

Fraser Island Report — August 2008

During the course of a safari from 9th to 17th August that traversed Fraser Island from Hook Point to Sandy Cape, John Sinclair had the opportunity to make a number of observations of the status of many aspects of the island. These were supported by FIDO President, Colleen Enchelmaier and Treasurer Jane Enchelmaier who spent a week walking in diverse parts of the island during July. These are some of his notes:

1. **Hook Point Road:** This is now in much better condition than at any time in last few years despite receiving heavier usage as a result of the heavy beach erosion from the storms in the first part of 2008. There are now many very steep cliffs and the erosion has left this southern beach littered with trees that once grew where there is now beach. At most tides the beach is very dangerous and tricky. The road is now more an essential means of access in view of the condition of the beach than an alternative and it should be the only means of access from the south. The decision was to leave the beach open for a year and to review it after 12 months. This time has now expired. The review should conclude that the beach should be permanently closed to traffic.
2. **Impact of higher rainfall:** As a result of the higher rainfall in the last 12 months, Fraser Island is greener and the lakes are fuller
3. **Lake Allom:** The lake that shows the greatest rise in height is Lake Allom. However, Lake Allom also displays a disturbing amount of cloudiness in the tea coloured water indicating that although most of the sand that is washed down the road to the picnic area has been stopped (the alluvial plume is now so deeply submerged that it couldn't be inspected), the water from the road that contains much fine dust has expanded the lake catchment. This means that, instead of the lake catchment being only virtually little more than the lake surface, Lake Allom now has an enlarged catchment with water running off the road. This is a very major change to one of the outstanding World Heritage values previously identified for the perched dune lakes of Fraser Island.
4. **Lake McKenzie:** While this lake has risen and there are signs that there is continuing run-off from the road entering the lake and building up the depth of sediment in the swale behind the lunette, there isn't such an obvious impact on the water quality. Probably this is because it is much more diluted in the much bigger lake. While there has been now further move as yet to open up the second beach for those on commercial tours only, there is some concern at the now artificial landscaping to protect the Melaleucas established on the main beach.
5. **Wangoolba Creek Road Impacts:** FIDO has been advocating the closure of the road between Central Station and the Pile Valley turnoff for over a decade and for over a decade the QPW has continued as usual to be in a state of denial because this is in the "too hard" basket. However the evidence of the impact of allowing this road to be used by heavy vehicles is becoming more and more alarming as alluvial plumes fill up former wetlands beside the creek and the tree falls, which FIDO believes are a direct impact of heavy vehicles using the road, continues.
6. **Beware of Arborists wielding Chainsaws:** FIDO has an ever increasing disquiet as we watch the number of trees being felled on Fraser Island at the behest of arborists. It appears that the only criteria necessary to save a tree from condemnation by an arborist is that it presents no danger to any passing public. Often trees have been felled anyhow. While we can obtain photographic evidence after these trees have fallen just how solid they are Arborists seem to have no requirement to answer for their increasing number of mistakes. However the environment is the main sufferer for the

mistakes and the amenity areas on Fraser Island used by the public suffer as a result of poor assessments by arborists.



A tree beside the walking track from Central Station to Pile Valley felled by an Arborist, presumably in the interest of public safety. The Akubra provides some sense of scale.

