

Fraser Island after FIDO's first forty years

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Abstract

This paper attempts to summarize four decades of the history of FIDO in campaigning to have the outstanding natural values of Fraser Island recognized and protected. Following the organization's founding in 1971 it took the organization six years to see the end of Fraser Island sandmining. The campaign to have Fraser Island World Heritage listed and to end of 128 years of logging lasted a further 16 years. During those 22 years FIDO was a pioneer in the field of ecotourism on Fraser Island to help finance those campaigns. The organization employed many innovative campaign strategies to advance its objectives to protect the natural values of the island. FIDO's most difficult time in its 40 year history has been since the island's World Heritage listing. This is because of a public perception that Fraser Island had been "saved". This has made it difficult to get appropriate action to protect the island's special values. FIDO has sponsored research, conferences and forums for all stakeholders. It has commissioned studies, built the first boardwalk on Fraser Island, initiated and prosecuted the interminable war on weeds on Fraser Island. It has produced educational backgrounders as well as many other publications in its educational role. FIDO is now working with other voluntary groups to create the longest volunteer initiated dedicated walking track in Australia. FIDO has become the corporate memory of Fraser Island accumulating significant archives and making the collection of Kgori's history a major role.

Saving Fraser Island has been an adventure. While not quite in the league of the adventures of Indiana Jones, it has provided a range of rich experiences that offered a level of excitement that I wouldn't swap for those of Indiana Jones. I feel enormously privileged to have been able to devote the best forty years of my life to campaigning to help preserve this outstanding prize.

It was just over forty years ago when returning from a Christmas - New Year camping holiday with my family I was opening my front door when the telephone started ringing. It was a desperate phone call from a Hervey Bay G.P Andy Mayne who headed the Hervey Bay Conservation Association. He had just discovered new Thursday Island mining lease applications and he was urging that his group combine with the Maryborough Branch of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland that I headed to fight of these sandmining lease applications.

That was the first of tens of thousands phone calls I have taken about Fraser Island since. It was also a phone call that was to change my life.

- Within a week we were holding strategy meetings with two of our great mentors, Lew Wyvill and Dr. Arthur Harrold in Noosa. They had just engineered the highly successful Cooloola Campaign that saved that sandmass the year before.
- Within two weeks we had established the Fraser Island Defence Committee although we were to change its name at the urging of the legendary Dr Len Webb from "Committee" to "Organization". That gave us our acronym and logo, FIDO and a theme that persists, "*The Watchdog of Fraser Island*".



- While we were finding our feet and developing the framework for what would become a formidable organization, QTM's sandmining plant that had just moved on to Fraser Island from Inskip Point began its operations churning up the foredunes near North Spit.
- Within a month I accompanied Lew Wyvill and Arthur Harrold on a marathon hike from Orchid Beach to Sandy Cape to inspect the areas where new mining leases had been applied for primarily to quarry silica sand.
- Over Easter in 1971 FIDO conducted its first safari. That helped us raise funds, expertise and public awareness. We subsequently engaged in more than 100 safaris and helping to pioneer ecotourism on Fraser Island.
- Four months after the phone call we were appearing in the farcical Maryborough Mining Warden's Court have assembled at incredibly short notice an array of expert witnesses describing the adverse impacts.
- Six months after the phone call I was standing in front of Joh Bjelke-Petersen on the Maryborough Town Hall Green conducting a public debate with him over the public interest and his government's allowing the leases to be approved. My intervention turned the Premier into a bitter enemy.

That was all within 1971.

- Fortunately that hectic pace wasn't continued through 1972, although FIDO was determined and reasonably successful at keeping Fraser Island in the news. The election of the Whitlam Government at the end of 1972 with a policy of making sandmining stand up to proper environmental assessment if companies were to be given export licenses gave us new hope.
- 1973 saw the visit to the island by the charismatic characters comprising the Committee of Inquiry into the National Estate led by Justice Robert Hope and including Milo Dunphy and Judith Wright.
- 1974 saw the Dillingham company proceeding with plans to mine Fraser Island as though it wasn't

necessary to meet the Whitlam Government's environmental assessment procedure. It turns out that they didn't. They had enveigled Gough and Margaret Whitlam during a junket to the island to quietly acquiesce and approve the mining to start without even the knowledge of the Environment Minister, Moss Cass. That set the scene for FIDO's most frantic year 1975.

