Conflict 'inevitable' in Abrolhos Island national park tourism push, industry warns

By Sarah Taillier

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The coastal community closest to a coral archipelago that looks set to become Western Australia's newest national park is hoping for a tourism bonanza, but fishers are flagging "inevitable" conflict between industry and tourists.

The Houtman Abrolhos are a network of 123 wind-swept islands off the coast of Geraldton, 400 kilometres north of Perth.

WA Premier Colin Barnett has unveiled a plan to create a national park that stretches across about 90 per cent of the islands, leaving out those occupied by fishers.

For the first time, camping will also be allowed at select sites and infrastructure will be improved, in the hope of expanding tourism to the region, which has a rich maritime history.

Geraldton Mayor Shane Van Styn said the plan was a "big deal" for attracting tourists.

"For a long time there's been talk about opening up the islands to tourism and now it's great to see that the Premier is personally taking on this initiative," he said.

"I know how passionate (Mr Barnett) is about this, and that gives me great confidence that we'll see a tourism bonanza over time coming out of Geraldton."

Increased numbers could cause clash

The Abrolhos Islands is one of the most productive fishing grounds for lobster and fin fish off the Mid West coast.
The Premier said the waters around the islands will not be included in the park, and recreational and commercial fishing will not be affected by the plan.

But Geraldton Professional Fisherman's Association President Terry Mouchemore said some conflict was inevitable between fishers and tourists, simply because of increased numbers of people in the area.

Mr Mouchemore said some fishers welcomed the move, but others just wanted life to continue as it had always been.

This is the first significant announcement for the islands since a sub-committee of Cabinet was formed in June 2014 to examine the futures of Coral Bay and the Houtman Abrolhos.

It is unclear when camping facilities will be ready for use, but a spokeswoman for the Premier said work would begin within this term of government.

**Warning on camping in A-class reserve**

Jay Cox has owned and operated a cruise and charter business at the island for 14 years and has long been pushing to boost tourism in the area.

He said the announcement to expand tourism at the A-class reserve lacks detail but was a step in the right direction.

"I still don't have access to the islands, I still don't have a base," he said.

"I still have to take everything back and forward with me each trip.

"I think it's a help, it's a step forward but there's still a long way to go."

But Mr Cox warned against allowing people to camp at the islands.

"People do run amok when they get left alone in places like that," he said.

"Fishing sanctuaries, that sort of thing, are targeted, we see that now a lot."

**Topics:** travel-and-tourism, rural-tourism, national-parks, houtman-abrolhos-6530-6530

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