

Operators join fight



Familiar ground: John Courtney (left) and Steve Turton have a common goal in protecting the Far North's world heritage rainforest from being ruined by high-volume visitor numbers.

Picture: MARC McCORMACK

TOURISM operators are being recruited to help prevent visitors from ruining the Far North's world-heritage rainforest.

The contribution of operators will be key to a new visitor monitoring system for the Wet Tropics world heritage area.

"It's very important early warning systems are put in place so we can take action to remedy any problems that occur," explained Prof Steve Turton, from the Rainforest Co-operative Research Centre.

Erosion, vegetation trampling and the spread of weeds and soil-based diseases are among the threats associated with increased tourism and recreational activity in the Wet Tropics world-heritage area.

Authorities hope tourism operators can help gauge human impact on the environment – a domain previously exclusive to government authorities and

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researchers. Participating tour guides will be asked to fill in a form with questions evaluating the standard of parking, walking tracks and water quality.

They can also comment on visitor behaviour.

The monitoring process has three tiers which also includes higher levels of assessment by rangers and researchers.

It was developed at a cost of about \$250,000 over three years through a joint effort by the Rainforest CRC, Wet Tropics Management Authority and Tourism Queensland.

Tourism industry consultant John Courtney, a founding member of the Alliance for Sustainable Tourism, said the region's tourism industry knew the val-

ue of protecting its greatest asset – the natural environment.

"When I first started working in the industry, as long as you had a clapped out Land Rover and could paint 'Bill's Safaris' on the side of it you were in, but the industry is very sophisticated now," he said.

One operator taking a lead role in the monitoring process is Down Under Tours, which takes many tourists to the Daintree, a high-use attraction.

Mr Courtney believed there would be opportunities to export the monitoring system to other countries such as Indonesia.

There are more than 180 visitor sites in the Wet Tropics, which are used by about 200 commercial tour operators.

The Wet Tropics are expected to attract four million tourists by 2016.