



Discussion Paper

MANAGEMENT OF FRASER ISLAND

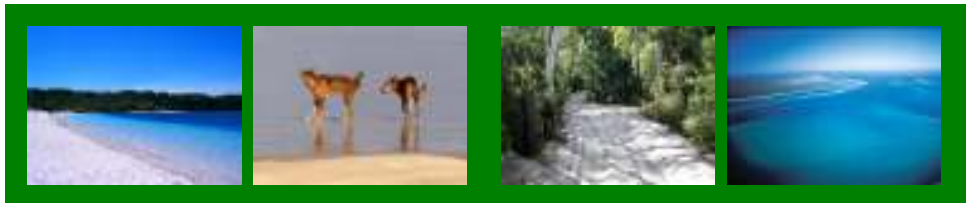
Released by

Glen Elmes MP

Shadow Minister for Climate Change & Sustainability

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The management of Fraser Island by the Bligh Labor Government has not been in the best interest of the environment, local residents, recreational fishers or tourists. Environmental conditions, quality of life, animal habitats and behaviour have continued to degrade due to a constant failure of the Bligh Labor Government to address these shortcomings.

The interaction between inhabitants of the island, tourists visiting, business operators and indigenous fauna has not been properly monitored and regulated. This has led to a significant impact on the quality of life for those who live on Fraser Island, those who work there, and those who visit as a tourist destination.

There are a number of key areas that require urgent action in order to address these imbalances:

1. Water and Soil Quality

Recent independent testing has established that high levels of human contaminants have significantly impacted on the quality of water and soil on Fraser Island. Such conditions present a health hazard to both residents and visitors. Elevated nutrient levels are also likely to have a significant impact on native flora and fauna.

2. Eurong Sewerage Plant

After four years of planning, the Bligh Labor government has withdrawn \$6.4 million in funding for the construction of a sewerage treatment plant by the Fraser Coast Regional Council at Eurong on Fraser Island. Infrastructure such as this could help provide a long-term solution to the issue of contaminants on Fraser Island.

3. Dingo Management

The ongoing incidents that are continuing to occur between human and dingo populations are a clear indication that the current management practices of the Bligh Labor Government are not working.

4. 4WD Management

4WD vehicles are an important part of Fraser Island's lifestyle. Careful consideration of the use of such vehicles is required in determining how best to manage their use and tourist impact upon Fraser Island.

INTRODUCTION

Fraser Island is the largest sand island in the world and has World Heritage listing. It is for Queenslanders a special place whether their individual visits to the Island are regular or not. It is also a mecca for tourists. Fraser Island attracts some 350,000 visitor nights per year creating a great deal of strain on the Island's fragile environment. There are roughly 100 locals who live on the Island and some 48 rangers who either live on Fraser or are flown in and out on a daily basis.

The 2003 UNESCO's Heritage Report on the State of Conservation of Fraser Island states that the two main threats to the World Heritage values are 1.) recreation & visitation and 2.) inappropriate fire regimes.

A number of issues have been raised by Shadow Minister for Climate Change & Sustainability, Glen Elmes in recent months that highlight LNP concerns with the overall management of Fraser Island. The breadth of these concerns make it clear that a wide ranging review of the current ineffective management strategy is needed to provide effective solutions to these problems that Labor has failed to manage.

1. WATER AND SOIL QUALITY

Two reports have recently been released with regard to water quality on Fraser Island. The first from Wade Hadwen from the Research Centre for Sustainable Tourism at Griffith University¹ and the second from RW (Bill) Carter from the University of the Sunshine Coast².

The issue of water quality can be broken down into two distinct areas:

- a) The perched lakes on the Island - of which there are 15 (the best known being Lake McKenzie and Lake Birrabeen). These lakes represent more than half of the world's perched dune lakes; and
- b) The movement of fresh water through the sand both underground and via fresh water streams which, in turn, empty into the ocean. It is estimated that "*the sandmass of Fraser Island holds the largest unconfined sand island aquifer in the world*" (UNESCO Heritage Report, 2003).