7. **What Age is That Tree?** FIDO has sought through the Community Advisory Committee to see a significant tree register established for Fraser Island to avoid the continuing destruction of ancient trees on Fraser Island. However a senior QPW officer is working on the assumption that there are no trees on Fraser Island older than 300 years because a nameless person in the Queensland Herbarium is alleged to have said so. Based on geomorphic evidence FIDO believes that many Fraser Island trees are more than 2000 years old. Many of these trees, mostly Melaleucas in the trail left after the advance of a sandblow, have been destroyed by QPW chainsaws or fires in the last decade. As well we are seeing many of the ancient Aboriginal scarred trees disappear. Gunyah trees, trees that were once cut open to harvest the honey of native bees and canoe trees have been left unmarked and unprotected. Several have been burnt out or died naturally in recent times. This is epitomized by the collapse of an old Angophora near Lake Boomanjin that had been robbed by Aborigines for honey over 100 years ago. Some effort is needed to recognize and protect these trees and provide some better interpretation of their special significance.
8. **Firebreaks — More than Banksia Serial Killing:** The QPW earlier in 2008 engaged a bulldozer to cut and clear swathes surrounding Eurong and Happy Valley for the dingo fences. FIDO later heard that the dozer then spent a further 6 weeks on the island clearing firebreaks. In August FIDO was able to witness some of the devastating impacts of this firebreak clearing. In the past FIDO was alarmed that there was a deliberate targeting of Banksias within 15 metres of many roads. Now virtually anything higher than 10 cms within 15 metres of the roads is being pushed aside and just to make this removal of plant life complete, a new practice of scraping the top 15 cms of soil and organic material off the road had been instituted. This topsoil is then pushed to form a bank on one side. At Lake Gnarran, this 20 metre wide swathe ran parallel to the lake although the lake itself could serve as a firebreak. Along sections of Bowrady Creek, the firebreak resulted in a wide side-cut with a two meter embankment on one side and a two metres embankment on the creek side spilling over the creek floodplain. To say that the establishment of these new firebreaks is an overkill is an understatement. The area of land now laid bare as a result of these firebreaks is reaching alarming proportions but the implementation of an adequate ecological burning practice is still not even off the ground. Reporting on the implementation of the Fraser Island Fire Management Strategy even to the Community

Advisory Committee is almost non-existent but following the better seasonal growing conditions in 2008, Fraser Island is now developing a fuel load that is likely to result in a massive ecological disaster unless the implementation of the Fire Management Strategy is given much greater urgency.



The bulldozer built bench beside Bowrardy Creek. The side-cutting creates two metre high walls on both the up and down sides for what purpose?



Typical bulldozer road widening to create a wider firebreak. Topsoil scraped off this expansive bare area is pushed to both sides to channel any water flowing down this road.

- 9. Waddy Point Burning Regime:** On the fire theme we must commend the efforts of the Waddy Point team for how effectively they have managed the fire regime surrounding the headlands and Orchid Beach. We noted fires starting late in the afternoon and self-extinguishing at night resulting in a succession of small, cool burns and the landscape looks in good shape as a result. Most of these fires were probably classified as “Property protection” fires. FIDO though looks forward to seeing this kind of model being extended more widely into the forests away from private property where.....???

10. **Gardening:** The EPA runs a retail outlet in Brisbane called “Queensland Naturally”. However the theme that is developing in the QPW is “Fraser Island unnaturally”. It wasn’t long ago that rangers used to walk along Wangoolba Creek at Central Station to remove fallen palm fronds to make the place more photogenic for the tourists. At Central Station the rangers are still charged with twice weekly removing every leaf from the path with a noisy environmentally unfriendly “air broom”. FIDO notes that in other Queensland National Parks, (such as at Natural Bridge), logs are removed to “tidy-up” the sites, but on Fraser Island the obsession is to plant up areas of bare sand. Thus at The Pinnacles following the huge storms that scoured out the area last year (a natural event), the QPW has gone to extreme lengths to try to cover up all evidence of this event by fencing and gardening efforts. These even extend out onto the beach where most of the alluvial plume that resulted from the storms has been fenced off and planted up with a plantation of casuarinas. However there is no such priority given to repair the unnatural erosion resulting from the alluvial plumes resulting from road run-off. It is time for the QPW to question its values and its priorities.

11. **Sandy Cape Volunteers:** It was refreshing to see that in at least one part of Fraser Island great use is made of volunteers. At Sandy Cape lighthouse, the resident ranger has been now withdrawn and the continuous occupation of the heritage listed light-station houses is now left entirely to rostered volunteers who maintain a 365 day a year presence at this historic station to prevent vandalism and to maintain the asset as well as to bring what was a ferocious infestation of weeds surrounding the station under control. The bush which was previously severely suffering from the invasion of sisal and bridal creeper is now remarkably clear and the Sandy Cape volunteers and the ACV groups who have achieved this are to be commended.

12. **Dingoes:** The issue of dingoes brought a furore with the establishment of dingo fences around the Eurong and Happy Valley townships. It ranged from the fury of some vocal residents to the relief of some visitors, particularly those with young children. However with fewer than 40 people who call these two villages home, it is a question of who should arbitrate in the public interest. Unfortunately the Queensland Government didn’t arbitrate or consult. It just went in and literally bulldozed ahead to build the fences. They were due to be finished by Easter but almost six months later, they are not functional because the grids and gates aren’t sealed off and dingoes can and do enter and leave the townships at will. However there are still dingoes on Fraser Island and except around the townships, they are behaving very naturally and are much less obvious. A dingo was observed during this trip digging up and eating some fish offal buried well above the high water mark.



