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Students Go Wild! **Backing a new generation of skippers**

As owner of three of the Mackay-Whitsunday region's top tourism businesses, Asher Telford is used to innovating through challenges, his latest leading him to initiate a unique solution for industry-wide staff shortages, while also creating career pathways for local youth.

This Friday, October 29, a total of 31 Grade 11 and 12 students from 10 schools between Calen and Sarina, will complete their last practical session in a year-long specially tailored 'Coxswain' course, aboard Mr Telford's state-of-the-art vessel and nationally acclaimed tourism product, 'Wildcat Mackay'.

Officially part of the Queensland Government's Vocational Education and Training in Schools (VETiS) program, enabling students to gain nationally recognised qualifications while still at school, the course has also been delivered in partnership with the Whitsunday Maritime Training Centre (WMTC).

Across the year's four school terms, WMTC trainers have travelled from Airlie Beach to Mackay each week, to deliver classroom training in venues provided by the Resources Centre for Excellence, Volunteer Marine Rescue Mackay and North Queensland Bulk Ports.

Additionally, for two days each term, and in many cases across weekends and school holidays throughout the year, students have been privileged to access valuable practical training and work experience aboard both Wildcat Mackay and other working vessels in the Airlie Beach-based Red Cat Adventures fleet.

With achieving the required sea-time for a Coxswain licence often proving the stumbling block for students who have otherwise successfully completed classroom components, Mr Telford said he hoped this approach would deliver real results.

"I wanted to see these students trained in real life situations on real working boats, not just in a classroom setting and then dropped into the industry," he said.

"I also wanted to show our region's young people that the maritime industry is up there with the mines as a satisfying career path; this is a profession where Australians are very highly regarded worldwide, so they're effectively opening up opportunities to travel the world by gaining a global skillset."





WMTC Training Coordinator, Deb Duggan, said students had completed a number of quite difficult subjects, particularly for those new to boats, including coastal navigation, seamanship and vessel handling, collision regulations, legislation, and engineering, as well as separate 'Shipboard Safety' training, where they learned to launch life rafts, light emergency flares, fight fires, and practise in-water survival skills.

"The students have had a fantastic, sometimes challenging year, and it has been awesome to watch them grow and gain confidence on the water," she said.

"I am really proud of what they've achieved and look forward to seeing them turn their new-found knowledge into meaningful careers."

Sarina State High School Deputy Principal, Matt Allen, said the initiative had given participating students "the opportunity and experience of a lifetime".

"Honestly, I can't think of anywhere else that would engage multiple agencies so effectively to provide school students such a leg up into this industry with these real-life training opportunities," he said.

Mr Telford said none of this would have been possible without the support of the Queensland Government's Department of State Development, Infrastructure, Local Government and Planning, and access to the VETiS program, through which students were subsidised for the theory and practical assessment components of the course.

"When I came up with this idea staff levels were critical – not just for us, but across the region," he explained.

"At the same time, we were facing a housing crisis, so even if skippers applied for our jobs, they were typically from out-of-town and couldn't find accommodation.

"Meanwhile we had local school students asking for work experience; my thoughts were: 'well the local kids are here, they're already embedded in the community, all they need is the training and opportunities to work in their own slice of paradise'.

"The housing crisis wasn't going to be fixed in one year, but maybe in that time we could address the crew crisis instead, and there was a government body out there who could help."





Queensland Tourism Minister, Stirling Hinchliffe, said the Palaszczuk Government had invested \$950,000 to help Red Cat Adventures get the award-winning Wildcat Mackay into the water.

“It’s terrific to partner with Red Cat Adventures on building a pipeline of skilled young Queensland skippers to grow the State’s regional marine tourism workforce,” Mr Hinchliffe said.

“Skilled tourism workers are absolutely critical to maximising the 2032 Games’ two golden decades of opportunity for Queensland’s world-class destinations to shine on the global stage.”

Tourism Mackay Chief Executive Officer, Al Grundy, commended all involved in the initiative saying each had played a part in future-proofing the local marine and tourism industries.

“It is wonderful to see these local students given an opportunity to enter such an exciting industry – congratulations to everyone involved,” Mr Grundy said.

The official title for the qualification attained is Certificate II in Maritime Operations – Coxswain Grade 1 Near Coastal.

The Coxswain licence is issued by the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) and enables the holder to command a commercial vessel less than 12 metres long, in inshore waters. Career pathways include the tourism, superyacht, fishing, and oil and gas industries.

The Red Cat Adventures Group encompasses the multi-national-award-winning businesses Red Cat Adventures, Wildcat Mackay, and Whitsunday Jetski Tours.

For more information, visit www.wildcatmackay.com.au www.redcatadventures.com.au and www.jetskitour.com.au.

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