- It was during my lobbying stopover in Canberra in January 1975 that Moss Cass learnt of how Whitlam and Rex Connor had betrayed him over Fraser Island. He reacted methodically and commissioned the first-ever environmental inquiry with the powers of a Royal Commission under the newly gazetted Federal Environment Protection Act. The Queensland Government opposed the inquiry and refused to cooperate. It also faced and survived legal challenges in the High Court by the mining companies. I was summons to appear at that whole inquiry that ran through most of 1975. It took a huge volume of evidence. Much of it was facilitated by FIDO in the face of hostile opposition from the state government and miners. 1975 was a year full of excitement and drama and meeting many impressive people. The year though saw no recommendations from the Commission because of the still pending High Court challenge. That enabled the Dillingham operations to make a big impact on the island in the interim. That added to the destruction of the foredunes caused by QTM's operations.
- While awaiting the recommendations FIDO was challenged during 1976 to keep the issue in the media. It was the end of October before the Commission could finally deliver its report. That ended sandmining from 31 December, but it enraged Bjelke-Petersen. His fury reached new heights as he lashed out at everyone who had opposed sandmining.
- In January 1977 I felt full forces of the Bjelke-Petersen vindictiveness when he defamed me saying I had misused my position as a public servant. Within a week of him being served with a defamation writ over that the Queensland Cabinet had abolished my public service position effectively exiling me from my home town.
- Fraser Island was one of the first four places in Australia the Australian Conservation Foundation proposed for World Heritage listing in 1974. It was conceded by all that World Heritage would mean ending the timber operations that had begun on the island in 1863. Therefore Bjelke-Petersen implacably opposed World Heritage. He also saw it as transferring some of his political powers to the Commonwealth. Having been forced to concede to the nomination of the Great Barrier Reef in 1981, Bjelke-Petersen ferociously declared that "*not one more inch*" of Queensland would become World Heritage. So from 1977, until the Bjelke-Petersen regime came to an end in 1989, FIDO's campaign was at a stalemate even though public opposition to the continued logging of Fraser Island' forests kept

growing and more and more people were clamouring for its outstanding natural values to be recognized.

After 20 years of the Bjelke-Petersen regime, Queensland elected the Goss Government. But Goss was hesitant to enact any policy to end logging. He was finally forced to address how this might be done. Goss appointed a Commission of Inquiry with similar powers to the 1975 Commonwealth Inquiry headed by the widely respected Tony Fitzgerald QC to examine the situation. This Fitzgerald Inquiry ran that through 1990 and reported in 1991, the same year the last log was removed from the island.

- * Fraser Island was finally inscribed on the World Heritage List in November 1992 after 22 years of dogged persistence by FIDO.

During FIDO's first 22 years, we employed many innovative strategies and measures to prosecute our campaigns from buying shares in Murphyores and running media tours of the island to setting about collecting oral history and helping direct new lines of inquiry. However, there was no more innovative strategy than FIDO's use of safaris. These enabled FIDO to gather information and monitor events on the ground on Fraser Island as well as becoming the main source of income for the organization. FIDO became largely self-supporting though its safaris. They were fun but in the process FIDO became a pioneer in eco-tourism in Australia and particularly on Fraser Island. The safaris not only helped recruit members and motivate supporters but they engendered a camaraderie and were great fun adventures. It is interesting that in a twist of fate, the ecotourism industry that FIDO helped spawn on Fraser Island is now a closed shop and this organization isn't now be able to operate safaris on Fraser Island due to Government regulations that are more helpful to commercial interests than to the public interest.

Many people might have thought that FIDO should have drawn a line under its activities at the high point of World Heritage listing in 1992, but FIDO has pushed on. There are several reasons why FIDO has persisted.

1. FIDO had many incomplete projects that it wanted to see through. For example, FIDO first advocated a light rail on Fraser Island in 1974. For some inexplicable reason there has been a political paralysis in responding to this solution to one of the most threatening processes on Fraser Island. Currently over a tonne of sand is vertically washed 30 cms downhill for every visitor to Fraser Island. Sand scoured from adjacent roads has smothered Yidney Lake. It is slowly filling some other lakes.
2. We recognized that without a watchdog organisation's monitoring many areas though to have been legally safe deteriorated over time. FIDO has recently reviewed what World Heritage has meant for Fraser Island and we were astonished to recognize just how much degradation has occurred on Fraser Island despite the extra layer of protection it was supposed to have received from the Commonwealth Government who have clear responsibilities under the World Heritage Convention. We are now very concerned over the Commonwealth's indifference. Fraser Island

certainly needs the continued presence of a vigilant watchdog organization.

3. One only has to look at the state of Indian Head to realize the extent of degradation and now the self-exacerbating scars on the most conspicuous landmark on Fraser Island just keep growing and spreading as do the weeds invading there. Indian Head epitomizes the wider environmental degradation occurring throughout the island.

