



Where the hell are they?

Flocks of Asian tourists with cameras flashing and wallets open may be an image of the past for Queensland, with bad weather, a lack of industry direction and the withdrawal of local and international flights hurting the state's \$18 billion tourism sector.

Whitsundays Tourism chief executive Peter O'Reilly says far north Queensland has had "six months from hell" after flash flooding in January gave the industry a bad start to the year. A Qantas decision to cut 20 per cent of domestic and international flights to the region could not have come at a worse time.

"It's a dark time ... there is no way around that," he says. "Our tourism numbers have been terrible since January and it's just really tough."

In early June, Qantas announced it would cut flights between Japan and Cairns. Chief executive Geoff Dixon says the routes had been "particularly difficult" for several years, and

continuing in light of high fuel prices would cost the airline more than \$100 million. Qantas said it would also cut domestic flights. Rival airline Virgin Blue then announced it would also consider cutting flights to the state.

The cuts are a blow for a struggling industry, state Tourism Minister Desley Boyle says. Qantas executives told her their decision was not made lightly. "I have ... made it clear to them the potential impact this will have on our industry. But there's no point sitting around saying, 'Woe is us'. [We] will tackle this issue head on."

Premier Anna Bligh has committed \$4 million to a rescue fund for the sector, which has been matched by the federal government. But the state government allocated Tourism Queensland \$63.49 million in its budget, \$3 million less than last year.

Tourism is Queensland's second-biggest export industry, employing about 104,000 people or about 7 per cent of the state's workforce.



But in an independent report commissioned by Tourism Queensland earlier this year, it was criticised for a lack of direction and innovation.

The report found big changes need to be made to ensure the survival of the industry. Many attractions were out of date and poorly promoted and there were too many regional tourism bodies.

The state government launched a \$48 million, 10-year strategy to revive the sector three years ago. Under the strategy – viewed with some cynicism by some industry players – annual visitor

Sinking feeling: Heart Reef in the Whitsundays

expenditure is planned to increase to \$21.6 billion, creating 1000 tourism jobs.

While the government admits there are no quick fixes, it will encourage further tourism from Asia. Boyle plans an emergency mission to emerging markets such as China, India and South Korea.

"Tourism is an industry that has seen tough times before and I can guarantee that ... tourism organisations will work together to see the industry through this one," she says. Jane Lindhe