards 2023; Special Project for entry ‘Rewilding Destination Marketing from the Inside Out’</p> <p><b>National Finalist:</b> National Banksia Sustainability Awards 2023.</p> <p><b>Top 10 Wotif Aussie Town of the Year Awards 2021</b> - The Entrance.</p>	<p>Tourism film about waterways: <a href="https://youtu.be/WRjdlcf9IPQ">https://youtu.be/WRjdlcf9IPQ</a></p> <p>Short film about waterways: <a href="https://youtu.be/BAlqz3o0kCs">https://youtu.be/BAlqz3o0kCs</a></p> <p><a href="https://lovecentralcoast.com/news/share-the-shore-to-help-protect-little-terns-visiting-the-coast">lovecentralcoast.com/news/share-the-shore-to-help-protect-little-terns-visiting-the-coast</a></p> <p><a href="https://loveourwaterways.centralcoast.nsw.gov.au/little-tern">loveourwaterways.centralcoast.nsw.gov.au/little-tern</a></p> <p><a href="https://take3.org/lovecentralcoast/">take3.org/lovecentralcoast/</a></p> <p><a href="https://lovecentralcoast.com/pelican-time">lovecentralcoast.com/pelican-time</a></p> <p><a href="https://lovecentralcoast.com/sustainability-pledge">lovecentralcoast.com/sustainability-pledge</a></p> <p><a href="https://lovecentralcoast.com/waterways-coastlines">lovecentralcoast.com/waterways-coastlines</a></p> <p><a href="https://lovecentralcoast.com/waterways-of-the-central-coast">lovecentralcoast.com/waterways-of-the-central-coast</a></p> <p>Central Coast Destination Management Plan 2022-25 (pg.72-75)</p> <p><a href="https://lovecentralcoast.com/central-coast-biodiversity-strategy-2020">Central Coast Biodiversity Strategy 2020</a></p>