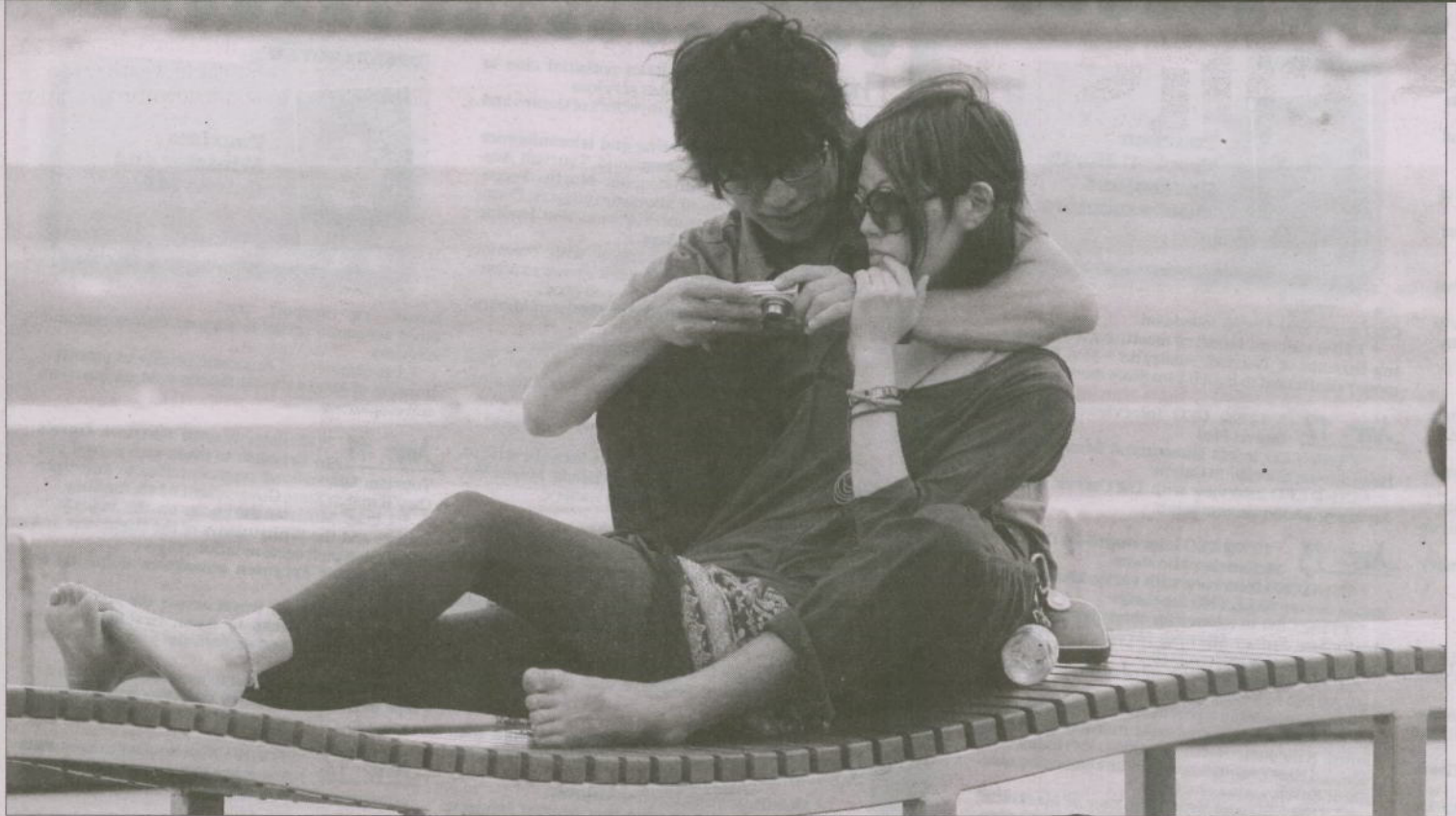


News that Qantas will cut routes from Japan shook the Far North tourism industry, now its bosses say we are in good shape attracting...



Still coming: Holidaymakers relax on the Cairns Esplanade as tourism bosses say Japan and Asian nations will remain key markets for the Far North.

Picture: JAKE NOWAKOWSKI

2.2m visitors a year

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CAIRNS tourism leaders will push for direct daily flights to and from the Gold Coast as part of a multi-pronged bid to protect the city's main source of income.

In the face of impending cuts to flights between Cairns and Japan, tourism chiefs say the industry is broadening its focus to lure visitors from other nations.

Tourism Tropical North Queensland chief executive officer Rob Giason said although the loss of Qantas services in December would hurt the region, the industry remained in reasonable shape.

"We have to remember that we're still attracting 2.2 million visitors per annum," Mr Giason said.

He said a four-point plan devised to boost tourism included relaunching campaigns in Japan which, despite an 8 per cent drop in visitor numbers in the past year, still provided close to 200,000 visitors to Cairns.

"It's not a matter of turning away from that market," he said.

INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS

	2007	2005
JAPAN	200,000	250,000
CHINA	56,000	33,000
INDIA/OTHER ASIA	13,000	9000
US/CANADA	132,000	114,000
EUROPE	178,000	161,000

To keep a share of the Japanese market, the industry would lobby for direct daily flights between Cairns and the Gold Coast, where links with Japan have been increased.

"We'll be talking to domestic carriers about the possibility of connectivity," he said.

The last direct flight between Cairns and the Gold Coast was axed in 2006 when Qantas scrapped its international carrier, Australian Airlines.

Mr Giason said campaigns targeting other growing international travel markets would be ramped up.

"Over the next five years we'll be working to ensure there's a greater balance to these markets," Mr Giason said.

The number of Chinese visitors to Cairns increased by 72 per cent amid strengthening trade ties between the two areas.

"(China) has really got great potential to provide us with visitors for a long time," Mr Giason said.

Korean and Indian visitor numbers to Cairns also are growing.

Mr Giason said the region remained attractive to tourists travelling from Canada and the US, despite the country's economic woes.

The United Kingdom market had dropped but backpackers remained consistent spenders in the region, taking in activities such as diving, bungy jumping, skydiving and the region's nightlife.

Mr Giason said marketing strategies were being prepared to launch in New Zealand - which is considered a reliable market - to position Cairns as a more attractive alternative to the Pacific islands.

"The whole palm tree-lined beach might not necessarily in itself be the key selling attribute, but the experience on the Great Barrier Reef could be," Mr Giason said.