For years Queensland has underfunded management of its protected areas. FIDO knows because we have been in existence for much longer than the QPWS. That organization was established in 1975 as a political response to FIDO raising public awareness in Queensland on nature conservation issues. Fraser Island desperately needs a group like FIDO to try to improve the island's budget. So far though getting a decent allocation for environmental protection in Queensland is harder than getting World Heritage listing under Bjelke-Petersen. In 2006-07 Queensland allocated just \$8.81 per hectare to its National Parks estate while the Commonwealth spent \$26.80 per hectare and New South Wales spent almost \$40/ha and Victoria was over \$30/ha. It costs four times as much per hectare to manage dune island national parks than it does for all parks in Queensland.

Just consider the following and you can appreciate the need for FIDO to continue its active role of advocacy for better management on Fraser Island:

- Visitor numbers had increased from 200,000 visitors to the Island annually at the time of listing in 1992 to almost 340,000 on the most recent statistics. In 2002 a study FIDO helped initiate found that this generated \$277M annually and created visitation's heaviest impact is most visibly seen at Lake McKenzie (Boorangoora) that annually attracts 217,800 people. Yet, there has been shameful neglect of the values of dune lakes and especially their aesthetic qualities. Lake McKenzie is no longer the most attractive place on Fraser Island because it has been modified out of recognition. The QPWS failed to carry out any monitoring of water quality for more than a decade although the purity of its water was one of its recognized World Heritage values.
- Using 4WDs as the almost exclusive means for travel on Fraser Island comes at an exceptionally heavy environmental price. Thousands of tonnes of road sand are relocated in every heavy downpour. A 2002 independent study showed that 6% of the Fraser Island road network had moderate smothering and 7% had moderate down-cutting while a further 3% of the network suffered severe down-cutting or smothering. Sludge and road runoff is being washed from roads into Lake McKenzie (Boorangoora), Lake Allom and other Fraser Island lakes in significant volumes.
- Fire ecologists continue to argue that the fire regime is far from optimal due to a lack of priority and resources.
- Dingoes were not a problem when Fraser Island was inscribed in 1992;
- The number of weed species on Fraser Island has more than doubled on Fraser Island since 1992;
- The amount of research on Fraser Island has fallen off significantly;

- Studies on the carrying capacity and transport and access systems were stopped in their tracks before any recommendations could see the light of day. That avoided having to make hard decisions that still need to be made.
- There has been a disregard of a free and open process for public consultation that has been reduced at time to tokenism and at other times, such as determining the island management's Strategic Directions, to total farce.
- There is startling evidence that climate change is going to see every sandblow on Kgari disappear during the 21st Century at the current rate of colonization.

The extra layer of protection the Commonwealth Government was expected to deliver responsibilities under the World Heritage Convention hasn't materialized. The Federal Government has limited itself to delegating day-to-day management of Kgari to the Queensland Government and its impecunious Parks Service. Over the past decade it has contributed only a token amount only towards the protection of its World Heritage values. This denies the moral Commonwealth a right to be critical of Queensland's management. Like Pontius Pilate it has turned a blind eye to its responsibilities. There is clear evidence of the Commonwealth's disinterest in how Fraser Island is being managed.

However I want to end on a positive note to show that FIDO isn't just a whining watchdog but underlining FIDO's more positive roles.

Our advocacy for light rail is based on hard data FIDO commissioned in the form of two feasibility studies in a light rail on Fraser Island.

Our support for research and promoting research on the island is evidenced by our biennial conferences.

It was FIDO that initiated the weeding programs in the centres of infestation, the townships of Happy Valley and Eurong and later helped initiate FINIA to get a more cooperative management of the weeds on Fraser Island.

It was FIDO that finally forced a very reluctant Queensland Government to take a more active role in monitoring the state of the lakes which had been neglected for over a decade.

It was FIDO's insistence that resulted in the development of a Fire Management Strategy for the island although there is still much more we have to say about how that strategy is being implemented, and we remain particularly critical of the scale of the firebreaks that have proven to be ineffective in

FIDO still believes that Fraser Island still meets the World Heritage criteria for which it was nominated, but many of these values are increasingly under threat. More resources are required to monitor and manage them. Without more Commonwealth Government financial contribution to the management of the island's World Heritage values and critical scrutiny of the day-to-day management, Fraser Island's slow environmental degradation will only continue.

[See powerpoint presentation with decade by decade analysis of FIDO's first forty years.](#)