

CASE STUDY



- Event:** Ports Australia Biennial Conference
- Date:** 27–29 August, 2018
- Attendance:** 200+ delegates
- Organiser:** Essential Experiences Event Management

Event Overview

Ports Australia held its 46th biennial conference at the Darwin Convention Centre from 27 to 29 August.

The conference, one of Australia’s chief maritime events, brought together decision makers from the sector, industry leaders and government. It focussed on the opportunities and challenges facing Australia’s port sector and was split into sessions on security, strategic planning, alternative energy, innovation, port policy and trade opportunities.

Ports Australia was ‘blown away’ the interest the Darwin conference generated.

‘We didn’t expect to get as many people in Darwin’, said Mike Fairbairn, Ports Australia’s Communications Director.

‘The feedback was positive. People were blown away by the Darwin Convention Centre and the hospitality. And the fact that the Waterfront Precinct was like a self-contained conference area in itself meant people didn’t have to get cabs or spend a lot of time travelling—they could come back to the conference quickly and easily.’

The conference organiser, Cameron Armstrong from Essential Experiences, said delegates came from every state in Australia.

‘We hadn’t done an event in Darwin for a while and we didn’t know what to expect—we thought

the numbers might be down', he said. 'But we far exceeded our target. We're very happy.'

About 20% of delegates brought their partners to Darwin, many who joined the dedicated partner activities program created for the conference.

Conference Objectives

Organiser Cameron Armstrong said the Ports Australia conference is about education and engagement. 'The objectives were bringing people up to speed with best practice and each port sharing stories about what they're doing', he said.

'For a sector that's geographically spread, it was important for us to bring everyone together in a space that felt natural and encouraged them to talk to each other', added Mike Fairbairn, Ports Australia's Communications Director. 'A more united sector is one of the outcomes we were seeking from the conference.

'In Darwin, people weren't pulled away by anything else', he said. 'If you're going down to a Melbourne conference, maybe you'll have a few meetings and you might spend half your time at the conference, but we had a full room for the entire two days, which doesn't always happen.

'The atmosphere in Darwin relaxed people, and they were able to socialise. I think there were a lot of new relationships and networks built out of the Darwin conference, which is one of the main reasons we do the event in the first place.

'The setting actually encouraged the sector to unify more—that would be one of the legacy issues from the Darwin event', Mike said.

Conference Format

The two-day conference opened with the Ports Australia AGM followed by a tour of the Darwin Port and a cocktail party at NT Parliament House, hosted by NT Minister for Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics, Eva Lawler.

'The cocktail party at Parliament House really set the tone for the whole event', Mike Fairbairn said. 'Having a state government minister host us in that beautiful setting also gave the event a serious flavour at the same time.'

The rest of the conference was split into 23 presentations and Q&A segments on the conference's main themes, with speakers from industry and government. An al fresco gala dinner on the second night was a highlight for delegates, who dined under the frangipanis as the sun set over beautiful Darwin Harbour.

Darwin Convention Centre

PCO Cameron Armstrong said the Darwin Convention Centre is right up there with Australia's top business events facilities.

'We've used most convention centres around Australia, and Darwin is very competitive with

those', he said. 'The food, the service—we couldn't fault the centre. It was perfect.'

Ports Australia's Mike Fairbairn credits the event's success to the centre itself.

'I think the success came down to the vibe the centre set—how it allowed delegates to interact with each other and build relationships', he said.

'In a lot of conferences, it's quite hard and fast. There might be a networking event on the first day and people may or may not come, and then it's a bit disjointed for the next few days and you might not see the same person again.

'But in Darwin, it was the perfect-sized venue, people bumped into each other again and again, and there wasn't a lot of distractions, which meant people built those relationships and went away with something more meaningful than a business card.

'We particularly liked the conference set up', he said. 'Ours was a smallish conference at 200 delegates, and the room never felt empty. The mingling area was fantastic with masses of a natural light.'

Mike said the Darwin Convention Centre and its staff were a standout—pleasant and professional.

'I never felt like we were asking too much', he said. 'If we needed something, we could ask anyone—we didn't have to go and find the main person. There was never an issue that was too big to deal with, so we could focus on the conference itself. It was wonderful.'

Darwin and the NT

PCO Cameron Armstrong said the perceived barriers to hosting a business event in Darwin aren't barriers at all.

'People think Darwin is a long way to fly and takes them away from work for too long, but it just isn't', he said. 'We planned our program around delegates meeting afternoon flights out, so they didn't feel like they had to stay an extra night. Our attendance numbers in Darwin squashed those road blocks.'

'We deliberately planned a Monday to Wednesday event so people could come up on the weekend and unwind beforehand', said Ports Australia's Mike Fairbairn. 'Most of our delegates are from the southern part of the country, so they got up to 30 degrees and thought it was just fantastic. It was a mini holiday for them.

'The fact that Darwin turned out to be an attractor in itself and could provide first-grade facilities just made the entire thing perfect', Mike said. 'So although there was some extra time and effort to fly up from Sydney or Melbourne, or even from Tasmania or Newcastle with connecting flights as some of our members did, it turned out to be a non-issue.'

'Darwin is unique', Mike said. 'I can't think of anywhere for the same investment that you get a waterside setting among the frangipanis under the setting sun. It's pretty special, and I think it beats a stock-standard ballroom in a five-star hotel any day.'



Conference Outcomes

PCO Cameron Armstrong said the Ports Australia conference in Darwin ticked all the boxes.

'No other place you can guarantee fine weather and confidently plan outdoor events at this time of year', he said.

'That's a stand out for us about Darwin—as well as perfect weather, it's got that lovely, relaxed vibe but still a high-quality offering as far as accommodation and facilities. So Darwin and the Darwin Convention Centre is very positive for us.'