



# Report: Fraser Island Discussion Paper

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Shadow Minister for Climate Change & Sustainability

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*“.....this front-line for Fraser Island also seeks to deal up front with the impact visitors can have and to engage and inform them as to how they can help protect the environment they have come to enjoy.....”*



## INTRODUCTION

Fraser Island (the Island) is the largest sand island in the world and is World Heritage listed. It is a special place for Queenslanders whether their individual visits to the Island are regular or not. It is also a mecca for tourists. The Island currently attracts some 380,000 visitors per year, creating a great deal of strain on the Island's fragile environment. There are approximately 100 local residents living on the Island and some 48 rangers who either live on the Island or are flown in and out on a daily basis.

The UNESCO Heritage Report on the State of Conservation of the Island 2003 states that the main threats to the World Heritage values are recreation, visitation and inappropriate fire regimes.

A number of issues have been raised by the Shadow Minister for Climate Change and Sustainability, Glen Elmes, which highlight the Liberal National Party's concerns with the overall management of the Island. The breadth of these concerns makes it clear that a wide ranging review of the current ineffective management strategy for the Island is needed to provide effective solutions to these problems, which successive Labor Governments have failed to address.



## ISSUES ADDRESSED BY THE DISCUSSION PAPER



The management of the Island by the Bligh Labor Government has not been in the best interests of the environment and its creatures, local residents, recreational fishers or tourists. Environmental conditions, quality of life and animal habitats and behaviors have continued to degrade due to the constant failure of the Bligh Labor Government to monitor and address changes affecting the Island.

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

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

### - **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 the 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. It should be noted here that there are considerable weed problems already present on the Island, with the potential for this situation to worsen significantly.

### - **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 the Island. Infrastructure such as this could help provide a long-term solution to the issue of contaminants on the Island. Funding for additional toilet facilities in other camping areas is pressing.

### - **Dingo management**

The ongoing incidents which continue to be reported between human and dingo populations are a clear indication that the current management practices of the Bligh Labor Government are ineffectual and injurious to the survival of this pure strain of dingo.

### - **4WD management**

4WD vehicles are an important part of the 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 the Island. The recent announcement for the requirement that all 4WD tours follow the "tag-along" model is a step in the right direction.

## **PARTICIPATION AND RESPONSES**

The invitation to participate in the formulation of a Discussion Paper attracted twenty-two submissions. All provided a valuable point of view based on experience, often personal, and incidents occurring on the Island. Other submissions provided highly detailed information supported by research.

All those who provided a submission are recognised in Appendix A. Their valuable contribution is acknowledged and appreciated. Each and every submission is valued as it brings a new perspective, either to the issues under discussion or in raising others. All have been carefully considered and re-considered in developing this report to the Discussion Paper.

The Shadow Minister has made a number of fact-finding visits to the Island and held a community forum in Hervey Bay which comprised Island residents, members of the resident indigenous community, tourist operators, environmental groups, and other interested stakeholders. In addition the Shadow Minister conducted one-on-one meetings with interest groups and individuals in order to inform and shape a well-researched view on the management of the Island



Picture above: Glen Elmes addressing a community group on Fraser Island, May 2009, together with local member for Hervey Bay, Ted Sorensen.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## RECOMMENDATIONS

A Liberal National Party Government will consider:

- establishing a review or enquiry to recommend the sequential steps necessary to the longer term restoration of the Island's biodiversity and the management model necessary to maintain it;
- taking all steps necessary to ensure that future decision making is evidence-based and designed to foster continuous improvement;
- reinstating natural biodiversity as the overriding policy objective and mandate its achievement and maintenance;
- an immediate comprehensive review of the existing literature to facilitate short term evidence-based decision making to ensure the current bad situation does not worsen;
- reviewing current on-island visitor stays on a sustainability basis and review the carrying capacity of vehicle movements;
- servicing future visitor growth off the Island utilizing Hervey Bay and the Cooloola Region's infrastructure and intellect;
- managing visitation over the whole annual cycle;
- introducing partial resting of the Island around breeding and other cycles;
- empowering local stakeholders to engage and educate visitors to be part of the solution rather than be the problem;
- reinstating funding for the Eurong Sewerage Plant;
- the *humane* school approach to dingo management (*see page 10*);
- continued monitoring of the success or otherwise of tag-along tours;
- ensuring improved training and education for drivers of 4WD hire cars.