Perched lakes exist because they have a base of coffee rock or other substances which capture the water permanently. Fresh water coming into a perched lake comes exclusively from direct rainfall. While many of the perched lakes in more remote parts on the Island maintain good water quality

¹ Hadwen, W. L., Arthington, A. H. and Mosisch, T. D. (2003) The impact of tourism on dune lakes on Fraser Island, Australia. *Lakes and Reservoirs: Research and Management* 8: 15-26.

² Tully, N., Carter, R.W., Brooks, P. and Tindale, N. (2009) The impacts of beach camping on Fraser Island water quality. Unpublished report to the faculty of Science, health and Education. University of the Sunshine Coast, Sippy Downs.

standards, there are lakes frequented by tourists, particularly backpackers, in which high levels of sunscreen and human urine are noted.

In 2003 a campground at Lake McKenzie was permanently closed due to the threat posed by tourist numbers and elevated nutrient levels.

While contamination of the perched lakes is serious, it is not considered at this stage to be harmful to humans. Of greater concern is the environmental damage being done to fresh water supplies as the water moves through the Island and eventually into the ocean.

With public toilet facilities lacking in many parts of the Island where large numbers of tourists gather, the disposal of human waste will often require a quiet walk off into the bush. Because of the sand make-up of the Island, human waste can remain stable for weeks through to months, binding to sand. Research suggests that there could be a build-up of a very real health hazard adjacent to camping areas and in underground and fresh water streams.

Also of concern is the camping zones on the Island's eastern beach where *"it is estimated that an average of 4.3 kilos of faeces and 18.3 litres of urine are added each year to every lineal metre of camping zone on Fraser Island's eastern beach."*³

In addition, testing has shown that nutrient and faecal coliform levels were two to ten times higher in camping areas than non-camping areas. Understandably, this is a serious health problem. Soil samples tested have shown high levels of nutrients. This threatens native plants such as banksias and encourages the growth of weeds on the low-nutrient island.

The potentially dangerous nutrient and faecal levels in camping zones on Fraser Island was raised by Glen Elmes in Estimates Hearings on 21 July 2009 with the Minister for Sustainability and Climate Change, Kate Jones. The Minister's disappointing response to these concerns was that she had instructed her department to undertake water testing on Fraser Island and the lakes.

Parks and Wildlife had *made this same announcement* on 13 October 2008. 10 months after Qld Parks and Wildlife stated that further testing was needed to determine the impact of visitation & recreation. Portable chemical toilets being mandatory as part of beach camping permits should be considered.

In December 2008, conservationists called for the closure of McKenzie and Wabby lakes, the two most iconic tourist sites on Fraser Island, over concerns with their water quality. The then Sustainability Minister Andrew McNamara said that he would not do this on the basis that the department had received recent scientific advice from the Fraser Island World Heritage Area Scientific

³ Williams, B 2009, 'Fraser Island a big toilet because of camping, *Courier Mail*, 7 August, <<http://www.news.com.au/couriermail/story/0,23739,25893287-3102,00.html>>.

Advisory Committee suggesting the lakes, including Basin, were in relatively good condition.

What is clear is that water quality has been an ongoing concern. The failure of numerous Climate Change and Sustainability Ministers to act, despite ongoing evidence, shows that management practices at this time are ineffective and totally unsatisfactory.

2. EURONG SEWERAGE PLANT

The Fraser Coast Regional Council had spent the past four years planning for the Eurong sewerage system which would have serviced about 200 houses and a resort.

This was meant to have been funded, following an announcement in 2006 by the then Minister for Local Government, Planning and Sport, Andrew Fraser, from a pool of \$49 million allocated to water projects across Queensland. Of this sum, a tranche of \$6.4 million was allocated to the then Maryborough Shire Council's Eurong Sewerage Scheme on Fraser Island.

The Council had announced that Parsons Brinckerhoff had been awarded the tender to finalise the design for the wastewater treatment plant and works and extensive community consultation had taken place.

