

# Making 4WD driving safer on Fraser Island?

**At 7.30 am on 18<sup>th</sup> April two young people were killed at 7.30 am when the troopie in which they were travelling with nine other foreign backpackers rolled over and over for 50 metres along the Fraser Island beach near Dundubara.**

It was a fatal tragedy that added yet another call to the tax-payer funded medical emergency services to evacuate the nine other seriously injured to mainland hospitals. It has sparked a public outcry for the Queensland Government to finally address what has been an obvious problem for Fraser Island management for years.

Accidents involving backpackers on Fraser Island have been occurring with regularity for so long and have been ignored for just as long by the Queensland Government anxious not to disrupt the cash flow they have been injecting into the Queensland economy and particularly the regional economy of the Fraser and Cooloola Coast. It has ignored calls that overseas residents should have to show some form of competency before they take to driving a heavily loaded three tonne vehicle with a higher centre of gravity than they would be familiar with in one of the most testing environments in the world of a driver's skills.

**\$\$s not sense:** The fact that the drivers are also responsible for up to 10 passengers that make up the usual complement of a backpacker's party seems to have also been overlooked by those who are more concerned about keeping the economy growing than they are on how much the Queensland Government is spending on emergency services when the inexperienced drivers are involved in tragic accidents.

The "Sunday Mail" reported that there have been more than 120 serious motor vehicle accidents on Fraser Island since 2003. What that ignores is the disproportionate number of those accidents that involve backpackers' vehicles.

**FIDO's position:** MOONBI has been reporting on these accidents for years and FIDO has been making submissions to the Queensland Government for better regulation of the backpacker traffic to Fraser Island for years. FIDO remains mystified why when the backpackers are visiting Fraser Island as part of a commercial tour package, the providers of those packages are not required to comply with the regulations that apply to all other commercial tour operators.

Just to quote some of the reports from past MOONBIs:

**July 2003** From MOONBI 83 —*Two British backpackers aged 18 and 19 were charged with dangerous driving after rolling their 4WD while doing "donuts" on Fraser Island's beach just south of Eli Creek. There were seven tourists of different nationalities aboard the vehicle when it rolled (involving emergency medical evacuation)*

FIDO then said: ***This is only one of many vehicle accidents involving backpackers who do not have to sit for a driving test to drive on Australian roads (or Fraser Island). The Queensland Government bears the cost of the medical evacuation and treatment of all Fraser Island accident casualties.***

**June 2005:** From MOONBI 105 —*Nine backpackers had to be flown to hospital after their 4WD troop carrier rolled on a sharp bend near Wanggoolba Creek and Central Station. Fraser Island police said the 4WD had been travelling around the hairpin bend at high speed when it flipped and injured the nine occupants.*

*A similar accident occurred on March 2 when a 4WD flipped near Eurong Beach on Fraser Island and injured seven backpackers. Police said backpackers frequently got into trouble on the island. The 24 y.o. English male driver was charged with driving without due care and attention.*

*Sgt Mooney from the Fraser Island police station said that no special licence was required to drive a 4WD. He added, "Generally it's just inexperience. The 4WDs are top heavy with two gear sticks. A lot of the young backpackers just aren't used to handling these kinds of vehicles."*

*A spokesman for 4WD hire company said local operators were meeting to address the problems associated with the hire of the off-roaders on the island. (Four years later nothing has changed and the 4WD hire companies keep stalling on anything that might affect their bottom lines).*

*A federal Parliamentary Committee on road safety has recommended that there should be special licences for 4WDs in view of the number of serious accidents they are involved in but it is up to the government to implement this and there is an extreme reluctance to do anything to change the existing system (or lack of one).*

**This time the Queensland Government must respond in a more positive way. It should implement the recommendations of Federal Parliamentary Committee and introduce special licences for 4WDs or at least the 4WDs that give the most trouble namely Troop carriers that become unstable and unsafe when fully loaded.**

**FIDO's proposal.** *Because the vehicles that are predominantly involved in serious accidents on Fraser Island are troop-carriers with up to 10 passengers (and most usually driven by an inexperienced foreign backpacker unfamiliar with Fraser Island conditions FIDO proposes: **That a special driving licence be required for driving any 4WD bus.** (This includes troop-carriers since "troop-carriers" capable of carrying 8 passengers in the back are classified as "buses" in Queensland). This would immediately eliminate almost all the self-drive backpacker drivers that have been a serious problem on Fraser Island for so long. However it would still allow people to hire smaller vehicles that might carry up to five passengers (but these would be more stable when fully loaded) or that troop carriers might be hired as long as they have appropriately qualified drivers.*