## OVERVIEW



What is the Island? Is it to be a pristine World Heritage-listed National Park? Is it to allow unencumbered residential development? Is it to foster eco-tourism? Is it to be a game park? Whose rights are paramount - humans or wildlife? Is

wildlife to be controlled and managed for the benefit of human visitors and residents, or are human visitors and residents to be managed for the benefit and preservation of wildlife and its supporting environment? Is it to be a pure-strain dingo sanctuary? Is conservation of the Island's biodiversity, natural heritage and cultural heritage values to be the main concern of managing bodies and government authorities and agencies. What steps does the Liberal National Party need to take to restore the balance?

When the character and purpose of the Island is determined, appropriate solutions may be developed.

Future Liberal National Party decision-making must be guided by a solid foundation of evidence-based studies and peer-reviewed research, which will enable evaluation and measurement and which in turn creates a model of continuous improvement. Anything less is an abrogation of responsibility.

Steps to initiate this model may include:

- initiation of an enquiry or review to address these questions, and clearly and publicly establish obligations under World Heritage status and which presents a full financial analysis;
- establishment of the sustainable carrying capacity of the Island under various visitor management options; and
- an objective and evidence-based analysis of the infrastructure requirements including water, sewerage, and road maintenance, which would inform and support the way forward



The submissions to the Liberal National Party's Discussion Paper on the Management of the Island make it very clear that many of the problems of the Island have arisen from an explosive growth in visitor numbers following World Heritage listing. Clearly, current visitation numbers of people and vehicles exceed those which are sustainable by the Island with its present infrastructure. The ill-considered and piecemeal approach by successive Labor Governments to address the crisis of the moment appears to allow all problems to grow exponentially in the forlorn

hope that no special interest group will be sufficiently offended to withdraw their electoral support. This "do nothing" strategy means just that - nothing gets done and, accordingly, nothing improves.

The submissions to the Liberal National Party's Discussion Paper on the Management of the Island mention the issue of increased visitor numbers and their vehicles, and address the impact of this in a variety of ways. For example, the proper management of tourism movements is proposed as a possible solution to water and soil quality - an approach which recognizes that once visitors leave the areas serviced by ablation blocks, the problem of disposal of human waste is immediately apparent.

However, and perhaps due to past negative experiences with this aspect within the public debate or as a result of "consultation" fatigue under the flawed Labor model, the obvious need to address the visitor numbers *per se* has not been undertaken .

**Visitor numbers now stand at some 380,000 visitors per annum, with an average length of stay of approximately 4 nights and which equates to approximately 1,500,000 bed nights (source: Fraser Coast South Burnett Tourism Association). Vehicle numbers are approximately 70,000 per annum and these figures are certain to rise.** Accordingly, the fundamental question must be asked: *how many visitors, with or without their own vehicles, can be sustained by the Island on an annual and ongoing basis and how is the determined maximum number to be managed?*

There are now significant tourism interests in the area whose livelihoods depend on sensible, inclusive and evidenced-based decisions. Addressing this is a critical step in the overall solution. Inaction or a continuation of the *status quo* is not an option.

Within the foreseeable future, visitor numbers will rise, perhaps even double. At that point, the actions to redress the reality of increasingly adverse impacts on the Island may well be impossible simply because of the scale of then existing vested interests. It would be shameful if a Langbroek Liberal National Party Government was required to relinquish the World Heritage listing for the Island on it's watch.

The Island is a World Heritage Park whose pristine wilderness is now compromised and the key issues which have resulted in this environmental degradation have stemmed primarily from the impact of tourism. This impact can be reduced if measures are taken to better monitor and control the activities of tourists and their vehicles. Visitation needs to be developed in a way which allows tourists to experience the Island in a more controlled, more engaged and environmentally-focused manner.