This funding has disappeared as a part of the withdrawal of almost \$14 million in subsidies to the Fraser Coast Regional Council. Local Government Minister Desley Boyle has said that it has no money to fund a sewerage plant on Fraser Island. Boyle also claims that the Fraser Coast Regional Council failed to apply for funding for the \$6.4 million Eurong Sewerage Plant in time.

Three years later, and despite the Queensland Government promising in May 2009 to provide a \$6.4 million capital subsidy for the design and building of the Eurong scheme, Boyle now says there is no available cash for the project.

"Well you see we don't have the money to fund the project right now"⁴

A properly constructed sewerage plant at Eurong will help to provide a long-term solution to water and soil quality issues. Porta-loos and chemical toilets, as well as composting toilets as used in other eco-friendly resorts around Australia (Ningaloo, WA) and internationally in USA, Ecuador, South Africa and the Caribbean should also be examined.

3. DINGO MANAGEMENT

It is estimated that there are somewhere between 100-150 dingoes left on Fraser Island. More recent reports suggest these numbers could be between 60 to 80 dingoes. The history of the dingo on Fraser Island extends over many thousands of years from when they first lived on the fringes of Aboriginal camps through to more recent European times when brumbies,

⁴ Spackman, K (2009) Govt defends Fraser Is sewerage snub, 17 August, ABC News <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/08/17/2657554.htm>>.

cattle and fish remnants on the Island provided a food source for the dingoes, a source which is not available to them today.

The management of interaction between humans and dingoes on Fraser Island has been a matter of great contention. These issues are exacerbated by reported attacks by dingoes upon humans.

Fraser Island dingoes were responsible for five attacks on humans last year. In April 2009, a 16-year-old schoolgirl had her shorts ripped and her buttocks bitten by a dingo on a beach at Eurong.

The recent incident with tourists on the Island, when a four year old boy had an encounter with a dingo, came about as he and another child were playing and running around in the sand dunes some 20 metres from his parents.

The previous Environment Minister, Andrew McNamara, spent over \$1 million building high fences and installing electrified gates around the tourist resorts and local communities on the Island. It is generally accepted that they have only been partially successful due to poor maintenance. There is evidence present from visitors to the island of dingo tracks on both sides of the fence. Locals have reported that snakes and vermin (mice, rats, etc) are in the main protected on one side of the fence and the dingoes are going hungry on the other.

The construction of the fencing has shown little or no regard for the environment or the Aboriginal cultural heritage of the Island. Photographs show where bulldozers levelled parts of Aboriginal middens when preparing to build the dingo fences.

Bree Jashin, of the Fraser Island Dingo Preservation Group, said that nine years on from the introduction of the island's dingo management strategy it its two primary objectives - "to reduce risk to humans posed by dingoes to an acceptable low level" and "to ensure the conservation of the wild dingo population on Fraser Island" - have clearly not been met

Adam J. O'Neill in his book "Living with the Dingo" outlined his view of the importance of the natural dingo family structure and states that the disruption of pack stability also alters population demographics resulting in young dingoes that may have a higher tendency to become destructive and aggressive.

Critics have argued that there seems to have been a deliberate policy over the years to destroy the alpha males and the alpha female dingoes which have resulted in juvenile dingoes having little of the pack structure left and no older dogs to learn from.

It has been reported that the use of hazing is widespread by rangers. Hazing is the practice of using clay pellets the size of marbles and firing them at dingoes using slingshots in an attempt to move the dingoes away from areas where humans are likely to be. Given that Fraser Island dingoes live on an

island, questions have been raised regarding where they are supposed to move to.

It has been claimed that any dingo that shows the slightest sign of aggression is destroyed. Locals have said that rangers also destroy many dingoes that show no signs of aggression. It is interesting to note that in autopsy results, the ages of the dingoes destroyed is generally around the one year mark and the last few reports obtained by the LNP show that their stomachs contain items such as hair, apples, mango seeds and alfalfa, but no other food.