Dingo feeding on fish offal just dug up above the High water mark

13. **Walking Tracks:** It was noted that increasing use is being made of all of the walking tracks on Fraser Island. FIDO notes that the Fraser Island Great walk is used more than any of the other Queensland “Great Walks” and this lends weight to our support for both honouring the late George Haddock and extending the Fraser Island Great Walk to Dundubara and Arch Cliffs.



Part of what is proposed as the George Haddock Trail

14. **Orchid Beach:** Recent severe storms have caused serious erosion at the site of the former Orchid Beach Resort. This is creeping ever closer to the airstrip and removing the buffering vegetation between the airstrip and the beach. Elsewhere it is noted that many of the taller trees obscuring some views of the ocean are dieing. It was noted that the Orchid Beach airstrip is still being maintained but there wasn’t much evidence of use and FIDO doesn’t know who is paying to maintain the airstrip for the small volume of use. The site of the Fishing Expo is being kept manicured. New public toilets have been erected close to the Orchid Beach store.

15. **Indian Head:** The state of Indian Head, the erosion and the shameful state of the access to this iconic site, justifies FIDO's push for a high priority Coastcare grant to help repair the damage. Unfortunately despite Fraser Island's World Heritage status the only high priority area in Queensland identified for a \$250,000 Coastcare grant was Moreton Bay. Nonetheless FIDO is arguing for Indian Head to be considered.
16. **Vehicle Free Beach?** On a walk from Middle Rocks to Waddy Point along what is supposed to be the only vehicle-free three kilometres along Fraser Island's entire eastern coast, it was disturbing to observe vehicle tracks. It was even more disturbing to see another vehicle coming along. It turned out to be a ranger who was checking on a fire. However as long as vehicles can get onto this beach, there is nothing to prevent them driving along it. FIDO believes that if the 200 metres at the northern end of this beach above the rope were made vehicle free there would be some hope of allowing this vehicle-free area to achieve its objective and develop naturally. There would then be no need even for rangers to drive along to check out who had infringed the rule.



The sign says, "No Vehicles beyond this point". But what's the Point?

17. **Fire places at Waddy Point campground:** It was a surprise to discover that at Waddy Point there are fire rings at virtually every camp site. FIDO was under the impression that like Dundubara, fires would be allowed at Waddy Point campground but only in a central community fireplace.
18. **Lantana in Retreat:** One of the more welcome observations was the continuing retreat of lantana on Fraser Island. Even before the release of biological agents to attack lantana on Fraser Island a few years ago, FIDO had reported seeing lantana retreating in the Wabby Lakes area. This time while walking from Ocean Lake to Birds Blow where few people ever go, several clumps of dead lantana were observed indicating that finally the aggressive and invasive capacity of lantana has been curbed and that it can now be more easily controlled (at least on Fraser Island) .
19. **Fishers and other users:** The closure of the area from the old Orchid Beach resort to just south of Indian Head from 1st August to 30th September meant there was a greater concentration of fishers south of Indian Head and during the week of the Brisbane Ekka, many extended the Show Holiday to a week on Fraser Island and several large

groups of fishers aggregated together. Generally during the week of the inspection, there were no observed problems created by backpackers whose numbers seemed to be down on previous years at about this time. However it was increasingly evident which roads were used by buses despite 2008 being a much wetter one than 2007 when buses were regularly getting bogged in the looser sand. There was a major emergency evacuation following a head-on collision on the beach just north of Eurong during this week

20. **Traffic Jams at Ngkala Rocks and Indian Head:** One consequence of the large groups of fishers was the queues of vehicles when one or two got stuck in the by-passes around Ngkala Rocks or behind Indian Head. Fraser Island isn't the place one expects to find traffic jams. Also noted was a 4WD that had fallen off this by-pass track behind Ngkala Rocks and fallen down a cliff onto the beach and seriously injured one of the occupants. Unfortunately vandals had virtually stripped this vehicle of every removable part.

In view of the increasing number of injuries and risks with 4WDs on Fraser Island, one has to wonder whether the obsession of the arborists in taking out trees and the obsession of the Queensland Government in wanting to avoid any further adverse human-dingo incidents show a proper set of priorities in protecting public safety.