Accordingly, the question of visitor numbers and their management over the whole of the annual cycle and particularly at peak times such as Christmas, Easter and school holiday periods, needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Placing a moratorium on any increase in bednights on the Island until a management plan is determined would be essential. Future tourist growth could be sustained by utilising the existing Hervey Bay infrastructure and the Great Sandy Management Plan tourism hub at Inskip Point.

To ensure the ongoing sustainable management and protection of the precious and irreplaceable Island environment, it is clear that greater participation in nature-based

research, education and awareness, is essential. It is also critical to ensure the engagement of all stakeholders, in particular those residents who presently appear alienated, frustrated and antagonistic towards the mismanagement of the Island by the government and its DERM agents.

Proud residents seek a front-line role in informing visitors of “their” Island and this could, for example, occur through a *Friends of The Island* association, set up in conjunction with the indigenous members of the local community, to greet and inform visitors. This model could be a seven day a week visitor information centre, providing education on a range of pertinent topics which focus, in particular, on biodiversity, dingoes, beach driving and comprehensive historical information on Aboriginal heritage and culture, logging, forestry and mining. There are 100 residents on the Island and 380,000 visitors annually. We will need to make it clear that the Islanders and the *Friends* group will inform and infect the visitor centre with pride and passion while the delivery will have to involve many others as well on a professional basis. So *Friends* may design; professionals will deliver.



However, this front-line for Fraser Island also seeks to deal up front with the impact visitors can have and to engage and inform them as to how they can help protect the environment they have come to enjoy. This partnership process could occur either at a visitor centre on the Island or on the incoming barge journey or both.

The Island community also wants to be consulted via membership of appropriate advisory committees, or through a Fraser Island local council, although economies of scale are likely to render the latter impractical.

A number of the submissions strongly advocate evidence-based decision making and authoritative peer-reviewed research in regard to the issues of water and soil management and dingo management.



A number of the submissions advocate a strong role for education, both in managing the Island’s future and in managing the movements of 4WDs and their occupants so as to preserve a beach as being one where vehicles may not go.

Left: inspecting dingo fence and plastic netting - Ted Sorensen and Glen Elmes. May 2009

# OVERVIEW OF SUBMISSIONS

The Liberal National Party Discussion Paper on the Management of the Island sought advice primarily on four issues. The policy response deals with each in turn.

## 1. WATER AND SOIL QUALITY



Lake Mackenzie, May 2009. Photo: Glen Elmes

The ten submissions which addressed this issue advocated detailed research to support evidence-based decisions for the wellbeing of the Island. These decisions mandate the immediate implementation of sustainable management practices to avoid long-term and irrevocable damage to the perched lakes and other natural fresh water supplies.

It is obvious that the uncontrolled visitations to the Island and inadequate ablution facilities cannot lead to any outcome other than the pollution of water and degradation of soil quality. Therefore visitation management and the provision of appropriate public toilet/ablution facilities at appropriate “comfort stop” intervals, together with appropriate servicing of those facilities and management of their use, are essential. The problem of disposal of human waste is immediately obvious as soon as visitors leave the areas serviced by existing ablution facilities. It does not address the human waste issue apart from the populated or temporarily populated areas.

Effective disposal of human waste requires practical on-going solutions, with proposed interim remediation such as isolation of the perched lakes for a recovery period. Construction of eco-friendly toilet blocks in the most popular camping areas and other high use areas, some of which have no toilet facilities at all at present, is only a partial solution. “Porta-loos” are not seen as viable given their impracticality and inability to enforce their use. The traffic of tourists travelling around the Island may need to be supervised if the problem of water and soil quality is to be resolved.

## 2. EURONG SEWERAGE PLANT



Human waste behind beach camping area, May 2009. Photo: Glen Elmes

The consensus is that construction of the Eurong Sewerage Plant is required and that government funding to assist or enable that construction be reinstated. The shelving of the plant is seen as a significant setback in cleaning up the water table, as well as being a major impediment to the existing, albeit limited, planned development at Eurong and does not allow for further major tourist development.