In June 2009, Jones ordered a dingo census on the island and revealed that a dingo fence would be built around the main waste transfer station at Eurong. The Minister's "comprehensive strategy" appears to have failed in both its major aims of protecting tourists and preserving dingoes.

4. 4WD MANAGEMENT

4WD vehicles on Fraser Island have proven popular as both recreational vehicles and as a common mode of transport for residents. The use of 4WD vehicles on Fraser's beaches is closely associated with the public's image of the island. These vehicles, used irresponsibly, impact upon the island's environment. The management of such vehicles is an important issue that requires clear planning to strike a sustainable balance.

Following the deaths of two international tourists in April 2009, speed limits and hire rules were reviewed. Premier Anna Bligh said she had ordered state Transport Minister Rachel Nolan to make the issue of safety on the World Heritage-listed island her priority.

LNP Leader John-Paul Langbroek supports a review of safety issues for 4WD's on this island:

"Let's not take the fun out of these sorts of experiences ... but let's have a look at those accidents that have happened and review the rules accordingly. I really have concerns about inexperienced visitors who have no knowledge of the conditions and sometimes don't realise the trouble they're getting into."

It was first recommended 18 years ago that beaches on the southern end of Fraser Island be closed to protect migratory shorebirds. This had been announced by former environment ministers Lindy Nelson-Carr and Desley Boyle. Previous Sustainability Minister Andrew McNamara decided not to close these beaches.

On August 14, 2009, the current Minister for Climate Change & Sustainability, Kate Jones, again announced the closure of 18km of beach to 4WDs on the southern end of Fraser Island. Her announcement did not include any indication as to when this would take place.

Speed limits of 40km/h were imposed on the 18km strip with a review after 12 months. Birds Queensland president and Fraser Island World Heritage Area

Community Advisory Committee member Mike West has stated that the review was never completed and drivers took no notice of the speed limit.

Closure of the beaches to 4WD access would require the upgrade of inland roads to compensate. Labor claims it will cost \$2 million to upgrade the inland road and approximately \$1.3 million per year to maintain it.

The Minister's excuse for this delay:

*"Currently we don't have the ability to do that but it remains our intention, given the beach is a key area for birds"*⁵

The Fraser Coast Four Wheel Drive Hire Association believes new hire regulations - banning hire companies carrying loads on roofs and limit the maximum number of passengers down from eleven to seven - have been made without any regard to the industry.

Government computer modelling shows the new rules will reduce the possibility of an accident by 16 per cent. Industry believes these regulations will increase the number of vehicles hired by 42 per cent and compliance with these regulations will force hire operators to pass significant costs onto customers.⁶

⁵ Williams, B (2009) Fraser Island ban to go ahead - one day, 15 August, ABC News < <http://www.news.com.au/couriermail/story/0,27574,25929530-3102,00.html>>.

⁶ Spackman, K (2009) Fraser 4WD hire restrictions criticised, 3 August, ABC News < <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/08/03/2643842.htm>>.

CONCLUSION

There is an enormous amount of information available that illustrates a significant number of deficiencies in the management of Fraser Island by the current Bligh Labor government. Measures that they have introduced have not had a positive impact and have failed to address the growing problems on the island. Questions should be raised regarding the expenditure by the Bligh Labor Government in its appalling mismanagement of Fraser Island.

An important starting point to provide new solutions to the challenges of Fraser Island's management should be an open enquiry into the current management practices. Stakeholders, residents and experts must be provided with every opportunity to report on issues they identify as important and provides options for new practices to be applied to this sensitive environmental location

FEEDBACK

The LNP welcomes feedback on the initiatives contained in this discussion paper. Feedback can be forwarded by:

Email: noosa@parliament.qld.gov.au

Mail: Office of Glen Elmes MP
P O Box 1849
Noosaville BC Qld 4566

Phone: (07) 5449.8988

Fax: (07) 5449.9719

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