The problem of human waste disposal is not exclusive to the perched lakes. The problem stems from the World

Heritage designation which has resulted in the explosive growth in visitor numbers and tourist demand. This has not been matched with sufficient infrastructure planning and provision of facilities. The impact of this is noticeable across the Island, particularly at Eurong where the potential exists to extend the ocean outfall of a sewerage plant which would utilize the robust outgoing tides.

An ocean outfall situation would be feasible at Orchid Bay but not at Happy Valley or Kingfisher Bay where self-management of sewerage by the resorts in these locations, and use of environmentally-friendly composting toilets in others, are the recommended solution.

### 3. DINGO MANAGEMENT

Submissions to the Liberal National Party Discussion Paper on the Management of the Island overwhelmingly focused on the dingo management issue - nineteen addressed the matter.

It must be borne in mind that the dingo is the largest natural land predator in Australia. Unfortunately, visitors see the Island dingo much the same as a pet dog; however nothing



is further from the truth. If the same visitors to the Island were to visit South Africa's Kruger National Park, where the largest predator is the lion, their behaviour, particularly in relation to caring for the wellbeing of their children, would have to be appropriately adapted to the circumstances. Similarly, this is applicable in Far North Queensland where adults are mindful of the presence of crocodiles and children are discouraged from being in close proximity.

Visitors ought to consider the dingo in the same light and act accordingly to protect themselves and their children. In line with this view, there is considerable support for a duty of care and consequential penalty regimes for parents who neglect their obligation to protect their children while on the Island. Suggestions arising from this standpoint and aimed at preventing direct interaction between dingoes and tourists is to implement robust visitation policies, keeping visitors on buses or on a viewing platform.

There are two strong and diverse schools of thought on dingo management. The first is to allow nature to take its course – a *Darwinian* school which espouses survival of the fittest, ie those animals which are most suited to their environment and best fitted to survive. As the peak predator on the Island, the first school, the *Darwinian* school, advocates that the fences be removed and the dingo be allowed to make its natural contribution to managing the ecosystem and its biodiversity.

This *Darwinian* approach argues that the dingo manages its population better and faster than other predators. For example, if too many pups are born than can be sustained by the existing food supply, they are either killed by the alpha adults or the alpha males and alpha females consume everything and the weakest will perish. If starving dingoes are evident on the beaches, many others will be starving, unseen in the more remote areas.

This school argues that random food drops will simply be consumed by the strongest and the weakest will fail to survive.



The other school of thought, the *humane* school, identified in the majority of the submissions, advocates a civil disobedience approach in the interim, which calls for a controlled supplementary feeding program, dissociated from humans, (such as drops from the air) “... to prevent the loss of even one further dingo...” while research into alternative solutions is conducted.

There is a broad consensus to change the status of the Island dingoes from *pest* to *endangered* (as in Victoria) and to cease the current practices of hazing (which promotes aggressive behaviour), culling (particularly indiscriminate culling of the alpha males and females), incestuous breeding, trapping, ear tagging, “taming” (for photo opportunities) and starvation (via disrupting feeding patterns), some or all of which leads to disruption of the pack structure, compromises ecological functioning and leads to biodiversity failure. A care facility for injured animals complements this approach.

The *humane* school view is supported by better fire management practice and by resting parts of the Island on an annual rotational basis to coincide with the dingo breeding and other species breeding cycles (such as nesting turtles and migratory birds) and to allow rejuvenation of the physical environment.

There is clear recognition that the the Island dingo is the peak of the biodiversity chain, “...a keystone species... the largest carnivore... and the top predator ...” which underpins the Island’s ecosystem “through its predatory and competitive interaction with herbivores, and smaller predators.”

There are calls for the Island to become a sanctuary where true dingo purity of lineage and its continuance can be preserved. The Island is the only environment in Australia where this is currently possible.

The sanctuary model has potential as a commercial venture, using a fee or levy structure together with links to education programs for both visitors and DERM staff and in conjunction with research by the like of Robert Appleby and/or his PhD research department at Griffith University to inform future decision-making. There is little faith in the credibility of Dr Laurie Corbett’s independence.

The issue of fencing is polarizing. On the one hand, some advocate maintenance of the dingo proof fence and grid rather than for its costly removal. If the fence is to be retained, a more proactive approach would be essential rather than the one currently employed by the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service, which is to work to a timetable rather than address obvious need. Accordingly the fencing and the grids are not adequately maintained and as a result the objectives for the plan fail.

Assertions made in several of the submissions make the claim that the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service appear to be running a successful “fear” campaign of misinformation.



DERM Ranger driving across a sand-filled dingo fence grid, October 2009. Photo: Glen Elmes

This culminates in the perception that the dingo is aggressive and threatening to humans and in turn has led to the implementation of excessive and inhumane control policies of the dogs thereby ensuring that tourism to the Island has a priority over conservation.

Current programs and policies neither ensure the preservation and restoration of the dingo population nor the conservation of the Island’s biodiversity, and they most emphatically do not emphasize public accountability or responsibility. They facilitate the continued decimation of this remnant population. An annual review

and assessment on the development of improved strategies and evaluation of Queensland Parks and Wildlife’s programs, as listed in *The Island Dingo Management Strategy 2006*, is critical.

Controlled tourism management, in conjunction with positive dingo management, should be seen as essential elements of biodiversity conservation on the Island and must be given high priority.

The instances of negative human-dingo interactions on the Island could be reduced dramatically, and the interests of biodiversity conservation furthered, if:

- certain areas of the Island’s natural tourist attractions, 4WD Access Tracks and camping areas were closed annually on a rotational basis for 2 to 4 months at a time, to allow for rejuvenation and to coincide with the dingoes’ mating season, bird migrations, turtle nesting periods and controlled fire burning regimes, etc;
- research and identify the maximum number of tourists (recreational carrying capacity) able to stay on the island at any one time;
- in the immediate term, food sources such as fishkill, dead sea life, etc, are no longer buried or removed but are left in situ to provide food for the dingoes.

There are a series of obligations arising from the World Heritage Convention, the Island Dingo Management Strategy, the audit of the Island Dingo Management Strategy, the *Nature Conservation Act 1992*, the *Animal Care and Protection Act 2001* and the *Animal Care and Protection Regulations 2002*. These need further review and should be addressed, in order to facilitate the development of a code of practice for the humane treatment of the Island dingoes and/or an Advisory Committee and code of ethics for the humane treatment of dingoes on the Island.

## 4. 4WD MANAGEMENT

There was a common thread, from ten of the submissions, which contends that 4WD accidents are either the result of drivers not being able to read the unique prevailing conditions on the Island and /or from driving in an unsafe manner either by speeding or “hooning”

Fundamental to the “prevailing conditions” viewpoint is that a speed limit and load limits/weight distribution-based regime may not be sufficient remedial management tools.

The issue of poor driving skills in a beach environment has been constantly highlighted, both from submissions received as well as a disproportionate number of vehicle accidents involving tourists in 4WD hire vehicles.

While vehicle hire companies do require customers to undertake some training, there is a view that this training needs to be more effective, particularly in light of tourists who do not speak English and who have never driven in an on-off road or beach capacity.

Suggestions for remediation included

- the use of NAVMAN systems to enable 4WD hire operators to self regulate
- the adoption of a Code of Practice
- improved maintenance of the current system of roads to continue to meet the demands and safety of vehicles
- improved traffic control
- improved driver education
- tour companies to provide their own 4WD vehicle drivers
- less disproportionate influence by 4WD hire companies
- current Government regulations posted in many languages for visitors.



## APPENDIX A

Thank you to the following for their submissions:

- David Anderson
- Sue Bloom
- Elisa Bond
- Clyde Coombs
- Judi Daniel
- Julie Fechner
- Fraser Coast South Burnett Tourism Association
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- Lindsay Hope
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